

The Booklist Interview

Carol Felsenthal

Booklist spoke recently with Carol Felsenthal, the author of biographies of Phyllis Schlafly, Alice Longworth Roosevelt, and Katherine Graham, about the biographer's craft and about the storm of controversy that has greeted her latest work, *Power, Privilege, and the Post*, an "unauthorized" account of *Washington Post* publisher Graham, whose decisions to publish the Pentagon Papers and to pursue the Watergate story changed American journalism.

BKL: How did you decide to write about Katherine Graham?

FELSENTHAL: It was 1985. I was working on my Alice Longworth Roosevelt biography, and I interviewed Graham. I remember being awestruck when I entered the *Washington Post* and thought about meeting this woman who had done such courageous things as a publisher in the sixties. The first thing she said when I walked into her office was, "I never talk to people who are writing unauthorized biographies, but I am talking to you because you've talked to everybody else." I thought at the time that it was a particularly preposterous reason: everyone's talking to you so I will, too. She was very modest, almost nervous. It was amazing behavior for a woman in such a powerful position.

BKL: Weren't you intimidated by what happened to the Deborah Davis book [an earlier biography of Graham, recalled by the publisher and shredded after objections from the family]?

FELSENTHAL: Yes, I was intimidated; yet, I figured she could never get away with it twice. What happened to Deborah Davis was terrible. It is not a bad book. It's unconscionable that writers' groups did not rise up in great anger. Kay Graham had a part in quashing that book, but it was really Ben Bradlee who was behind it.

BKL: Was Bradlee doing it at her bidding or for his own interests?

FELSENTHAL: He is very protective of Kay. On one level, she's his livelihood, or was. [Graham has retired and is now chair of the board.] There is also genuine affection between the two of them. He was also furious that Davis tried to prove that he worked for the CIA. The story, as I know it, is that Bradlee wrote this letter, and Bill Jovanovich, who then ran Harcourt Brace, just caved right in. He recalled the book and had it shredded. It has come out in two other editions since.

BKL: What did you do to ensure that your book wouldn't run into similar trouble?

FELSENTHAL: Writing about a living person is always a very frightening prospect. You have to be very, very careful. Still, if I had really tried to protect myself, I would have had a book with no heart to it. As things go, this book was read by a lawyer who came back with a long, long list of concerns. She said I had to show sources, show that I had evidence to back up everything I was saying.

BKL: What is considered adequate evidence from a legal point of view?

FELSENTHAL: Two verbal sources, or, depending on what it was, I had to find written sources—archival material, news clippings, pages in books—so that everything could be traced to a source. I had to go through the extremely ponderous job of attributing everything, which in a trade book is not expected. In a trade book, you expect a certain amount of information on sources and an index. But I have 38 pages of footnotes.

BKL: That makes it sound like a history tome, but it isn't, right?

FELSENTHAL: Right. It is a very anecdotal book. In fact, some people have even called it gossipy. But that's okay. It's readable and full of stories.

BKL: Enough stories to make a TV miniseries, I hear.

FELSENTHAL: Yes, we finally signed a contract. Now the producer has a year to put it together. It will be interesting to see if it gets made. Obviously I'll make some money, and it will bring a lot of attention to the book.

BKL: Are you concerned that the filmmakers will sensationalize the book?

FELSENTHAL: I do worry about it, but the miniseries will probably bring the book back to the best-seller list. It made best-seller lists in Washington and here in Chicago. On the whole, I'm anxious for the movie to be made. When I've read about authors complaining that they haven't liked the movies made from their books, I've said to myself, gee, I wish that was something I had to worry about.



Michael Posner

BKL: You were a book-review editor at the American Library Association for years. How does it feel to be on the other side of the reviewing business?

FELSENTHAL: The state of book reviewing in this country, I think, is terrible. As a book-review editor, I think you can get lively reviews without giving the book to someone who has an obvious conflict of interest or a grudge. There are a lot of grudge matches in book reviewing. On the other side, there are a lot of reviewers who are kissing each other up.

BKL: How was the treatment of your book?

