

Reviews and Critics

Mrs. Paine's Garage and the Murder of John F. Kennedy

By Thomas Mallon

Pantheon, 224 pages

The New York Times

Russian Lessons

By SARA MOSLE

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ON Feb. 22, 1963, a housewife named Ruth Paine attended a party in an affluent section of Dallas where she met a young Russian woman, Marina Oswald, and her American husband, Lee. Ruth Paine had moved to Texas a few years earlier with her husband, Michael, who worked for Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, but the two had recently separated. A Quaker and a liberal Democrat trying to raise two children on her own and lonely in a city renowned for its conservatism, she saw something of herself in the displaced and isolated Marina, who, unable to speak English, had retreated to a bedroom to tend to her infant daughter.

Ruth had taken some Russian over the years and was eager to try out her rusting skills with her new acquaintance. Over the next few months, she would become so close to Marina that she would eventually invite her to live in her home. John F. Kennedy had not yet planned his trip to Dallas when Ruth also helped Lee Oswald get a job at a downtown warehouse used for storing schoolbooks. But its unforeseeable proximity to the route of Kennedy's motorcade would prove lethal.

In her kindness and openness to strangers, Ruth Paine was not unlike Abdussattar Shaikh, the retired San Diego professor who innocently offered his home to two of the terrorists who hijacked American Airlines Flight 77, which was flown into the Pentagon on Sept. 11. That night, as Thomas Mallon writes, Paine couldn't know that "her relationship with the Oswalds had begun its exact nine-month gestation toward another Friday."

Mallon has "always been drawn," as he has put it, "to literature's suburbs," and in "Mrs. Paine's Garage," the suburb is literal: Irving, Tex., just west of Dallas, where, only occasionally visited by their husbands, Ruth and Marina lived in the Paines' modest ranch-style house, sharing the child-rearing and housekeeping chores in the weeks immediately prior to the Kennedy assassination. On Thursday, Nov. 21, Lee unexpectedly spent the night -- he usually confined his visits to the weekends -- and the next morning retrieved his rifle, which, unbeknown to Ruth, he had stored in her garage.

Mallon, a "Lone Nutter" who believes that Oswald acted alone, is an obvious assassination buff, the kind of person who can count the frames of the Zapruder film and knows that Officer J. D. Tippit was shot at 10th Street and Patton, not 10th and Dalton, as he once corrected Norman Mailer in a review of "Oswald's Tale." In his fine historical novels, he has often approached the past from a sideways angle, and here views the events in Dallas from Paine's perspective, which gives them an unexpected freshness.

Despite this, the book, which was excerpted in *The New Yorker*, too often has the feel of a magazine story (albeit a good one) stretched to book length. In Mallon's defense, it must be said that he has championed "the brief life" or biography, and any book that deals with the Kennedy assassination in less than 500 pages is probably better for it. But, if anything, one wishes the book were shorter. As it stands, "Mrs. Paine's Garage" has a queasy fascination that derives less from its contribution to the already vast assassination literature than from its slow-motion depiction of a national tragedy colliding with a very private life. Wildly out of place in right-wing Dallas, Ruth Paine had little in common with the so-called Mink Coat Mob, the group of wealthy, fashionable Dallas women, who, encouraged by Bruce Alger, the city's Republican congressman, famously spat on Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson four days before the presidential election in 1960.

Paine's father, an insurance salesman from Ohio, once took his daughter to a Norman Thomas rally. Her husband, Michael, a direct descendant of Ralph Waldo Emerson and an heir to the Forbes fortune, was the son of a Trotskyist who, with the support of Dwight Macdonald, once ran for the New York City Council on the Socialist Workers ticket. But such distinctions -- between Oswald's Marxism and the Paines' anti-Communist Socialism -- were lost in Dallas, where anyone left of

Republican, including the president of the United States, was often denounced as "a Commie."

By inviting a woman she scarcely knew into her home in April 1963, it's almost as if Ruth Paine were matching Dallas's right-wing fanaticism with an equally radical act of her own. Trapped in a bad marriage and isolated by her domestic duties, Paine was desperate for companionship. Although her relationship with the Oswalds was ostensibly designed to improve her Russian -- Lee wouldn't permit his wife to learn English -- the emotional interchange," Mallon writes, "outweighed the linguistic one."

