

## He did it his way: all 957 pages

*Bill Clinton eluded the grips of a hands-on editor by delivering his book very late and very long*

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Coming to a media circus near you in a just a few more days, Bill Clinton's memoir is the biggest thing since last summer's blockbuster, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

This summer, Clinton's publisher, Knopf, plans a 1.5-million print run (the company's largest ever) for *My Life*, and has paid him a US\$10M advance. That's about what Clinton's been making annually on the lecture circuit, too, and will just cover the legal bills (for Whitewater, impeachment, and so on) he couldn't leave behind him, forgotten in a White House drawer.

For a cognoscente like the 42nd president, the money's gravy. Attention's what counts. There's been plenty; more to come. Clinton gave the opening address at last week at BookExpo in Chicago. Next, it's Dan Rather and 60 Minutes, then Good Morning America, Larry King, Katie Couric.

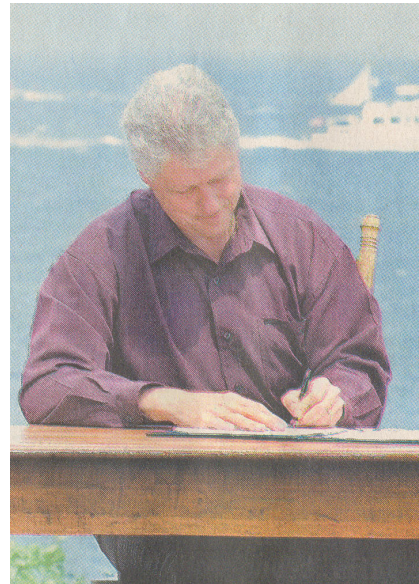
"Any day now," his handler told the New York Daily News, "I expect to hear from other planets."

Four years out of the presidency, it's still familiar buzz for William Jefferson Clinton (he goes by that name now — Bill's disappeared).

It's familiar buzz for his editor, Robert Gottlieb, too. Gottlieb has edited Doris Lessing, Mordecai Richler (with whom he was close), Chaim Potok and Jessica Mitford, and steered luminaries like biographer Robert A. Caro, novelist Toni Morrison and newspaper magnate Katharine Graham to their Pulitzers. From 1987 to 1992, he took five years away from books to edit *The New Yorker*.

"An elevated work of gossip," Gottlieb has said, "is the kind of book we all like to read." He has a thing for kitsch, owns a collection of women's plastic handbags, and has written a book about them. Not long ago, in the New York Observer, where he is also dance critic, he reviewed a history of bras. He loves the mixedbrow, likes to speak of "the good bad book." He has an Elvis lamp, favours Beethoven. He likes ballet, too — but only after he edited Katharine Graham's memoirs and began accompanying her there.

Gottlieb devoured print early. It's said that as a child he read *War and Peace* in a day. Well-schooled, well-travelled, affecting a Woody Allen déshabille, he tried out Britain and stage-directing but came home to Manhattan and books, joining Simon & Schuster in 1955. Within two years, he'd signed a first novel called *Catch-18* by then-unknown author Joseph Heller. Leon Uris had just brought out *Mila 18*, so Gottlieb changed the title to *Catch-22* and scissored up the manuscript to make it his own.



Michael Korda, himself a powerful celebrity editor, remembers Gottlieb then as ferocious, exuberant — and proprietary, with bits of the *Catch-22* manuscript taped to every surface of his teeming office. Soon, Gottlieb was known for his firm hand — and his eclectic taste.



Within ten years, he became editor-in-chief at Simon & Schuster, publishing thrillers by Michael Crichton, spy novels by John LeCarré, and *Miss Piggy's Guide to Life*, but also more literary works like the collected stories of John Cheever. The publication of the collection made Cheever's career, and his own.

But Gottlieb became known as well for his involvement with a young, unhappy writer from New Orleans named John Kennedy Toole. Gottlieb never officially became Toole's editor, only his tormentor. Toole had a novel; for years, Gottlieb asked for revisions. In the end, he lost interest and rejected it.

"With all its wonderfulness," he wrote, the book "does not have a reason. It isn't really about anything. And that's something no one can do anything about."

Toole went to New York to appeal Gottlieb's decision, and was turned away. After the novel was finally published in 1980 by Louisiana State University, it won a Pulitzer — but the author was not around to accept it; Toole had killed himself 11 years earlier, at the age of 32. (With help from the novelist Walker Percy, Toole's mother had convinced the university to publish the book.)

Maybe it's an old story. Writers frequently clash with editors. And about Toole and Gottlieb there are various accounts. Whatever is true, in early 1969, Toole drove to California to see the Hearst mansion, then back through Georgia to stop by the home of Flannery O'Connor. Finally, he pulled up to woods in Biloxi and threaded a garden hose from his tailpipe through one of his back windows.

He'd always been troubled; it was merely his last mistake to run into the scissors of wunderkind editor Gottlieb. Under the circumstances his book's title, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, can't help but seem right. ("When a true genius appears in the world," Jonathan Swift wrote way back in 1706, "you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.")

But it's not that most writers don't have their troubles. William Jefferson Clinton allowed to the media last month that he was "killing himself" to finish his memoir, staying up all night. Last week at BookExpo, he shared his version of writer's block (a whole four hours gone fuming over Ken Starr and also his stepfather, an angry man who fired a gun indoors when Clinton was five).

He even fussed about whether his book would be any good. "I have no earthly idea if it's a great book," he said, "but it's a pretty good story."

The writing has been a while in coming. Clinton thought things over a long time first while he renovated a writer's studio from an old barn behind his house in Chappaqua (Gottlieb moved other of his celebrity writers into the Knopf offices to oversee them, but not Clinton), and while he talked things through with Ted Widmer, an historian at Washington College.

As a member of the past administration's national security staff, Widmer once wrote Clinton's speeches. As interlocutor while the book was in progress, he spent a day or two a month in the Chappaqua barn with Clinton and a tape recorder, drawing him out in chat, Clinton's *forté*. Clinton then worked from the transcripts.

The two only began the White House years in January, and the project is a full year late. That makes it vintage Clinton — overdue and, at 957 pages, windy.

Gottlieb, now 70, doesn't talk publicly about Clinton. He's not free to, Knopf says cagily. The legend of Clinton's book — like Toole's before it — has much to do with Gottlieb, the mandarin, the book baron, the master — but the books themselves, almost nothing. Now the great intervenor has all but left Bill Clinton alone.

It's hardly the Gottlieb Michael Korda once saw plastering his office with rewrites. In the case of *My Life*, there has hardly been time for an edit, certainly not an edit of Gottlieb's exhaustive variety, and Clinton, in a charming comeuppance and reversal of fortunes, has sidestepped Gottlieb with his blab.