

ARE YOU TOUGH ENOUGH TO WRITE UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHIES?

If everyone told the truth and nothing but the truth, writing biographies would be easy. Just talk to the right people, write up what they say and—voilà!—you'd have the story of a life. But human nature being what it is, people would rather present themselves and their loved ones in the best possible light than share embarrassing or painful incidents from the past.

That's why biographer Carol Felsenthal doesn't mind when subjects like Katharine Graham, the legendary publisher of *The Washington Post*, flatly refuse to cooperate with her. "I have no desire to write an authorized biography," she declares.

Felsenthal prefers telling the *whole* story—warts and all. Her research into the life of Katharine Graham, for example, unearthed a great deal of information that Graham and her family were apparently quite upset to see in print.

Much of Felsenthal's bestselling biography, *Power, Privilege and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story* (Putnam), focuses on Graham's personal obstacles and tragedies. Brought up by a hypercritical mother, Graham was almost a nonentity until she was thrust into the leadership of the family-owned *Post* by the suicide of her brilliant but emotionally abusive husband. Graham—who later made journalistic history by supporting her paper's Watergate investigation—was initially unprepared for the role.

Felsenthal took pains to understand how Graham could possibly have transformed the rather second-rate *Post* into an internationally respected (and profitable) publishing empire. Her compelling insights into the life and mind of this complex woman have sold hundreds of thousands of books—and TV movie rights.

In writing the biography, Felsenthal interviewed almost 300 of Graham's closest associates, using a technique she refined while writing biographies of Phyllis Schafley and Alice Roosevelt Longworth: verifiable name-dropping.

"The trick is to use one door to open the next door. Once I got the first interview, I would write letters to the next group I wanted to talk to," Felsenthal says. "In the letter, I state: 'Among the people I have interviewed are. . . I expect—and encourage—people who get that letter to call those on the list and find out what I'm like as an interviewer.'"

In fact, Felsenthal's one and only interview with Graham (which was



Carol Felsenthal

done for the biography of Alice Longworth) resulted from such a letter. "She told me that she never cooperated with unauthorized biographers, but she was talking to me because everyone else had," Felsenthal laughs.

Once she is in the door, Felsenthal relies on meticulous research to guide her questioning. "A week or so before I went to any interview, I did nothing but bone up on the people I'd be seeing."

She organized the material she reviewed using a system she calls an "entry."

Every time a significant person in Graham's life was mentioned in a document, news clip or interview, a copy would go into a file folder under that name. Felsenthal would then note the mention on a master document in the file. The result was a two-foot-high pile of papers full of little pieces that eventually began to fit together in Felsenthal's mind.

At her interviews, Felsenthal tends to start with an easy question and then let human nature take its course. "It's kind of a trade secret, but people always say more than they should. They start trying to entertain the interviewer because nobody wants to be boring. Everybody wants to come off sounding good."

She advises aspiring biographers to be prepared with written-out questions

but not to be afraid to let the interview go where it will. "People hate silences. It makes them nervous, so in order to fill the silence, they will tell you something that maybe they shouldn't have. When I listen to my tapes, I often want to strangle myself for speaking up just when the person is getting to the heart of the matter."

Felsenthal always tries to corroborate the stories she gets with at least one other source. This has proven to be a wise move, too, considering how strongly the Graham family and friends reacted to her book. In the most scathing attack, Graham's daughter Lally Weymouth said (in an op-ed piece in the *Post*) that the book "consists of a hideous caricature of my father and a slanderous depiction of my entire family."

Graham's son Donald, recently named *Post* publisher, contradicted a positive

review of the book in *The New York Times* by calling Felsenthal's material "unreliable because it is based on the accounts of people who have an ax to grind or who do not know what they are talking about."

Felsenthal's responses to these attacks were never published. But when Graham's friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr., wrote an article condemning the book in *New Republic*, she wrote a long letter that was printed in the magazine, chiding the editors for publishing a "tribute to Kay Graham . . . disguised as a review of my book."

Felsenthal especially admires the fact that Graham allowed the *Post* to print a rave review of her book, despite the fact that it was relegated to page 15 of the book review section. Felsenthal concedes that Graham "could have killed it easily, but she didn't. She's always kept her hands off the editorial side, and I respect her for that."

Furthermore, Felsenthal still believes her book was something of a tribute to Graham and to her leadership of the *Post*. "I was in graduate school during Watergate, and I thought she was a woman of great courage." In showing her faults and shortcomings, Felsenthal believes she's made Graham's eventual success look even more astonishing.

—Nancy Shepherdson