



Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

Boris Kachka

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux is arguably the most influential publishing house of the modern era. Home to an unrivaled twenty-five Nobel Prize winners and generation-defining authors like T. S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, Susan Sontag, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Franzen, it's a cultural institution whose importance approaches that of *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*. But FSG is no ivory tower—the owner's wife called the office a “sexual sewer”—and its untold story is as tumultuous and engrossing as many of the great novels it has published.

Boris Kachka deftly reveals the era and the city that built FSG through the stories of two men: founder-owner Roger Straus, the pugnacious black sheep of his powerful German-Jewish family—with his bottomless supply of ascots, charm, and vulgarity of every stripe—and his utter opposite, the reticent, closeted editor Robert Giroux, who rose from working-class New Jersey to discover the novelists and poets who helped define American culture. Giroux became one of T. S. Eliot's best friends, just missed out on *The Catcher in the Rye*, and played the placid caretaker to manic-depressive geniuses like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Jean Stafford, and Jack Kerouac. Straus, the brilliant showman, made Susan Sontag a star, kept Edmund Wilson out of prison, and turned Isaac Bashevis Singer from a Yiddish scribbler into a Nobelist—even as he spread the gossip on which literary New York thrived.

A prolific lover and an epic fighter, Straus ventured fearlessly, and sometimes recklessly, into battle for his books, his authors, and his often-struggling company. When a talented editor left for more money and threatened to take all his writers, Roger roared, “Over my dead body”—and meant it. He turned a philosophical disagreement with Simon & Schuster head Dick Snyder into a mano a mano media war that caught writers such as Philip Roth and Joan Didion in the crossfire. He fought off would-be buyers like S. I. Newhouse (“that dwarf”) with one hand and rapacious literary agents like Andrew Wylie (“that shit”) with the other. Even his own son and presumed successor was no match for a man who had to win at any cost—and who was proven right at almost every turn.

At the center of the story, always, are the writers themselves. After giving us a fresh perspective on the postwar authors we thought we knew, Kachka pulls back the curtain to expose how elite publishing works today. He gets inside the editorial meetings where writers' fates are decided; he captures the adrenaline rush of bidding wars for top talent; and he lifts the lid on the high-stakes pursuit of that rarest commodity, public attention—including a fly-on-the-wall account of the explosive confrontation between Oprah Winfrey and Jonathan Franzen, whose relationship, Franzen tells us, “was bogus from the start.”

Vast but detailed, full of both fresh gossip and keen insight into how the literary world works, *Hothouse* is the product of five years of research and nearly two hundred interviews by a veteran *New York* magazine writer. It tells an essential story for the first time, providing a delicious inside perspective on the rich pageant of postwar cultural life and illuminating the vital intellectual center of the American Century.

Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Details

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From Reader Review *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux* for online ebook

Veronica says

Interested in publishing? Want an insiders take on one of the grandest American publishing houses? Looking for a gossipy rag to read on a sunny beach? Then look no further than Boris Kachka's *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art and America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus & Giroux*. Though the extraordinarily long subtitle is somewhat off-putting, the breezy, glib narrative sets the perfect tone for a sunny afternoon of wandering attention, alcoholic digressions, and juicy gossip. Kachka likes to turn a good phrase, as the title indicates, and he tries hard and frequently to do so throughout this tour of the personalities, editors, and authors that have made FSG what it is today.

The two central figures of this narrative are Roger Straus, who started the company against the wishes of his parents, wealthy Jewish-Germans and central figures of "Our Crowd," and Robert Giroux, who joined the company later in it's life, after a decade or so at Harcourt, Brace. Straus was the magnetic personality who kept the company going on one side through wealthy connections and shrewd business deals, while Giroux brought in some of our best-known authors. The opposites-attract dynamic worked for a while before it fell apart, as it eventually had to. In Kachka's rendering, Straus comes across as a larger-than-life personality, the kind that is magnetic but hard to live with in the long run. He was a notorious philanderer and cheapskate who rarely paid his authors the money they needed and his employees the money they deserved. Giroux, on the other hand was quiet, reserved, and worked hard to get his authors their due. Giroux was a Jesuit trained scholarship boy from Columbia, who ended up running the *Columbia Review* with his best friend and future poet John Berryman. His loyalty to his house and to his authors earned him their respect, and when he finally did break with Harcourt, Brace for their unwillingness to take risks with authors such as J.D. Salinger, he took the likes of T.S. Eliot with him.