The arrangement lasted only a few weeks before Oswald announced that he was moving his family to New Orleans. But this "brief period," Mallon observes, "would stand out as a kind of feminine idyll, a respite from male boorishness and inattention." Although Marina would not return to Ruth's house until late September, the women continued to correspond. "Everything you do and think is interesting to me," Ruth wrote in June. And a few weeks later: "I love you Marina, and want to live with you."

Today, Mallon reports, Ruth denies any "lesbian attachment" to Marina, but when the young Russian abruptly dropped her benefactor immediately after the assassination, Ruth continued to write, like a spurned lover, to no response, apologizing for imagined sins -- "I am coarse and stupid, especially in Russian" -- and begging for a rapprochement that never came. Mallon provides little insight in this uncharacteristically superficial portrait of Texas and the times. (His book has none of the subtlety or richness, say, of "In the New World," Lawrence Wright's superb memoir about growing up in Dallas in the 1960's.) Its odd value, rather, is as a reminder of the stark isolation of many American housewives in the middle of the last century.

But where Mallon goes really wrong is as a conspiracy theorist. In a 1993 interview, Michael Paine changed his longstanding assertion that he had no inkling of Lee's murderous impulses in the months prior to the assassination, suddenly stating that he now remembered that Lee had shown him the famous backyard photograph of Lee and his gun in the spring of 1963. Mallon pronounces this to be "arguably the most important evidentiary information to come forth about the assassination in decades" -- a preposterous claim, given the computerized enhancements of everything from this photo to the audio tapes of Dealey

Plaza on Nov. 22 that have emerged over these same years.

As Gerald Posner reveals in his definitive book on the Kennedy assassination, "Case Closed," countless witnesses have stepped forward through the decades to alter their original testimony, and in nearly every case the changes don't hold up. "Resolving every conflicting account is impossible," Posner concludes. "However, the statements can be . . . judged for credibility. Testimony closer to the event must be given greater weight than changes or additions made years later, when the witness's own memory is often muddled or influenced by television programs, films, books and discussions with others."

Mallon concedes that there's something "eerily precise" about Michael's revised recollections, yet he insists that "the particularity of what he remembers . . . argues for the memory's authenticity." Actually, it argues for the opposite, since imagination can fill in details that memory can't. And Mallon is too good a writer and thinker to be chasing after the chimera of suppressed memory.

But even if one accepts his assertion about Michael Paine at face value, it's hard to see how it might have "truly . . . made all the difference." Although Ruth might have asked Oswald to remove the gun from her garage, there's little reason to believe that he would have gotten rid of it altogether. And given her efforts to stay in touch with Marina after the assassination, it's hard to see how knowledge of the gun would have materially changed Ruth's relationship with Marina or prevented her from trying to help Oswald in small ways.

In Mallon's obvious affection for the scrupulously honest Paine, one can detect something of his admiration of Mary McCarthy, who once wrote, "I believe there is a truth and that it's knowable." As he approvingly added, "Not your truth or my truth; a truth." But in "Mrs. Paine's Garage," Mallon ends up giving us his truth about President Kennedy's assassination.

ALSO FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES:

BOOKS OF THE TIMES; *Friend of the Family, Witness to History*

By JANET MASLIN

For the uninitiated, Ruth Paine is a Rosencrantz or Guildenstern in the drama of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. She provided shelter for the family of Lee Harvey Oswald during the fall of 1963, a time when the Oswald marriage was troubled, and Lee clearly had other things on his mind. And it was in her garage that Lee kept the rifle that he would use to shoot the president. Hard-core conspiracy hounds have puzzled over what this Quaker housewife's actions and jottings (from her appointment book in March: "LHO purchase of rifle") really mean.

Thomas Mallon, whose first-rate novels ("Henry and Clara," "Dewey Defeats Truman") have often been positioned right beside important historical events, has wondered, too. "It is not an exaggeration to say that she had been on my mind, in one way or another, for 30 years," he writes. But this slender new nonfiction book will not quite explain why.

Since the only piece of writing entirely devoted to Mrs. Paine has been a 1964 Redbook article by Jessamyn West, author of "Friendly Persuasion," Mr. Mallon certainly has Ruth Paine's story all to himself. She figured only marginally in the film "J. F. K." and turns up in Don DeLillo's "Libra" teaching Lee to drive ("Let's try it in reverse one more time"), so there should be a good deal for him to work with.

