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TITLE INFORMATION

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LaCava, Adrienne
Manuscript (312 pp.)

BOOK REVIEW

LaCava's well-researched, character-driven debut thriller tells a tale of CIA involvement in President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

In late 1963, 45-year-old CIA operative Gabriel Haines is sick of the agency's political wrangling and wants nothing more than to ride his horse and live a "simpler, freer kind of life." So, when his wealthy Army buddy Tucker Massey suggests that he become the foreman at a cattle ranch in Texas Hill Country, he heads to Dallas for a meeting. A few days later, Haines has a job offer in hand and "a brand new stable, corral, and cowboy quarters" waiting for him. Unfortunately for Haines, however, he walks through Dealey Plaza on his way out of Dallas, on Nov. 22, 1963, and he sees a Cuban exile lurking in the plaza as the assassination occurs. Haines heads to the Caribbean, believing that "his Company credentials" will make people think he was involved in the president's death. Months later, Tucker reaches out to Haines and begs him to return, and Haines resigns his position in the CIA and heads to the ranch. There Haines interacts with Tucker's pregnant mistress (who keeps a journal), his status-obsessed wife, his angry teenage daughter, his alienated half-brother and his lonely niece. It turns out that Tucker was part of Lyndon Johnson's private, off-the-record security squad when Kennedy was shot, and now-President Johnson summons Tucker for an off-the-record mission. LaCava uses impressive historical research, effectively depicting the simmering burn of the civil rights movement and Vietnam, and demonstrates an astonishing ability to convey the feel of the era without becoming dry or preachy. At the same time, her portrayal of a spunky, motherless preteen girl, a neglected mistress and a world-weary spy are realistic and never stereotypical. Her measured use of imagery also vividly evokes locations across Texas and Mississippi, "where silvery moss dripped from the oak trees like the beards of old men."

A riveting historical novel, featuring brisk plotting and engaging characters.

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