

## COMMENTARY

# City Author Tells Kay Graham Story



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**B**iographers write about people who have made a difference. In the last decade, Chicago writer Carol Felsenthal has written perceptive and readable biographies of three notable women: activist Phyllis Schafly, Alice Roosevelt Longworth and Katharine Graham of the Washington Post.

Her latest, *Power, Privilege, and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story*, which was just published by G.P. Putnam's, is the freshest and most insightful study of a major American newspaper since Gay Talese's *The Kingdom and the Power*. It is doubtful whether a Washington writer could have written with Felsenthal's detachment. It's a terrific book.

Mrs. Graham didn't cooperate with Felsenthal, which didn't discourage her. Authorized biographies are seldom memorable. Felsenthal, who had interviewed Mrs. Graham for the book about Alice Longworth, spoke with dozens of the publisher's associates, including her sister. Ben Bradlee, the Post's former editor, who is writing his own book,

wouldn't talk.

Felsenthal chronicles the lives of Eugene Meyer, Kay Graham's father, who bought the bankrupt Post in 1933; and Phil Graham, Kay's husband, who had ambitions to be president of the United States, but gained power as the publisher of the Post and as the power broker who persuaded John F. Kennedy to choose Lyndon B. Johnson as his vice president in 1960. According to Felsenthal, Graham was abusive to Kay, subjecting her to ridicule as a "Jewish cow." Graham, a manic-depressive, killed himself in 1963.

Following the death of her husband, Mrs. Graham became the publisher of the Post and transformed a stodgy old paper into one of the nation's best. She chose wisely in naming Benjamin Bradlee as the Post's editor. Mrs. Graham showed toughness when she published the Pentagon papers in 1971 in defiance of a court order. She also supported her editors and reporters in their pursuit of the Watergate scandal. Felsenthal discloses, though, that Mrs. Graham wasn't above playing favorites. Among her pals was Nancy Reagan. The Post endorsed the controversial nomination of Edwin J. Meese III for attorney general.

Mrs. Graham's reputation as a feminist is undeserved,

Felsenthal concluded. Though Mrs. Graham invested \$20,000 to help launch Ms. magazine, she promoted few women to senior positions at the Post. A Post writer told Felsenthal that Mrs. Graham grumbled when the Post's women's section was remade as the glitzy Style section. "You men have gotten hold of my women's section, and there's no food, no fashion, no parties," Mrs. Graham lamented. The Style section became a showcase and national trend-setter for feature writing.

In preparing her memoirs, Graham is interviewing people about herself. "It was as if she were not confident of getting her facts of her own life right, as if she did not trust her memory or her interpretation or her insights," writes Felsenthal. Lester Bernstein, a former Graham associate, adds: "What it does in a funny way is recapitulate the way she has lived her career, constantly leaning on other people, so that now she apparently needs other people even to tell her about her own life."

Felsenthal, though, gives Graham her due as a woman who had major impact on her times. Mrs. Graham has made a significant difference.

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