

# KNOWING WHAT SELLS

*Times Books publisher strives to keep ahead of the pack*

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In the dog-eat-dog world of book publishing, Greenwich resident Peter Osnos strives to keep ahead of the pack.

As publisher of Times Books, a division of media giant Random

House, Osnos must chase authors down with the speed and grace of a greyhound, then hold on to them with the tenacity of a pit bull.

"There are a lot of publishers out there, and it's a very competitive business," Osnos said recently from his Manhattan office.

But, if current best seller lists are

any indication, Osnos is, indeed, a top dog.

Right now, there is the highly successful and equally controversial "In Retrospect", the memoirs of former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara (who served under presidents Kennedy and Johnson and helped lead America into the Viet-

nam war), as well as "The Gospel of Life," the recent encyclical letter from Pope John Paul II.

"Basically, if you wait for books or people to come to you, you've probably waited too long," Osnos said, defining the aggressive nature of book publishing today. "You should be out trying to initiate."

Which is what Osnos and Times Books did with the Pope.

## PROFILE

"Actually, that wasn't too difficult. Last summer, we heard he was doing an encyclical on issues like abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty, so we went to the Vatican and said we would like to publish it when it comes out," Osnos explained.

"Their only consideration was that we do a respectful and proper job — not modify or diminish his encyclical," he added.

While the Pope's encyclical naturally would generate public interest, many manuscripts are not so cut and dried. But there is a recipe for success, according to Osnos.

"My definition of a good book is that it should be topical but enduring, topical in the sense that it addresses issues that are of interest at that moment," Osnos said.

Even so, it is not always easy to define what is topical.

"Take McNamara's book, for example," Osnos said. "You might say it (the Vietnam war) all happened twenty or thirty years ago, but the reaction to the book makes it clear that this isn't yesterday to most people. It's absolutely today in every way."

In many ways, Vietnam is still today for Osnos.

Born in Bombay, India, and raised in New York, Osnos attended Cheshire Academy and earned his bachelor's degree at Brandeis University in Massachusetts before garnering his master's degree in journalism from Columbia University.

After a brief stint as an editorial assistant at I.F. Stone's Weekly, Osnos took a job at The Washington Post, where he worked as an assistant editor and metropolitan reporter before being assigned to Indochina in 1970 — where he would cover McNamara's war.

"I'm awfully glad that I went to Vietnam because Vietnam was probably the central experience of American life in my generation. I feel good for having had the opportunity to see for myself and was able to write about what was going on for two very important years while the war was raging," Osnos said. "It helped me, and it helps me in a great many ways to understand what the war was about and why Americans still feel so strongly about it."

After his time in Indochina, Osnos honed his editorial skills at The

Washington Post, serving as a Moscow correspondent, a foreign editor, a national editor, and as London bureau chief until 1984.

"I did a little of this and a little of that in my years at The Washington Post," Osnos said. "I'm not (CNN reporter) Peter Arnett, chasing a war from place to place."

Now Osnos is perfectly happy dogging promising manuscripts at Times Books instead of dodging bullets in Vietnam.

"Publishing is a funny mix of commerce and substance, and I really love the idea that we are able to do things like the Pope's encyclical or McNamara's book because we are providing information that people need and doing it in a way they can't get elsewhere. That's important," Osnos said.

Among his responsibilities as publisher is the task of producing 100 books a year in fields that vary from public affairs to history and biography, and from business and economics to science and health.

That involves finding the writer, acquiring book rights, going through the editing process, then working through the publishing process, which includes creating the controversy and excitement that sells books.

But not all books are destined for the best-seller list, so Osnos tries to remember what a senior executive at Random House once told him.

"You don't know how good it feels to succeed until you know how lousy it feels to fail," the executive said.

Not that failure has ever been a problem.