While these two men dominate the story of FSG, there are numerous others who hold a vital place in its history. Farrar, who started the company with Straus after being ousted from his own publishing house while recuperating in Algiers after the war; Rose Wachtel, the office supplies manager who was such a tyrant that according to one of the employees, if you wanted a new pencil you had to show her the old one to prove that you really had worn down the nub. There's also digressions on authors and their scandals, such as the possibility that Susan Sontag slept with Straus (they were a power couple downtown in matching leather jackets, according to Kachka), or Jonathan Franzen's public spat with Oprah, which gets more pages than it really needs (and is excerpted here, at Slate.com). There are almost too many people populating this little history. To help alleviate the pain of remembering who's who, there's a 25-page index, along with endnotes for each chapter and an extended bibliography. Together, these tally 100 or so pages.

Kachka likes to sound good, yet his prose tends toward the bombastic; it starts right there in the subtitle. But who cares whether or not FSG really was the hottest house in publishing, or if it really is the most celebrated publishing house in America? Kachka is out to sell a book and to tell a good, if frequently tangential, yarn full of gossip on titans of publishing and celebrated authors alike. Just yesterday, over at *New York Magazine*, Kachka was pointing out the ironies of booksellers, readers, and authors bemoaning the impending death of the last brick and mortar book chain, Barnes & Noble, when it had been previously reviled as the death of independent bookstores and a bane to authors everywhere. He of course mentions the mediocre orders for his own book (only 100 copies for 600 stores), blaming Barnes & Noble for bad contract

deals with his publisher, Simon & Schuster. If Hothouse had been written in this straight-forward, informative prose, I might have learned a bit more about the creation and maintenance of FSG. But then it wouldn't have been nearly as fun, nor would it have felt like the unique treat that it is. Books like these don't come along very often, and when they do, those with even the smallest interest in the publishing world ought to take note. Hothouse may not be the bestseller that Kachka clearly hopes it will be, but it has captured the attention of the entire book world and in that sense hits its mark perfectly.

Barbara says

I liked it alot. It's gossipy enough and does give you an enough info about publishing, though I kinda wonder whether it would work now and it comes out of much money. My favorite part is when one of the editors is reading through a slush pile and comes across *Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle and it sticks in her head. It definitely helps if I have read the author or book they are talking about. Would recommend to people interested in publishing.

Gary Landry says

From start to finish, "Hothouse" is a fun, engaging, almost mesmerizing read. This book is part history, part Toto pulling back the curtain on the inner workings of an esteemed publishing house, part "The Devil Wears Prada" grafted onto the New York publishing scene, and part New Orleans style jazz funeral for that once independent house of legends and lovers of the written word.

With the corporatization and hyper-commercialization of the New York publishers that began in earnest a quarter of a century or so ago, and the attendant, insipid primacy of the bottom line that has since so woefully cast its dark shadow on what was once a precious harbor of hope for aspiring authors, we may never again see the kind of nurturing of serious talent that was once upon a time the true bottom line of places like Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. This book was particularly enlightening on a personal level since I submitted a manuscript years ago to someone who was then barely known but is now one of the most powerful literary agents in the country (one of his authors, like FS&G's Jonathan Franzen, had his novel selected by Oprah for her book club). He called me up the morning after receiving it, said he had stayed up almost all night reading my novel, and not only told me that he loved my book but also paid me one of the kindest compliments I have ever received, telling me that I write like Pat Conroy. But although he tried for two years to get a publisher to take my novel, he could not do so, adding that the corporatization of the major publishing houses had resulted in a mania for franchise authors who were not only already known but who were bound in golden handcuffs that resulted in them becoming purveyors of franchise characters who could be packaged into virtually guaranteed annual bestsellers. In retrospect, after reading "Hothouse," I realize that he was telling me that a golden era had passed for aspiring new authors. This wonderful book has now laid out for all to see just how that came to be. For new writers, so many doors have now been slammed that we now have little choice but to follow the yellow brick road of ebooks and cling to a hope eternal that a real life "Glenda" will come along and be our savior.

