

# Robert Gottlieb's 'Avid Reader': A Publishing Giant's Memoir

Sept. 23, 2016

The New York Times

**Nonfiction**



Robert Gottlieb with Toni Morrison and her son Slade, photographed by Jill Krentz on Jan. 19, 1978, at the National Book Awards; all rights reserved.

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**AVID READER**

**A Life**

By Robert Gottlieb

Illustrated. 337 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$28.

Robert Gottlieb's buoyant memoir of his indefatigable editorial career proves Noël Coward's observation that work is more fun than fun. Gottlieb is willing, in fact, to go beyond that: "From the start, words were more real to me than real life, and certainly more interesting." The range of what he read — "from Racine to nurse romances" — always remained even wider than the multi-browed spectrum of material he published at Simon & Schuster and Alfred A. Knopf. His life has been a busman's holiday without any brakes — he was once at the hospital with his wife, "checking over Cynthia Ozick galleys while helping count . . . contractions" — and his gift as an editor was to grasp that every book is both ineffable (tone is "something that, if it's wrong, no editor can fix") and improvable ("cutting . . . will edge a book closer to its Platonic self").

Now 85, Gottlieb has spent much of the last two decades as a writer himself, and he does a fine, fast job of evoking his 1930s and '40s New York boyhood as the only child of a fairly chilly marriage. For whatever warmth he needed, there were always the books, as well as the era's "sweet popular culture" of radio serials, magazines and major league baseball, all of this at the bottom of a ladder leading upward toward Gilbert and Sullivan and then Balanchine, whose New York City Ballet became, after books, a second imaginative home.

After Columbia and Cambridge came Simon & Schuster, a carnival of publishing whose lists had lots of down-market moneymakers ("those crossword puzzle books!") and whose upper management had its down-low mores: "The men had a tendency to marry each other's mistresses." Gottlieb began as an editorial assistant, a position that was entry-level in about the same way the Pearly Gates of heaven are. "I was sticking my nose into everything, because everything fascinated me," he notes. He made his mark writing ads with Nina Bourne, an elegant industry legend: "The joy of it! Nina curled up in her desk chair, pecking away at her typewriter, a cigarette dangling from her fingers or burning out in her ashtray. . . ." The long S&S chapter, a love song that is the best stretch of the book, includes Gottlieb's

great editorial successes with Jessica Mitford's gleeful muckraking of the funeral industry ("The American Way of Death") and Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" — "still the book I'm most closely associated with," one whose author showed a "total lack of defensiveness" while being edited. Gottlieb exhibits a modest defensiveness of his own in recounting how, after "several years of back-and-forth" editorial work, he rejected "A Confederacy of Dunces," whose wildly eccentric author, John Kennedy Toole, later committed suicide and whose "horrifying mother, Thelma" (the heroine of other accounts), conducted a nasty and anti-Semitic "campaign of vilification" against the editor.

All he ever wanted, Gottlieb insists, was autonomy, not power, and the reason he left for Knopf at the age of 36 was a restlessness that came over him when "everything had become all too easy and comfortable for me — life in the office was like a daily party." He took Bourne with him.

Gottlieb says he "never had a long-range plan for Knopf," a house that was distinguished but, by 1967, creaking with bureaucratic routine. The new chief's ad hoc instincts soon had hits coming thick and fast — and sometimes very slowly: Gottlieb describes his creative and contentious dealings with Robert Caro, whereas Toni Morrison ("We were meant for each other") delighted his blue pencil.

The Knopf stretch of "Avid Reader" gallops through the glamour of Lauren Bacall, who wrote her memoirs on the company premises; the popular histories of Barbara Tuchman ("Her sense of entitlement was sometimes hard to deal with"); and the evolution of Salman Rushdie ("From the moment he won the Booker he seemed more demanding, less cordial"). Gottlieb confesses to the writers he was sorry to lose (Don DeLillo, Robert Stone) and the occasional good riddance (Harold Brodkey), but he throws so many bouquets that the perfume can sometimes give the reader a bit of a headache. Books are again and again "rapturously" received, and "Liv Ullmann is not only a beauty, a talent and a grand woman, she's a pro." The

least revealing tale may involve working on Bill Clinton's memoirs: "I never encountered a mind that grasped things more rapidly. . . . He was a complete professional." This isn't the sort of thing Gottlieb typically let his own authors get away with.

The long association with Knopf was interrupted for five years, beginning in 1987, when its parent company's owner, S.I. Newhouse, who also ran the Condé Nast magazine empire, took advantage of a new spate of Gottlieb's restlessness and persuaded him to take over *The New Yorker* from its seemingly eternal editor, William Shawn. The baroque drama that ensued — Shawn left people in doubt as to whether he had resigned or been fired; the staff protested the new editor's arrival — has been much chronicled over the years, and Gottlieb now offers his own restrained supplement to all that. Once he was allowed to establish himself at the magazine, he followed no more of a long-range plan than he had at Knopf, making modest, incremental changes, most notably to the publication's rule-bound fiction. But these modifications wouldn't be enough for Newhouse, a man subject to his own bursts of restlessness; in 1992 the owner opened the windows on 43rd Street to the hurricane that was Tina Brown. Gottlieb, almost embarrassed by the generosity of his severance package, returned to Knopf and refused a salary.

All the books in "Avid Reader" do make way for some pages about the author's non-print life. One learns of his eight years in "strict Freudian therapy," a deep interior dive that he knows must now seem antique, not to mention surprising, in light of the gusto he displays on nearly each page. (Bourne described him as "psychosomatically healthy.") He presents his long, happy second marriage to the actress Maria Tucci and their difficulties raising a son with symptoms of the as-yet-unnamed Asperger's syndrome. As for his compulsion to collect plastic handbags (he wrote a book about them), the most consoling piece of information imparted to the reader may be that the handbags have competition from other collectibles.

Some of this memoir's keenest pleasures come from a series of portraits that demonstrate how the author's most profound associations and friendships have been with women, whether Nina Bourne or Nora Ephron or the British literary agent Deborah Rogers. He makes clear that they offered him, like fiction, a compass by which to move in the world. Gottlieb's closeness to the New York agent Candida Donadio eventually came to "an ugly end," but during his happy days at S&S, he and this excitable, sometimes vengeful talent-spotter shouldered each other's troubles; or, as Gottlieb puts it, borrowing a phrase from another intimate, Irene Selznick, "took in each other's washing." He says that work has been his "natural state of being," and everything in "Avid Reader" convinces one that that's so. But it was the brightness and vivacity of all these women that kept the lights on, at the office and in his mind.

Thomas Mallon's most recent book, "Finale: A Novel of the Reagan Years," has just been published in paperback.