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JON SALL/SUN-TIMES

Carol Felsenthal, Katharine Graham's biographer, has had troubles with her upcoming book about another publisher, S. I. Newhouse Jr.

A chilling story about publishing

BY PAUL D. COLFORD

Chicago writer 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 Putnam's in 1993, over the expressed concerns of Graham's attorney, the 500-page book still earned the respect of the Post's reviewer, biographer Ronald Steel. He said the book was "unlikely to please its subject" but that it painted "a persuasive portrait of a gutsy woman."

Though Graham allowed the review to be printed in her newspaper, her family and friends later mounted a heavy attack on the book, calling it inaccurate and scurrilous. (Graham last week won a Pulitzer Prize for her own biography, published last year.)

Meanwhile, Felsenthal—who is also the biographer of Alice Roosevelt Longworth and Phyllis Schlafly—signed a six-figure contract with Viking Press in 1994 to write a biography of another powerful and secretive publisher—S.I. Newhouse Jr., who last month announced he is selling the Random House publishing empire to Bertelsmann A.G., a German conglomerate.

In this case, however, Felsenthal has had a much tougher road to publication: Viking's new management canceled her book in finished form.

Felsenthal completed her manuscript at the end of last year, she said, 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 she could not publish the Newhouse biography, which had

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quired by Viking's previous management, because too
many people mentioned in the book are friends of hers
and Petersen, a former Random House executive.

"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 or-
phaned manuscript, one not easily placed elsewhere, giv-
en Newhouse's extensive ownership of other book pub-
lishers 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 him-
self asked Phyllis Grann to pull the book. He owns so much that people cen-
sor themselves."

As it turned out, Penguin Putnam paid Felsenthal the balance of her con-
tract 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. It arrives
four years after publication of the prize-winning *Newhouse* (Johnson Books),
by *Newsday* reporter Thomas Maier (author of *Dr. Spock*, reviewed at left).
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 Pen-
guin Putnam reflects merely the personal reservations of company manage-
ment or the kind of impenetrable publishing power that some authors and lit-
erary 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 diffi-
culty journalists will have in writing about a media topic or a media figure
without fraying a tie that the subject has to the publisher. Indeed, editor and
publisher Steven Brill says *Content*, the media-watching magazine he plans
to launch in June, will rely on staff reporters, not free-lancers, who might be
skittish about jeopardizing contacts in broadcasting and publishing that they
may depend on for other assignments.

Grann, who was chair 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 subsidiaries such as Viking, purchased Putnam and Grann became presi-
dent of the new Penguin Putnam Inc. Boasting annual sales estimated at
\$860 million, Penguin Putnam will become the world's second-largest con-
sumer 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.

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

Brophy, Felsenthal's agent, also declined to comment.

Paul Aiken, executive director of the Authors Guild, said, "It's not a com-
plete remedy to be paid off—you're supposed to be paid and published."

Aiken 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 govern-
ment censorship. These houses have the power to determine much of our cul-
tural discourse and free debate."

Peter Olson, who will head Random House Inc. after Bertelsmann com-
pletes its purchase, has said the newly enlarged company will maintain a di-
versity 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.

Last year Rupert Murdoch's HarperCollins, beset by financial problems,
cancelled more than 100 books. More recently, Murdoch ordered HarperCol-
lins in to cancel 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. (Macmillan in Britain picked up the book; 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 dumped Rob-
ert 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.

Putnam's 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 canceled an unauthorized biography of Calvin
Klein and paid its two authors in full, reportedly after concerns were ex-
pressed 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.



Newhouse

Newsday