Gary P. Landry, author of "The Bridge Tender" (a historical murder mystery/romance/courtroom drama shining the spotlight on the utter idiocy of prejudice) and "River of Mist and Light" (a contemporary thriller/murder mystery set in New Orleans and the adjoining river parishes).

<https://www.facebook.com/GaryPLandry>

Patti's Book Nook says

This is one of my first book reviews for my Booktube channel Ismellbooks. My web address is <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDv6...> for any brave souls who want to check it out. I am not doing much promotion as my editing needs work and I still feel a bit awkward in front of the camera...but I feel comfortable telling all my bookish friends because I believe you guys can look past all that! If any of you all have a channel please let me know, I'd love to take a look. Also, for any Booktopians interested, Susan Gregg Gilmore also has a Booktube channel called A Book & a Bottle where she pairs wines with various reads. It's great!

Moving on, Junot Diaz blurbed Hothouse as the "Mad Men for the Literary World" and he was right. Straus was the black sheep of a wealthy industrial family. He was bullish, obscene, and a womanizer to name just a few. In spite of this (and sometimes because of) he had a sixth-sense about publishing great material and an engaging presence at parties. Giroux was the partner who came from a working class family in New Jersey and was the sensitive side of the firm. He was obsessive in his editorial care and brought most of the literary talent. He had a great friendship with T.S Elliott. Farrar was not at the firm nearly as long and I honestly don't remember much from his sections except he came back from Algeria and found himself out of a job and made his way over to Straus & Company.

I often wish there were half-stars for ratings. It would be 3.5 stars. I wouldn't rate this as high as the 4 star Merchants of Culture (about the history of US and UK trade publishing) by John B Thompson. Hothouse is about one of the most influential and esteemed publishing houses post- World War II. It's a good book- lots of high society gossip, anecdotes about important authors, world traveling, and family drama. The problem was the sheer amount of information continuously thrown at the reader which was impossible to absorb and remember past a few minutes. Lists of authors, dates, titles, employees, and mergers created a dense and time-consuming novel. There were many details which seemed too trivial to be mentioned. I'm extremely impressed by Boris Kochka's research and care...there were 50+ pages of footnotes!!! Try this one out- it might be a better book to dip in and out of than to digest in one fell swoop. Happy reading!

Bill says

Excellent history of the publishing firm Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. Along with Knopf, they are the two American publishing houses most synonymous with publishing good books, whether fiction or non-fiction. I have very rarely been let down in reading any book with their imprint on it.

FS&G were home to an unrivaled 25 Nobel Literature prize winners. Quite an achievement. Their list of authors is a virtual who's who of great writers

All in all, it's a very entertaining and interesting book. What goes on behind the scenes is really very intriguing.

Highly recommended for those who like reading books about the book industry, as I do.

