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CAMELOT

By Caryl Rivers

Zoland Books. 372 pp.

The young woman finds the President captivating. "He was so good at thinking on his feet. He had an amazing command of the facts." He also has a weakness for nubile flesh, and when she crosses her legs beneath her short skirt the first time they are alone, she feels his eyes caress them: "She thought, Oh, my God, the leader of the Free World is staring at my legs!"

He knows this vulnerability poses danger. "There was a Jekyll and Hyde aspect to his pursuit of women. Cautious in so many other areas of his life, in this he took absurd risks that could have destroyed him politically, and at several times came close to doing so."

This is not the Starr report. This is John F. Kennedy, in 1963, ogling the legs of Mary Springer, 25, reporter for the *Belvedere Blade* in Caryl Rivers' historical-topical novel *Camelot*.

The contemporary feel seems clearly intentional, as Rivers' tale obliquely and justifiably suggests that J.F.K.'s tenure was the early bloom of our withering era. All the elements are here: the dawning feminism in Mary that makes her aware she can be something other than a secretary, the gathering sweep of the civil rights movement which drives the plot, the early hints of the quagmire lurking in Southeast Asia, even frequent references to Richard Nixon whose later transgressions would lead indirectly to today's headlines.

All the elements are here, too, for a powerful novel, and Rivers makes an earnest stab at writing one.

Mother of a 5-year-old, Mary covers the White House, accompanied by photographer Jay Broderick. Initially, Jay gave little thought to Mary, "She was just the girl at the next desk, married to some local, who could say fuck and make it sound charming." But lately the sexually frustrated Jay's begun to pay less attention to his fantasies about Jackie Kennedy and started to notice Mary. She is, after all, three-quarters available, separated from the athlete-turned-alcoholic husband she'd deceived into marriage.

Interwoven with sections from each of their viewpoints are italicized passages of J.F.K.'s musings as well as journal entries from Don Johnson, a black creative writing student at Georgetown who'd worked in the South for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Several historical figures, too, from Pierre Salinger and Tom Wicker to Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins, make cameo appearances.

Never quite able to blend these parts into an organic whole, Rivers does tie them all onto a plot line in which Maryland suburb Belvedere's city council decides to level a black neighborhood and erect luxury apartments. Their thinly disguised motive: to rid the town of blacks.

As the black community, including Johnson, protests and sympathetic journalists Mary and Jay cover the story, Rivers achieves one of her two resounding triumphs in the novel, making vivid the vicious backlash of fear and racism with which so many

Northern whites met the civil rights movement. In both action and attitude, these gun-wielding, epithet-hurling whites tell the undertold tale we sanctimonious Northerners of the time largely ignored: that racism was a national, not regional, problem. We know early on that this inflamed crisis will lead to disaster, though we'll wish it did so less predictably.

The novel's other triumph--the product of Rivers' assiduous research in Doris Kearns Goodwin, Ted Sorensen and several other venerable historians--lies in the characterization of John Kennedy. Camelot, after all, was less than idyllic not only for young knights like Jay eager to use his lance a lot, but even for King Arthur. Rivers' Kennedy is filled with self-doubt. She limns his lifelong struggle to escape his powerful father's Irish Old World ways, his early emulous fear of never emerging from his older brother's shadow, his longing for his sister Kathleen's independence, his mixture of love and envy for his younger brother Robert. Unlike Robert, J.F.K. is less fully committed to the confrontational strides forward King is taking, which he fears might cost him the 1964 election.

The real-life Kennedy becomes the most intriguing character, however, not only through his own appeal but by the default of the fictional characters.

Neither Mary nor Jay feel more than cardboard. Rivers misses many chances to render them engaging: Mary, say, actually giving much thought to her daughter; Jay caring for Mary instead of only lusting for her. Unable to sustain meaningful interaction between them, Rivers frequently falls back on sex, but invariably it's a clinical, bodice-ripping sex lacking all subtlety, a musk scent without top or bottom notes: "He held her, not gently, and was surprised to find that her body answered his in kind. Her tongue explored him with a desperate ardor, while his hands found the warm flesh beneath her blouse. They spoke not a word but hurled their bodies at each other like gladiators."

With Don Johnson, Rivers, like so many white writers of benevolent inclination, offers a sanitized and bloodless mannequin clearly earmarked for victimhood. He has potential. One intriguing quirk, for example, is Johnson's memory of loving cowboy movies starring Lash LaRue, who wielded a bullwhip rather than revolver. But it never seems to occur to either Johnson or Rivers to suggest the source of this attraction for a descendent of slaves may lie in the prospect of being the one holding the whip.

In many ways, Rivers writes with authority. A journalism professor at Boston University, she depicts the newsroom expertly, from the then-new photo-offset printing process to the type font of The Washington Post. Her historical research is thorough, although she'd have been wise to do some on firearms [she has a "revolver" using a "clip of ammunition"]. While her dialogue can be embarrassingly sentimental--"Oh, Mary," cries Mary's mother, "he's using you, don't you see? He's going to bed with you for--for his animal instincts"--it can also be wryly gnomic: "The saints smiled a lot, but only when someone was burning them alive. Martyrdom is the Irish Catholic idea of having an orgasm." [278]

Had she gone one way, Rivers might have produced a riveting historical tome. Had she gone the other, she could have written a probing novel. In *Camelot* she stays tentative, perhaps a bit too nice, and never quite finds her direction.