

The Untouchable

With tens of thousands of books published every year, most writers only dream of getting their latest work reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*. But for biographer Carol Felsenthal, the *NYTBR* turned into a nightmare.

In the Dec. 20, 1998, issue, Tom Goldstein, dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, dismissed *Citizen Newhouse: Portrait of a Media Merchant*, Felsenthal's unauthorized look at the rise and follies of S.I. "Si" Newhouse Jr., as "a rather dull hatchet job." In an unduly harsh tone, Goldstein complained about the book's title, oddly nit-picked at a few short passages on the Newhouse-owned *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, and concluded, "let this book be the last of its kind." Ouch.

"I imagined as I read this thing that there were umpteen book editors withdrawing assignments, saying, don't bother, the *Times* has just given this book such a completely negative review," says Felsenthal, who previously wrote well-received biographies of Katharine Graham, Alice Roosevelt Longworth and Phyllis Schlafly. "Why assign this unworthy book when there are so many others and such little space?"

Indeed, only a handful of other papers bothered to review the book; it was trashed in the *New York Observer* and the *Washington Post*, but both Chicago papers printed positive reviews. As owner of more than 20 newspapers, the Condé Nast magazine group (which includes *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*) and, until recently, Random House, Newhouse is perhaps the most powerful man in the media—but no one else would touch the book. Felsenthal was a pariah.

By then, she was getting used to the feeling. As Jefferson Decker first reported in this magazine a year ago, when Felsenthal turned in her completed manuscript of *Citizen Newhouse* to Viking, Phyllis Grann, president of Viking's parent company Putnam Penguin, decided to cancel the book. Her reason wasn't the quality of Felsenthal's work, Grann explained, but because a friend appeared on nearly every page. Rather than jeop-

ardize personal or business relationships in the incestuous world of publishing, she chose self-censorship. Eventually, after all the other big publishers passed, the book was picked up by the small, independent publisher Seven Stories.

While the book is not flawless, Felsenthal is no hack. Its biggest shortcom-



ing is Newhouse himself, who even the author admits "is kind of a mope." But the book is an insightful, entertaining look at the "alternately boneheaded and brilliant moves" Newhouse has made. Taking the opposite approach of his father—who treated the newspaper business as if he was running the corner grocery store—the son has emphasized style over substance and buzz over the bottom line (as evidenced by the huge advances given to the likes of Nancy Reagan and Dick Morris that cut into Random House's profits or the millions lost at *The New Yorker* under Tina Brown).

Any author who gets panned is suspicious of a reviewer's connections and motives, or if he even read the book, but Felsenthal insists that Goldstein had a conflict of interest. "If it had been someone else who wrote the review, who wasn't dean of Columbia Journalism School," she says, "I would have let it go."

Investigating her claims, *In These Times* filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the New York attorney general's office. According to its records, the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation, through which the family does most of its giving, gave \$30,000 to the Columbia Journalism School in both 1996 and 1997 (the most recent years for which records are available). In 1989, it gave another \$70,000 to sponsor a series of seminars on media and society. Goldstein was appointed in

December 1996, but did not take over as dean until July 1997.

Of course, for one of the country's richest men—*Forbes* estimates Newhouse is worth \$4.5 billion, and he once spent \$17 million on a single painting—this money is a pittance. Still, it compounds the question of whether Goldstein, part of whose job is to place his students in jobs and internships with Newhouse publications as well as to raise money for the school, should have passed on the assignment. At the very least, he should have acknowledged any ties to Newhouse. (As *In These Times* went to press, Goldstein was unavailable for comment.)

It should be noted that, with everything Newhouse owns, it's hard to find a top-level journalist without some connection to him. No one is suggesting that he directly pressured Grann or Goldstein. But through his sudden hirings, firings, sales and acquisitions, Newhouse has made it clear that he can make life unpleasant for those who fall out of favor. As media companies continue to consolidate, it will become harder for Felsenthal, or any writer, to cover these moguls.

For Felsenthal, vindication would be an editor's note in the *Times*, noting a con-

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flict of interest. Fat chance. Charles "Chip" McGrath, editor of the *NYTBR*, is a former deputy editor of *The New Yorker*. He repeatedly refused to be interviewed for Felsenthal's book because, as he put it in a letter, it did not have the "explicit approval" of Newhouse.

Has Felsenthal learned anything? "One lesson is not to write about publishers, because the one subject that publishers don't want to cover is themselves," she says. "But the real lesson is to speak up."

Is it? Or, as magazines and book publishers fall into fewer and fewer hands will more authors simply leave the Newhouses, Murdochs and Turners alone, hoping to get ahead? ■

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