February 10, 2009

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Posted December 2, 2008 | 12:27 PM (EST)

Spelling Ted Without Ed


Whoever said you can't judge a book by its cover? The dust jacket of Ted Turner's new autobiography, *Call Me Ted*, co-written with Bill Burke, features the famous businessman in a suit and tie on the front, and in a cowboy hat and denim on the back. Perhaps subconsciously, it reveals the complicated -- and contradictory -- story lurking within.

As a sophomore at Brown University, Robert E. "Ted" Turner, III declared Classics as his major. His father, Ed Turner, was not pleased. "I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass," he wrote, "and the sooner I get you out of that atmosphere, the better." Fearing that his son would become preoccupied with "Leonidas... and... William Faulkner, a contemporary of mine in Mississippi," Ed forced Ted to return home, where he joined Turner Advertising Company, the old man's billboard business.

Ted Turner drove himself to become "the world's greatest sailor, businessman, and lover at the same time." While he didn't quite make it, he did become the premier visionary and innovator of the media business in the last forty years: he founded CNN, the world's first twenty-four hour news service; created TBS, the first cable Superstation; formed TNT, the Cartoon Network and the Goodwill Games; captained the victorious 1976 America's Cup sailing team; and is currently the largest private landowner in the United States. His personal fortune at its peak was ten billion dollars. Despite these achievements, *Call Me Ted* suggests that Turner feels unfulfilled.

His autobiography, too, is unsatisfying. For such a surprising life, Ted's memoir is exceptionally unsurprising. Ever since Ed Turner summoned him home, it seems, Ted hasn't fully resolved what he wanted to do when he grew up. In *Call Me Ted*, he is serially and simultaneously a rebel and an establishment figure.

His maverick credentials are well-known. He is the riverboat gambler cum businessman whose first job was pulling weeds from beneath billboards in the rural south, a modern day Rhett Butler who rolled the dice and bloodied the noses of bigwigs. Turner picked fights with the professional sports establishment, Hollywood power players, the FCC and the U.S. Congress. He bought and sold stations and studios, acquired the rights to *Bugs Bunny* and *Gone with the Wind*, and pissed off Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen by colorizing classic films. In his spare time he sparred with the sailing establishment and came away as Yachtsman of the Year four times.

Turner's alter ego is not part of his carefully-cultivated public persona -- but it's there, hidden in plain sight. Left an estate valued at over a million dollars when his father shot himself in 1963, Ted wasn't hardscrabble -- when he started. More telling, though, is his endorsement of time management, persistence, and maximizing shareholder value, as the keys to success. He is a Carnegie duality: part Andrew, part Dale. As if one good Turner deserves another, Ted becomes the Ed (and id) of his imagination, a bullish, bulldog of a businessman who works round the clock, neglects his family, cheats on his
wife and then expects loyalty at home, imposing the patriarchal codes of "hard work" and "self-reliance" on his children and sending all three of his sons to military school.

In *Call Me Ted*, it becomes apparent that Turner should have worried about Arthur Miller more than Faulkner. Like Willy Loman, he finds it difficult to stay focused. He spends more time describing a lost magpie he befriended than any one of his five children. And instead of reflecting on the lasting impact of CNN, he laments again and again that his tombstone will read: "Here Lies Ted Turner, He Never Owned a Broadcast Network."

Inviting readers to distrust Ted's narrative, the authors let fawning former employees and business associates, Turner's family, and luminaries like Bill Gates and John Malone weigh in. More often than not they contradict Ted. On the AOL-Time Warner merger, for example, Turner says he asked his four most-trusted friends to approve the deal before he signed. In separate sidebars, three of the men recall it differently. In a sense it's refreshing for an autobiography to contain *Rashomon*-like versions of epochal events but here, as in the rest of the book, you don't know who to believe, and Ted doesn't seem all that credible a source.

The autobiography actually provides the basis for a withering assault on Turner's business judgment. He was clearly at his best in the start-up phase of his many ventures, from the early days of WTCG to drumming up attention for the hapless Atlanta Braves in the seventies to dreaming up CNN. It is not insignificant that he succeeded by bringing his "Celebrity" power to bear. Turner understands the Celebritification of Culture about as well as anyone, and that's saying something. But he was not a great -- or even a good -- dealmaker. He was undressed by Kirk Kerkorian in the acquisition of MGM, and his sale of Turner to Time Warner eventually cost him his company and much of his fortune. In this regard, too, Turner's candor is impressive but, surrounded by so much braggadocio, it is atonal, if not downright odd.

All the more so when Jane Fonda weighs in with a remarkably candid assessment of her former husband. Noting his troubled childhood, she says: "He can't sit still because if you sit still, the demons catch up with you...he had to spend every minute of his life protecting himself and that makes it harder to open up to people..." Bingo. Apparently, Turner can't really open up, even in his autobiography, even with a co-writer. But he's honest enough to leave the fingerprints of a seemingly bi-polar septuagenarian, who is scared, sad, loud and proud. The only hopeful note is that he is Ted Turner, after all, and in five years he might have a new ending.

Ted Turner is the iconic businessman of his generation. In many ways, he is representative of the fundamental American conflict between modernity and tradition, the maverick and the establishment, North and South, red and blue. He stands at the intersection of news and business and entertainment having had no small part in creating the Era of Infotainment. Would-be moguls, however, should take note. Turner is hardly a tragic figure -- he still has a lot of money and his philanthropy, if a bit naive at times, is honorable and admirable. But *Call Me Ted* makes you wonder what would have happened if he got that Classics degree at Brown.

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