Paul says

Enh. I mean, it's well done. It's "exhaustively researched," though this is like saying it uses a lot of verbs, or prepositions, or punctuation marks. The problem is, a publishing house doesn't really have the through story that a biography focusing on a single figure would. Hothouse is billed as a biography, and it reads like one, but there are just *too many characters* to keep things interesting. There are more names in this thing than in a phone book, and, while this is mostly my fault for not being well enough read, I didn't really care about enough of them to find this book interesting. I mean, sure, the stuff about Sontag (about whom there sure is a lot in here) is interesting, and once we move into the 80s and 90s (and especially so into the aughts, where Franzen gets a lot of attention (ditto Eugenides, who I can't say I'm a fan of)) I started to pay more attention, but by that time we're 2/3 of the way through. Basically I'm not sure who this book is for. Or, rather, I know who I think it's for, which is either someone who knows absolutely nothing about publishing and wants a sort of entre/overview, or else someone who knows basically everything about publishing and wants the inside scoop about FSG in particular. I'm somewhere in the middle—I know a bit about the industry, I have worked and continue to work in publishing in various capacities, and plus I like reading books, so my interest (in publishing) is vested (er, pecuniary, anyway) and personal, but then I don't really care who the acquisitions editor of FSG's children's division was in 1973, and who replaced her after she was fired for X, Y, Z reasons. I mean really, there's just so much nitty gritty and X replacing Y for Z reason and this unheard-of editor courting this obscure author and so on and so forth and so on and so forth and so on. And then, all the gossipy sex and backstabbing seemed to be played up a bit—look under the hood of any company and you're gonna find some scandal. It didn't make things any more interesting when it popped up, and I don't think calling the book Hothouse is accurate. Anyway, well done, well put together, but I can't say I know anyone who would be interested in reading all 350 pages of this. I was interested in reading about the Franzen/Oprah "fracas," but then nothing new was really revealed to me. That's the problem with such a wide-ranging survey-type narrative. There's no time to really dig deep into any one particular story, so all you get is a bunch of little anecdotes. That plus a lot of family history, which to me was frankly boring. Yes, I'd like to hear about Carver's childhood, or Barthelme's, or any author's I admire. But Roger Straus? Or Roger Straus's father? Maybe this just wasn't the book for me.

Marjorie says

In spring 1968 I looked for a summer job at a publishing house in New York City. I was an English major...I found a job at Farrar Straus and Giroux. While the summer confirmed that the NYC publishing world was not for me, it was nonetheless an amazing experience to see people like Susan Sontag come in the door. This book is a fun read for me from that vantage point, and an extended swim in the waters of the Mad Men-like environment of a remarkable company that shaped much of The literary scene of the twentieth century.

Now that I've finished it, I felt that it dragged on and became bogged down in the power struggle about Roger Straus, Jr. exiting the company. To me the fun had to do with the back stories about people I'd met and the confirmation for me that I would have been a terrible misfit in the cutthroat world of publishing

A good read for people interested in the dynamics of the American literary world.

Cynthia says

This isn't a bad book. It is clearly exhaustively researched and contains some good and interesting information. But getting through the entire volume is an exhausting slog. It is not entirely the author's fault. The book covers many decades and hundreds of people. After a while, the endless litany of personalities and unconnected anecdotes blur together until a reader ceases caring. I read the book cover to cover, as I always do when reading. But perhaps this book would be more interesting if a reader just opened to a random page, skimmed a few vignettes, and then picked another random page. It is a good reference, perhaps, but not a great read.

Dan says

Reading a history of a business is often like trying to find the beginning of a circle. They never rise from a vacuum; instead, they are a product of a confluence of factors and people you probably have never heard of. *Hothouse* is no exception. Luckily, Roger Straus was such a magnetic personality and such an important player in 20th century publishing that as long as you pay attention to what was going on with him you're in good hands. Eventually, the pieces start to fit together.

What I liked most about Kachka's take was the gossipy insights into the psyche of Straus, Giroux and their major authors (Sontag, Wolf, Franzen, etc.). It was fascinating to see these iconic figures snipe and schmooze their way through careers. I kept pretending I worked at FSG and was privy to all these great moments! But, I'm kind of glad I didn't work there. From all accounts Straus seemed unbearable—brilliant, but unbearable. Staying focused on Straus was a bit of a double edged sword. He was obviously important and in many ways the story of FSG is the story of Roger Straus, but I would've liked to see more parity for Giroux, whose working class roots and homosexuality are infinitely more appealing to me than Straus' inherited wealth and entirely unsurprising philandering.

