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Who shot J.R.?
Millions of viewers waited eight months to find out



“**I**n its first full season, *Dallas* had already started catching on. As a result, CBS ordered four more episodes, so where the season was supposed to end with [patriarch] Jock Ewing on trial, now they needed a new cliffhanger. By this point, J.R. as a character had really taken hold. He was the man you loved to hate, and women were always rooting for [his wife] Sue Ellen to go out and get herself a lover. It was perfect timing for a whodunit, and the writers cleverly used those last four episodes to give everybody an immediate motive for shooting him.

Unexpectedly for all of us, ‘Who Shot J.R.?’ boomed into, I suppose, the first and grandest worldwide phenomenon resulting from an American TV show. I had friends in England who said that bookies were taking bets on the shooter. A rumor went around Australia that Miss Ellie, J.R.’s own mother, had done it.

[Because of a writers strike], it was a long summer until the shooter was revealed [in November], so the excitement kept building. A few days after the writers had come up with the idea of shooting J.R., producer Phil Capice had told me

Dallas creator
David Jacobs
recalls the shot
heard ‘round
the world

that [Sue Ellen’s sister and J.R.’s mistress] Kristin was to be the shooter. But Phil was very secretive by nature—when they compiled the *Dallas* show ‘bible’ [the repository for writers’ ideas for stories and characters], they would number the copies and lock them in a safe. And so as part of Phil’s brilliant strategy to protect the secret, all of these different possibilities were filmed, with different cast members pulling the trigger. So nobody, even in the cast, knew who did it for sure.

I knew the Kristin solution was going to be an anticlimax—but I really don’t think it mattered. It was going to be a let-down no matter *who* it was. The show still ended up being the most-watched episode of TV ever, until the *M*A*S*H* finale. And I got to realize a dream—sort of. Like any other young writer, I’d always wanted to be published in the *The New Yorker*. Well, the summer of ‘Who Shot J.R.?’ the magazine ran a cartoon: On one side of a police desk is a meek-looking man with his hat in his hand. And a cop is saying to the sergeant, ‘He says he shot J.R.’ I was so excited, and asked myself, ‘Does this count as getting into the *The New Yorker*?’ I’m taking the position that it did.”

— David Jacobs, creator of *Dallas*