

By Pat Aufderheide

**A**S BARRIERS TO FREEDOM OF expression fall around the world, here at home a major voice for human rights and diversity of expression was silenced when Pantheon Books was gutted by corporate managers on February 26.

The savaging of Pantheon shows why, under the current system, cen-

## BOOKS

sorship is not necessary to suppress unfashionable or dissident opinion. Elimination of the vehicles of expression will come, indirectly, to the same thing. And the "invisible hand" never gets dirty.

Pantheon was one of the last enclaves of serious publishing of history and culture for a general audience. It stood, over its 47 years, in the shrinking arena between cat calendars and the increasingly vanity-press world of academic publishing. (See accompanying list of published authors.) Begun by refugees whose publishing house had been destroyed by Adolf Hitler, it consistently published books to be read by the curious and concerned. As publishers increasingly shredded or remaindered yesterday's books, Pantheon kept its impressive backlist in print and available to new generations of readers.

**Talk of the town:** Never much of a "profit center," Pantheon was bought by Random House in 1961 and run as its prestige line. In 1980, when the Newhouse family bought Random House—the largest trade-book publisher in the country—many bland promises were made (as were made when Newhouse bought *The New Yorker*, which has also undergone drastic upheavals) that there would be no tampering with editorial content. Since then, its financial status has been shrouded in the secrecy of the Newhouse family books, although the Newhouse estimates of Pantheon losses seem magically to grow every time managers talk to reporters.

Last fall, the removal of Robert L. Bernstein, a longtime defender of quality, as head of Random House, and his replacement by bottom-line expert Alberto Vitale (ex-CEO of Bantam Doubleday Dell), led to widespread expectations of new tampering. Newhouse has called for cost consciousness in every Random House division, including Pantheon.

Andre Schiffrin, head of Pantheon Books, also felt the pinch. Rather than slash his forthcoming list and cancel outstanding contracts with authors, he resigned on February 26. He has since been unavailable for comment—apparently, like Bernstein, having been forced into silence as a condition of his job termination.

The next day, senior editors Tom

Engelhardt (see adjoining statement), James Peck, Wendy Wolf and Sara Bershtel—with a total of 56 years of service—resigned in protest. "Pantheon was founded in 1942 to protect an imperiled culture," they wrote in a joint statement. "We sought to continue that tradition by bringing into public view the forgotten and the iconoclastic, the quirky and the profound, the crises faced by other cultures, and our own. We sought as well to give voice to at least some of the victims of our age—and to expose those who abused their wealth and power."

"What motivated us was the commitment to provide a forum where some of the least popular but most important ideas and voices could be heard. And what encouraged us was that so often the books we believed in became classics and commercial successes, and that so many authors chose to publish with Pantheon because they believed in the values it represented."

On March 1, a fifth editor resigned. Engelhardt explained the loss in terms that can't be quantified. "The authors on our list will all be able to be published by other houses. An Ariel Dorfman, a Todd Gitlin can find a place," he said. "But what about the new Ariel Dorfman? Who will find that author, cultivate him or her, introduce them to a reading public? That's the real loss here."

Vitale rushed to assure critics of "Random House's commitment to maintaining Pantheon's position as one of our most prestigious imprints, and to insuring its continuity and success in the years to come." But it's hard to see where that commitment stands in relation to making

every Random House division a profit center, and to the decision to amputate Pantheon's list of forthcoming books and its authors' contracts.

**\$10 billion and no debts:** The Newhouse media empire could, in theory, afford a prestige loss leader. The last time *Advertising Age* magazine did a count of the 100 top media companies, in June 1989, Newhouse's Advance Publications ranked seventh, above Knight-Ridder and the Hearst Corporation, with a 7 percent increase in its revenues in a year.

Its 26 newspapers haul in nearly double Random House's \$800 million annual gross, and its magazine empire—including such publications as *Vanity Fair*, *HG*, *GQ*, *Details* and *Bride's*—also substantially outgrosses its book holdings. Newhouse's publishing group also holds a host of cable operations that are a financial bright spot as cable's fortunes rise. Unlike many expanding media empires, the Newhouse family holdings appear to be free of debt. (The Newhouse family's close-to-the-vest and tight-fisted policies—the privately held operation is virtually non-union, a legacy from founder S.I. Newhouse's days—are notorious now, thanks to an Internal Revenue Service tax-fraud case Newhouse won on March 1, which shed a rare ray of light on the family empire. Maggie Mahar's comprehensive article in the Nov. 27, 1989, *Barron's* picked out some of the best parts from the mountain of documents.)

