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February 1, 1999

## The Newhouse Saga, From Sam to Si

Reviewed By Jurek Martin

*Edited By Jay Palmer*

**T**here is a kind of hero in this detailed, though "unauthorized," profile of one of the biggest empires in the very particular world of newspaper and magazine publishing. But he isn't the man whose face adorns the dust cover, and therein lies the problem.

For it is pretty obvious that Carol Felsenthal really rather likes old Solomon Isidore Newhouse, known as Sam, who started buying newspapers when he was a teenager in New Jersey and never really stopped until he died, aged 83, in 1979. Her affection is understandable: There is something undeniably sweet about the modest little mogul devoted to the bottom line, who never had an office, kept all knowledge of his business in his head or in his battered briefcase, hardly ever interfered with what his newspapers wrote, and was totally devoted to a wife whose mind never stretched far beyond her clothes closet.

No such regard is showered on his son, Si Jr., whose overwhelming focus has been on the magazine side of the business. Where the father was happy with local newspapers (none ranked among the nation's finest), the son's world is in the glitziest, glossiest New York-based publications -- Vogue, Vanity Fair, the New Yorker, the full Conde Nast stable -- all designed to promote the cult of celebrity and to generate what Tina Brown, formerly editor of the New Yorker, liked to call "buzz."

**CITIZEN NEWHOUSE:  
Portrait of a Media  
Merchant**

by Carol Felsenthal  
Seven Stories Press,  
\$29.95, 512p

Yet Si Jr., for all his publishing properties, extensive art-buying and party-giving, remains almost as closed a book as his father, and Citizen

Newhouse doesn't really pry him open. It was written without the cooperation of the notoriously reclusive Newhouse family and, indeed, nearly never appeared in print at all. Viking refused to publish it after it was finished, possibly because of discreet pressure from the Newhouses, and it was then picked up by Seven Stories Press, which doesn't duck the controversial.



Like most "unauthorized" biographies relying on secondary sources, this one comes over principally as a hatchet job on Si Jr. and on many of those who have worked for him. Felsenthal's research -- over 400 interviews and press clippings beyond number, she says -- seems impressive, though its numbing and sometimes repetitive detail may lose readers not already plugged in to the esoteric world of New York publishing.

But there are some gleaming nuggets. One is the close relationship of father and son Newhouse with Roy Cohn, notorious aide to Sen. Joe McCarthy and general eminence noir to New York society. He seemed to provide the ebullience and sophistication they lacked. Cohn, we also learn with some amazement, managed the campaign of Anthony Lewis, the distinguished liberal columnist on the New York Times, for student body president at Horace Mann High School in Manhattan. He even used to date Barbara Walters.

This fascination with show and style may explain Si Jr.'s attraction to the men and women who ran his magazines, especially as his father's generation of trusted non-family advisers grew old or died. These prized employees have included Diana Vreeland, Grace Mirabella and Anna Wintour of Vogue; Tina Brown, successively of Vanity Fair and the New Yorker; Harry Evans, her husband (a power at Random House); the Florio brothers and many more.

Yet virtually all of them ran publications that often lost money, sometimes by the bucketful. Si Jr. would reward such aides munificently. But he'd also fire some on what Felsenthal portrays as more whim than sound business judgment. That's a tough case to make against a man who has expanded his inherited and still privately owned empire to the point where it stands, according to the latest Forbes figures, at around \$9 billion.

Felsenthal implies that much of that credit belongs to Donald Newhouse, Si's younger brother, who has mostly tended to the company's profitable newspaper and cable operations. But since the two dine together every Sunday night and talk to each other several times a day, it's hard to believe that they don't work hand in glove.

Still, Si Jr. isn't the conventional media magnate, in that his own opinions remain obscured. That wasn't the case with William Randolph

Hearst and Henry Luce earlier this century, nor is it with the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black today.

For all her apparently diligent digging into the minutiae of publishing, Felsenthal doesn't reveal what Si Jr. actually thinks on the great matters of this or any other day. In this respect, he comes across as his father's son. The patriarch didn't like craft unions, but mostly voted for the Democratic Party. However, only in 1964, under heavy and, he found, distasteful seduction from LBJ, did he direct his newspapers to endorse, or, at the minimum, not to oppose, the incumbent President. Today, nobody appears to be beating at Si Jr.'s door in search of political support, which probably suits him just fine. He is, after all, a Newhouse.

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