

HELP ?

Feeling the breath of a 'dragon lady'

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Start Page: 15

Abstract:

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Afterward, the Graham family mounted a heavy-duty disinformation campaign to discredit the book. It began when the Post itself published a review of Felsenthal's book by the distinguished biographer Ronald Steel, who called it "a persuasive portrait."

In the New York Times Book Review, Donald Barlett, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, repeated a number of Felsenthal's "delightful stories" and commented darkly on the Grahams' tendency - common in Washington journalistic circles - to become chummy with powerful politicians. A letter to the Book Review from Kay's son, Donald, attacked Barlett's review as well as Felsenthal's book, calling it "based on the accounts of people who have an ax to grind."

Full Text:

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In the adjoining review, Sharon Barrett writes that the queen mother of the Washington Post has been called many things, among them "Dragon Lady."

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It's to Graham's credit that she did not order the review killed - possibly because Steel is just too renowned. But in a Post op-ed piece shortly afterward, her daughter Lally Weymouth branded Felsenthal's book "a slanderous depiction of my entire family."

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"based on the accounts of people who have an ax to grind."

And then Arthur Schlesinger Jr. eviscerated *Power and Privilege* in the *New Republic*, even though he is an intimate of the Grahams. Admitting the relationship in the review hardly released him from commonsense ethical obligations, one of which is to beg off any assignment smacking of personal conflict.

Finally, a made-for-TV movie based on Felsenthal's book, whose script had received final approval, was killed by Ted Turner's broadcasting empire.

Felsenthal was not the first biographer to feel the imperious wrath of the Grahams, who are classic examples of the old dictum that those who spill other people's secrets are often quick to declare themselves immune from scrutiny. In 1979, Deborah Davis' *Katharine the Great* upset Graham so much that she intimidated the book's publisher, William Jovanovich, into recalling it from the stores and pulping more than 20,000 copies.

The Grahams "were able to show many but minor factual errors" in the Davis biography, Felsenthal says. "They were not able to do that with mine because I am fastidious about research and reporting and because I had an excellent copy editor and a very cautious lawyer who carefully vetted the manuscript."

One would expect such a writer to be bitterly contemptuous of Graham's autobiography - especially since it mentions neither the Davis nor the Felsenthal books. Not so. *Personal History* "is very good," Felsenthal says, "the first half in particular, in which she is surprisingly frank about the perils of her childhood and her marriage to Phil Graham."

In fact, Felsenthal adds, had Kay Graham's book been published before *Power, Privilege and the Post*, "I wouldn't have been able to have written mine. They are so close. Her book confirms and repeats 90 percent of what's in my book. There were several anecdotes that . . . seemed to be too extreme to be true. I used them with trepidation, and there they are, repeated in (Graham's) book."

For instance, Felsenthal says, a childhood friend of Graham told her about "an incident that epitomizes" the wintry household in which young Kay grew up. Agnes Meyer, Kay's mother, "looked at her one morning, noticed that her daughter was maturing physically, and began to lecture her on menstruation. 'Oh, Mother,' Kay interrupted, 'that happened to me a year ago.'"

"Had *Personal History* been biography rather than autobiography, I would have contemplated the possibility of plagiarism," Felsenthal says. "In other words, I got her right."

Asked to summarize her view of Graham, Felsenthal declares: "Kay was a terrible businesswoman . . . She depended in an almost childlike way on (financier) Warren Buffett or whoever was the great man of the moment." But she also "understood the importance of the Pentagon Papers and of Watergate, and she made extremely courageous decisions that could have proven disastrous to her family's fortunes. And, for someone so concerned always about what others thought of her, she kept out of the editorial (side). That's her strength, and that's enough."

Felsenthal is nearly finished with another biography of a secretive and imperious publishing magnate - Si Newhouse, lord of the Random House empire as well as the *Condé Nast* magazines. "You might or might not believe how terrified these Newhouse employees are of me," she says.

In the Newhouse-owned New Yorker a couple of weeks ago, the respected David Remnick reviewed Personal History, whose author is his former employer. But he did not mention Felsenthal's book and the Graham family's campaign against it, although he did cite the trashing of Davis' biography.

When she asked Remnick why, Felsenthal says, he replied that he had read her book, but didn't like it and so decided to leave it out of the review. "I asked him if he knew that I was writing a book about Si Newhouse and he said no, he had no idea.

"I then asked him if we could schedule an interview for the Newhouse book. He had said earlier in the conversation that he believes it's wrong for journalists not to talk to other journalists who are writing legitimate books, but he would not agree to an interview, claiming not to know Si Newhouse."

(Remnick responded: "It's true that I would help any journalist or biographer. I've worked for the Grahams and commented on them, and I've worked for Tina Brown (the New Yorker editor) and commented on her. My judgment is that while Si Newhouse owns the New Yorker, I do not have enough personal contact or knowledge about him to say anything particularly new or intelligent, and I would hope Ms. Felsenthal would respect that.")

When Felsenthal approached Kay Graham's minions for interviews, often they declined or agreed only on condition of anonymity, but many talked, "in dark corners of unfashionable restaurants." But Newhouse employees, Felsenthal says, are too "afraid - because he pays better than just about anyone else in the publishing universe and because he seems to own just about everything any writer wants to write for - that they don't even answer my letters."

One would think that Felsenthal - also the biographer of Phyllis Schlafly and Alice Roosevelt Longworth - would find it easier to write lives of more cooperative people. She demurs. "I'm very interested in newspapers and magazines and the people who own and run them," she says. "I would bet that I am a repository of more information and gossip about the media than anyone alive."

In short, a dragonslayer whose weapons are doggedness and a well-stuffed file cabinet.

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[Illustration]

Carol Felsenthal, controversial biographer of Katharine Graham: "I got her right." See also related story.

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