

Joe McGinnis: A Brief Biography

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Joe McGinnis was born on December 9, 1942 and received a Bachelor of Science degree from Holy Cross in 1964. He served stints as a reporter for the *Worcester Telegram* and *Philadelphia Bulletin* and in 1967, still in his 20s, landed the coveted position of general issues columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. John Osborne, book critic for *The New Republic*, called McGinnis “something of a journalistic prodigy, a sharpshooter with minimal regard for reportorial niceties and a special appeal to young readers.”

During the 1968 presidential campaign, McGinnis learned Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat Hubert Humphrey retained image consultants to enhance their appeal on television, and determined to write a book about the subject. Turned down by Humphrey’s people, McGinnis approached the Nixon media team, which allowed him to observe the marketing of “the New Nixon” first-hand. Quitting his job at the *Inquirer*, McGinnis practiced so-called “immersion journalism,” following the Nixon media offensive on a near-daily basis for five months. McGinnis never identified himself as a journalist. Nor did he reveal his anti-Nixon bias. “My great advantage was that I wasn’t considered press. I was the guy writing a book,” he told *Life* magazine. *The Selling of the President, 1968* was published the next year to brisk sales and critical acclaim. The book spent

seven weeks on the bestseller list and was number one in nonfiction sales for four weeks. The *New York Times*' Christopher Lehmann-Haupt called The Selling of the President "a series of artfully turned-out scenes" which "simultaneously entertain us and make us fear for the future of the Republic."

McGinniss' next tried his hand at writing a novel. The Dream Team (published in 1972), about a young author's sudden ascent to the top of the best-seller list and attendant slide into gambling and alcohol abuse, was thought by some to parallel McGinniss' response to the success of The Selling of the President. A subsequent book, Heroes (1976), compiled a series of interviews conducted with well-known Americans. In 1975, McGinniss spent a year chronicling life in Alaska for Going to Extremes (1980), abandoning the theme of fame to investigate the aftermath of that state's oil-related economic boom. Writing in *The Nation*, Mark Kramer hailed McGinniss as "a first-rate reporter" and praised Going to Extremes as "fine reading. ... thick with whole people, exotic landscapes (and) the nervous and constant curiosity of an adventurer..."

McGinniss' devoted four years to the 1983 bestseller Fatal Vision, an account of Army Dr. Jeffery MacDonald's trial and conviction for the brutal murder of his pregnant wife and two young daughters. McGinniss initially felt MacDonald might be innocent, but in the course of investigation concluded MacDonald was responsible for the triple murder. Yet the

technique of “immersion journalism” that had served McGinniss so well in The Selling of the President proved problematic with Fatal Vision. To begin with, McGinniss accepted MacDonald’s invitation to become part of his defense team during the murder trial. McGinniss also agreed to share a percentage of the book’s profits with MacDonald – a highly dubious proposition. Jeffrey MacDonald believed Fatal Vision would make the case for his innocence, and his collaboration with McGinniss was predicated on that belief. When the published book suggested otherwise, he sued Joe McGinniss for continuing to elicit his cooperation under false pretenses. McGinniss insisted he never guaranteed MacDonald Fatal Vision would exonerate him, and several non-fiction writers came to the author’s defense. The case ended in a hung jury. MacDonald pursued another trial, and McGinniss subsequently paid him a \$325,000 cash settlement, with no admission of liability on the author’s part. McGinniss claimed he agreed to the settlement because he didn’t want to give MacDonald any further publicity. In March 1989, the *New Yorker’s* Janet Malcolm – who had her own libel problems – eviscerated McGinniss for deceiving MacDonald in a sensational two-part essay called “The Journalist and the Murderer.”

After another book dedicated to a vicious family murder (Cruel Doubt, 1991), McGinniss trained his sights on Senator Ted Kennedy in the critically lambasted The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy (1993). McGinniss was justifiably taken to task by reviewers for speculating on the

imagined thoughts of Kennedy family members without troubling to actually interview any of them. Any biography of the myth-encrusted Kennedy's "must," McGinniss wrote by way of explanation, "attempt an approach that transcends that of traditional journalism or even, perhaps, of conventional biography." One of the milder criticisms came from Linda Steiner of the Dictionary of Literary Biography, who complained the book was "filled with melodrama and sarcasm." Kennedy biographers William Manchester and Doris Kearns Goodwin also asserted McGinniss had stolen from their work.

In the mid '90s, McGinniss was set to write a book about the O.J. Simpson trial, but after Simpson's acquittal ("a farce," averred McGinniss), he returned a \$1.75 million advance to Crown Books. He then sought to reinvigorate his career by writing about sports, a long-time passion. The Miracle of Castel di Sangro, which chronicles the nine months he spent bonding with an Italian soccer team, was published in 1999.

* Material for this biography was compiled from Contemporary Authors, *The New York Times*, and *SportsJones Daily Online Sports Magazine*.