But Mr. Mallon winds up inflating "Mrs. Paine's Garage" with minutiae. The reader will learn about Oswald, for instance, that "the young Marxist could also object to the way she cooked his potatoes and ironed his shirts." Recalling this, Mrs. Paine remarks, "Picky, picky." Latter-day conversations throughout the book make her sound like a nice, friendly person. That doesn't make this an interesting story.

In 1963 Ruth and her husband, Michael, had moved from Philadelphia to a Texas suburb and were on the brink of divorce. Michael now says that he didn't really love her, and that she got on his nerves. "Ruth would get antsy, wiggling her foot just at the point in the conversation when I started to get interested," he tells Mr. Mallon. She, too, was restless, just as a friend invited her to meet a young Russian woman and her American husband. Since Mrs. Paine was studying Russian, she jumped

at the chance.

The meeting occurred on Washington's Birthday, which meant a precisely nine-month gestation period for the friendship, which is the kind of thing that "Mrs. Paine's Garage" is apt to point out. And Marina Oswald, who was so desperately unhappy that she attempted suicide the following day, soon became a focus of Mrs. Paine's attention.

"Everything you do and think is interesting to me," she wrote to Marina. And: "I love you Marina, and want to live with you." Mr. Mallon writes, "To the suggestion that she and Marina had a lesbian attachment, Ruth today replies, with a laugh, 'No, that hadn't occurred to me!' "

In any case, Marina moved in. And both husbands were essentially gone, although when Lee turned up, he made "a happy addition to our expanded family" and "generally added a needed masculine flavor." The other thing he added to the household was a bolt-action Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, concealed inside a blanket roll.

After Lee used that gun to such heinous effect, the Paines found themselves pulled into the investigation. And the friendship between Marina and Ruth was abruptly over. Ruth began a series of entreaties, including tempting Marina with the Spring-Summer Sears, Roebuck catalog, but to no avail. The Oswald family regarded Ruth as something of a publicity seeker, and Marina eventually told the Warren Commission, "She likes to be well known, popular, and I think that anything I should write her, for example, would wind up in the press."

Mrs. Paine described Oswald's ordinariness to the commission, prompting Mr. Mallon to bring up the banality of evil and compare her to Hannah Arendt. Her address book contained the name of William Esslinger, who claimed not to know her, until the F.B.I. realized that the Paine family had once given him a cat. "His implication in the events -- accidental, temporary, tangential," Mr. Mallon reflects, "is, in its way, an inconsequential version of Ruth's own, which depended on the collision of innocent intentions and unforeseen enormities."

This book's genuinely poignant aspect is Ruth Paine's what-if wonderings, as she considers whether any changes in her behavior might have altered history. Mr. Mallon thinks several things might have made the Paines realize how dangerous Oswald was -- a letter he typed, a

photograph he displayed -- if only they had noticed. He also wonders if the Warren Commission report would have more credence if the hearings had been televised. And he notes that if Marina Oswald had been thrown into the spotlight four decades later, she might have been weighing an offer to pose for Playboy.

In conclusion: Ruth Paine's typewriter, once used by Oswald to write an eyebrow-raising letter to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, is now somewhere in Managua, Nicaragua. The Paines' daughter wonders "if there's a significance that I'm living two miles away from the non-New York house of Caroline Kennedy." And the oak tree on the lawn of the house where Oswald stayed is now bigger than it was in 1963.



by Daniel Fierman

In this slim nonfiction volume, novelist Mallon has unearthed the life of Ruth Hyde Paine, the young mother of two who housed Lee Harvey Oswald's family in the months before he killed President Kennedy. To those not steeped in assassination mythology, the degree of separation from the event itself recalls that old Mel Brooks chestnut, "What does that make us? Absolutely nothing." In shedding light on a particularly dark corner of the story, the talented Mallon has produced an odd curio - part reporting exercise, part speculative ramble, and part heartfelt appreciation of a woman he quite clearly admires.



