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Review
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The Difficult Journey Of a Newspaper Titan

Katharine Graham in 1964

POWER, PRIVILEGE AND THE POST
The Katharine Graham Story
By Carol Felsenthal
G.P. Putnam's Sons; 511 pages; $29.95

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL STERN

How the woman who 'felt like an orphan' became the gutsy leader of the Washington Post

The first editorial decision Katharine Graham made as publisher of the Washington Post, in August 1963, was to print news of the death of her predecessor and husband, Phil Graham, on the front page, including the fact that he had committed suicide.

Her most important editorial decision came eight years later, when she decided to print the Pentagon Papers after the New York Times was enjoined from publication. She did so despite contrary advice from her most trusted advisers and threats of prosecution from the Nixon Justice Department. This courageous act was soon followed, in 1972-1973, by her decision to back her staff's ongoing Watergate reporting, which led to the fall of Nixon, won the paper a Pulitzer Prize for public service and signaled the emergence of the Post as one of the nation's pre-eminent institutions.

Carol Felsenthal tells the inside story of Kay Graham's journey from poor little rich girl — an emotionally abused daughter and wife — to enthronement as the "queen bee" of America's media establishment with exceptional verve and diligence. Felsenthal, the biographer of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, has done prodigious amounts of original research — including dozens of interviews with figures ranging from Graham family retainers to Sir Isaiah Berlin — the fruits of which are seamlessly integrated into a lively narrative. And she footnotes every quote in her book, attributing only a handful to anonymous sources.

"Power" weaves together two fascinating stories. One is Graham's bitterly unhappy upbringing and marriage in the context of the American Jewish elite's ordeal of assimilation. The other is the "biography" of the Washington Post itself.

Kay Graham's father, Eugene Meyer, was one of the great financiers of the early part of the century and head of the Federal Reserve in the Hoover administration. Her mother, Agnes Ernst, a gentile, was a ferociously independent journalist and intellectual who carried out passionate (although usually platonic) affairs with the great artists of her time, notably Thomas Mann.

Graham once told a friend she "felt like an orphan growing up." Her mother, a "Viking," was savagely critical of her and largely left her to the care of the governess and chauffeur. Her father, less aloof but equally demanding, imposed rigid work and study schedules on the "plodding, retiring" young girl. When Graham graduated from college, she received only

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a note from her mother's secretary, with her first name misspelled.

Meyer had grudgingly begun to prepare his daughter to inherit the Post, which he bought in a bankruptcy sale in 1933, given her siblings' lack of interest or ability. Her marriage to Phil Graham brought her parents a surrogate son and heir they clearly preferred to her.

Phil was the golden boy of a generation of up-and-coming New Dealers that included John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and George Smathers. Charming, brilliant, ambitious, Phil outshone his shy and anxious wife in every way. Meyer transferred voting control of the Post to Phil, not his daughter; Agnes deferred to him. After her marriage, in 1940, Kay Graham retreated into a bell-jar life as a mother and occasional, awkward hostess for her husband's and parents' charmed circle.

Phil Graham was a manic-depressive, and the gnawing sense that he owed his success to his father-in-law exacerbated his growing instability after the war. By 1954, Felsenthal reports, he had taken to calling Meyer a "kike" to his face, reviling Kay Graham in public as a "Jewish cow," and calling his own children "little yids." Kay's response was to act like a battered woman, remaining totally submissive and self-effacing.

Phil's self-undoing culminated at a meeting of influential newspaper publishers and editors in 1963, where he drunkenly seized the lectern, denounced his fellow publishers as stupid cowards, painted acid-etched — but accurate — portraits of his rivals and began to regale the crowd with sordid details of sexual affairs in Washington, starting with JFK. He began a strip-tease as he was hustled off the podium. Felsenthal notes the journalistic ethics of a bygone era: Graham's extraordinary performance before the country's media elite went unreported.

Felsenthal's portrait of Graham's emergence from the shadow of her husband and parents is fair and well rounded. Her career as adequate businesswoman and superb publisher is the foreground of Felsenthal's other gripping story. "Power" is a terrific newspaper book, full of caustic, reporter's-eye-view tales of the newsroom and boardroom as the Post grew from the smallest and weakest paper in Washington to a mighty monopoly.

