

# BOOK WORLD

## The Education Of a Publisher

### PERSONAL HISTORY

By Katharine Graham  
Knopf, 642 pp. \$29.95

By Jill Ker Conway

**K**ATHARINE GRAHAM's account of her life has something of interest for everyone. Of course it is the ultimate Washington "inside story." But much that makes this book a compelling read lies far outside the Beltway. For this serious effort to make some reckoning of a long and varied life throws more light on the psychology of women, and the profound changes brought about by the women's movement, than a dozen tomes filled with psychological jargon.

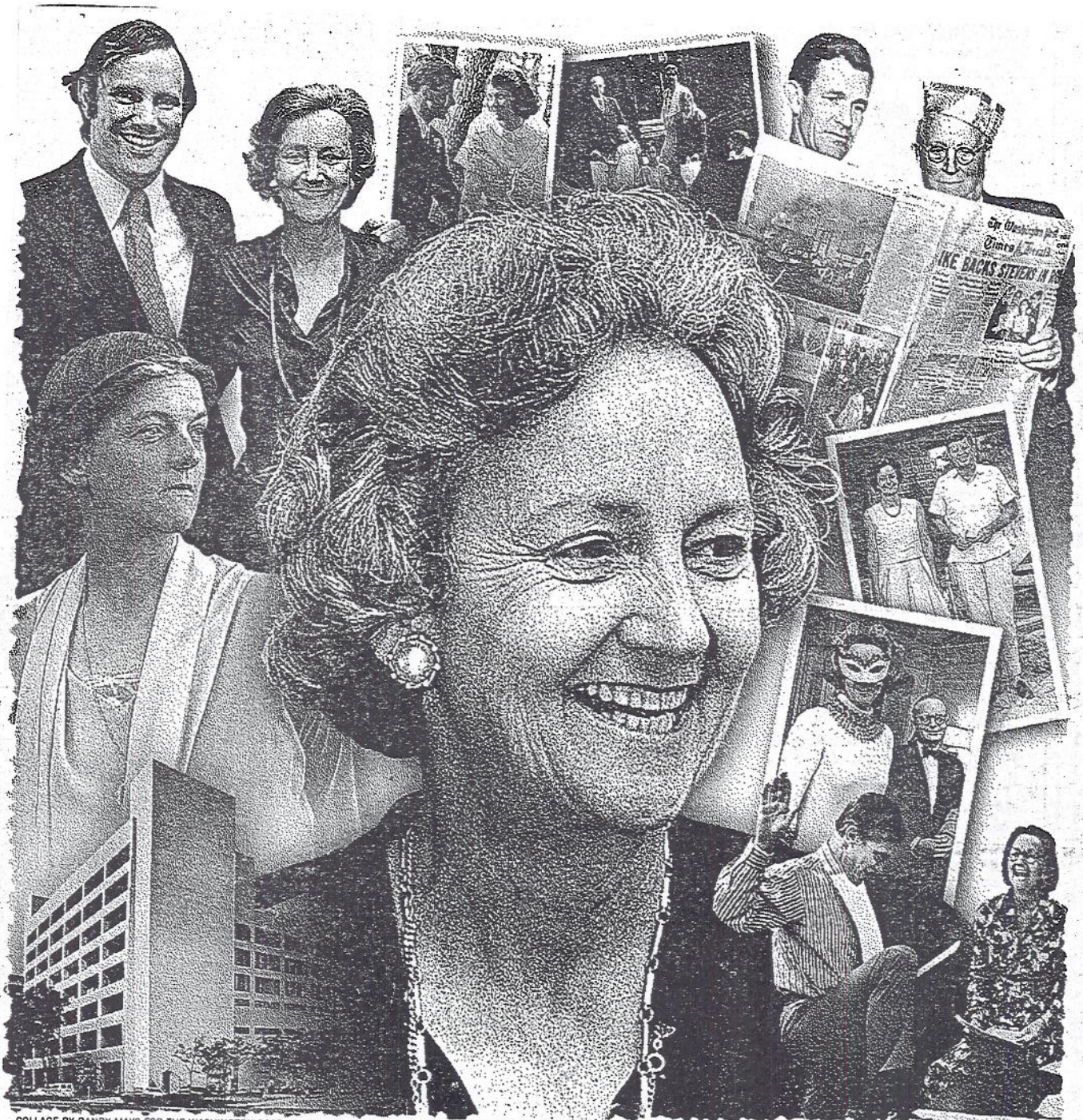
The astonishing reality that Graham documents in great detail is that this woman, whose managerial talents rescued a teetering enterprise and turned it into one of this country's most powerful and admired media empires, was unaware of her managerial skills or her capacity for leadership until well into mid-life.

