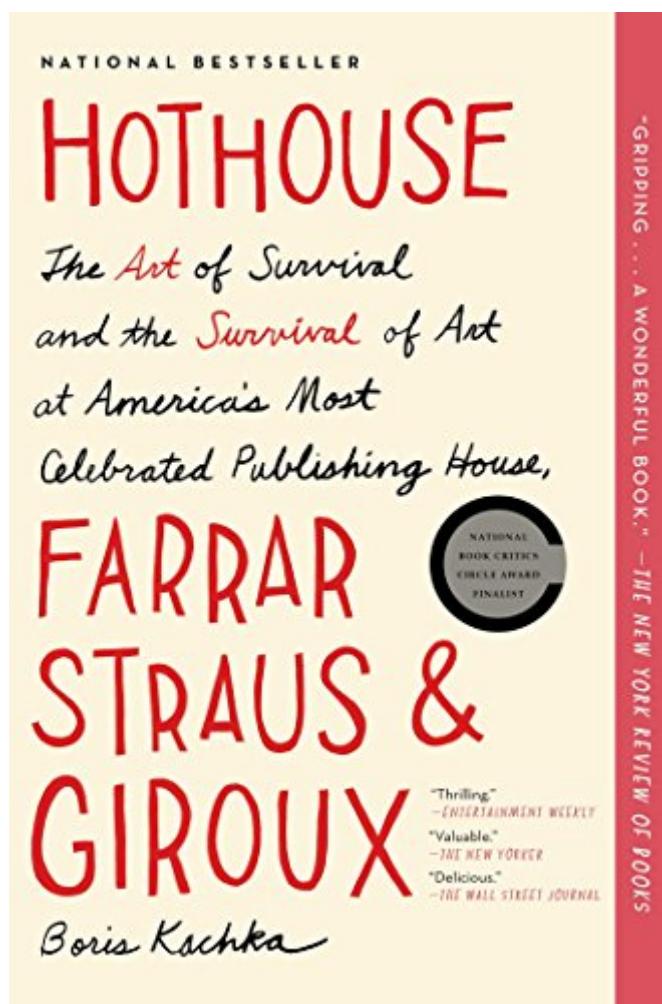


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# Hothouse: The Art Of Survival And The Survival Of Art At America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, And Giroux



## Synopsis

“Mad Men for the literary world.” Junot Díaz, Straus and Giroux is arguably the most influential publishing house of the modern era. Home to an unrivaled twenty-five Nobel Prize winners and generation-defining authors like T. S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, Susan Sontag, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Franzen, it’s a cultural institution whose importance approaches that of *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*. But FSG is no ivory tower—the owner’s wife called the office a “sexual sewer”—and its untold story is as tumultuous and engrossing as many of the great novels it has published. Boris Kachka deftly reveals the era and the city that built FSG through the stories of two men: founder-owner Roger Straus, the pugnacious black sheep of his powerful German-Jewish family—with his bottomless supply of ascots, charm, and vulgarity of every stripe—and his utter opposite, the reticent, closeted editor Robert Giroux, who rose from working-class New Jersey to discover the novelists and poets who helped define American culture. Giroux became one of T. S. Eliot’s best friends, just missed out on *The Catcher in the Rye*, and played the placid caretaker to manic-depressive geniuses like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Jean Stafford, and Jack Kerouac. Straus, the brilliant showman, made Susan Sontag a star, kept Edmund Wilson out of prison, and turned Isaac Bashevis Singer from a Yiddish scribbler into a Nobelist—even as he spread the gossip on which literary New York thrived. A prolific lover and an epic fighter, Straus ventured fearlessly, and sometimes recklessly, into battle for his books, his authors, and his often-struggling company. When a talented editor left for more money and threatened to take all his writers, Roger roared, “Over my dead body!” and meant it. He turned a philosophical disagreement with Simon & Schuster head Dick Snyder into a mano a mano media war that caught writers such as Philip Roth and Joan Didion in the crossfire. He fought off would-be buyers like S. I. Newhouse (“that dwarf”) with one hand and rapacious literary agents like Andrew Wylie (“that shit”) with the other. Even his own son and presumed successor was no match for a man who had to win at any cost—and who was proven right at almost every turn. At the center of the story, always, are the writers themselves. After giving us a fresh perspective on the postwar authors we thought we knew, Kachka pulls back the curtain to expose how elite publishing works today. He gets inside the editorial meetings where writers’ fates are decided; he captures the adrenaline rush of bidding wars for top talent; and he lifts the lid on the high-stakes pursuit of that rarest commodity, public attention—including a fly-on-the-wall account of the explosive confrontation between Oprah Winfrey and Jonathan Franzen, whose relationship, Franzen tells us, “was bogus from the

start. Vast but detailed, full of both fresh gossip and keen insight into how the literary world works, *Hothouse* is the product of five years of research and nearly two hundred interviews by a veteran New York magazine writer. It tells an essential story for the first time, providing a delicious inside perspective on the rich pageant of postwar cultural life and illuminating the vital intellectual center of the American Century.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