Amazon.com Product Description

"Exactly forty years have passed since Ruth Hyde Paine, a Quaker housewife in suburban Dallas, offered shelter and assistance to a young man named Lee Harvey Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina. *Mrs. Paine's Garage* is the tragic story of this well-intentioned woman who found Oswald the job that put him six floors above Dealey Plaza-into which, on November 22, 1963, he fired a rifle he'd kept hidden inside Mrs. Paine's house. But this is also a tale of survival and resilience: the story of a devout, open-hearted woman who weathered a whirlwind of suspicion and betrayal, and who refused to allow her connection to the calamity of that November to destroy her life. From these stories, Thomas Mallon has fashioned an account of generosity and secrets, tragic might-have-beens and eerie coincidences, that unfolds with a gripping inevitability." -



Friend of the Family

The strangest figure in the JFK assassination is the most honest one

By Clay Smith

When Ruth Paine, an Irving housewife, pulled into her driveway on November 21, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald was in her front yard under the oak tree playing with his daughter Junie. His wife Marina was there too, and she quickly apologized to Ruth for his presence. For nearly two months, the arrangement had been that Lee would visit only on the weekends, and this was a Thursday. Marina was ostensibly living in the four-room house with Ruth, Ruth's two children, and her own two children, one newly born, because Ruth wanted to improve her Russian, an education that Marina, who was from the USSR, could provide. But Ruth was also a devoted Quaker living in a place where the Friends had to hold their weekly Meeting at a Seventh Day Adventist school by Dallas' Central Expressway. Ruth was lonely and needed Marina's friendship. Tomorrow a copy of the divorce petition Ruth had filed eight days ago would arrive in her mailbox. Tomorrow would not be a good day. When some law enforcement officials from Dallas rang her doorbell Friday afternoon, Ruth initially thought they were there to serve papers connected to her divorce. Then they and Marina pointed out to her that the rolled-up blanket Lee had stored in her garage had concealed the rifle used to kill President Kennedy.

To students of the JFK assassination, the strange life of Ruth Paine is yet another reason to insist that *the truth is out there*. Michael and Ruth Paine moved to Irving from southeastern Pennsylvania in 1959 because Michael went to work for Bell Helicopter, a new company in Ft. Worth. Though Michael didn't share Ruth's adopted Quaker faith -- he joined Dallas' First Unitarian congregation -- he was her soul mate, in an intellectual way, at least. As Thomas Mallon writes in *Mrs. Paine's Garage: And the Murder of John F. Kennedy* (Pantheon, \$22), his quixotic meditation on the woman who became the Warren Commission's most

important witness, the Paines' solidarity "helped the two of them to weather the unfamiliar mental climate that greeted them on the Texas prairie" but "the strain of trying to do the right thing -- in the world and toward each other -- imperiled Ruth and Michael's marriage from the start. As he took pains to be honest about his lack of feeling, she forced herself to be brave; both scarred themselves with candor and civility." Ruth met the Oswalds in February of 1963 at a party in Highland Park hosted by a man who was in a madrigal singing group with the Paines. This is certainly one reason conspiracists refuse to believe that Ruth and Michael weren't in on the assassination. In fact, the Paines *were* odd characters for Texas. "It makes sense in a way," Mallon recently told the *Chronicle*. "Well, why was Ruth asked to go to that party? Because the host of the party knew of her interest in Russian, and why did she know the host of the party? Because they sang madrigals together. Madrigal singers, I'm sure in Irving, were pretty thin on the ground in those days." *Mrs. Paine's Garage* is actually everything *but* an attempt to implicate Ruth. It is entirely unlike any other book about the assassination. Much of it reads like a good detective novel as Mallon lays out what happened in the months immediately before and then after the assassination. But Mallon has always been intrigued by the innocent bystanders at American historical events who get caught up in events much bigger than themselves. His well-known novel *Henry and Clara* (1994), is about Henry and Clara Rathbone, the couple whose lives were upended because they happened to be sitting in the theatre box with the Lincolns the night of his assassination. Like Janet Malcolm's *The Crime of Sheila McGough* (1999), *Mrs. Paine's Garage* is a probing investigation into a person who is so deliberate about being honest, so "morally interesting," as Mallon writes, that she seems fundamentally different from other people, who don't understand her and somehow conclude that she isn't talking straight with them. Mallon explains that

From the first hours of this first afternoon, it is Ruth's open-faced cooperation that stands out. As the police car headed from Irving to Dallas, an officer in the front seat wheeled around to ask her: "Are you a Communist?"

