

Grove Press

P-Rosset, Barney
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EXCERPTS:

Barney Rosset, the Force Behind the Grove Press

By Randy Sue Coburn

It is not unusual for Barney Rosset to dream that he is an aerialist. In these dreams, the spotlight is on him and his attire is clearly meant for flying through the air. There's just one problem: he does not know the first thing about *being* an aerialist.

As the trapeze swings toward him, he reasons with dream-like logic, "This is obviously what I am, so I must know what to do." Without any idea of how he'll keep from crashing to the ground, he always grabs the trapeze. At that point, with Rosset confident that another element will somehow surface and be responsible for his survival, the dream always ends.

For the past 27 years, that is pretty much the way it has been for Barney Rosset and Grove Press, the publishing house built around his highly developed insinctions.

At first, it was a one-man operation with not many more titles, financed by a million dollar-plus legacy from Barnet Lee Rosset Sr., a Chicago banker. After 10 years of skating on the edge of bankruptcy — a state exacerbated by Rosset's involvement in the landmark obscenity trials that gave us "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and "Tropic of Cancer," and freed writers to consider sex — Grove blossomed into the publishing house of the '60s, flush with dramatically new ideas, interests and profits.

For a number of reasons, some of them exceedingly curious, Grove has shrunk back to an eight-person business. Now, when publishing houses are more easily associated with corporations than individuals, it is only slightly theatrical to call Rosset the last independent publisher in New York.

"Who else is there?" an editor from a corporate subsidiary wonders rhetorically. "There's Barney and there's Farrar, Straus and Giroux."

Because Grove reflects Rosset's personality to such an extent, the two of them are impossible to separate.

The FBI, the CIA and the Army, whose records include a somewhat baffling chart of Rosset's existence, would probably agree. According to the Rockefeller Commission report, Grove was the only private enterprise to be unduly harrassed by intelligence agencies. In Rosset's office, three large cabinet drawers are filled to capacity with files obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. The data goes back to his days as a student at Chicago's progressive Francis W. Parker School, which the 57-year-old Rosset describes as "a bigger influence on me than my parents or college."

Grenade Through the Window

Rosset may have been pointlessly protesting history when, at the age of 17, he picketed "Gone With the Wind" as a racist movie. But it helps explain why he later published LeRoi Jones and "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." Once, in what appears to be classic Rosset style, he managed to offend both civil rights activists and opponents by printing what now seems to be simply a sensitive photograph of a white woman and a black child, both of whom are nude.

That photograph appeared in Evergreen Review, Grove's bi-monthly cultural magazine — "a lewd little satellite in the publishing empire of Barney Rosset," in James J. Kilpatrick's description some years ago. In 1965, as an Evergreen cover featuring Che Guevara hit the streets, a band of Cuban exiles launched a grenade through a Grove Press window, an act Rosset regards (without substantiation) as one of the most successful CIA-directed anti-Castro missions.

Besides generating controversy, Evergreen harmonized perfectly with Grove's books, printing works by Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Brautigan, Pablo Neruda, Norman Mailer, Terry Southern, Jean Paul Sartre and Robert Coover, among others. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" first reached a wide public through Evergreen Review's second edition, which was devoted to "The San Francisco Renaissance."

When financial difficulties finally shut down Evergreen in 1973, it went out with the Rosset imprint.

Later, Rosset would confuse his fans at the CIA and FBI by publishing in paperback a book called "The Crisis in Communism; The Turning Point of Socialism." The hardcover version, as it turns out, was published by a CIA-subsidized house. "I call that unfair competition," Rosset says. He is not kidding. That accusation is a pearl in the string of suits Rosset has filed against about a dozen officials, including Richard Helms, William Colby, and James Schlesinger.

"So far," says Rosset, "we've won the right to sue. And it's hopeless, you know. I don't want a money settlement, except to cover legal expenses (which the ACLU is helping to defray). I want an information settlement."

When this interview ends, it has progressed from awkward to comfortable. Tomorrow, Rosset is told, things should probably get more specific. "Oh," he says, "that's never as much fun."

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"That is an interesting story," says Fred Jordan. "Maryland's case against 'I Am Curious Yellow' was the first to reach a state supreme court. They held against us, and we appealed. At the time, Jerry Ford was minority leader of the House, and he was launching a drive to impeach Justice William O. Douglas. Barney and I were coming back from Denmark when we saw the Herald Tribune — Ford was on the cover waving a copy of Evergreen Review, saying that Douglas was writing for a pornographic magazine." (Evergreen had excerpted the last chapter from Douglas' book, "Points of Rebellion.")

Douglas subsequently excused himself from all cases involving Grove — including the court's next case "I Am Curious Yellow." That ended in a tie vote, which had the effect of upholding the previous decision.

But then, Grove has demonstrated something of a knack for closing the door on itself. After opening up the sexual dialogue in literature, much of Grove's erotica (like the 'The Story of O,' a French prostitute's account of sexual slavery) was crowded out and stripped of its mystique by totally artless porn. After Grove invested "I Am Curious Yellow" profits into avant-garde foreign films, that market promptly dwindled, thanks, in part, to the porno wave started by "I Am Curious Yellow" (a film that would scarcely merit an R-rating today).

But before the Supreme Court had its say, angry women were standing outside the new Mercer Street building wearing buttons that read, "I Am Furious Yellow." Their protest was

against Grove's "sado-masochistic literature and pornographic films that dehumanize and degrade women." Led by several women whom Grove had employed, they were arrested for occupying executive offices. Grove did not press charges. "The shame of it was that Grove would have been interested in publishing the sort of books they wanted," says Kent Carroll, now Rosset's top editor.

The Chaos Was Total

Simultaneously, the Fur, Leather and Machinist Workers was adding to the crush on the sidewalks in front of Grove; that old, leftist union was picketing in its attempt to make Grove its first publishing conquest. For months, Rosset says, "the chaos at Grove was total." Whether the union won or lost, he told the union, financial difficulties would force Rosset to fire a large number of employees. The union lost, and did not attempt to unionize another publishing house.

"We destroyed them," Rosset says, "and that was really painful to me. The demands we got were things like I had to abandon my house in East Hampton to a black women's collective, divide all the profits and put in a day care center. In the end, it was a disaster for everybody. . . I deeply believe the FBI and CIA backed it all, and that Grove's anti-war stance had something to do with it. I think that's one of the pieces I'm missing. But I don't think the head of the union, or some of the women, were aware of being duped."
