

Book Week

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**Katharine Graham
became the guiding
force of her
newspaper against
everyone's
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her own.**



Taylor Jones
© The Charleston Gazette

Kay Graham

How She Rose to the Occasion

By Wendy Smith

More an oral history of the Washington Post over the last 60 years than a traditional biography of its longtime publisher, this is a vintage work of popular non-fiction.

It is voluminously researched (albeit with the noticeable non-participation of its subject, her family and a few key players such as former Post editor Ben Bradlee) and enjoyably gossipy, with a tendency to quote slews of sometimes contradictory opinions rather than offering the author's own. It offers an entertaining chronicle of the newspaper that broke into the big time with its gutsy coverage of the Watergate scandal and of the woman who became its guiding force against everyone's expectations—including her own.

Born in 1917, Katharine Meyer Graham was viewed by most people during her first 46 years as smart but self-effacing, living in the shadow of her formidable parents and, later, her powerful, ambitious husband, Philip Graham. Her father, Eugene Meyer, the descendant of prosperous French Jews, made his fortune as an investment banker, then devoted himself to public service as a presidential advisor. In 1910 he married Agnes Ernst, the assertive daughter of impecunious German Lutheran immigrants.

Carol Felsenthal, a Chicago journalist and author of the biography *Alice Roosevelt Longworth*, paints an unflattering portrait of the tension-riddled Meyer family into which Katharine was born. Eugene devoted most of his attention to his government work, while Agnes—vitriolically depicted as a selfish, often cruel mother—neglected her offspring in favor of public works and flirtations. The fourth of five children, Kay (as her family called her) later said, "I thought I was the peasant walking around brilliant people."

Felsenthal depicts Kay gaining self-confidence at Vassar, where she worked on the undergraduate newspaper. Her father, who had acquired the virtually bankrupt Washington Post in 1933, began to regard her as the one of his children most likely to help him revive it. After her final two years at the University of Chicago (to which she transferred at her father's insistence) and seven months as a reporter for the San Francisco News, Kay came to the Post to be trained as Eugene's assistant.

Then, in 1939, she met Phil Graham, son of a Florida dairy farmer, star of his Harvard Law School class and clerk to a Supreme Court justice. They married less than six months later, and when Phil got out of the army in 1945, Eugene named him associate publisher of the Post. At this point, Felsenthal virtually abandons Kay to devote the next 100 pages to a chronicle of Phil Graham's tenure at the Post.

This is perhaps unavoidable, since all the sources quoted depict Kay as disappearing into the role of unobtrusive wife and mother, but a few more paragraphs examining the difficult Graham marriage—and fewer quotes from interviews conducted with nearly everyone who ever worked at the Post—would have better maintained the book's thematic continuity.

Nonetheless, Felsenthal tells an absorbing story of Phil Graham's successful effort to make the Post the quintessential insider's guide to Washington politics, even as she shows his behavior

becoming increasingly erratic owing to the manic-depressive illness that led to his suicide in 1963. Her portrait of Kay's assumption of power after Phil's death reveals the widow terrified, not very knowledgeable about the paper and patronized by its male executives, who did not expect she would really lead

the company (which also owned Newsweek), despite her 55 percent ownership of the voting stock.

But Kay Graham rose to the occasion, firing men who refused to understand that she was now the boss, taking classes and reading textbooks to enhance her knowledge of the newspaper business and consulting such powerful friends as Robert McNamara, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith to learn what she could do to make the Post survive and grow.

Using the same techniques she employed to describe the Phil Graham years—extensive quotation from interviews, including pop-psych appraisals of people's neuroses as well as the issues involved—Felsenthal creates a lively tapestry of differing viewpoints that fluidly narrates executive shuffles, the rise of the paper to journalistic excellence under editor Ben Bradlee and the breaking of the Watergate story by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein under the leadership of managing editor Howard Simon, bravely backed to the hilt by Kay Graham.

Felsenthal depicts Graham as a woman who remained insecure and anxious, a snob ashamed of her half-Jewish ancestry, who overcame her limitations to become a powerful executive and to shape the Washington Post Co. into one of the nation's most successful and influential media corporations.

If the book seems at times a bit shallow, lacking deeper insights into the complex interplay of personality and history that shaped the newspaper, this is perhaps an inevitable limitation of an account based heavily on material provided by contemporary eyewitnesses. *Power, Privilege, and the Post* will someday be superseded by more critical and focused books about the Washington Post and Kay Graham, but they are unlikely to be more entertaining.

Wendy Smith is a New York literary journalist and author.

Power, Privilege and the Post

The Katharine Graham Story.
By Carol Felsenthal.
Putnam's. \$29.95.