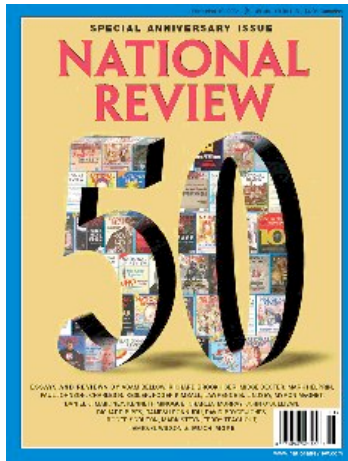
"No," she replied, "and I don't even feel the need of the Fifth Amendment on that one."

She remembers translating the question to Marina, who, sitting beside her in the back of the police car, was "very quiet at that point," and "not

just because of the language difficulty."

In September of 1963, Ruth was finishing up a cross-country drive with her two children, visiting various relatives and friends, and she stopped in New Orleans to see the Oswalds, who were living there because Lee was looking for work in his hometown. (They also moved there because Lee had made an assassination attempt on right-wing Dallas resident General Edwin A. Walker.) Earlier, Ruth had tentatively suggested to Marina that she should return to Texas to have her second child, but she was mindful not to encroach upon Lee's status as the family's decision-maker. She addressed specific questions about hospital fees directly to Lee. Ruth ended up taking Marina back to Texas on September 23 (Marina "let out a cheer when she crossed the border into Texas, telling Ruth, somewhat surprisingly, that she thought of the state as her home"). On October 4, Lee showed up unexpectedly in Dallas. When Rachel was born on October 20, Ruth was at the hospital, but Lee was not. "Even today," Mallon writes, "Ruth doesn't blame him for this; he may have had a job, but he hardly had the money, and with the hospital's fast-discharge procedure for new mothers, Marina would be home in forty-eight hours." *Mrs. Paine's Garage* may fascinate with its detail about the "collision of innocent intentions and unforeseen enormities" in Ruth's life, but it is also an account of how good and evil collide with one another: "The goodness that would assure a selfless response to any evil unfolding before Ruth's eyes may have handicapped her, beyond the average person, for recognizing the evil wrapped in a sullen, enigmatic personality such as Lee Harvey Oswald."

Ruth initially hesitated when Mallon wrote her asking her if she'd be interested in talking about herself and how she survived being "grafted onto history" rather than just the assassination itself. Her eventual acquiescence means that there is now a book about her that is deeply personal and prescient, though sympathetic. I asked Mallon if Ruth was allowed to see a copy of the book before it was published. "This was not written as a cooperative venture with Ruth," he said. "I obviously depended on her for interviews, but," as could be expected, "Ruth gave me remarkably free rein." She directed him to the personal papers she had donated to the Quaker library at Swarthmore and "stayed out of my hair completely." The two of them are friends. "Ruth Paine would have been an interesting person had Lee Harvey Oswald never darkened her door."



National Review, Jan 28, 2002
by Michael Potemra

So you're at a party, and you meet a young couple. The husband is, rather obviously, a tough case. He's angry at the world-thinks everybody is either stupid, or out to get him, or both. But he and his wife speak Russian, and you want to improve your skills in that language, so you decide to get involved in the young couple's life. You make some calls and get the guy a job in a warehouse; and you give his wife a room in your suburban home in return for help with the housework, and with your Russian.

It's the kind of thing nice people do, every day, in America: reach out to their neighbors in a practical way. We usually don't hear about these everyday decencies; we certainly would never have heard of this one, but for the fact that the young husband in this case used his warehouse job as an opportunity to assassinate the president of the United States. On Friday, November 22, 1963, the Dallas police came to the residence of Ruth Paine and her youthful tenant, Marina Oswald, bringing with them a spotlight that showed America one of its most remarkable, but also representative, characters.

Ruth Paine, Texas housewife, is now the heroine of one of the best nonfiction works of recent years: Thomas Mallon's *Mrs. Paine's Garage and the Murder of John F. Kennedy* (Pantheon, 211 pp., \$22). Mallon details how, armed with her Quaker faith and a guileless, quirky sense of humor, Mrs. Paine navigated her way through the consequences of her young friend's act of madness. The early investigations-Dallas police, FBI, Warren Commission-were just the beginning; Mrs. Paine would also eventually become fodder for the kooky Jim Garrison probe, and for the conspiracy theorists and their numerous Internet sites. Mallon discusses all of this, often in highly amusing detail; but what really makes his book a delight is the fact that at the very heart of it is a

human being who is as alive in the book's pages as the best characters are in great works of fiction.

