

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1998 • SECTION 14

CHICAGO TRIBUNE.COM/BOOKS

Chicago Tribune

BOOKS

INSIDE

FICTION

A lively deathwatch

Louis Begley's
'Mistler's Exit' 2

FICTION

'Rude Behavior'

A satire of sports
and society 2

NONFICTION

Media monarch

Carol Felsenthal's
biography of
Si Newhouse 3

Examining a media empire and its emperor

CITIZEN NEWHOUSE: Portrait of a Media Merchant

By Carol Felsenthal

Seven Stories Press, 512 pages, \$29.95

By Steve Weinberg

Carol Felsenthal is a Chicago biographer with a penchant for choosing subjects who want to make her life miserable because they think she has made their lives miserable.

Earlier subjects of Felsenthal's

Steve Weinberg is writing a biography of American journalist and author Ida Tarbell under contract to St. Martin's Press. His unauthorized biography of industrialist Armand Hammer led to a libel suit in Britain a decade ago. Hammer died shortly before the scheduled opening of the trial, ending the litigation.

unauthorized reporting include Washington Post/Newsweek Publisher Katharine Graham and anti-feminist political activist Phyllis Schlafly. Those books caused Felsenthal and her publishers difficulties. It is debilitating for a biographer trying to learn the truth about somebody to work for years in the face of uncooperative, sometimes hostile, sources. It is wearing for a publisher to worry about libel or invasion-of-privacy litigation—imagined, assumed, threatened or real.

The Graham and Schlafly books, for all the difficulties, at least got published by the houses that contracted for them. This time, however, Felsenthal's unauthorized words about an influential subject—newspaper, magazine and book publisher Samuel Newhouse—caused an editor, named Phyllis Grann at the giant New York City publishing

house of Viking to cancel a book contract.

Felsenthal received payment from Viking. But for an author who spends years on a book trying to satisfy a particular editor, money in the bank does not constitute full satisfaction. (This reviewer's calls to Grann's office for an explanation of why the book was canceled went unreturned, but Felsenthal writes that Grann told her it "had nothing to do with the quality of the manuscript. It was wonderful, she said, but unfortunately a friend of hers appeared on nearly every page." In other words, Grann had no desire to offend Newhouse, or her own friends who had talked to Felsenthal about Newhouse, or her friends who had not talked to Felsenthal but ended up in the biography anyway.) The only reason Felsenthal's gutsy book is now available is a publisher named Dan Simon at Seven Stories

Press, a small, upstart, New York house.

The troubles surrounding the book are bound to overshadow its content. On the one hand, that is a shame, because it is a first-rate biography that ought to be read, not just talked about because of its publishing history. On the other hand, it is not a shame, because the controversy illuminates a book-publishing disease called cowardice, about which readers ought to know.

Admittedly, Newhouse is no subject for the faint of heart among authors or publishers. Born in 1929 to a self-made, hardworking, humorless, newspaper-tycoon father and a kind, inept, socially ambitious mother, Sam Newhouse showed little promise for business as a young man despite the best schooling money could buy. He blossomed later, despite introvertedness, an

SEE NEWHOUSE, PAGE 4

see over

Newhouse

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

unprepossessing appearance and a tendency toward meanness in the corporate suite. Today he is considered the most-powerful person in publishing, and therein lies the kernel of Felsenthal's trouble: Newhouse has the wealth and power to make professional life miserable for any author or any competing publisher who displeases him. If he is as petty, as ultrasensitive to perceived slights as Felsenthal recounts, he might be making her life miserable soon. He certainly did nothing to make her task easier during the research and writing stages.

In that regard, Felsenthal can take some solace from not being a trailblazer. In 1994, Thomas Maier, a reporter for the Long Island newspaper *Newsday*, fulfilled a contract from St. Martin's Press for an unauthorized biography of Newhouse. He and his agent had had difficulty finding a publisher, and had received only a tiny amount of

money from St. Martin's, given the project's magnitude. But, finally, there was the finished book, "Newhouse: All the Glitter, Power, and Glory of America's Richest Media Empire and the Secretive Man Behind It." Unlike Viking down the road, St. Martin's stayed the course.

Maier built his groundbreaking biography on the foundation of the 1983 book "Newspaperman: S.I. Newhouse and the Business of News" (Ticknor & Fields), by Oregon journalist Richard Meeker, about the father of Felsenthal's subject and the founder of what became a print-media empire. Felsenthal, in turn, builds her biography on the work of Maier and Meeker.

Although some of her information is necessarily derivative, she has unearthed many fresh details: Some are complimentary, many are uncomplimentary. Felsenthal has done her best to make the book current, chronicling the departure earlier this year of controversial editor Tina Brown from Newhouse's *New Yorker* magazine, plus Newhouse's surprise

sale of Random House to an overseas publishing conglomerate. These later chapters are one of the book's strengths for readers who want the latest scoop on the media magnate. But these same chapters weaken the book as a work of art; they read less fluidly because they were obviously thrown together on deadline.

Newhouse is unlikely to derive satisfaction from this account of his life. But if he thinks the book is more negative than positive—which it is—part of the cause is his refusal to cooperate. It is hard for a biographer to balance the detractors when the subject of their criticism refuses to reveal his point of view or allow those he influences to do so. Felsenthal writes that when she requested an interview with Newhouse's daughter Pamela, the reply stated, "I feel it is a violation of the respect people owe one another to publish the biography of an unwilling subject." By that point in her research, the brushoff did not surprise Felsenthal. But it upset her: "The concept of a public

figure, of the importance of examining the lives of people who are influential in politics or academia or the arts or media, seemed a notion that had yet to cross her mind. If the values of journalism had ever been discussed over the Newhouse dinner table, Pamela's mind had obviously been elsewhere. Then again, chances are that the subject never came up—that it is one to which Si himself hasn't given much thought."

Given the circumstances, Felsenthal's book is remarkably even-handed. Hers is now the Newhouse biography of choice.

Perhaps it will become a big seller, teaching Grann at Viking a lesson. Challenging the powerful between book covers does not have to end badly. Meeker and his publisher survived the cries of protest from the Newhouse partisans. In fact, Meeker's alternative newspaper, *Willamette Week*, thrived in Portland, Ore., where his main competition was a Newhouse-owned daily, the *Oregonian*.

Maier and St. Martin's survived, too, despite apparent

attempts by Si Newhouse and his underlings to render the book invisible—attempts that went beyond non-cooperation during the author's research stage. "None of the Newhouse papers ever reviewed this biography," Maier wrote in the paperback edition of his book. "[T]he fourth-largest chain in America . . . decided that it was best for their readers not to learn anything about the boss." Maier said the Newhouse papers also did not publish Liz Smith's nationally syndicated column mentioning his book. Newhouse's magazine *Vanity Fair* refused to publish an ad for the book. Despite Newhouse's apparent influence, Maier got a book contract from Harcourt Brace to write what became a well-received biography of Dr. Benjamin Spock.

For all the pain of seeing her book canceled by Viking, Felsenthal will quite likely write more books if she chooses, to, given her talent. Truth is her best defense against libel and other upsetting possibilities—and this book has the ring of truth.