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Double Dirt / Seymour Hersh stains himself with JFK mud

By David J. **Garrow**. David J. Garrow is the author of the Pulitzer-winning "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." 1132 words

THE DARK SIDE OF CAMELOT, by Seymour M. Hersh. Little, Brown, 498 pp., \$26.95.

YOU'VE ALREADY heard about him: knowing he was infected with a sexually transmitted disease, he nonetheless had sex with scores of women. Nushawn J. Williams, the young HIV-carrier who is alleged to have endangered the lives of dozens of New York state women? No, John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States.

A 23-year bout with venereal disease is only one of the many charming and tasteful allegations that clutter Seymour M. Hersh's new "investigative" biography of Kennedy, "The Dark Side of Camelot." The venereal disease story, however, also exemplifies the deep problems and stark shortcomings that constantly mar Hersh's book. Number one, the story's not all that new: two previous Kennedy biographies cited the exact same underlying evidence from Kennedy's medical records years ago.

Number two, Hersh then jumps to the most dramatic possible conclusion - labeling Kennedy "an obvious risk to his wife, and to his other sexual partners" - based upon a far from convincing interpretive leap. Hersh gives copies of some "incomplete handwritten notes" made by one Kennedy doctor in 1961 - and publicly available at the Kennedy Library in Boston - to an M.D. who holds an administrative post in a Washington interest group. This physician is not identified as any specialist on sexually transmitted diseases, but Hersh nonetheless blithely trumpets the doctor's opinion that Kennedy "clearly was suffering from a sexually transmitted bacterial disease called nongonorrheal urethritis" or, in women, chlamydia. In case a reader's uncertain just how much to make of this, Hersh adds that "By 1997, untreated chlamydia was believed to be the cause of 35 percent of infertility among American women."

The implication, of course, is that Kennedy himself injured women in just this way, but Hersh never expressly addresses the awful insinuation he's just made. Did Kennedy so harm any women? Maybe or maybe not - but that imputation is several hops, skips and jumps away from the incomplete doctor's notes about Kennedy's "prostate tenderness" with which Hersh started. I wouldn't rely on Seymour Hersh for any of this, or, after reading this book, for much of anything else.

The sexual parts of "Dark Side" - let's be blunt about this - nonetheless seem far more dependable than Hersh's erratic meanderings about the Kennedy family's ostensible ties to organized crime, about John and Robert Kennedy's already long-known desire to get rid of Fidel Castro and about Kennedy's well-publicized uncertainty about what to do in Vietnam.

That's because of one simple thing, and it's the only truly original contribution that "Dark Side" makes to Kennedy historiography: Four retired Secret Service agents who guarded the president have for the first time described in explicit detail how John Kennedy had more women running in and out of his life than the Secret Service could keep track of.

Hersh seems to think that he's scored this modest but significant little coup because of his unparalleled journalism skills, but the true answer is much simpler: The agents say that only since the death of Jacqueline Kennedy have they been willing to tell stories that she understandably would have found highly embarrassing.

But the fact that John F. Kennedy was our least monogamous president is nowadays hardly news, and while the four agents' stories sound quite dependable, they're not worth spending \$26.95 to read. Wait for the promised ABC television show on Hersh's book in early December, when some if not all of the four agents will speak on camera in their own voices.

But Hersh runs into problems even within John F. Kennedy's sex world. He clearly has struck up something of a friendship with the best - and longest - known of Kennedy's illicit presidential girlfriends, Judith Campbell Exner. While virtually no one doubts the truth of Exner and Kennedy's sexual relationship, Exner now, in her conversations with Hersh, has altered and amplified in significant ways the recollections she first publicly voiced more than 20 years ago.

Exner may be telling the truth when she now adds to the record a completely new story about how she carried several hundred thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills from Kennedy himself to Chicago gangster Sam Giancana, another Exner friend. Precisely why Kennedy would be sending money to the mob, rather than vice-versa, is a problem Hersh conveniently evades, but sometimes stories are too good to be true, especially when the person telling them didn't put them in her initial "tell-all" autobiography but now can use them as a way back into the national limelight.

Again and again Hersh makes a mess of his badly undersourced and underdocumented claims of Kennedy family ties to organized crime. Hersh thinks he has some evidence showing that John Kennedy's father, Joe, paid Giancana to take an active role in the 1960 election; Hersh then also voices the additional claim that the mob was channeling its money to the Kennedys. Most writers would think this two-way flow requires some explanation or interpretation, but not Hersh: since both stories of course reflect badly on the Kennedys, Hersh is all too happy to push both of them forward, even if the resulting mishmash makes no sense whatsoever.

Problems of similar magnitude occur again and again. When Hersh gets to Castro's Cuba, he dredges up a former Army sergeant who "vividly recalled" having helped to arrange a private CIA briefing "for Senator Kennedy" prior to the 1960 election. Only several sentences later does Hersh acknowledge that his sergeant "was not allowed to attend the briefing and did not actually see Kennedy at the safe house"; the bottom line here is that there's absolutely no firsthand evidence that any such "safe house" briefing ever took place.

Hersh is so consistently credulous of any and all claims that reflect badly on John Kennedy - or his relatives - that "Dark Side" becomes less and less believable the more of it one reads. Indeed, the book's biggest biographical puzzle is not about John F. Kennedy, it's about Seymour Hersh: How can someone with his prior track record, which includes a Pulitzer prize for reporting on the My Lai massacre, self-destruct in a way that leaves his professional reputation in tatters? That's a more intriguing mystery than any of the Kennedy ones Hersh fails to solve.

Photo- Seymour Hersh, author of "The Dark Side of Camelot"