

*Our first big hit*, The Starr Report.

## **A Steamy Report Aids a Publisher's Debut**

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*The New York Times*

**By Doreen Carvajal**

**September 21, 1998**

By rather brief tradition, the literature of choice at the year-old PublicAffairs publishing house started by the Random House refugee Peter Osnos is intelligent and reflective—serious nonfiction scorned by conglomerates seeking best-seller profits.

So how is it that Mr. Osnos's leading title on his debut list this fall is a breast-heaving 421-page tale of unrequited love, of a tormented affair of a young woman scorned and a married man scarred, of an impossible relationship characterized by bodice-ripper sentiments and romance-book regrets? A book brimming with sentiment like: I "cannot ignore what we have shared together. I don't care what you say, but if you were 100 percent fulfilled in your marriage I never would have seen that raw, intense sexuality."

Expect no grainy photographs for your \$10 purchase, but there's not much else left to the imagination in "The Starr Report"—That Book—which PublicAffairs started shipping before dawn last Monday with a dignified crimson-and-gray cover and the complete text of the report of the Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr, chronicling President Clinton's relationship with the White House intern Monica S. Lewinsky. Also included are the White House rebuttal and early news articles from The Washington Post about the steamy Government document, which makes "The Valley of the Dolls" read like a phone book.

"I didn't know that when we chose PublicAffairs for this company's name that we literally mean public affairs, but that's the way it worked out," Mr. Osnos, 54, said dryly from the company's headquarters—sparse, dorm-like offices that share the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of the Fisk Building in midtown Manhattan with the nonliterati, like Arista Dental and Dentogenic Studios.

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The company's maiden catalogue does indeed boast serious books, like Arthur L. Liman's posthumous memoir of his legal career and the Iran-Contra investigation, and Neil Baldwin's exploration of Mexico and the myth of Quetzalcoatl, the principal god of the Aztecs. But the company has printed far more copies of "The Starr Report" than of any of the nine other titles, with 300,000 books shipped on the first day, and Mr. Osnos is poised to gamble by printing still more. "We could print hundreds of thousands right now," Mr. Osnos said. "We are still going to print as conservatively as we can because we don't know how long this is going to last."

But for now, copies of “The Starr Report” are moving as if they were Stephen King paperbacks—and are a far better bargain for Mr. Osnos than a blockbuster novel would be because his company can publish the Government document without paying advances to its authors, subsidizing expensive book tours or sparring with agents. By some estimates, PublicAffairs could easily make more than a half a million dollars in profits if the books continue to sell briskly.

“We’re sold out in Cincinnati, Denver, Paramus, Dallas and Las Vegas,” an exuberant Mr. Osnos marveled before bolting from his office to meet another company employee to debate how many more copies to print. (To be sure, PublicAffairs has at least two competitors, which also report brisk sales of Mr. Starr’s report—a \$5.99 mass-market paperback by Pocket Books, part of Viacom’s Simon & Schuster unit, and a \$9.99 trade paperback from a small California publisher, Prima.)

It is a rather odd state of public affairs for Mr. Osnos, a former reporter and editor at The Washington Post who left Random House two years ago as the publisher of its Times Books imprint. One of the last books he published there was a slim political work by President Clinton, which certainly failed to match the sales power or Oval Office sizzle of “The Starr Report.”

As the publisher of Times Books—once owned by The New York Times Company—Mr. Osnos came to believe that the system for publishing serious books was flawed and the audience for them too limited to support standard author advances and corporate overhead. It bothered him that “Times Books was doing more and more consumer reference books and crossword puzzles, and I wanted to do public-affairs books,” he said.

So he resigned to start his own company, and set about looking for partners to share the costs of author contracts. “PBS Frontline” signed on in return for exclusive rights to produce documentaries tied to the books it helped underwrite. His plan also attracted minority investors like the ABD News anchor Peter Jennings and the former C-Span chairman Robert Rosencrans. It also prompted Frank H. Pearl, a lawyer and chairman of the venture capital firm Perseus Capital, to buy a majority interest and make PublicAffairs a part of his expanding publishing group, which also includes Basic Books, a bastion of scholarly works, and Counterpoint, a literary press.

For his part, Mr. Osnos has no qualms about making a publishing debut with a Government page-turner of Oval Office romance and footnotes that helpfully provide the definition of telephone sex and Ms. Lewinsky’s dry-cleaning habits—or lack thereof.

“I do not have a moment’s doubt that a report by this special counsel, recommending the impeachment of the President of the United States, is a historic document,” Mr. Osnos said.

“I cannot think of anything more substantive,” he added. “Do you think I should curl my lip at the President of the United States? I’m not in the business of judging whether history is elegant or not. History in this case is degrading.”

“The Starr Report”—as *The Book*—could have a significant impact on the fledging PublicAffairs, letting it subsidize more projects and “change our sense of what is possible,” Mr. Osnos said.

Is there a sequel? Mr. Osnos is waiting for 2,800 more pages of evidence.

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