Overall, this was a very entertaining and informative read that underscores the larger narrative of how publishing has grown into the multi-national corporate machine it is today. It's also a good reminder that publishing—like everything else—is largely about who you know!

If you liked this, make sure to follow me on Goodreads for more reviews!

Nooilforpacifists says

"And then this happened; then that happened. She slept with him; he then slept with that other guy. Later, this book sold; this didn't; this other one went to a different publisher. Plus the company changed its name-- again."

Yawn. Relentlessly chronological; incredibly boring. I made it less than half way through before confining it to the rubbish bin.

Edward says

I don't know that I can say quite why, but I found this history of the estimable publishing house Farrar Straus & Giroux simply gripping reading. Perhaps because it is a densely packed account of literary culture in the United States (primarily) from, roughly, the post-WWII era until almost yesterday. The main character, the mover and shaker of FSG, Roger Straus, Jr., is an alternately fascinating and repellent character. Then there are anecdotes about the authors published by FSG: T.S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, Joan Didion, Susan Sontag (a *lot* about her), Sontag's son David Rieff, Tom Wolfe, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and then the more recent crowd such as Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides. There is, also, detailed accounts of the musical chairs of editors and publishing houses, who is where when and why, and how they make the rounds sometimes with *their* authors in tow, sometimes not. It's one publishing house under review but it turns out to be a huge canvas covering many subjects including class and religion (though, one criticism, hardly a word about race). It can be a little over-detailed about contracts and money and who got paid when and how much, but I found largely breezy and captivating.

Mark says

Catnip for book lovers. And Mad Men of the publishing world, yes, certainly, but I as I note below, I think the Mad Men had considerably more reticence than this randy group. A remarkable story: both a review of the life and times of Roger Straus and a history of his publishing house. Kachka relates in clear and entertaining prose the rise and struggles of FSG, covering the story from the beginning right up through the books published last fall. The sale to Holzbrink is discussed, along the with steady rise of Jonathan Galassi. Lots of gossip, lots of dirty stories, intrigue, failure, success, and so on.

News to me was the critical role played by FSG in the support and publication of mid-century Italian literature:

"The relationship with Levi—and Einaudi—paid enormous dividends. Italians tumbled like pagliacci into Farrar, Straus's catalogs: Dino Buzzati, Cesare Pavese, Romualdo Romano, and, most crucially, Alberto Moravia, whose books came to epitomize Italian style as Rome crept toward the age of Fellini. Jean-Luc Godard and Bernardo Bertolucci filmed Moravia's work. *The Woman of Rome*, his first novel with Farrar, Straus, would be published in 1949. Eleanor Blow, one of the scouts who'd tipped Straus off to Levi, wrote a trend-defining essay in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1947, describing the Italian movement as "virile, fresh and even exuberant," especially when compared to the "defeatist spirit" of most other postwar Continental literature."

How could they then have missed out on Italo Calvino? Einaudi is even called out, and yet not a word about Calvino. That's a story that didn't make it into the book, and would surely have been interesting.

Nice to know their heads weren't always in the clouds, though. Recognizing the need to occasionally publish commercial books to pay the bills, I find it surprising that FSG didn't publish sex manuals: they certainly had the expertise there to edit them:

“Everybody was fucking everybody in that office,” says Leslie Sharpe, a former FSG assistant who occasionally slept with Roger after she, too, left the firm. Sharpe had come in as Michael di Capua’s assistant, following someone who’d made a less favorable impression on Roger. “Goddamn it,” he’d half joked to di Capua, “can’t you hire somebody who’s pretty and smart?” At Sharpe’s first outing with the editors, Roger proposed a toast: “Fuck our enemies!” Leslie looked at him and said, “Mr. Straus, shouldn’t we be saying ‘Fuck our allies’?” He was smitten, and so was she. “When I think of Roger,” she says, “I think of the statue of the wonderful bronze Poseidon holding the trident.” He wasn’t, she insists, any kind of run-of-the-mill misogynistic lecher. “Roger loved women as people,” she says. “He was the best lover anybody could ever have, and part of that was that he really understood women, and he understood that every woman was different.”