FELSENTHAL: As a longtime and avid reader of book reviews, I think, overall, I have been treated very fairly. But there have been a couple of noteworthy incidents. There was a mixed review written for the *Baltimore Sun* containing a lot of negative opinions. Right

at the end of the review, the reviewer, "in the interests of full disclosure," noted that his wife works for the *Washington Post* and he does consulting or special projects for the *Post*. How could a book editor assign my book, about the publisher of the *Post*, to this person? And how could he write an objective review of my book when his wife is an employee of the *Post*? I think it's wrong to give a book to someone for whom it is a clear conflict of interest.

BKL: Did any other publication assign the book to a reviewer with an obvious bias?

FELSENTHAL: The *New Republic* gave it to Arthur Schlesinger to review. He wrote a scathing piece on it. He is a close friend of Kay Graham's, and he was a close friend of Kay's late husband, Phil. He was one of the men who ran to her side when Phil committed suicide. He was with her on the day when John Kennedy died. He should not have reviewed the book. It was very arrogant and pompous of him.

BKL: Didn't the *Post* review your book?

FELSENTHAL: Yes. They loved it. It was assigned by the book editor, Nina King, who was in a tough spot. Here she is, the book editor of the *Post*, and here comes this book that is about her paper and her employer. They can't ignore it. Obviously people in Washington are interested in it. So she assigns it to Ronald Steel, a very distinguished

professor who wrote the definitive biography of Walter Lippmann. I suspect they thought he would be very critical of the book. He's an academic, and I'm a journalist. But Steel had nothing but good things to say about my book. So what was the *Post* to do? Well, they ran it on page 15 instead of in the front. My feeling was that a reviewer of that caliber would normally have received more play.

BKL: Yet couldn't Graham have just quashed the review?

FELSENTHAL: The most interesting thing of all is that Kay Graham ran it. That confirms everything I say about her as a great newspaper publisher, mostly because she kept her hands out of the editorial side. Kay always insisted on keeping personal views and friendships separate from the newspaper.

BKL: Doesn't her son run the newspaper now?

FELSENTHAL: Don is the oldest of Kay's four children and the heir. More than the heir, he is now the CEO and has taken over the *Post* company. My portrait of Don Graham and my take on him is that he is very deliberately trying to be as different from his father as he can—he is not full of charisma and charm. The newspaper business is very important to him.

When the *New York Times Book Review* also gave my book a good review, Don Graham wrote a letter to the editor. I've never seen a letter from him anywhere; I don't think he likes to do that sort of thing. The letter basically said, "Doesn't your distinguished reviewer [the reviewer was Donald Bartlett, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for the *Philadelphia Enquirer*] realize just what a bad book this is?"

BKL: I read that Graham's daughter, Lally Weymouth, called your book a "hideous caricature of my father and a slanderous depiction of my entire family."

FELSENTHAL: It's the portrait of the father that is so painful to them. They say that I don't make it clear enough that Phil was mentally ill when he was spouting anti-Semitic slurs at Kay. But I make it very clear. From the very beginning, I talk about his manic-depressive illness and the fact that treatment was totally ineffective. I think Phil's behavior has to be taken in context, and I always present it that way.

Another thing they have criticized is what they say is my portrait of Kay as an anti-Semite. I don't say she's an anti-Semite. She had plenty of top executives whom she depended on who were Jews. And she wanted one of them to run the company. I'd say she's a snob. It's not Jews she doesn't like, it's people with certain mannerisms that she considers low class. She is a garden-variety snob.

BKL: Did you actually interview Graham for the book?

FELSENTHAL: No; she refused to talk to me. But she's working on her memoirs, and at the same time I was interviewing people for my book. Kay was doing the same thing. I always knew I was interviewing the right people because they would say, "Oh, two weeks ago Kay Graham called and asked me for an interview," or "I just spent two hours with her yesterday." Then I knew I had all the right people.

BKL: Did anyone in Graham's family talk to you?

FELSENTHAL: At the very end, after I had the first draft written, I sent a letter to Ben Bradlee, Lally Weymouth, Don Graham, Kay, and her sister. They also got the letter listing the people I had interviewed. So, if they were going to talk to me at all that would have been the time. Only her sister did.

BKL: How did you select interviewees?