But Newhouse has also been greedy in the merger-and-takeover atmosphere of media conglomeration. Si Newhouse's part of the operation—he controls the \$3 billion

books-and-magazines part of a \$10 billion operation, while his brother controls the rest—recently bought a group of British publishers as well as the Crown Publishing Group. Both deals saddled the company with unprofitable operations.

Maybe this added pressure tipped the balance for Pantheon, or maybe it was just another part of the inscrutable Newhouse management style. Pantheon is not the first victim within Random House of the Newhouse slash-and-burn style; the college division was destroyed in 1988 even though sales were up. And it probably won't be the last. Another prestigious trade-book line, Vintage, is also under scrutiny for possible merger with the more mainstream mass-market line Ballantine.

**Playing politics?** Elimination of alternative voices by bottom-line logic is one thing. But Pantheon was not only a haven for intellectual work but also a major publisher on human-rights issues and a voice of the left in American society. "We're losing a major forum for dissident opinion, not least because Pantheon set such a high standard," said Pantheon author Barbara Ehrenreich, whose *Fear of Falling* was recently issued by Pantheon and whose *The Worst Years of Our Lives* is forthcoming.

Could the axing of Bernstein (a liberal advocate) and of Pantheon be politically as well as economically motivated? It's impossible to prove. But the values promoted in many Pantheon books have not been high on Si Newhouse's list over the years.

Si Newhouse attended Syracuse University—where his father had funded a communications program—for a few years before dropping out. He spent more than a decade on the society and fashion circuits before settling down to run glossy magazines under the tutelage of the editorial director of the Newhouse-owned Conde Nast magazine em-

pire. He eventually made his reputation in celebrity journalism (reincarnating *Vanity Fair*, for instance).

*The New Yorker* transition was a symptom of his insensitivity. The editorial changeover was accomplished gracefully, alienating writers, several of whom quit. There is now a much less friendly atmosphere for those within *The New Yorker* who want to raise issues of conscience.

His political convictions may side with his personal loyalties. He was anti-communist attorney Roy Cohn's closest friend—it's all in Nicholas von Hoffman's biography *Citizen Cohn*—and has been known to swing his media clout in the direction of his friendships. In *Mobbed Up*, a biography of Teamsters President Jackie Presser, James Neff describes how a Newhouse paper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, printed a false retraction of a negative story about Presser (whose attorney was Roy Cohn), which helped Presser get re-elected.

None of this necessarily makes Pantheon a political target for Newhouse's ire. But the clues at least add up to an indifference to the communities and values that Pantheon championed.