Osnos also serves as editor on many of Times Books' projects, with a list of clients that reads like a Who's Who of authors and celebrities, from Jimmy Carter to "Magic" Johnson, and from Nancy Reagan to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

He can't begin to estimate how many books he's read.

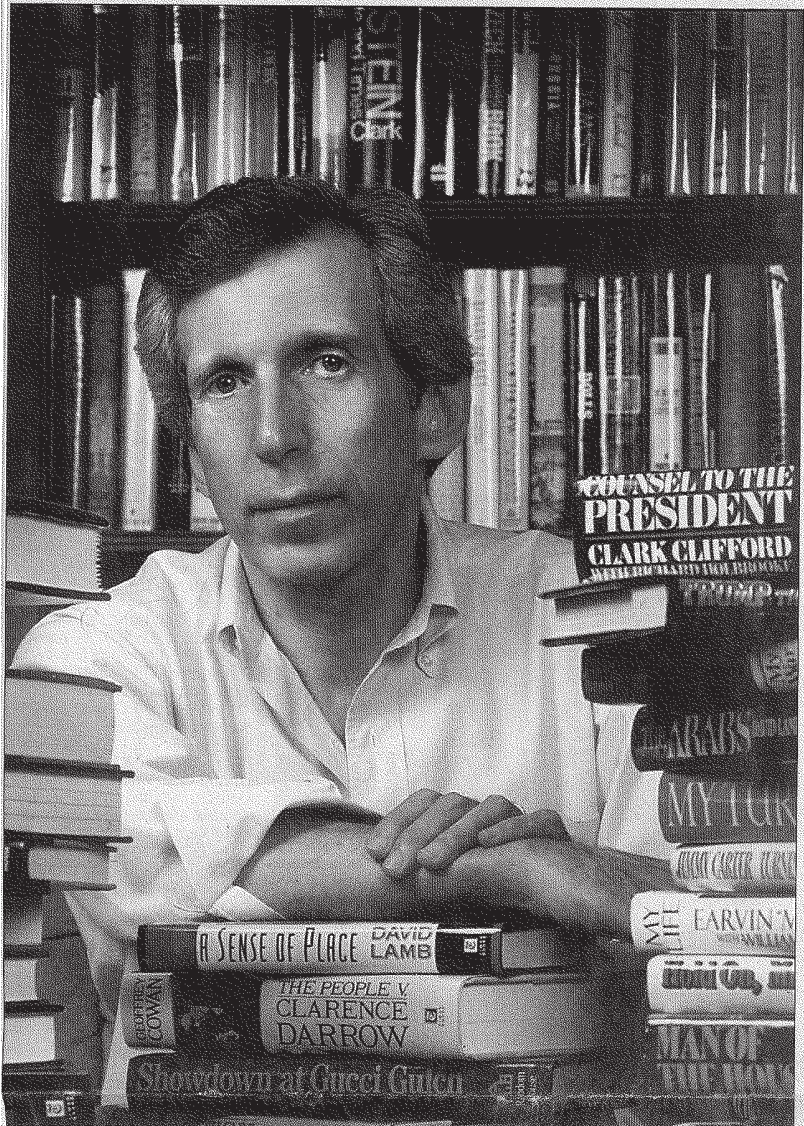
"I don't even want to guess. Scores and scores," Osnos said from amid the towers of tomes and hills of hardcovers that define his office. "It's what I do for a living."

When he is not working, Osnos, who has lived in Greenwich with his wife and two children since 1987, tries to stay in shape.

"I'm a full-fledged card-carrying member of the Greenwich YMCA and an inveterate runner," said the 51-year-old Osnos. "I've explored a lot of the backcountry here in Greenwich."

And despite the high-profile nature of publishing, despite the big-name authors and the big-city lights of New York, Osnos is still in Greenwich.

"I love it and I think Greenwich is a great town," he said. "It's very much home."



Peter Osnos, publisher of Times Books, at home in Greenwich.

Paul Desmarais / Staff photo