As left-wing, WASPy Yankees, Ruth Paine and her husband Michael (a great-great grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence) were certainly anomalous in the suburbs of Dallas. But in circumstances as somber as a presidential assassination, Ruth's eccentricities would probably have stood out even on New York's Park Avenue or Philadelphia's Main Line: "Girlish exuberance and nervous, high laughter dart in and out of her manner and conversation, even when the prevailing mood is grave. . . . [She wants] to assist, explain, and conciliate . . . with almost anyone, in whatever circumstances, including the adversarial and bizarre."

Ruth is a cross between Candide and a Quaker Scarlett O'Hara: a spunky innocent trapped in truly insane events. This spirit comes through quite clearly in many of her statements and writings quoted by Mallon. In one passage, she has just spent a very long day testifying before the grand jury of the Garrison inquiry, to help out with what she had so far believed to be a very serious investigation. At day's end, she finds herself in Garrison's office:

Garrison had a can of Metrecal. Do you remember Metrecal? Does anyone remember Metrecal? There he was drinking his Metrecal, and I was starving, and nobody was talking about feeding me anything. I'd gotten up at four in the morning or something. And Garrison began explaining, with chalk in hand and a chalkboard, how the CIA was training people out in the parish, out in the swamps, or whatever . . . I was definitely feeling, "I'm surrounded by some very strange people here. What is going on? What is going on here? . . . Can't I go home?"

Ruth wanted to go home, much as James Joyce wanted to awake from the nightmare called history. But she played her part, and did so with a basic goodness rooted in her religious faith. Mallon calls the core of her Quaker belief an "active peacefulness," which is a pretty good phrase for the life of prayer in any religion. This is from an essay she wrote in 1953 about Quaker meetings:

There I discover and extend a contact with that which I call God. There, occasionally, spontaneous poetry flows through me, without beginning or end; the beauty of life sings in my heart. Sometimes I will see a new direction to my life, or discover an answer to a problem . . . I reach out from within me to the people around . . . All these things happen elsewhere, but they happen

more in Meeting.

This sense of religion as a heightening and deepening of ordinary life is very much in the American grain; indeed, her description of Quaker services is reminiscent of that by another very bright, very good American seeking peace in the midst of awful historical events: her fellow Quaker Whittaker Chambers, in his autobiography, *Witness*.

Like the heroic Chambers, Ruth Paine is an inspiring example of the goodness and warmth of the American heart. Mallon makes the Rochefoucauldian observation that goodness is unsettling, that we would rather "wrestle" with the problem of evil-after all, it reminds us that there are some people worse than ourselves-than face the reality of goodness in others, which reminds us how often we fall short. But in this book, he has given us a lively antidote: the story of a woman who is good, and also highly entertaining; indeed, lovable.

Reviewed by Bob Ruggiero

It was an interest in improving her Russian that brought Ruth Paine to a friend's party in February 1963. The freethinking wife and mother was studying the language and heard that in attendance would be a young American man and his Russian wife who had just returned from that country. But Mrs. Paine got more than speaking lessons when Lee Harvey and Marina Oswald became an integral part of her life, in turn making her a part of history. Not a book necessarily about the JFK assassination, *MRS. PAINE'S GARAGE* is instead of story of friendship, circumstance, and "what-if?" scenarios. Paine and Oswald became fast friends, conversing almost exclusively in Russian, mostly about family life. Paine would eventually invite the pregnant Marina and her daughter to live in her house while an itinerant Lee alternately looked for jobs or --- finding one in a nearby city --- would visit on weekends and himself stay over. Over the weeks, Ruth took a heftier interest in Marina and her life, even to the point of donating blood at a local hospital in exchange for a discount on Marina's upcoming delivery as well as financial help. But she was often put off by Lee, who sometimes would berate and physically abuse Marina and insist that she not learn any English. Eventually, most of the Oswald's meager possessions found their way into the structure of the title --- most notoriously the rifle that the Warren Commission said murdered John F. Kennedy. And while nothing seemed amiss the morning of November 22 when Lee Harvey Oswald awoke and left the house for his job at the Texas School Book Depository (which Ruth had gotten for him), everything would change after lunchtime when word of the assassination hit the news and Ruth opened the door to find a phalanx of FBI agents asking about her houseguests...Paine's whirlwind ride over the next 37 years would include everything from testifying before the Warren Commission to vilification by the JFK-obsessed ranging from the LNs ("Lone Nutters") to the CT ("Conspiracy Theorists"). Ironically, her close ties with Marina would not survive. Soon after Secret Service agents ferreted her away, the widow Oswald, for many reasons, some unsubstantiated, cut off all ties with the woman who was ostensibly her only American friend. Then there was the seemingly odd but intense, almost courting-like relationship with Oswald that Paine seemed to pursue, complete with

