



Rewriting Her Legacy



Christopher Holme, Gael Towey Dillon, Jacqueline Onassis and Bryan Holme at work in 1977. BETTMANN/CORBIS

By Edward Kosner
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It's hard to imagine that there's more to say about the extraordinary life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, but it turns out that there is: Two dueling books tell the story of the last third of her life spent as a literary editor in New York, with JFK and Ari just ghostly presences in the background.

William Kuhn's "Reading Jackie" and Greg Lawrence's "Jackie as Editor" are seemingly the same book—chronological accounts of her 19-year career at the publishers Viking and Doubleday—but they are actually very different. Mr. Kuhn's is heavy on hagiography and analysis, Mr. Lawrence's is an energetically reported and crisply written story of a whip-smart, middle-age working woman who marshaled wits, charm, steely will and, of course, unmatched connections to make a new life for herself.

In 1975, Jackie (as both authors choose to call her) found herself stranded in a 15-room Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York after the death of her second husband, the coarse billionaire Aristotle Onassis. Two debonair godfathers rescued her from idleness and depression. The first was Tom Guinzburg, an old friend who had inherited Viking from his father and who invited Jackie to be a consulting editor for \$10,000 a year. When that job ended badly, John Sargent, another charmer, brought her to Doubleday, where she had a long and productive run.

The question about Mrs. Onassis's career has always been whether she was a serious editor or just an ethereal beauty wafting around town from authors' lunches in the Grill Room of the Four Seasons (where she liked to sit in the Siberian balcony) to chic book parties. Mr. Kuhn and Mr. Lawrence make it clear that she was a tireless and imaginative acquirer of compelling if sometimes esoteric books, an editor who nurtured her writers and fought like a lioness for her projects with the suits on the business side.

Over the years, her lists reflected a taste for aristocracy. She published exquisitely illustrated books about Versailles and stylish accounts of Louis XIV and life in the French courts. She did the same for the Romanovs, Mughal India, Stanford White's New York architecture and George Catlin's drawings of North American Indians. There was expensive fluff, too: Six coffee-table books glorifying Tiffany (Fifth Avenue, not Louis Comfort).

She had her best sellers, although neither Mr. Lawrence nor Mr. Kuhn manages to give many sales figures for her titles. She inspired Barbara Chase-Riboud to write a smash novel about Thomas Jefferson's slave consort, Sally Hemings. The tell-all memoir by the drug-addicted ballerina Gelsey Kirkland, "Dancing on My Grave," was a winner, too, as was Bill Moyers's lavished TV conversations with mythologist Joseph Campbell. She could be commercial, transcribing years (and several ghosts) on "Moonwalk," a Michael Jackson extravaganza with a feeble text. "Do you think he likes girls?" she archly asked a colleague after yet another weird visit to the King of Pop.

READING JACKIE

By William Kuhn
Doubleday, 350 pages, \$27.95

Mr. Kuhn's conceit in "Reading Jackie" is that the opaque story of the last part of her life can be revealed by glossing her publishing output. This is valid enough, but the result can be ponderous. Discussing a Jackie book about presidential wives, Mr. Kuhn reflects that colonial women were often involved in printing

and news paper work and adds: "[So] to have joined Viking was less a new departure than a return to an earlier tradition. That must have appealed to a woman as history-minded as Jackie." Still, he does provide a priceless glimpse of Mrs. Onassis exclaiming "Oy vey!" as she wrestles with files on the floor of her tiny Viking office.

Mr. Lawrence's book is full of vivid anecdotes evoking what it was like to be one of Jackie's colleagues or authors—or her boss. He gives a detailed account of the worst moment in her publishing life: when she quit Viking after Tom Guinzburg put out a potboiler by Jeffrey Archer in which President Ted Kennedy is the target of an assassination attempt. Mr. Kuhn kisses off this episode in a page. Mr. Lawrence shows convincingly that it was only after the Kennedy family erupted and she was rebuked in a snarky New York Times review that Mrs. Onassis claimed to be victimized by Mr. Guinzburg and quit the house.

Jackie rarely line-edited her titles, but Mr. Lawrence has got hold of original manuscripts and editor's letters documenting her close reading and perceptive questions and observations. She directed several authors to cut their books in half and had no trouble telling a master like Louis Auchincloss, the blue-blooded chronicler of New York and 18th-century French society, to liven things up. "Could you get a little more air flowing through it in places where information is more tightly packed?" she gently prods. "Could we have some lovely stories, some waspish stories?" She chastised another author: "You know, you remind me of those little terrier dogs at fox hunts. . . . They're just so nervous and anxious to please."

JACKIE AS EDITOR

By Greg Lawrence
St. Martin's, 320 pages, \$25.99

Even so, both books are full of testimonials by writers of all sorts to her solicitousness and dedication, her mania for the quality production of her books and her faultless manners. Time and again, her calls to incredulous writers to solicit material ("This is Jacqueline Onassis, and I'd like to talk to you about . . .") would be

met by "And I'm the Queen of Sheba" or hang-ups. She'd cheerfully call back and breezily accept their apologies. "It happens all the time," she'd say with a giggle.

She certainly understood journalism. She once told Gelsey Kirkland: "When Jack and I were in the White House, it was Camelot to everyone. . . . After I married Ari, I was the traitor. . . . And now, suddenly, I'm the world's greatest mother!"

Mrs. Onassis was in full stride as a \$100,000-a-year productive editor but was feeling rotten in early 1994 when she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Keeping the dire nature of her illness as secret as she could, she worked through four courses of chemotherapy in a matter of months. When she died in May, her career as an editor had lasted longer than either of the marriages that had made her a legend.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire, and the Daily News.

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