Clearly a miss on Roger Straus' part, and he didn't miss much.

Marvelous book, full of details of the literary and publishing life, such as it was. Somehow I don't think the business is so much fun anymore.

John says

It is a rare publishing book that goes beyond the gossip and stories of editors to give the nitty gritty details of the publishing world, but Hothouse walks the line of NY publishing gossip and a fascination with minutia. There's even talk of advances for titles and marketing budgets. An interesting read for anyone longing for old New York and the days of personality-driven publishing houses.

Trent says

I loved this, but if you don't work in publishing, it may be too much "inside baseball."
Still, if this review makes you want to buy this book, please do so at your local independent bookseller

Courtney Brown says

Like reading someone else's yearbook.

I finished (mostly because I had to for book club, and if there's anything earning an English degree taught me, it's how to read books I don't like), and bits of it were interesting, but I wish it had been a more accessible story for those of us not in the book industry and less a Leviticus-esque listing of names: author, editor, publisher, repeat.

On the plus side, it certainly reaffirms my view that publishing is not for me.

Ryan says

I received my copy through Goodreads First Reads.

I would highly suggest this to anyone in the business of publishing, editing, or writing. Even those not in the business will find an engaging and compelling narrative of FSG.

Hothouse provides a surprisingly entertaining account of FSG's history. The characters, especially Roger Straus, are what keep Katchka's narrative interesting. Straus is portrayed as a larger than life character that becomes the driving force behind the publishing company. His involvement in CIA operations as well as his engagement of sex in the workplace lend to his many unique philosophies of running a company.

The account also drops numerous names of authors, editors, and publishers. This provides support to the narrative, but at the expense of alienating readers not familiar with the names. Regardless, it doesn't affect the flow of the book.

Overall, Kachka provides the reader with an entertaining account that any literary buff can appreciate.

First Second Books says

You guys: it turns out that FSG's publishing history is totally crazy.

How crazy?

You can't get fifty pages of this book (which is, I should be clear, a nonfiction account of FSG's publishing history) without running into government agents spying on the Nazis disguised as literary scouts.

(I think we can all agree that that's crazy.)

Carole says

This is a weak four star. I enjoyed the history of the fabled publishing house, which developed from a struggling small firm to a proud powerhouse of famous, award winning authors. The success can be attributed to the larger-than-life Roger Straus, who, despite as irascible and somewhat coarse personality, had an uncanny knack for finding and developing talented authors, as well as editors. The book jumps about a bit (it could use a bit of editing) and gives editor Robert Giroux somewhat short shrift. The book is gossipy and funny, but sometimes assumes you are more familiar with the literary scene than the average reader. I had to look up a number of authors, which was an education in itself. In one instance, Kachka writes about an award winning author and fails to mention the name of the book. You develop a growing admiration for Straus, especially his willingness to stick with struggling authors. His focus was not the bottom line. There is lots of color, and Jonathon Franzen's brush-up with Oprah Winfrey is covered in some detail. Thomas Friedman comes off as a boor. All in all, Hothouse provides an entertaining insider look at the literary world through the story of Ferrar, Straus and Giroux and its literary stars, including Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jack Kerouac, Flannery O'Connnor, Tom Wolfe, Susan Sontag, Seamus Heaney, and Mario Vargas Llosa.

Jason Diamond says

Been working on a piece that deals with the publishing history and I picked this up for research purposes. The only problem was that I couldn't put it down and it derailed my work. It's a fascinating and fun book, maybe one of the best on the publishing industry I've ever read.

Hank Stuever says

Dishy, well-reported, well-organized. But you have to come to it with a ready-made interest in the behind-the-scenes world of New York book publishing before, during and well after the "Mad Men" years. I find publishing fascinating (having been published); outside of Manhattan, I'm not sure you could convince anyone that they need to read this. Still, though, it was a satisfying read.