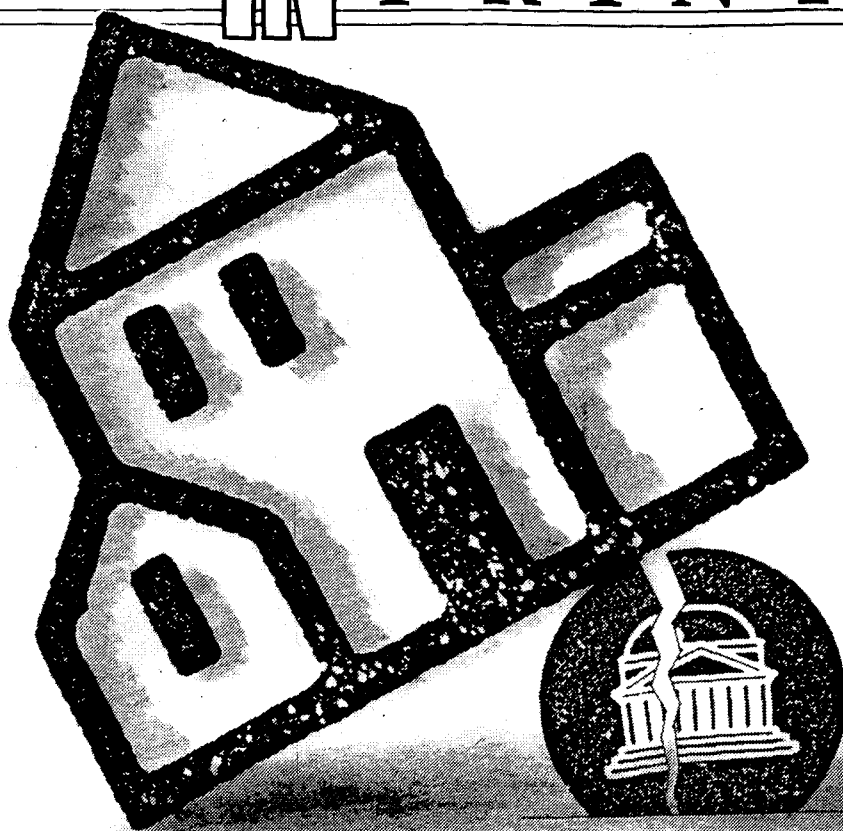
## Words to live by

Pantheon's backlist reads like a trip through midcentury intellectual history. It is particularly significant since the majority of the authors were first published—and some exclusively—by Pantheon. It includes, among many others:

Gunter Grass  
Boris Pasternak  
Julio Cortazar  
Giuseppe de Lampedusa  
Simone de Beauvoir  
Marguerite Duras  
John Berger  
Mary Renault  
Peter Schneider  
Eva Figs  
Eduardo Galeano  
Gunnar and Alva Myrdal  
Noam Chomsky  
Jean-Paul Sartre  
Juliet Mitchell  
Barry Commoner  
Edward Said  
Herbert Gutman  
Eugene Genovese  
Norman Birnbaum  
Arno Mayer  
George Kennan  
Willy Brandt  
Michel Foucault  
Eric Hobsbawm  
Orville Schell  
Italo Calvino  
Studs Terkel  
Danilo Dolce  
Alan Watts  
Carl Jung  
R.D. Laing  
Walker Evans  
Susan Meiselas

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## Pantheon's fall: publish and perish





The fate of Pantheon accompanies other signals of erosion of diversity within the book publishing industry—the one ad-free print medium. E.P. Dutton has recently shrunk into invisibility. North Point Press, a young house that revived some classics and discovered new writers, is up for sale. In the same week that

**"I don't know why rich people can't treasure something without feeling they have to own it," says Pantheon author Lawrence Weschler.**

Pantheon got the ax, Grove Weidenfeld—a merger of Grove Press and Weidenfeld and Nicolson—was put up for sale. The major prospective buyer is the Newhouse family.

And of course there's innovator Chris Whittle (whose holdings are now partly owned by the largest media conglomerate in the U.S., Time-Warner), who has just launched his latest brainchild: the book that carries advertising. Whittle Books are distributed, in their advertising-laden version, free to decisionmakers, and are also sold without advertising to the general public.

Publishing has been transformed from a low-profit trade in ideas to a high-stakes, multibillion-dollar business in which, as Calvin Trillin once said, books now have a shelf life shorter than yogurt. It's been a long process, tracked by Thomas Whiteside in his 1981 *The Blockbuster Complex*. (The book is now out of print, of course; it was serialized in *The New Yorker*—in the pre-Newhouse era, of course). And as Jason Epstein recently pointed out in the *New York Review of Books*, betting on a few high-return authors sets unrealistic expectations for book-biz money managers. Fueling the trend has been corporate conglomeration, in which book publishing becomes one part of a media empire and financial decisions from on high become paramount in editorial judgment. Newhouse is now the rare privately held corporation in a world of international corporate media giants, including News Corp, Bertelsmann and, of course, Time-Warner.

"The conglomeration of publishing has made houses like Pantheon an endangered species in the last decade," charged Alec Dubro, president of the National Writers Union. (As media expert Ben Bagdikian has noted, the number of corporations controlling the country's media went from 50 in 1983 to 26 in 1988—and will shrink even further in the next decade.)

