

Boston Globe Sept. 2000

THE INCUMBENT

By Brian McGrory

Pocket Books. 345 pp.

Anyone who's ever watched a police spokesperson slalom through a press grilling or seen a reporter skirmish in court at the point where the First and Sixth Amendments collide will concede Brian McGrory's point that "cops and reporters are like oil and water."

Yet, over the skins of both cops and reporters a similar coat of cynicism takes shape, and for the same reason: both see the oldest kind of sins committed the newest kind of ways, then listen to lies and evasions as what little truth seeps through gets spun far beyond its genuine shape.

For Jack Flynn, Washington correspondent for The Boston Record in McGrory's riveting debut political thriller, the nightmare begins when gunfire ends a round of golf he's enjoying on the most beautiful course he'll ever play, wounding both Flynn and his partner, President of the United States Clay Hutchins, just when the president has proposed that Flynn become his press secretary.

The wary Flynn mistrusts things that glitter, especially when an anonymous call to his hospital room tells him things aren't how they seem. It just may be that Hutchins' job offer is tied to questions Flynn's begun asking about recent presidential pardons. When a second attempt on Flynn's life occurs days later, Flynn begins to understand the wisdom in the Arab proverb, "He who tells the truth should have one foot in the stirrup." Even he who's merely pursuing it should keep one hand on the reins.

That McGrory's novel rises far above its genre does not make it any less effective as pure thriller. From the start, he weaves a tension that grows taut as a frontier hanging. Before writing a twice-weekly column, McGrory was The Globe's White House correspondent. So we feel the authenticity of Flynn's serpentine path toward the facts.

First, red herrings swim by. The F.B.I. says the shooter was a crazed militia member, if a bit tough to identify after they've fired six warning shots into his face. The feds may even be trying to send Flynn down blind alleys.

But why might the President develop an Etch-a-Sketch memory when asked about pardoning some loser on a felony murder rap from two decades ago? Why does he offer Flynn enough power to make the press secretary job as seductive as Gollum's ring? Then there's comely F.B.I. agent Samantha Stevens, trying to turn Flynn's head even though he knows a reporter and a fed would form the least likely couple since the dish ran away with the spoon.

Flynn's head won't turn easily, for reasons that make this novel less the work of a newcomer than a master.

As the best thrillers must, "The Incumbent" offers a tight, credible plot with a denouement as tense as a childhood dream of falling. What lifts it to art are McGrory's skill in characterization and profundity of theme.

Flynn quickly becomes an appealing narrator, a Pulitzer finalist with an ingratiating crush on himself. Offered the press secretary job, he admires Hutchins'

"ability to look for good staff." With wry wit, he confesses that when his editor passes by he quells "[his] first impulse, which involved a kidney punch." He beats up an Idaho militiaman who sorely needs it, and when he's finally taken off the story for his own safety he treads his deadly path alone.

He's got that journalist-detective voice, so jaded you could carve it into a Buddha, but underneath the crust lies a wounded and caring man. He resists agent Stevens because just a year earlier Flynn's wife died in childbirth along with the infant, and he mourns too deeply to wish to fill that void. McGrory shows Dickensian skill at making us buy the sentimental, using Flynn's dog like a Little Nell. We can't resist a guy who'll risk death to keep his dog safe.

Like Flynn, McGrory takes risks. He sinks to the Stephen King device of drawing on the ready-made landscape of pop culture; one source looks "like a cross between the Pillsbury Doughboy and the Skipper on 'Gilligan's Island'." Like theater of the absurd, he makes readers feel a reporter's blind alley by saying everything they'd read in the previous paragraph is untrue. He'll give self-amused winks, as when Flynn tells secretary Royal Dalton, "You're going to be screwed. Take my word for it, Royal," and aims some winks directly at Boston, naming Flynn's partner Havlicek, having Flynn check into a hotel under the name Lawrence Bird.

The touchstone revealing Flynn's character is the president himself. Clay Hutchins has his own appeal. Ascending to office upon his predecessor's death two months before election, former businessman Hutchins is a straight-talking, no-nonsense guy, a Ross Perot without the nuttiness that spells fruitcake. In an era when most politicians' idea of taking a strong stand is going to a Boston/Chicago game and yelling, "Go Sox!" Hutchins has the integrity to tell it straight about the Middle East, the wisdom to shun yes-men and a campaign style Gore and Bush could profit from studying. Amid Washington's halls of power, where you can't toss a marshmallow in the air without it bouncing off five Macbeths, Flynn can't help admire him.

But he knows that all is not as it first seems. So, as Flynn draws close enough to Hutchins to determine if he's a natively good man or a redeemed one, we move to the heart of Flynn himself.

Regular McGrory readers, who've seen him use his column to help find marrow donors for a leukemia victim [Jan. 99], won't be surprised by what's inside this fictional journalist who invokes names like Bradley and Reston. Under the jaded crust lies an idealist, just like the author.

He raises crucial questions. What is the role of private character in public statesmanship? Who is the United States government: the people or those they've entrusted with power?

This last one he answers with what feels like his own cardinal tenet: It is the people, and the people have a right to know. Under cover of just spinning a powerful tale, McGrory shows us that a society can ensure its liberty only if it ensures a free press to inform it, then "[the public] can decide what they want to do with that information."

McGrory does many things superbly here, but here's what he does best: he echoes the message, a generation later, of Woodward and Bernstein. At a time when media giants merge and competitive fiduciary pressures bend the press toward entertainment over substance, McGrory, like his heroes, will make thousands of aspiring journalists excited and proud to contemplate the future they've chosen.