It's all here, from Graham's discomfort with "too-Jewish" staffers; to her charged relationship with Ben Bradlee, her cocky, self-assured executive editor and "nominative husband," as Felsenthal calls him; to the rise of financier Warren Buffet as her closest adviser; to the changing of the guard as her son, Donald Graham, took over the paper in 1991.

"Power" is also an excellent business case history, carefully describing the strategic errors that have left the Post in its current vulnerable position as a Washington-focused, newspaper-based company with ancillary media interests while its major competitors have become fully-integrated media colossuses.

All that, plus readable prose, is quite a bargain these days. Hurry, hurry, hurry, and read all about it. ■

Michael Stern, a Palo Alto lawyer, was a Washington Post reporter in 1970.

BRAZIL

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polyrhythms." A quarter of the population lives in dire poverty. The average life expectancy in some regions is 35 years for 80 percent of the population. The infant mortality rate ranks among the world's worst. AIDS is on the rise, with 68 percent of Rio's male prostitutes infected, and inflation is rampant. The litany of environmental despoliation is dispiriting. The brutality of past military dictatorships and, more recently, the inefficacy of Fernando Collor de Mello's democratically elected regime add to the country's woes.

Krich can't explain how such a put-upon people can shrug off their oppression. Indeed, he's frankly flabbergasted when, in a neighborhood of flimsy thatched huts without electricity and with raw sewage trickling underfoot, he is told that Brazilians are musical "because we live in a place of so much happiness." By his eloquent finale, however, Krich takes the leap of faith and can't help marveling at a nation that "dedicates itself to encouraging and preserving the pleasure principle" while other countries systematically dismember themselves.

His observations hit close to home when he starts comparing Brazil with that other "continent size, frontier-driven, slavery-haunted" New World country, the United States.

While Krich observes instances of overt prejudice in Brazil, he also sees far more amiable mixing between the races than he is used to.

And in Bahia, the most African of the country's cities because of its colonial role as a Portuguese slave port, he comments, "I have never seen black people so genuinely at peace with who they are. By comparison, the expressions of Afro-American pride I'd seen back in the States seemed exaggerated poses, cast in bitterness."

Krich may be treading sensitive ground here, but black activist musician Gilberto Gil backs him up, pointing out that in Bahia the

BEST-SELL

FICTION/BAY ARE

This Week	
1	THE BRIDGES OF MADI
2	DEGREE OF GUILT, Patt
3	KITCHEN, Yoshimoto
4	THE ENGLISH PATIENT,
5	A SECRET HISTORY, Tar
6	GRIFFIN & SABINE, Bar
7	SABINE'S NOTEBOOK,
8	LIKE WATER FOR CHOC
9	BONE, Ng
10	ALL THE PRETTY HORSE
11	DEVIL'S WALTZ, Kellerm
12	WAITING TO EXHALE,
13	FRAUD, Brookner
14	EINSTEIN'S DREAMS, Li
15	DRAGON TEARS, Koont

NONFICTION/BA

This Week	
1	WOMEN WHO RUN W
2	HEALING AND THE MI
3	ASSEMBLING CALIFOR
4	THE TIBETAN BOOK OF
5	TURNING POINT, Carte
6	DREAM MAKERS, DREA
7	NOBODY NOWHERE,
8	THE TE OF PIGLET, Hoff
9	THE WAY THINGS OUG
10	MEN ARE FROM MARS,
11	A TASTE OF POWER, B
12	MEETING THE MADWO
13	CARE OF THE SOUL, M
14	MARLENE DIETRICH, Ri
15	AROUND THE CRAGGI

QUALITY PAPERBA

This Week	
1	A THOUSAND ACRES,
2	EARTH IN THE BALANC
3	REVOLUTION FROM W
4	BARGAIN HUNTING IN
5	COWBOYS ARE MY WE
6	VOX, Baker
7	THE WORK OF NATION
8	BACKLASH, Faludi