

PAIN AND POWER

Graham's battles get a hitesweet biographical look

POWER, PRIVILEGE AND THE POST:

The Katharine Graham Story

By Carol Fejersenthal

G.P. Putnam's Sons, 492 pages, \$29.95

Review by Judy Rose

When Katharine Graham graduated from college, neither of her parents bothered to attend. The congratulatory note from her mother's secretary misspelled her first name. She burst into tears.

During her marriage to the brilliant but manic-depressive Phil Graham — who outdistanced even his pal Jack Kennedy in glamour and ambition — she cringed when he called her a "Jewish cow" and criticized her looks, weight, social skills and melted in front of company.

It didn't help that the foul-mouthed and promiscuous Phil had perched his last mistress through the offices of the Wash-

ington Post and Newsweek, calling her "the next Mrs. Graham." The pair planned to force Katharine out, even though the Post had been given to Phil by her father.

In 1963, after Phil Graham shot himself to death in their bathroom, Katharine Graham took over the Washington Post and Newsweek magazine with so much insecurity she had to drill herself to spit out a Merry Christmas greeting to her employees.

Until middle age, Katharine Graham was "a big brown woman," mainly noteworthy for the hilariously cruel people who tormented her.

But after her husband's suicide, Graham slowly and painfully grew into the woman whose 70th birthday party in 1987 was attended by senators, Supreme Court justices, CEOs and ex-President Reagan — a party at which humorist Art Buchwald said, "There is one word that brings us all here ... and that word is 'fear.'"

Graham stood behind her Washington Post staff during Watergate, despite threats that she'd lose her television licenses and Attorney General John Mitchell's famous line: "Katie Graham is going to get her tit caught in a big fat wingtip if that's published."



It became common after Watergate and the Pentagon Papers flap to call Graham the most powerful woman in the world. But author Carol Fejersenthal tries hard to dirty up Graham's positive public image in "Power, Privilege and the Post," a disturbingly two-faced biography.

For the first half of the book, while reporting the oracles Graham suffered from her parents and her husband, Fejersenthal piles on the pain and evokes a natural sympathy. But in the second half, as Graham starts growing into her new life, it's Fejersenthal who turns savage. The last 200 pages consist of quotes from dozens of men — yes, all men — who competed with Graham or worked for her, describing what's wrong with her. It's tedious in its one-sidedness.

Fejersenthal's word choices are tiresomely cruel, too. As Graham neared 70, Fejersenthal briefly admits she gained what most would call the wisdom of experience. But Fejersenthal chooses to call it "geriatric maturation."

In the first half, though, this book contains many startling mini-biographies. There's Graham's mother, Agnes Meyer, a pretentious woman who flouted her relationships with sculptor Auguste Rodin, writer Thomas Mann and philosopher John Dewey but ignored and humiliated her children.

There's her father, Eugene Meyer, who earned a fortune — \$60 million in 1915 — then joined the government as head of both the U.S. Reconstruction Finance Corp. and the Federal Reserve, he



Above: Katharine Graham leaving U.S. District Court with Ben Bradlee after a 1971 victory allowing the Washington Post to publish the Pentagon Papers. Above left: Phil Graham in 1947.

was considered the most powerful money man since Alexander Hamilton. He bought the Washington Post because he was bored by retirement.

There's Phil Graham, "Agnes Meyer in pants," charming, brilliant, cruel, self-doubting. He once screamed at President Kennedy, "Do you know who you're talking to?" He'd been called the most promising man of his generation. But his raging mental illness put him in a sanitarium. He charmed the staff out of a weekend pass, which let him get home to his guns.

There's Ben Bradlee, who became a celebrity journalist after Watergate. Graham took him away from his bureau chief job at Newsweek to make him the Post's executive editor. She knew she needed him to make the paper great, though he had been her husband's ally in his infidelities. He used to amuse the Washington crowd by declaring, "All Phil Gra-

ham needs is a good divorce."

The reader might wish this promising book didn't deteriorate into carping. Katharine Graham is not an idiot. She took over a minor-league newspaper whose coverage was a joke and created the now-respected Washington Post. The ranks of major publishers are spotted with powerful oddballs. Graham clearly outclasses most of them in journalistic ethics and hands-off management. Given her background, she has done a remarkable job of running two of the world's most important publications.

It seems like a late swipe at Katharine Graham was to give her a biographer as cruel as her mother and her husband.

Five Press staff writer Judy Rose attended Katharine Graham's Newsweek party during the 1989 Republican Convention in Detroit and dispenses the author's claim that Graham can't give a good party.