FELSENTHAL: Well, with a person like Kay, who has so much power, you have to start at the outside and work your way to the center. You can't just go to Kay's daughter and say, "I'm writing about your mother. Tell me everything." You try to interview people with prominent names, so you can then use the prominent names to open the door to some other people. That is what will get the next person to talk to you. This is especially true with a Washington subject. If you've interviewed A, B, and C, then D wants to be in your index, too.

BKL: What do you think of Janet Malcolm's definition of a journalist as a "kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance and loneliness and betraying them without remorse"?

FELSENTHAL: I think that was a ridiculous article. I don't betray people. I am very careful to keep things in context and not to fool around in the course of interviewing.

BKL: Is it hard getting people to talk to you?

FELSENTHAL: I have found that it's easier than people think. If you establish a rapport with someone, you can get them to talk about all kinds of things. You know they're telling you stuff that, later on, they're going to be sorry they said, but they just keep on talking, trying to impress you. So you don't show much emotion—even if they are telling you something shocking, and you feel like jumping up and down and checking to make sure the recorder is working. You just remain very calm and impassive, and the more impassive you are, the more eager the subject is to top one story with another.

—Interview conducted by Denise Donavin

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advances other terms he could have chosen). Schiebinger subsequently chronicles the rise of scientific racism and sexism and examines the place of females in the great chain of being, raising provocative, pertinent questions such as why was the skull, not the pelvis, selected as the basic unit for anatomical investigation? Carefully selected illustrations support the text's arguments, as do some 70 pages of notes and bibliography. —William Beatty

Thapar, Valmik. *The Tiger's Destiny.* 1993. 176p. index. illus. Kyle Cathie, dist. by Trafalgar Square, \$34.95 (1-85626-080-1). **YA**
593.74428 Tigers—Ecology [BKL]

Thapar discusses the importance of the tiger in the Asian and Indian cultures and the fate that awaits it in a world that no longer worships it and can barely manage to feed it. The first third of the book is devoted to the integral role the tiger played in Asia and India before the arrival of Europeans, when the tiger was accorded godlike status. (The last third of the book, however, shows that with the advent of Europeans, the relationship between tiger and human changed forever.) The second section would be worth the

purchase price even if it were published without text. Beautiful full-page and half-page full-color photographs of the tigers in India's Ranthambhore National Park depict the lives of tigers in the wild. From a photograph of a female and her cubs to pictures of tigers who have been forced to a nocturnal life in their quest for survival, these pictures say more about the daily lives of tigers than any textbook or environmental-awareness pamphlet could ever communicate. —Caroline Paulison

Thomson, Keith Stewart. *The Common but Less Frequent Loon and Other Essays.* Nov. 1993. 189p. index. illus. Yale, \$22.50 (0-300-05630-3). Galley. **YA**

508.221 Natural history || Biological diversity [BKL] 93-17240

The president of the Academy of Natural Sciences says these essays are "little sermons" or "mystery stories" that represent his views on the nature of science and celebrate "things that are important in a life fully illuminated by science—namely, books, animals, plants, people, and ideas." For the most part, this book, which is divided into three sections on the uses of diversity, being a scientist, and the future of evolution, finds Thomson concerned with a

wide range of subjects, including the asymmetry of a shark's tail, the meanings of evolution, the literature of science, and the use of the common loon as an indicator of environmental health. Intended to be both instructive and entertaining, these scholarly pieces may best serve as night-stand reading for the scientifically sophisticated—i.e., those who can easily handle such titles as "Sine Scientia Ars Nihil Est?" and "The Puzzle of Paleospondylus" and who delight in the excitement of scientific discovery and debate. —Whitney Scott

Technology

Barker, Larry M. *Scanner Radio Guide.* Oct. 1993. 152p. illus. HighText, paper, \$14.95 (1-878707-10-8). Galley.

621.38419 Radio—Monitoring receivers [BKL] 93-077213

Elsenson, Henry L. *Scanners and Secret Frequencies.* Oct. 1993. 320p. illus. Index Publishing Group, 3368 Governor Dr., Ste. 273F, San Diego, CA 92122, paper, \$19.95 (1-56866-038-3). Galley.

621.38419 Radio—Monitoring receivers || Eavesdropping [CIP] 93-78786