HOTHOUSE, by Boris Kachka.I wasn't sure if I'd like this book, an account of the history of one of the most prestigious publishing houses in America, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, in its many names and guises over the years. But I did like it; in fact I liked it a lot. Because I am a booklover, and this is a book just made for people like me. There are anecdotes and stories galore here, and I knew right away I'd have fun with this book, and began immediately jotting down the names of books and authors I've known of for years, but still haven't read. Now I have a stronger resolve to read folks like Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell, and maybe I'll even finally give On the Road: The Original

Scroll (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition) — another try. And Eileen Simpson's memoir, *Poets in Their Youth: A Memoir*, sounds delicious. Sontag? I probably still wouldn't understand her stuff, but then I did enjoy reading *Always Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*, Sigrid Nunez's memoir of her time with Sontag, a book cited a couple times here, as Kachka has much to say about the close relationship Sontag enjoyed with publisher Roger Straus. And it brought back so many fond memories of FSG authors I have read, both recently and long ago - Flannery O'Connor, Philip Roth, Thomas Merton, Nelson Algren, Solzhenitsyn, and others. And, more recently, Jonathan Franzen and his disingenuous public "dis-ing" of Oprah. Plenty of people have already weighed in on *HOTHOUSE*, so I'm just gonna list a few favorite lines here. Like when editor Robert Giroux asked T.S. Eliot "Did he think it was true that most editors were failed writers? Tom supposed it was, but then so were most writers." I LOVED that! Or Giroux's coining of "the term 'ooks' to describe the 'not quite books' that dominated the bestseller lists and gift sections of bookstores." Or just the mentioning of newer old favorites of mine, like Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love: A Novel* or Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World: A Novel*. Kachka didn't have to dwell on names and titles like these; their mere mention evoked pleasurable memories. And this is much of the charm of *HOTHOUSE* - all these names, all these titles, famous and obscure alike. Another section which touched me deeply was that last conversation between Roger and his son, Rog (Roger III), finally acknowledging that the son was not coming back to FSG, that he did not want to inherit the family business. And then the phone call in which Roger arranged to sell the company to a large German conglomerate, the end of an era in publishing. I was reminded of my own father reaching a similar realization, fifty years ago, that none of his sons wanted his family business, built up over a twenty-year period. And so he sold it. Selling the family business, problems between fathers and sons. It's sad, but it happens. I have only barely brushed the surface of the myriad stories in *HOTHOUSE*, but for book enthusiasts, this is definitely a must-read. I am not surprised to see a cover endorsement from Larry McMurtry, whose own memoir (which I also loved) was called simply *Books: A Memoir*. Highly recommended. (four and a half stars)- Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, *BOOKLOVER*

I know so little about the publishing business even though I am an avid reader. So when I read Robert Gottlieb's review of it in *The New Yorker*, I was intrigued. Fiction can be, for me, less appealing than a really well-written novel. But this book was one I didn't want to put down when I got started. The men involved--Farrar, Straus (especially him) and Giroux are very well depicted and, I assume, accurately so. But more than being just about the rise of an amazing publishing house, this

is also about the writers who published with FSG beginning back to World War II years. And the backdrop of wealth behind especially Roger Straus, Jr. All in all, a great read. Highly recommended to anyone who is an avid reader and has an interest in publishing houses which seem, today, to be far inferior to the likes of FSG.

Interesting account of one of the finest houses to exist in NY publishing. I particularly enjoyed the biography of the firm's most ebullient, charismatic member, Roger Straus. When he is out of the picture on these pages, the narrative seems to dim. My main caveat with this book is the somewhat elitist, "literary" tone, as if that rarified hothouse air may only be breathed by the cognoscenti located within a five-block radius in Manhattan. Still, it was interesting to read of the discovery of major artists such as Sontag, Didion, Wolfe, & Franzen. It's a window into another age when publishers released what they liked, based on quality and not focus groups.

Who would think that the books we read and such back room tales to tale? That is the case with this non-fiction story of one of the great American publishing houses in the days before e-books and mega book stores at the mall. IF you think this is going to be a nice story of Maxwell Perkins or B. Cerf, think again. This book could be filmed as one of those soaps from the 1980's starting Joan Collins and maybe Jack Nicholson. Imagine Old Jack in the literary world and start smiling.

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