

BOOKS

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GROWING UP *with the* POST

A lively biography
of The Washington Post's
Katharine Graham

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE POST

The Katharine Graham Story.

By Carol Felsenthal. Putnam. 512 pp. \$29.95.

By Fran Schumer

The story of Katharine Graham's life and career is at least as interesting as any published by her newspaper. As told by Carol Felsenthal, whose previous books include a life of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, it begins with the compelling life of Graham's father, Eugene Meyer. A Jew of German descent, he made millions on Wall Street, married Graham's mother, the Valkyrian Agnes, and bought The Washington Post in 1933, when it was far from the distinguished paper it is today. (In 1912, it illustrated a story about the theft of the "Mona Lisa" with the wrong picture.) Meyer skipped over his only son, Eugene 3d, and chose as his successor Katharine, the only one of his five children in whom he sensed a drive and purpose similar to his own.

A product of her generation, Graham, according to Felsenthal, seemed less comfortable as publisher than as the publisher's wife and willingly ceded the reins to her husband, Philip Graham. (A previous suitor had been John Oakes, whose family owned The New York Times.) Philip Graham was brilliant, charming, volatile, manic-depressive and, in August 1963, a suicide.

How Graham managed to recover, not only from her husband's suicide but from

his wild and public philanderings, is left unexplained. But slowly, and with undeniable strength, she did. From a woman so nervous that she had to practice saying "Merry Christmas" before a party, she emerged as the leader whose "Let's do it, let's publish" gave the Post the go-ahead to print the Pentagon Papers, violating a court injunction and risking financial ruin. From there, it was a small step to Watergate, whose history, thanks to the Post and Hollywood, already is known.

So who is Kay Graham? You get a pretty good idea after reading this fascinating biography with its zillion sources, including a few of the author's own "deep throats." Graham wouldn't talk - her memoirs are said to be under contract with Knopf - but lots of her friends would, and even more of her enemies. Yet, they, too, end up with a grudging admiration for this woman who grew in stature as her newspaper did during their crisis days.

Was Graham as harsh as some of these enemies allege? At times, yes, Felsenthal writes. She fired a lot of people, but then what successful corporate chieftain has not? More important, did her position skew the coverage of issues in The Washington Post? The author implies that on several occasions it did, but more remarkable are the number of times it did not, given her friendships with such public figures as Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger and Lyndon Johnson. She even attempted to befriend Richard Nixon, pre-Watergate, and encouraged the Post to endorse him as "the right man to lead the country" in 1968.

But it may have been because she was



AP FILE PHOTO

Katharine Graham: She grew from deep shyness to enviable self-confidence.

the ultimate outsider -- a wife, daughter and woman at a newspaper at which no women had reigned -- that she had the humility to defer to more seasoned experts. And in those she had remarkably good taste. It was Graham who hired Ben Bradlee, who hired Howard Simons (among the lesser-sung heroes of Watergate) and so on down the line.

Also ironic is Graham's early ambivalence toward the women's movement. "What do those broads want now?" she is alleged to have said (not in this biography) about a group of disgruntled staffers at Newsweek. But eventually, she came

around on this and many other issues, with one exception. She never had much interest in her Jewish roots. The "Our Crowd" depicted by Stephen Birmingham, from which her father hailed, was definitely not hers.

If there are flaws in this biography, they are that the author has too much distance from her subject, who wouldn't talk, and not enough distance from her sources, who would. In an unauthorized biography, the most valuable sources are people with

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Fran Schumer is a journalist and author.

Graham's story represents Post's tradition of journalism

■ GRAHAM

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a grudge. Consequently, you get a lot of quotes full of rage and too many expletives to appear in this newspaper.

Also, the balance between scandal and history is slightly weighted toward scandal. How else to explain why only four pages are devoted to Watergate, and at least that much to Philip Graham's affair with Robin Webb and Bradlee's relationship with Sally Quinn?

And on the subject of gossip, the author's skewering of one of Graham's children seems protracted and cruel. However accurate, this roasting of a nonpublic figure makes a reader wonder what purpose it serves. The answer is that it sells serial rights — in this case, appropriately, to Vanity Fair.

Still, the author has amassed an amazing amount of information, not to mention history, anecdotes and quotes as illuminating as John Mitchell's immortal "Katie Graham is going to get her tit caught in a big fat wringer if that's published." Among them are Bradlee's complaint to Graham, "I can't edit with your [expletive] finger in my eye"; Phil Graham's description of Kay as a "Jewish cow"; Kay's description of Phil's psychiatrist, Leslie Faber, as "our little Jewish dentist"; and Graham's heroic "Let's do it, let's publish" that put her and her newspaper



GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO / JOE RUNCI

Katharine Graham speaks at the MIT commencement in 1982.

on the journalism map.

If this isn't biography in the style of Justin Kaplan or Leon Edel, "Power, Privilege, and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story," is certainly in the best tradition of journalism as practiced by her newspaper. At the end of each chapter, a reader wants to echo the traditional notation at the bottom of a page of news copy: "More."