pleading letters. Although Paine, a devout Quaker with an unarguably big heart, maintains her interest in Oswald was strictly due to a genuine love of their friendship and concern for her well-being. Ultimately, the slim *MRS. PAINE'S GARAGE* is an interesting --- if not substantive --- account of one woman's wholly unexpected thrust in history. It will of course be of great interest to the JFK assassination community, whose intense if sometimes nutty theories are also given space here with Mallon's reports from an annual conference (which he suggests resemble "a cross between gatherings of the Modern Language Association and Trekkies"). It's an easily digested addition to a literary genre: What course history might have taken if Ruth Paine had taken up Chinese instead of Russian --- and subsequently never found Oswald a job whose window held an impeccable view of Dealey Plaza --- is but one of the book's tantalizing questions.



DAVE DENISON
Prospect's Books editor

WHY DID MRS. RUTH Paine of Irving, Texas, make the notation "LHO purchase of rifle" on the March 1963 page of her Hallmark pocket calendar? Soon enough, everyone would find out that LHO was Lee Harvey Oswald. But how and why would an unassuming mother of two young children in a Dallas suburb know, eight months before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, that Oswald had purchased a rifle? Could she have been in on the plot? Consider the evidence: In the spring and fall of 1963, she gave room and board to Oswald's Russian-born wife, Marina. She made the crucial phone call that helped Oswald get a job at the Texas School Book Depository warehouse. It was her garage that stored LHO's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle until the morning of November 22. And after the fateful shots rang out from the sixth floor of the warehouse that day, and after police caught up with Oswald hours later hiding in the Texas Theatre and then traced their way to the Paine house in Irving, hadn't Ruth Paine greeted the officers by saying, "Come in, we've been expecting you"? Imagine how it must have looked that November afternoon to the Dallas County sheriff's officers as they drove Ruth Paine and Marina Oswald to the station. It was too soon to know whether Lee Oswald had anything to do with the shooting of the president, but he seemed like a man on the run: He had killed a Dallas patrolman shortly after noon, before rushing into the theater. And now they had discovered that Oswald's wife was Russian. Top federal authorities already knew that Lee also had lived in the Soviet Union. On the ride to the station, an officer turned to Paine and asked her directly, "Are you a Communist?" She denied it. Then, translating the question for Marina, Ruth began speaking in Russian! Who dares not to call it conspiracy? Anyone, answers Thomas Mallon in *Mrs. Paine's Garage*, who takes the time to get to know Ruth Paine. Mallon gives us a portrait of an honest woman, a Quaker-inspired pacifist who was, and is, dedicated to improving the world around her. A retired schoolteacher in Florida by the time Mallon began spending time with her, Paine comes across as someone whose clear conscience is the one thing that gave her strength to bear up through the investigations, accusations, and

