

Their stories have power to fascinate, appall, inspire

# Faces of journalism,

■ **Power, Privilege, and The Post.** Carol Felsenthal. Putnam. 511 pages. \$29.95.

■ **Murdoch.** William Shawcross. Simon & Schuster. 492 pages. \$27.50.

■ **Forward Positions: The War Correspondence of Homer Bigart.** Edited by Betsy Wade. University of Arkansas. 240 pages. \$24.95.

By GENE MILLER

Fascinating book *Power, Privilege, and The Post*. It is as if John Philip Sousa composed his *Washington Post* newspaper march with a hundred cymbal crashes, mostly on the off-beat.

Carol Felsenthal, an author with a wondrous ear for discord, lays out the insecurities, eccentricities and triumphs of publisher Kay Graham, allegedly "the most powerful woman in America." ("Makes me feel like a lady weight lifter," she once replied.)

Graham, a k a "The Lady of the Potomac" and "Katharine the Great," is fair game, I guess, and it's all terribly gossipy. But it's also a bit bad. Felsenthal's opus, a reporting avalanche, makes the reader wonder if she felt compelled to bury everyone and everything.

Family heritage is a starting point. Kay's father, Eugene Meyer, confidant of six presidents, the most influential financier "since Alexander Hamilton," took his valet and a maid on his honeymoon.

Kay's pompous, wild-hare mother, Agnes, platonic lover of Nelson Rockefeller, Thomas Mann and Adlai Stevenson, among others, once dragged the 4-year-old Kay, her least loved child, into a bathroom and taped shut her mouth.

From Vassar, the "shy, humble, self-effacing" Kay wrote home, and Agnes routinely answered through her secretary with the opening, "Your mother says . . ." Agnes got plastered with considerable frequency. Eugene locked the liquor cabinet.

Kay's father purchased The Post

in 1933 from Ned McLean, who once relieved himself in the fireplace of the East Room at the White House, misaimed and piddled on the leg of the Belgian ambassador.

Eugene unpacked FDR's Supreme Court and eventually turned over the factory to Kay's husband, Phil Graham (Miami High, '27), a brilliant, charming, sexist, foul-mouthed, philandering manic-depressive who persuaded Kennedy to offer Johnson the vice presidency, drafted LBJ's "Great Society" and made cartoonist Herblock shave Nixon's beard.

Outrageously anti-Semitic upon occasion, Phil called Kay "a Jewish cow" and their children "kikes and yids."

*'Power, Privilege, and The Post' lays out Katharine Graham's insecurities, eccentricities and triumphs.*

During a union power struggle, Phil once bragged that he could defecate in Times Square and no newspaper would report it, and that's just about what happened. Felsenthal writes, when he went crazy, got a bed at the "nut house" — and eventually blew his brains out with a shotgun.

Thus began the metamorphosis of the frightened widow to the off-with-their-heads publishing tycoon, so unnerved at first she practiced saying "Merry Christmas." Later she talked "truck driver" expletives and so angered unionists that one picket sign proclaimed, "Phil Shot the Wrong Graham."

Felsenthal's account is mostly source identified. Exceptions are Ben Bradlee, her ex-editor now

writing his own memoirs, and Kay herself, who assigned people to interview others for her own book. One unauthorized book in 1976 so outraged her that she persuaded the publisher to pitch 20,000 copies into a shredder. I'll bet her own book isn't published in her lifetime. She is 75 and supposedly worth \$490 million. Son Donny, a subway straphanger, now runs the firm.

Seemingly, Felsenthal skips nothing: Truman Capote's coming-out shindig for Kay ("The Party of the Century"); The Pentagon Papers, where reporter Ben Bagdikian purchased two airline seats, one for 4,400 sheets of paper; Watergate, when Bradlee sat in his office and worked crossword puzzles (contrary to the movie version); the Janet Cooke Pulitzer fiasco, which may have cost Bob Woodward the editorship, and the "Hitler Diary" dupe in Newsweek.