Some readers shaped by the post-feminist culture of the

United States will sniff, claim that she must be fooling, and consider this aspect of the story self-serving. But what Graham describes rings true for those of us old enough to remember the culture that taught women that their relationship with a man *was* their life. If he was troubled psychologically, drank too much, or seemed given to high-risk financial gambles, it was the wife's fault for not engineering, no matter what the odds, the perfect marriage.

Some will find it difficult to credit that even after 23 years of marriage to Philip Graham, a man with erratic mood swings, accompanied by increasingly bizarre behavior, she didn't learn enough about manic-depressive illness to exercise her own judgment about her — *Continued on page 9*

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COLLAGE BY RANDY MAYS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST. PHOTOGRAPHS OF AGNES MEYER AND FAMILY PORTRAIT BY EDWARD STEICHEN; PHOTOGRAPHS OF PHILIP GRAHAM WITH EUGENE MEYER, KATHARINE GRAHAM WITH BEN BRADLEE BY CHARLES DEL VECCHIO; CENTER PHOTOGRAPH OF KATHARINE GRAHAM TAKEN IN 1979 BY DOUGLAS CHEVALIER

**Clockwise from left: The Washington Post building; Agnes Meyer; Katharine Graham with her son Donald; her wedding and family portraits; Philip Graham with Eugene Meyer; with President Kennedy; with Truman Capote; with Ben Bradlee**

Agnes and Eugene Meyer, Katharine and Philip Graham greet visitors to the new Washington Post building on Jan. 19, 1951.



THE WASHINGTON POST

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husband's treatment. But in the late '50s and early '60s mental illness was still a dreaded family secret, psychoanalysis was thought of as the universal cure, and one didn't question the judgment of "experts."

"It bothers me," she writes, "that I was so passive about the nature of Phil's illness and so accepting of Farber [his analyst] for so long. I'm not sure why I didn't insist on more of an explanation." But her training in passivity was too deep to be overcome easily, let alone to allow her to look critically and with detachment at her brilliant, manipulative, manic husband who was determined to leave the hospital and end his life. And, we learn, though the author doesn't say it, he chose a place and a method of suicide that would result in the greatest possible grief to her.

**I**N ANGLO-SAXON culture, it has always been permissible for women to exhibit strength and discover managerial talent when widowed, or when the family has been struck by tragedy. So we watch with fascination the emergence of a new woman, like some brightly colored butterfly from the safe concealment of a dun-colored chrysalis, as Katharine Graham begins to take up the reins at *The Washington Post* and its affiliates. Her task was made more complicated by the fact that her father—Eugene Meyer, publisher of *The Post*—displaying classic patriarchal attitudes, had given her husband, not his daughter, the controlling interest in *The Washington Post Company*.

Once this legal issue has been successfully negotiated, the story becomes more familiar as the narrator quickly becomes the powerful Washington figure we all know from media headlines and photographs. What makes it such pleasant reading is the opportunity Graham gives the reader to trace the process of her transformation. Occasionally the reader wonders whether her social insecurity can possibly be genuine—as for instance, when she has her hair and makeup done by Kenneth (the "in" hairdresser of the day) before donning a Bergdorf copy of a Balmain dress to appear as guest of honor at Truman Capote's cele-

brated black-and-white masked ball. The shrewd Capote knew exactly who would become the important woman of the moment, but his guest still didn't. At Kenneth's, she tells us, "I was watching while he pinned curls over the beautiful Marisa Berenson's head, one by one. Finally, he got to me, and the wait was worth it. I wound up looking my very best. Of course, in that company, compared with the sophisticated beauties who blanketed the ballroom, my very best still looked like an orphan."