recriminations that came out of the death of the president. "I think of people this kind of catastrophic event could happen to, I'm probably better off than most," she tells Mallon, "because I feel the world is a kindly place and it'll treat me okay, that there may be chaos around, but I'll come out okay." And she did. Her cooperative attitude from the earliest days of the investigation resulted in her being released from suspicion by Dallas authorities, the FBI, and, later, the Warren Commission, which made her the principal witness in establishing the role of Oswald in the assassination. The questions about her own activities, in fact, were easily answered. She had given Marina Oswald a room in her house partly out of a desire for the companionship of another young mother in difficult circumstances and partly as a way of learning a foreign language. She had made that notation for March 1963 after the facts about Oswald's activities became public, as she went back and tried to establish a time line for the events she had indirectly been a party to. She was unaware that a rifle wrapped in a green blanket was among Oswald's possessions in her garage. And she did not say to the Dallas sheriff's officers, "Come in, we've been expecting you." It hadn't yet occurred to her that the assassination she had heard about on television earlier that day could have anything to do with the morose and shiftless husband of her new Russian friend. IT ISN'T PRIMARILY EXONERATION that Mallon is concerned with, though. Only the most suspicious of conspiracy theorists actually think that the Paines were in on the plot. (They are out there, of course. As one assassination "researcher" puts it: "There's still a lot more work to be done" on the Paines.) What drew Mallon to the story was his desire to understand how it felt for an ordinary American such as Ruth Paine to be swept up in such a spectacular and mysterious political crime. The way bystanders get pulled into historical events is a theme that Mallon has previously explored in novels (he is the author of *Henry and Clara* and *Dewey Defeats Truman*, among others); and he reports that Paine "had been on my mind, in one way or another, for thirty years," since he read a story in the newspaper about her in 1963, when he was 12. So here is Ruth's story, told for the first time at book length. We learn of her upbringing, her family history, her deep feeling for Marina Oswald, her despondence when Marina cut off the friendship after the assassination, and her recollections of the worst moments in her life and the way she has lived with them. Clearly, Mallon was touched by Paine's Quakerly benevolence, and he finds it heartbreaking that she ever crossed paths with the Oswalds--a family that, from all evidence, didn't deserve her. It wasn't just the delusional unbalance of Lee or the coldness of Marina that beset her, but (after the assassination) the unhinged pettiness of Oswald's mother, Marguerite, and the suspiciousness of Oswald's brother Robert. "None of the Oswalds ... had been much equipped by their own experience to understand a vessel of disinterested kindness like Ruth Paine," Mallon writes. It's also clear that characters such as Paine don't come alive on the page in quite the way characters in a good novel

do. Mallon hints at a kind of quiriness about Paine that other writers have noticed, but somehow she never seems to emerge as a fully developed person in all her complexity. One suspects that she is, in fact, not a complex person and that Mallon found in this case that truth is duller than fiction. Though he finds Ruth Paine blameless, he takes a different tack with her husband, Michael. The Paines were in the midst of an amicable divorce at the time of the assassination, and for a while after the event they reconciled. Michael Paine, now living in Massachusetts, faced a harder line of questioning when Mallon caught up with him. It turns out that Michael had admitted in a 1993 documentary that months before the killing of the president he had seen the famous picture of Lee Oswald holding up a rifle with two radical newspapers. Yet he had not told Ruth back then about the evidence that Oswald owned a weapon. Mallon attributes this momentous failing to Michael's passivity, which is plausible, but then goes on to implicate Michael's familial roots in New England, which supposedly gave him a live-and-let-live "worldview and sensibility." Sometimes, Mallon speculates, "a refusal to think the worst of people is precisely what brings it out in them." Leaving aside the dubious regional theory (one could also argue that a typical New Englander would react more strongly against gun ownership than any Texan would have), the tone in the section about Michael is discordant. Both Paines were guilty of a lack of vigilance; but even these many years later, Americans are not good at rooting out unimaginably devious plotters. If it is unfair to torment Ruth Paine with what-ifs, the same ought to hold true for her husband, who, after all, is not the one who brought the Oswalds into their lives. Nevertheless, Mallon is a writer with an interesting mind, and he makes good points about the banality of evil and the enduring "paranoid style in American politics" when it comes to the Kennedy assassination. Almost 40 years later, conspiracy theories still captivate us, especially "in the danker precincts of the Web, where everything is, literally, linked." And in today's media culture, conspiracies make for the best entertainment value, as Oliver Stone demonstrated with the movie JFK. What Mallon has contributed is an anti-conspiracy theory. Facts are put into context and things add up. Sometimes life is ordinary even in the most extraordinary of circumstances.

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Ruth Paine, the well-intentioned Quaker woman who brought the Oswalds into her Dallas home, who got Lee his sixth-floor book depository job, and in whose garage the murder weapon was stashed, has somehow managed to retain her dignity since JFK's death. This graceful study focuses on Paine's struggles with her own guilt and with assassination buffs. A story of admirable strength and sustaining faith. (LJ 12/01)