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## Newhouse Bio Survives a Fall

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CAROL FELSENTHAL distinguished herself as a digger not easily intimidated by a mighty subject when she wrote "Power, Privilege and The Post," a biography of Washington Post owner Katharine Graham. Published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1993, over the expressed concerns of Graham's attorney, the 500-page book still managed to earn the respect of the Post's appointed reviewer. Biographer Ronald Steel said the book was "unlikely to please its subject" but that it painted "a persuasive portrait of a gutsy woman."

For an encore, Felsenthal signed a six-figure contract with Viking Press in 1994 to write a biography of another powerful publisher -- S.I. Newhouse Jr., who has generated considerable news coverage and literary gossip since his stunning announcement last month that he is selling Random House to Bertelsmann A.G., the German media conglomerate. In this case, however, Felsenthal has had a much tougher road to publication, seeing that Viking's new management took the unusual step of canceling her book in finished form.

As Felsenthal tells the story, she completed her manuscript at the end of last year, and believed it was undergoing a customary legal review. Instead, she said, her agent, Philippa Brophy, was asked to lunch in mid-January by Viking president Susan Petersen and Phyllis Grann, the president of Penguin Putnam Inc., of which Viking is a part. According to Felsenthal, Grann explained that she could not publish the Newhouse biography, which had been acquired by Viking's previous management, because too many people mentioned in the book are friends of hers and Petersen's, a former executive vice president of Random House.

"It's not a hatchet job -- it's an objective and balanced look at Newhouse and it's sympathetic in many ways," Felsenthal said. But after four years of work, including more than 500 interviews, Felsenthal now had an orphaned manuscript, one not easily placed elsewhere, given Newhouse's extensive ownership of other book publishers and leading magazines (such as Vanity Fair, The New Yorker and GQ) that publishers routinely hope will excerpt a book or profile an author as part of a publicity campaign.

"When it happened, I was completely outraged," Felsenthal added. "In this case, it was self-censorship. I make no claim or charge that Si Newhouse himself asked Phyllis Grann to pull the book. He owns so much that people censor themselves."

As it turned out, Penguin Putnam paid Felsenthal the balance of her contract and a small, independent house, Seven Stories Press, picked

up the book and may stick with the earlier plan to publish it in the fall. Arriving four years after publication of Newsday reporter Thomas Maier's "Newhouse" (Johnson Books), Felsenthal's new look at the publishing titan will encompass the unexpected exit last fall of Random House publisher Harold M. Evans and the pending sale of the company.

Meantime, a lingering question is whether the book's cancellation by Penguin Putnam reflects merely the personal reservations of company management or the kind of impenetrable publishing power that some authors and literary agents have come to dread as consolidation puts more publishing houses, such as Random House and Putnam, into fewer hands.

At the very least, Felsenthal's experience underscores the increasing difficulty journalists will have in writing about a media topic or a media figure without fraying a tie that the subject has to one's publisher. Indeed, editor and publisher Steven Brill says that Content, the media-watching magazine he plans to launch in June, will rely on staff reporters -- not freelancers, who might be skittish about jeopardizing contacts in broadcasting and publishing that they may depend on for other assignments.

Grann, who was chairman of Putnam when the company published Felsenthal's Graham book, added Viking to her executive purview in December, 1996. That was when the British-based Pearson Group, the owner of Penguin USA and subsidiary imprints such as Viking, closed on its purchase of Putnam and Grann became president of the newly formed Penguin Putnam Inc. Boasting annual sales estimated at \$860 million, Penguin Putnam will become the world's second-largest consumer book publisher when Bertelsmann forms the new and twice-as-large Random House Inc. by merging its acquisition and its Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group at midyear.

Paul Aiken, executive director of the Authors Guild, characterized the Felsenthal cancellation as "exactly the sort of thing we're worried about . . . In the current publishing environment, the fear of self-censorship among the four major houses is really as great as government censorship. These houses have the power to determine much of our cultural discourse and free debate. We're concerned about that, especially after the announcement that Bertelsmann will buy Random House."

Peter Olson, who will head Random House Inc. after Bertelsmann completes its purchase, has stated repeatedly since last month that the newly enlarged company will maintain a diversity of titles and imprints and not trim the number of books it will publish.

At the same time, the Felsenthal episode recalls similar incidents involving other authors. In the 1990s, dozens of other books have been dropped by publishers for a variety of reasons.

HarperCollins Publishers, beset by financial problems, last year reconsidered the commercial prospects of more than 100 books, including a bunch that were long overdue from authors, and decided to cancel the books. Not everyone reacted with dismay; Jonathan Yardley,

the Washington Post columnist and an author himself, suggested that HarperCollins owner Rupert Murdoch was giving "a swift kick in the derriere" to the industry, which "publishes too many books, too many of which are bad, too few of which have any discernible market, almost all of which end up being published inattentively."

More recently, Murdoch ordered his HarperCollins organization in Britain to cancel plans to publish a memoir by Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, because the book will criticize China, where the media baron has vast business interests. (As a result, the British publisher Macmillan acquired the book for sale overseas; Times Books will publish it in the United States in the fall.)

Earlier in the decade, Simon & Schuster allegedly bowed to pressure from Paramount Communications, then its parent corporation, and relinquished Robert Sam Anson's planned book on The Walt Disney Co., headed by two former Paramount executives. Anson took the project to Pantheon Books, a division of Random House.

G.P. Putnam's Sons cited "legal reasons" when it dropped Richard E. Burke's "The Senator: My 10 Years With Ted Kennedy," later published by St. Martin's Press. In addition, Putnam let go an unauthorized biography of Calvin Klein and paid its two authors in full, reportedly after concerns were expressed by influential friends of the designer, including David Geffen, whose record company was owned by MCA Inc., which was then Putnam's parent company, too. The Klein biography -- "Obsession," written by Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher -- later was released by Carol Publishing.

"It's not a complete remedy to be paid off -- you're supposed to be paid and published," Aiken added.

Brophy, Felsenthal's agent, declined to comment on what happened to the Newhouse book.

A request for an explanation from Grann was made through Marilyn Ducksworth, Putnam Penguin's corporate director of public relations. On Tuesday, Ducksworth said: "Officially, we have no comment."

### **Ed Burns Looks Back**

If only Lou Carnesecca, the legendary basketball coach of St. John's University, had gone just once to watch Ed Burns play the game at Hewlett High School. Didn't happen. "For that matter, nobody from Division I, II, or III schools came to see me play either," Burns writes. "And so my basketball dream died a horrible death."

Burns tells us a lot about himself and his impoverished struggle to make his first feature-length film ("The Brothers McMullen") in an upbeat introduction to "Three Screenplays by Edward Burns." The collection of his scripts is newly published by Hyperion in an oversize paperback and timed to the release two weeks ago of his third film, "No Looking Back."

### **Rebecca in the Garden**