"We are creating a climate where economic censorship over the dis-

semination of ideas is a real likelihood," Dubro said.

Even the book industry's major trade magazine found the Pantheon news shocking. In a rare full-page editorial in *Publishers Weekly*, editor in chief John Baker wrote that Pantheon had long been the "shining example, to critics who complained of conglomerate publishing, of how sophisticated work could still flourish in its context. Now it seems as if perhaps those critics were right: that big-money publishing cannot tolerate important, exciting work that does not always reap instant profits."

Lawrence Weschler, a *New Yorker* writer who decided to publish his *The Passion of Poland* with Pantheon because of its policy of keeping backlist books in print and whose most recent book, *A Miracle, a Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*, is forthcoming from Pantheon, said, "If we're entering into the era where every single book division has to make money every single quarter or lights go out somewhere, we're in real trouble. The whole rationale [for corporate takeover] was that there were going to be little alcoves of security for quality stuff because the Danielle Steeles would pay for it."

Weschler commented on a recent article he wrote for *The New Yorker*—an interview with a Polish publisher on the ironies of publishing in Poland today, where high prices have severely shrunk readership. "That wasn't the article I wanted to write," he said. "That article would have reported the whole conversation, which took place in Andre Schiffrin's house. The Polish publisher was as appalled by Andre's situation as by his own."

"There's a paradox in this current 'triumph of capitalism,' when under capitalism living standards are lowering. And it's paralleled by a triumph of 'freedom,' when publishing houses are shutting down around the world. What guarantees freedom is the free exchange of information, but the vitality of the free exchange of ideas is more and more limited."

"I don't know why rich people can't treasure something without feeling that they have to own it," Weschler said wistfully.

**Talking back to \$10 billion:** The Pantheon gutting has created an unprecedented public furor, beginning with the public resignations of the editors.

Many Pantheon and other Random House division authors issued a statement, to be published in the *New York Review of Books*, protesting "an assault on editorial independence and cultural freedom." The statement asserts that the Newhouse family, upon purchasing Random House, "incurred, willy-nilly, an obligation to preserve and nurture this invaluable resource for writers, editors and readers." The authors protest "censorship—however rationalized—by corporate fiat."

Along with public statements, some 350 writers, including Kurt Vonnegut and Studs Terkel picketed

Random House on March 5; others jammed Random House fax lines with protest messages. Some writers, including Terkel, are talking of boycotting Pantheon for future projects.

"Andre Schiffrin is a risk taker and a man of social responsibility," Terkel said. "They used the most obscene two words today, 'bottom line,' to get rid of him. The barbarians are now in charge at Pantheon. Dough, not books, is what it's about, so why not sell detergent? Or better yet, in the case of Random House, deodorant."

But in the absence of any public policy that recognizes the special role of the media in a democracy, it will be difficult to do more than mourn the loss of such institutions. In the current brass-knuckles world of book publishing, any obligation to preserve and nurture cultural resources, such as Pantheon authors charged Newhouse with, goes unrecognized either in law or corporate culture.

Creating public policy that can

rein in the most destructive aspects of corporate capitalism in media industries is tricky business. Preserving freedom of speech and the right to publish freely has been safeguarded in this country by keeping government out of press business, and there is little precedent for balancing corporate clout with regulation in the print media. And part of the problem is rescuing legitimacy—in the deregulated, freewheeling economic environment fostered by the Reagan years—for the public's right to freedom of expression superseding corporate freedoms. That would mean acknowledging that, at times, the interests of media corporations are not wholly consonant with the crucial freedoms of speech and published expression upon which a democracy rests. And that would anger the powerful corporate interests that now cross-feed the biggest entertainment sellers through their publishing, broadcasting, cable and movie pipelines.

It's not as if there aren't good ideas for public policy, indeed, ideas that

have worked in some form in the past. Bagdikian suggested in his book *The Media Monopoly* limiting the holdings of media corporations. Such legislation would not tamper with freedom of expression, but it would cool down the marketplace. Of course, it would also significantly change the current economic landscape.

