

Robert Giroux, Editor, Publisher and Nurturer of Literary Giants, Is Dead at 94

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

Robert Giroux, an editor and publisher who introduced and nurtured some of the major authors of the 20th century and ultimately added his name to one of the nation's most distinguished publishing houses, died on Friday in Tinton Falls, N.J. He was 94.

He died in his sleep at Seabrook Village, an independent-living center, a niece, Kathleen Mulvehill, said.

If the flamboyant Roger Straus presented the public face of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, presiding over the business end, Mr. Giroux made his mark on the inside, as editor in chief, shaping the house's book list and establishing himself as the gold standard of literary taste. The publisher Charles Scribner Jr., in his memoir, "In the Company of Writers" (1991), wrote, "Giroux is a great man of letters, a great editor and a great publisher."

Mr. Giroux was T.S. Eliot's American editor and published the American edition of George Orwell's "1984," accepting it despite the objection of his immediate superior, whose wife had found some of the novel's passages distasteful.

He introduced a long roster of illustrious writers, publishing first books by, among others, Jean Stafford, Robert Lowell, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O'Connor, Randall Jarrell, William Gaddis, Jack Kerouac and Susan Sontag. He edited Virginia Woolf, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Carl Sandburg, Elizabeth Bishop, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy, Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley, Derek Walcott and William Golding.

In one instance he persuaded William Saroyan to transform "The Human Comedy" (1943) from a film script into a novel by suggesting that he simply remove the camera directions from the manuscript. The novel sold well and became a book-club selection.

But to his lasting regret Mr. Giroux also saw two momentous books slip from his grasp, J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" and Kerouac's "On the Road."

Mr. Giroux was attracted to editing while a student at Columbia University, when he took an honors seminar with Raymond Weaver.

"Weaver was the first biographer of Herman Melville, and the first person to read the manuscript of 'Billy Budd,' in 1919," Mr. Giroux told the poet Donald Hall in an interview for The New York Times Book Review in 1980. "This left a mark on me. I thought, 'Imagine discovering a literary masterpiece.'"

How many masterpieces Mr. Giroux discovered will be for the future to decide. As he himself insisted, it can take decades for a book to become a classic. Still, one of the first books he edited is now on any list of the century's best: "To the Finland Station," Edmund Wilson's 1940 masterwork on the rise of socialist thinking. Mr. Giroux judged the manuscript to be nearly flawless.

Born on April 8, 1914, in Jersey City, Mr. Giroux was the youngest of five children of Arthur J. Giroux, a foreman for a silk manufacturer, and Katharine Lyons Giroux, a grade-school teacher. He attended Regis High School in Manhattan but dropped out shortly before he was to graduate in June 1931, deciding instead to take a newspaper job with The Jersey Journal.

"It was the Depression, and jobs were hard to find," Mr. Giroux told The Times in 1988, when Regis finally did give him his diploma. "If I didn't take that one in April, I wouldn't have gotten it at all."

Despite his lack of high school credentials, he received a scholarship to Columbia University and set out to study journalism. But he was soon won over to liter-

ature by classes with Weaver and Mark Van Doren, the poet and critic. He went on to become editor in chief of The Columbia Review, the campus literary journal, publishing Thomas Merton and John Berryman, both fellow students then.

Graduating in 1936, Mr. Giroux set his course for a career in editing. But with publishing jobs scarce, he joined the public relations department at the Columbia Broadcasting System, waiting four years before he found his first editing job, in 1940, at Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Two years later, with the outbreak of World War II, he entered the Navy as an intelligence officer and served on the aircraft carrier Essex, reaching the rank of lieutenant commander — part-

Assembling a formidable catalog of authors, yet ruing two who got away.

ly, he said later, because his hair was white, having turned so in his youth.

In 1952 he married Carmen de Arango, who worked at the United Nations. The marriage ended in divorce in 1969. In addition to Ms. Mulvehill, Mr. Giroux is survived by two other nieces.

After leaving the Navy, Mr. Giroux took an article he had written, about the rescue of a fighter pilot downed at the Battle of Truk Lagoon in the Pacific, to a Navy public information office in New York. There, he said, he found the officer in charge, Lt. j.g. Roger W. Straus Jr., sitting with his feet up on his desk. Lieutenant Straus said he liked the article and could get him \$1,000 for it by selling it to a mass publication. "Rescue at Truk" ran in Colliers magazine

and was widely anthologized.