Occasionally, though, she overstates the power, if not the privilege:

"When The Washington Post takes an editorial position, hundreds of editorial-page editors follow suit." That's horse manure.

### The media mogul

Rupert Murdoch is the media mogul from Australia, oft known as "the Dirty Digger," and British journalist William Shawcross, famed for his devastating *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, levels his fire this time at a sitting duck. But he misses as often as he hits.

His chronology is jagged, and the telling of Murdoch's gargantuan money manipulations, consumption and regurgitation is understandably a bit hard to clean up.

But his research is heroic; he catches the absurdities of tabloid journalism — "Headless Body In Topless Bar" — and quotes lots of interesting people, columnist Mike



# warts and all

Royko among them.

No self-respecting dead fish would want to be wrapped in a Murdoch newspaper, Royko wrote. Calling him "The Alien," he wanted to know why Murdoch was so easily welcomed to citizenship when poor Mexicans and Haitians aren't. He was not fleeing communism or tyranny.

"Nor does he have a skill that is in short supply. By profession, Murdoch is a greedy, money-grubbing, power-seeking, status-climbing gad. Since when is that skill in short supply?"

Shawcross unearthed a pile of Murdoch-bashers. Auberon Waugh, the Spectator's resident iconoclast, labeled him the "hairy-heeled, tit-and-bum merchant from Oz," and noted Murdoch's ceaseless, exhausting travel around his empire.

"When I was in Adelaide [where he owned his first newspaper and where he is still venerated as a patron saint], I was told that he survives this form of existence by having an enema before every flight, and by eating nothing on the day of flying. What sort of life is that for a man of fifty-six? Does he not realize how short is our existence on earth? For all his success, all his wealth and power, he is not a free man. It is the life of slave."

Intriguing commentary, granted. But is it true? The reader is left to guess.

## The war correspondent

*Forward Positions: The War Correspondence of Homer Bigart*, is a museum piece, and like the statuary in the Louvre, it is magnificent work that belongs on a pedestal, an ink-stained one for the dead master.

No one, not even Ernie Pyle, reported War II — and later Korea and Vietnam — with a finer touch for clarity, precision and under-



**Felsenthal**  
stated drama.



**Shawcross**

More magazine got it right in a citation: "Four decades of single-minded attention to his craft, a persistent skepticism toward all forms of power and tenacious pursuit of social injustice long before such reporting became fashionable."

From microfilm and sneezy old clips in what used to be called the morgue, Betsy Wade, a New York Timesperson, resuscitated 50 Bigart dispatches for cloth cover. Ancient history, sure, but they sing. This one is from *The Herald-Trib*:

*ABOARD U.S.S. MISSOURI, TOKYO BAY, Sunday, Sept. 2, 1945 — Japan, paying for her desperate throw of the dice at Pearl Harbor, passed from the ranks of the major powers at 9:05 a.m. today when Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu signed the documents of unconditional surrender.*

*If memories of the bestialities of the Japanese prison camps were not so fresh in mind, one might have felt sorry for Shigemitsu as he hobbled on his wooden leg toward the green baize-covered table where the papers lay waiting.*

*He leaned heavily on his cane and had difficulty seating himself. The cane, which rested against the table, dropped to the deck of the battleship as he signed.*

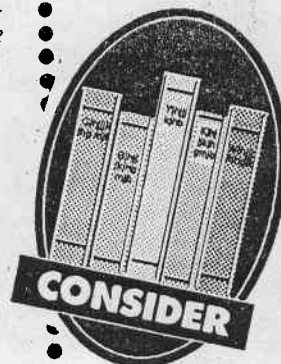
The book should be required reading in every journalism school in America. It won't, of course, and that's a damn shame.

Gene Miller, *The Herald's* associate editor/reporting, is a two-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize.



**THREE FACES:**  
Homer Bigart,  
left, Katharine

# THE BOOK PAGES



**BOOK FAIR FARE**

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