Giroux (standing, center) with Isaac Bashevis Singer at a 1972 FSG lunch honoring Singer.

APPRECIATION

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COURTLY LION ROBERT GIROUX'S LIFE REMINDS US THAT GREAT PUBLISHING NEEDS QUIET REBELS (AND TASTE).

BY BORIS KACHKA

A CHILLING, WINDSWEPT RAIN was falling as roughly 100 current and former members of Farrar, Straus and Giroux (publishers of T. S. Eliot, Sontag, and Bolaño) gathered earlier this month inside Columbia's St. Paul's Chapel to remember Robert Giroux, the brilliant, modest editor who died this past September at the age of 94. For FSG, and for all of publishing, the gloom was more than meteorological. It was the first time the attendees had seen Becky Saletan since she'd resigned from the top spot at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, just after its owners froze new acquisitions. And in less than a week, FSG publisher Jonathan Galassi would tell his staff that the once fiercely independent (and still quasi-autonomous) house's corporate overlord, Macmillan, was laying off FSG workers and bringing some departments under its umbrella. "You could feel the mood of sadness and togetherness," an editor later said. "To me that felt like the eye of a storm."

But it was also worth bearing in mind what another editor, Paul Elie, said in his memorial remarks: "It is tempting to float an analogy between his death and the death of a certain kind of publishing. But the fact is that his kind of publishing was rare in his own time, and so was he."

Consider what brought Giroux to FSG in the first place: The same frustration with bottom-line publishing that drives literary editors to drink today. Giroux had spent the decade after World War II at Harcourt, Brace, where his taste and exacting attention helped build a sterling list of authors. But in the late forties, his boss was replaced by Eugene Reynal, a man who just didn't get good books. When Giroux wanted to acquire *The Catcher in the Rye*, Reynal objected, "The guy's crazy," meaning Holden Caulfield. In 1955, Giroux angrily resigned and accepted an offer from Roger Straus, the flamboyant publisher of Farrar, Straus & Co. He never asked any of his authors to follow, but seventeen of them did, including Eliot, Robert Lowell, Flannery O'Connor, Bernard Malamud, and one of his best friends, poet John Berryman. Straus—who died in 2004—considered Giroux's arrival "the single most important thing to happen to this company."

Giroux met Berryman while studying on scholarship at Columbia, supporting himself by writing film reviews for *The Nation* and giving away promotional samples of cigarettes. He became a star editor of Columbia's lit journal; one of the friends he published, Thomas Merton, later remembered him as "strangely placid," unlike the excitable neurotics he hung around with.

Giroux's mentor, Mark Van Doren, offered him a fellowship at Cambridge, which he declined because he didn't want to become an academic, even though he was already a keen Shakespeare scholar. (Berryman, who had a spottier school record, went instead.) "He preferred to be a brilliant dilettante," says Patricia Strachan, a former Giroux assistant who became a top editor before ending up at Little, Brown. "Literature is life. He didn't want a rigid life."

He may not have been rigid, but time and again he had to be the steady one. As the writers Giroux was closest to (Lowell, Berryman, Jean Stafford) succumbed to breakdowns, addictions, and untimely deaths, he was there to visit them in the hospital, to keep them writing, and eventually to mourn them. Premature white hair and an air of formality helped (he was known around the office as Mr. Giroux), though he could be warm and enthusiastic about books, opera, and movies (he once wrote a fan letter to Rock Hudson imploring him to play Hamlet). The only time Strachan saw him cry was when he found out, in 1972, that John Berryman had jumped off a bridge.

"He had a priestly aspect to his character," said Father Patrick Samway, a good friend and a Jesuit priest himself. "What was so unusual about him was his utter lack of ego." This was in stark contrast to Straus, a Guggenheim scion who paraded around the city in a convertible Mercedes and ascot, and would never use a ten-dollar word when a four-letter one would do. Giroux was polite and grammatical, didn't drive, and dressed, according to Jack Kerouac's mother, like a banker (she thought this made him a positive role model).

"They were oil and water," says Galassi, Straus's chosen successor. Giroux usually ate lunch at his desk—turkey sandwich and Jell-O for dessert—while Straus single-handedly made the Union Square Cafe a publishing cafeteria. In the early eighties, Giroux complained, "Editors used to be known by their authors; now some of them are known by their restaurants." It was an easy thing to say when—especially in the days before frenzied auctions over next-big-things—top agents were giving him the right of first refusal on their best writers.

Giroux rose to chairman, but he never made the big decisions—something Straus reportedly reminded him of, telling him, "You still don't know the difference between an editor and a publisher." Giroux later responded, "There's nothing great about the word *publisher*, per se."

What Straus and Giroux did share were very similar tastes and a genuine love of authors, and they both tended, as old age and corporate consolidation advanced, toward cranky proclamations. Each in his own way, of course: Straus compared conglomerate publishers to spaghetti salesmen, publicly feuded with Simon & Schuster, and turned down offers to buy the house (before relenting in 1994). Giroux, conceding "I'm just an old fogey," asked, "Who the hell would read a book by Nixon?" (What did he make of O.J., you wonder.) He railed against "ooks"—gimmicks that weren't quite books—which account for the majority of what's now published. He often said, "It is the publisher's job, if he cannot find a masterpiece to print, at least to avoid publishing junk."

Junk is not a modern development, any more than layoffs or bankruptcies. Galassi made this clear at the memorial, calling out the titles on the 1952 Farrar list—before Giroux came onboard. These included an autobiography by bandleader Artie Shaw and books on traveling and hunting in Florida. "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." The times will never catch up with those schlocky books from '52, but one or two of them may have helped the company hold on long enough for Giroux to get there. In the early years, it was Straus's canniness and connections that kept the company going. Giroux was the one who made it worth salvaging. Galassi will have to keep doing both. ■

Photograph by Jill Krementz