Rejoining Harcourt, Mr. Giroux became executive editor in 1948. The company's founders, Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace, encouraged him to sign up books rejected by other publishers, like "Wise Blood," by O'Connor, and "The Natural," Malamud's first novel.

But he also missed opportunities. Mr. Giroux had edited Kerouac's first book, "The Town and the City," but was unprepared later when Kerouac showed up at Harcourt, Brace with a manuscript written on sheets of onion-skin and teletype paper pasted together and delivered in a roll about 120 feet long. When Mr. Giroux would not agree to the author's demand that he make no changes in the manuscript, which consisted of a single sprawling paragraph, Kerouac stalked out, taking his book, "On the Road," with him. Viking eventually published it to wide acclaim, and Mr. Giroux expressed his chagrin long afterward.

Mr. Giroux had also written to Mr. Salinger offering to publish his short stories, which had been appearing in The New Yorker. He got no response, until one day his secretary announced that a Mr. Salinger was there to see him. Mr. Giroux repeated his short-story offer. Mr. Salinger argued that his stories wouldn't sell until he had published a novel, which he said he was working on. It was about a prep school student named Holden Caulfield, he said, on Christmas vacation in New York City. He assured Mr. Giroux that he would like it, and they shook hands on an agreement to publish it.

More than a year later, Mr. Salinger sent Mr. Giroux the manuscript of "The Catcher in the Rye." Mr. Giroux was all set to publish it, certain it would be a winner. Then Harcourt's textbook department intervened, saying "Catcher" wasn't right for the house. Mr. Giroux retreated,

forced to reject what turned out to be one of the great successes of the century.

Furious at the interference, Mr. Giroux began looking to move to another house, and in 1955 he joined Farrar, Straus & Company as editor in chief. Almost 20 of his writers at Harcourt eventually followed him, among them Eliot, Lowell, O'Connor and Malamud. It was a display of loyalty returned; Mr. Giroux was known for the care he lavished on his writers, whether visiting Stafford in the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic while she recovered from a breakdown or insisting that Eliot raise his fee for poetry readings.

Farrar, Straus — founded in 1946 by Mr. Straus and John C. Farrar — made Mr. Giroux a partner in 1964. He ultimately became chairman. The first book to bear his imprint was Lowell's book of poems "For the Union Dead."

But his relations with Mr. Straus were not without friction. Where Mr. Giroux was the man of letters, Mr. Straus was a hard-bargaining businessman and something of a showman, giving gossipy parties at his Upper East Side townhouse. In the late 1960s, as the company's 25th anniversary approached, Mr. Giroux proposed an anthology in celebration. Mr. Straus approved and told him to edit the selections and to write a preface. But when Mr. Straus read what Mr. Giroux had written, he demurred. His wife, Dorothea, he said, objected to how Mr. Giroux had described him on their first meeting, at the naval office — as having his feet on his desk.

"But you did, Roger," Mr. Giroux recalled saying.

"Dorothea doesn't like it," Mr. Straus replied.

Mr. Giroux, convinced that it was really Mr. Straus who didn't like it, angrily canceled the project, which never appeared. Mr. Straus died in 2004; Mr. Farrar in 1974.



ARTHUR W. WANG

Robert Giroux in the 1980s.

Mr. Giroux did write several books of his own, including "The Book Known as Q: A Consideration of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (Atheneum, 1982) and "A Deed of Death: The Story Behind the Unsolved Murder of Hollywood Director William Desmond Taylor" (Knopf, 1990), each of which was reviewed respectfully.

From 1975 to 1982, Mr. Giroux was president of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, an organization that fights movie censorship. Late in life he began a literary memoir but never completed it, saying he found it distasteful to write negatively about Mr. Straus.

His ambition to write might have prompted an exchange with Eliot, then in his late 50s, on the day they met in 1946, when Mr. Giroux, "just past 30," as he recalled the moment in "The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes," was an editor at Harcourt, Brace. "His most memorable remark of the day," Mr. Giroux said, "occurred when I asked him if he agreed with the definition that most editors are failed writers, and he replied, 'Perhaps, but so are most writers.'"