

Books

CITIZEN NEWHOUSE

Portrait of a Media Merchant

By Carol Felsenthal

Seven Stories • 512pp • \$29.95

HE'S SHY, RUDE, AWKWARD—AND BRILLIANT

Most media moguls—Murdoch, Redstone, Turner, Eisner—are famously idiosyncratic. They play by their own rules. But there's one tycoon who makes the rest look like conformists: Samuel I. "Si" Newhouse Jr., who, along with his younger brother Donald, controls Advance Publications Inc.

Quirky though they may be, most of the other moguls run public corporations. And they're in business to make money. Not Si. His \$9 billion empire is as secretive as they come. As for profits, Si isn't against the idea. But what he wants is more intangible: status, prestige, buzz—as best reflected in his high-visibility Condé Nast magazines, such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, *GQ*, and *The New Yorker*. Running a big deficit year after year at *The New Yorker* is not a problem for Si, who is not your model CEO. He is, among other things, shy, short, insecure, awkward, inarticulate, rude, cruel—and, in his way, brilliant.

Or so reports Carol Felsenthal in *Citizen Newhouse: Portrait of a Media Merchant*, an unauthorized, relentlessly gossipy if less-than-penetrating portrait of the Newhouse dynasty—with emphasis on Si.

In addition to the glamour factor, the book seems certain to snag shelf space because of a fortunate prepublication contretemps. Felsenthal originally signed a contract with Viking. But in 1996, Pearson, Viking's parent, acquired G. P. Putnam and made former Putnam President Phyllis Grann head of the merged entity. That posed a predicament. In 1993, Felsenthal had stirred up a publishing brouhaha with *Power, Privilege and the Post: The Katharine Graham*

Story, also unauthorized, not friendly, and published by Putnam. After Grann read the 800-page Newhouse manuscript, she rejected the book—but paid Felsenthal the full agreed-on advance. As Felsenthal tells it, Grann said it was "wonderful... but unfortunately a friend of hers appeared on nearly every page." Many other publishers passed on the book. It finally found a home at Seven Stories Press, a small New York house.

Mainline publishers' lack of interest certainly didn't stem from faults in the book, for there is a rich tale to tell. Start with the two protagonists: Sam

Newhouse Sr. and his son Si. Other than a common unprepossessing demeanor, they seem to have come from different planets. Sam Sr., the eldest of eight children of Jewish immigrants, was humble and self-effacing, even after he got rich. He started as an office boy at a New Jersey weekly, the *Bayonne Times*. Sam had little interest in newspapers but liked making money. Gradually, he acquired some 25 papers,

most of them local monopolies such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. His financial strategy could be summed up in the word "frugality"—no corporate headquarters, no secretaries, no files. Several of his papers were rated the worst in the country.

In time, Sam's younger son Donald gravitated to management of the newspapers, which he runs today. But Si seemed directionless until his mid-30s. According to *Citizen*, Si had "no particular cultural or intellectual interests." He "seemed always on the prowl for the thing or the person that would give him some center to his life."

That became Condé Nast, publisher



NEWHOUSE PURSUES GLITZ MORE THAN PROFITS

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MIRABELLA LEARNED SHE WAS BEING REPLACED AT VOGUE WHEN HER HUSBAND HEARD IT ON TV

of *Glamour*, *House & Garden*, and *Young Brides*, which Sam had given to his wife, Mitzi, for a 35th-anniversary present. Sam wasn't pleased about Si's involvement with mostly low-margin magazines, but he eventually acquiesced.

Si's metamorphosis into perhaps the reigning arbiter of high-end glitz is not only curious but mysterious—even, I suspect, to the author. One key element has been Russian-born Alexander Liberman, an influential figure at Condé Nast and one whose esthetic vision has shaped the entire company. Just as important, Liberman shaped Si. "Some say Alex is superficial," says Felsenthal in *Citizen*, but "Si saw him as stunningly stylish." With Liberman's help, Si began "assembling an image to present to the world."

But the image was often blurred. Si's vision is still a work in progress. Even in the early 1970s, says *Citizen*, Si "showed signs of tiring quickly of certain artists, whose work might be there [on his wall] one cocktail party and gone the next." His choice of female companions, after di-

voice from his first wife, reflected similar capriciousness. Newhouse eventually settled down into a second marriage to Victoria Benedict de Ramel, an editor and writer of architecture books.

Uncertainty at Condé Nast shows no sign of abating. When Anna Wintour became editor of *House & Garden* in 1988, employees rushed to upgrade wardrobes "to avoid the disapproval of the chic and skeletal Wintour." One woman observed that "riding up the elevator in the company of Anna Wintour can consume a year's worth of self-esteem."

More substantively, Si habitually fires publishers, writers, and, especially, top editors. Casualties include Diana Vreeland, William Shawn, Robert Gottlieb, Grace Mirabella, Paige Rense, Anthea Disney, Amy Gross, Lou Gropp—and, last August, Ruth Whitney from *Glamour*.

Newhouse's style of dismissal is legendary. When Gropp, editor of *House & Garden*, was vacationing in 1987, he telephoned Si to check in.

"Lou, have you been reading *Women's Wear Daily* while you've been on vacation?" Si asked. Gropp said he hadn't.

"There have been a lot of stories in *WWD* [saying] that Anna Wintour is going to become the editor of *House & Garden*," Si said.

"Well, is that true?" Gropp asked.

"Yes," replied Newhouse.

In 1988, Grace Mirabella learned she was being replaced at *Vogue* by Anna Wintour when her husband heard the news on TV.

In her memoir *In and Out at Vogue*, Mirabella said the 1980 dismissal of Edie Locke from *Self* "is still seen by many... as the blow that ushered in the new era of disloyalty, insecurity, and cutthroat competition that plagues the magazine world in our day." Felsenthal says the rapid changes at Random House "have spread not only through the various Random House imprints but through New York publishing as a whole. Feeding frenzies in search of the



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next sure thing have become the order of the day."

Last May, Si's empire was rent by the spectacle of what seemed like fratricide: Steven T. Florio, president and CEO of Condé Nast, fired his own brother, Tom Florio, president of *The New Yorker*. It seemed almost as if Si's empire was consuming itself.

For media junkies, *Citizen Newhouse* is a feast. The Newhouses declined to cooperate, but Felsenthal conducted 430 interviews, and the book—a vast compendium of facts, quotes, and anecdotes—shows it. While the doings at Random House, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and other properties have been extensively reported in the press, she adds new details—such as André Schiffrin's

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baroque dismissal from Pantheon in 1990.

Oddly, however, the reader may feel less than satiated. One failing is Felsenthal's sketchy portrayal of the empire's finances. The book notes an oft-quoted truism that "Donald makes the money, and Si spends it," but it doesn't go much further than that.

Moreover, despite all the facts that the author has marshaled, the narrative seems bloodless—mainly an assemblage of often unsifted information, requiring the reader to determine what details are important and which aren't. One yearns for more connection in the narrative to put the drama into some clearer perspective.

Finally, for all the attention given to Si, he remains a remarkably opaque character. He is capable of such shrewd moves as the recent repositioning of *Details* from a quirky, aimless, downtown magazine into a stylish, rapidly growing magazine for men in their 20s. Si has a keen eye for talent, such as Tina Brown. But he is also capable of the most destructive personnel decisions. Even at the end of the book, the reader may wonder what to make of this curious man, let alone his legacy.

BY CHRIS WELLES

Senior Editor Welles is a media junkie.