In the meantime, Pantheon authors and readers are finding cold comfort in the empty promises of Alberto Vitale. "He needs to reassure us that the standards and practices of Pantheon, which were based on editorial sensibility rather than on corporate preoccupation with the bottom line, will continue to be preserved," said Dave Marsh, author of the Bruce Springsteen biography *Glory Days*. That reassurance, in the form of financial support and the recreation of an editorial community, will be much more difficult than was the decision to gut Pantheon. ■

**Editor's note:** Pat Aufderheide is a Pantheon author.

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## One from the heart, from the heart of the beast

Like others before, like many to come, Pantheon has been Newhoused. Publicity releases may try to transform the "resignation" of Andre Schiffrin, managing director of Pantheon Books, into a positive event filled with bright promises for the future. But such promises should fool no one. For 28 years Schiffrin shaped Pantheon into a publishing house of daring and distinction. Si Newhouse is ensuring, with his removal, not merely an individual departure but the disappearance of a great publishing vision, which will now continue in name only. (The plans of Alberto Vitale, the new chairman of Random House, to massively cut Pantheon's list and, undoubtedly, staff are just two aspects of the reality that awaits Pantheon somewhere down the road.)

As a senior editor at Pantheon Books for almost 15 years, I am under no illusions about the future of the publishing house I have known and cared about, and so I have given my resignation to Mr. Vitale.

Because the public stage and the terms of debate are not controlled by people like me, the events at Pantheon may be framed only in terms of the proverbial bottom line and of what passes for financial rationality in a world in which the "books" belong to accountants and those objects we have published with pride are referred to by managers like Vitale as so many "units." Si Newhouses's real books are, of course, not open to us. But there should be no mistake. If there is such a thing as white-collar crime, there should be another category called "cultural crime," and the fate of

Pantheon Books, left these many months to dangle in the wind of rumor and gossip, would come within that rubric.

Pantheon as a publishing house has had a distinguished history of documenting the lives and stories of people who might otherwise have been forcibly disappeared from history, or who might never have appeared in the first place. It was set up by the most distinguished European publishers of the pre-war period, including Helen and Kurt Wolff and Jacques Schiffrin, whose publishing houses the Nazis had crushed (or "Aryanized"). Among Pantheon's first books was a mini-edition of Vercors' *Silences de la Mer* to be dropped by the Royal Air Force into occupied France.

In more recent times, from Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life* to Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*, from David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews* to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Pantheon has put significant effort into documenting and reminding the world of that greatest and most horrific attempted disappearance of modern times. So, too, from Ariel Dorfman's *Widows* to Liu Bin-yang's *Tell the World*, and Lawrence Weschler's upcoming *A Miracle, a Universe*, it has turned its attention to the terrible disappearances of our world today.

Over almost half a century, Pantheon has brought to American readers books meant to challenge, to startle, to offer new perspectives, to force us to rethink our relationship to the world, to our society, to ourselves. The existence of Pantheon has allowed those voices, dissenting voices (often voices that dissented even from each other), to

be raised to a level that all of us could hear. Studs Terkel, Herb Gutman, Barbara Ehrenreich, Noam Chomsky, George Kennan, John Berger and so many other authors came to us because they wanted to be identified with a house that considered publishing an act of social responsibility.

Now, in a world in which a few men like Si Newhouse, Robert Maxwell, Rupert Murdoch and Reinhard Mohn (of Bertelsmann AG) and a handful of relatively faceless media conglomerates have our culture by the throat, Pantheon is itself in danger of being disappeared in all but name, and along with it a significant part of America's alternative cultural tradition.

And this is all the more disturbing because Pantheon was in no way a dying publishing house. It was, on the contrary, a publishing house with plans for the 1990s and beyond, a publishing house addressing itself, as it had done for so many years, to the major issues of our day.

The assault on Pantheon, the silencing of its true voice, is a crime against our culture, against the possibility that in times of crisis, in times of change and of hope, there will still be a plurality of voices, voices of advice and of anger, of dissent and of warning, with alternatives ways of looking at the world, alternative ways of assessing the past, alternative ways of viewing the future. My sadness at the end of the Pantheon I knew passes all bounds. I can only hope that those authors who have the opportunity will go to and support the few remaining independent publishers still in our world today.

—Tom Engelhardt