

*They Don't Print 'Em
Like They Used To*

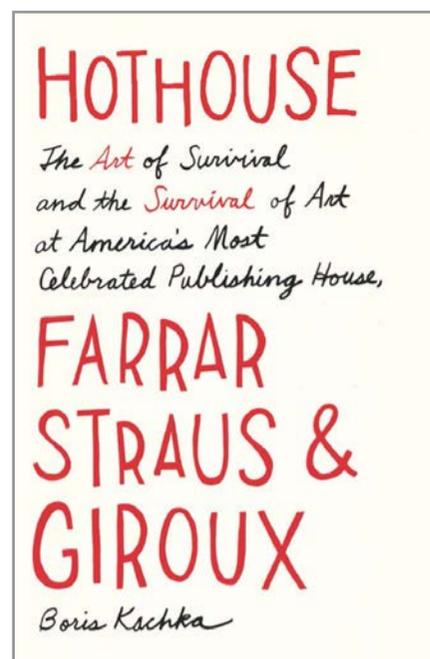
HOTHOUSE:

THE ART OF SURVIVAL AND THE SURVIVAL OF ART AT AMERICA'S MOST CELEBRATED PUBLISHING HOUSE, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

REVIEWED BY **MICHAEL ANDERSON**

HIGH CULTURE DON'T PAY—THAT'S NOT its function. This makes for a rocky marriage between art, which hopes to make a living, and commerce, which looks to make a fortune. Inevitably, the moneychangers take over the temple. Such was the fate of one of America's most distinguished publishing houses, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, a story that struggles to emerge from Boris Kachka's book *Hothouse*.

Since it issued its first titles in 1946, FSG has been dedicated to finding and publishing books of enduring value. Its roster of authors includes 25 Nobel laureates in literature; between 1978 and 1995, the house published 10 of the 18 winners. Its non-Nobel list is equally glittering, including Edmund Wilson, Philip Roth, Flannery O'Connor,



By Boris Kachka
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Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn. Its children's list boasts authors such as Roald Dahl, Maurice Sendak, and William Steig. (As MGM once did, FSG can claim it has more stars than there are in heaven.) The house was as famous for its miniscule advances and unpretentious offices—"filthy, inadequately heated and cooled, never painted, teeming with bugs and ugly fluorescent tube lights"—as for its solicitude toward its writers and its literary cachet.

FSG was very much the product of the post-World War II era, when education was prized (think of the GI Bill) and artistic accomplishment conferred a status that was esteemed more than money. The house also represented



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Roger W. Straus Jr. (1917–2004) lusted after mistresses and book deals with Nobel laureates.

a vehicle for the social advancement of its principals, however different the motivations of Roger W. Straus Jr. and Robert Giroux. (John Farrar, who began the firm with Straus following his ouster from Farrar & Rinehart, contributed little except an illustrious name.)

The black-sheep scion of the Straus department store dynasty and the Guggenheims, Straus rejected business for the romance of publishing. Giroux, the

son of a factory foreman from Quebec and an Irish-Catholic seamstress in Jersey City, was the first in his family to graduate from college. (His classmates at Columbia University included Thomas Merton and John Berryman.) “The most remarkable thing about the partnership of Straus and Giroux,” Kachka writes, “is that their paths crossed at all.” For each man, a career in high art was a social steppingstone.

This is most apparent in Straus, a larger-than-life vulgarian who comes across like one of the unpleasant caricatures in an Edith Wharton novel. Given to speaking in “the Royal ‘I,’” as Kachka puts it, a restless philanderer and devotee of the high life, Straus, with his equally high-born wife, Dorothea, enjoyed playing the salonista. His Upper East Side townhouse became the locus of what Kachka calls “the culture of FSG . . . a full-blown literary apparatus—a one-stop shop of literary greatness. Come for the parties; stay for the book contract; give back by reviewing our other authors or talking them up at the next party.” (Appropriately, Straus’s pet author—he advanced her funds, handled her mail, paid her bills—was Susan Sontag, the embodiment of intellectual social climbing.) It was Straus who set his sights on Nobel laureates. (Publishing rival Jason Epstein sniped that Straus “wanted nothing but Nobel Prize winners.”) His own literary taste was, not to put too fine a point on it, unsophisticated: His two big editing triumphs were Gayelord Hauser’s *Look Younger, Live Longer* (1950) and Sammy Davis Jr.’s autobiography *Yes I Can* (1965); he rejected *Lolita* (1958)—like it or not, the finest postwar American novel.