The choice of that word—*orphan*—is interesting because it sends the reader back to the earlier chapters of the memoir, to Graham's childhood, and her difficult relationship with her mother. Agnes Meyer held her children to extremely exacting standards of dress and deportment, expected the girls to be beautiful and socially successful, while undercutting them in any intellectual interests they developed.

As the fourth child in the family, Katharine Graham managed to escape excessive parental notice, living in a world where she spent more time with servants than parents, unwilling to engage in any form of rivalry with a flamboyant mother who was regarded as a great beauty. Mrs. Meyer was given to heavy drinking in private, and suffered acute mood swings. Her daughter Katharine grew up helping the

family cope with her mother's moods, but never openly questioning her mother's character. Graham's resulting low self-esteem was partially remedied by an initially happy marriage, but reactivated in even more acute form when her manipulative husband began denigrating her before guests and before their children.

Thus, although a reader's initial response to the orphan image is to ask, Just how much of the world's possessions and talents does this woman need before she feels secure?, on reflection, the image rings true. There is a Cinderella-like quality to this story, although it is one with a feminist ending, in which Cinderella triumphs and surpasses the prince in the management of affairs of state.

Once Katharine Graham is in complete control at The Washington Post—publisher as well as president of the company—the narrative picks up speed. First of all, as a senior woman executive, she had to face and deal daily with the issues women faced in an extremely sexist workplace. She tells us she was slow to learn how to deal with them in her own life, let alone how to lean on all-white male management to change, and in public she was a defender of management from challenges of discrimination, which she now concedes were justified.

But events would not wait for her slowly developing consciousness to evolve. In late June of 1971, she was faced with conflicting advice from editorial staff and the company's lawyers about whether The Washington Post should publish the Pentagon Papers. To do so was to face certain confrontation with the U.S. government—because a legal decision in New York had resulted in a court order temporarily restraining the New York Times from further publication of the papers. The decision she now faced presented a textbook case of freedom of the press. What made it even more contentious for The Washington Post was that its parent company was in the process of going public, so that the decision to publish could jeopardize the public offering and bring harsh retribution from federal regulators. Events had conspired to make it impossible for The Post's principal owner and publisher to deny her own agency any longer. She acted decisively and knew she was doing it.

"I could tell from the passion of the editors' views that we were in for big trouble on the editorial floor if we didn't publish. . . . At

the same time that the editors were saying, seriatim, 'You've got to do it,' Paul Ignatius [the president of the newspaper] was standing beside me, repeating—each time more insistently—'Wait a day, wait a day.' . . . Frightened and tense, I took a big gulp and said, 'Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead. Let's go. Let's publish.'"

**F**ROM THAT POINT on, there could be no denying, even to herself, who was in charge. As Graham points out, the decision to publish established The Washington Post as a major national player, and made its publisher someone whose actions mattered to the press and the country. This time all the inner voices she'd inherited from the past were silenced.

"To some degree, I gained a measure of self-assurance. This was my first serious visibility on the national scene. I was very publicly exposed, written about, photographed, and interviewed, which both scared me and to some extent fed my ego. The pressure, the intensity, and the rapidly unfolding developments were another extraordinary learning experience for me.

Graham's account of the Watergate affair and The Post's reporting of it shows her customary scrupulous effort to see the issues from all points of view. Most valuable to historians are her accounts of the Nixon administration's reprisals, the challenges to The Washington Post Company's television licenses, up for renewal in 1972 and 1973. Her blow-by-blow account of the unfolding of the Watergate scandal makes gripping reading—a story only she can tell.

There are naturally some defects in this fascinating narrative. Graham is clearly writing for historians, and takes great pains to cite the archival record fully. This laudable effort to cite the sources sometimes makes the reader wish she would just tell the story in her own incisive prose. Her understandable interest in her own passivity at earlier stages of her life undermines or downplays its central tragedy. So the reader tends to forget what a personal triumph just staying sane and balanced must have been for someone experiencing the roller coaster of life with an untreated manic depressive. Clearly it trained her to ride the roller coasters of public life with courage, but for the learning she must have paid a very high price. ■