Straus provided the reckless buccannering spirit that gave FSG its aura of

intellectual deshabelle, but it was Giroux who gave it literary distinction, “one its restless gut, the other its quiet brain,” Kachka writes. Giroux very likely was the greatest book editor of the 20th century, the man we all think Maxwell Perkins was. As a 26-year-old editor at Harcourt, Brace, he was assigned Edmund Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* (1940) and Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941) among his first projects; eight years later he was editor in chief.

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Besides shepherding eminences such as T. S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, and George Orwell, Giroux discovered Jean Stafford, Bernard Malamud, and Jack Kerouac. (It is testament to his taste that after publishing Kerouac’s first book, he rejected *On the Road*.) When in 1950 the new owners at Harcourt prevented him from acquiring *The Catcher in the Rye* (thereby denying the house a perennial bestseller), Giroux resolved

to move elsewhere. In 1955, he left for Straus's firm; 17 of his authors—including Eliot, Malamud, O'Connor, and Robert Lowell—followed him. “In one fell swoop,” Kachka writes, “Straus . . . had himself a damned good house.”

“The most sobering of all publishing lessons,” Giroux once said, is that “a great book is often ahead of its time, and the trick is how to keep it afloat until the times catch up with it.” His attitude was perfectly congruent with Straus's decision, as Kachka writes, to focus “less on his company's growth than on its identity—less on market share than on a market niche.” Such a conservative strategy demanded excellent scouting (Straus became a tireless European traveler, seeking writers and luxury hotel accommodations with equal enthusiasm), a passion perhaps closest to Giroux's heart, inspired by Columbia professor Raymond M. Weaver, the Melville scholar who discovered the unpublished manuscript of *Billy Budd*. “I thought how great it would be to discover a literary masterpiece,” Giroux declared.

Giroux and Straus were obvious temperamental opposites. “Why must you be so crude?” Giroux would snap; “You don't know the difference between an editor and a publisher,” Straus would retort. Giroux once commented,

“There's nothing so great about the word *publisher*, per se, except that one publisher—I think it was the second Nelson Doubleday—said, ‘I publish books. I don't read them.’ An editor would never say that.” But the publisher holds the purse strings.

As publishing attempted to emulate Hollywood in the go-go '80s, with multimillion-dollar advances (and subsequent losses), Straus tried to keep pace; for three weeks in 1988, FSG held the top two spots on the fiction bestseller list with Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* and Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent*. He abandoned a hard lesson learned after his early success with Gayelord Hauser about “a publishing trap that seems obvious but turns out to be very hard to resist,” Kachka writes. “One very successful year leads to excess cash, which is then plowed into ever larger advances buoyed by excessive confidence. . . . Linear growth is very hard to achieve in books—never mind the exponential kind—and the headiest times call for the greatest excess of caution.”

In 1994, Straus arranged the sale of his publishing house to Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck. (Giroux had retired and, in any case, wasn't an owner.) The deal was part of the trend that would put half of American publishing in the hands of only

five corporations. Straus took in some \$30 million. After 40 years of making a living, he decided to make a fortune. Today FSG is but a subsidiary, giving a tarnished imprimatur of class to a media conglomerate, its current leader, Jonathan Galassi, but a corporate courtier. Although it still proclaims its devotion to literary art, FSG today is more a “brand” than a cultural force.

Although Kachka ostensibly is interested in FSG because of its cultural distinction, his book concentrates on gossip rather than literature. (“By the turn of 1960,” he writes, Straus “was probably sleeping with three of his female employees. . . . The rumor went that the man who delivered fresh towels in the office on Fridays . . . also provided Roger with fresh sheets.”) It is a measure of the book’s unrelenting superficiality that, rather than any of FSG’s outstanding authors, the writer who gets the most attention is the comparatively undistinguished Jonathan Franzen. Giroux may have given the house its

soul, but Straus, as in life, dominates the pages of *Hothouse*. All too often the book reads like a biography of Straus, lightly leavened by a corporate history. Giroux gets little more than the chapter detailing his biography.

Kachka is a contributing editor at *New York* magazine and writes like it. His chapters are more a series of articles than a developed narrative; the history of FSG is anchored in neither social nor literary contexts. And it is a bitter irony that an account of a publishing house renowned for quality is written in careless journalese. Indeed, *Hothouse* is all too typical of what American publishing has become, now that houses no longer talk about publishing books but “moving units.” The value of *Hothouse*, for those pondering the decline of American publishing, is that it serves as an example of what it ostensibly details. ■

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