

## Page Turner

After the passing of his longtime coeditor, Robert Silvers goes it alone at *The New York Review of Books*.

Photograph by TONY FLOYD

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**V**isit Robert Silvers in his office at *The New York Review of Books* and it becomes clear that certain phrases have never entered his lexicon. The first: “light reading.” On vacation recently, he kicked back with a little Montaigne. “I read the most *marvelous* early-20th-century translation, with brilliant notes,” he says. “It was intensely satisfying!”

“Business casual” is another notion in which the legendary editor seems disinterested. Though it’s a steamy August day, the genial 76-year-old is in a navy suit and tie. His dapper appearance is even more notable when one considers that he just returned from the aforementioned trip—two weeks in France and Switzerland—the night before.

The holiday was no doubt much needed. In June Barbara Epstein, with whom Silvers founded the *Review*, died at age 77 from lung cancer. For more than four decades, the two coedited the journal of books and politics that has been called the Dow Jones ticker tape of highbrow culture. And although illness had forced Epstein to cut back on her responsibilities for months before she died, Silvers says her vacant office is something he’s still adjusting to.

“It’s a question of an absence in a collaboration. Barbara and I would exchange every manuscript,” he says soberly. Even today, he says, “I will read a piece and think, Uh-oh, Barbara might have trouble with that.”

The August 10 issue featured a tribute to his colleague, a series of recollections by writers with whom she’d worked closely, including Diane Johnson, Larry McMurtry, Gore Vidal and John Ashbery (who called her “my first critic”). Fittingly, the accounts echo the last project on which Silvers

and Epstein collaborated, an anthology called *The Company They Kept: Writers on Unforgettable Friendships* (New York Review of Books). Due out in October, the book includes Robert Oppenheimer’s insights into the difficult last years of Albert Einstein, Darryl Pinckney’s memoir of his days as Djuna Barnes’s houseboy, and Susan Sontag’s confession of her intellectual crush on Paul Goodman. All 27 pieces were previously published in the *Review*, and in almost every case, the essays were “a spontaneous thing.” Explains Silvers: “When someone died, we would very naturally be talking to one of their friends, and the person would say, ‘You know, I would like to do something.’”

*The New York Review of Books* was dreamed up by Barbara, her then husband, Random House editor Jason Epstein (they divorced in 1980), poet Robert Lowell and his wife, writer Elizabeth Hardwick, over dinner one night in 1962, during the newspaper strike. The idea was to publish more incisive and vigorous literary criticism than the anodyne stuff then seen in *The New York Times*. Silvers and Epstein became the journal’s editors, and from the very start, their contributors represented the MVPs of the intellectual arena: W.H. Auden, Hannah Arendt, Edmund Wilson.

Silvers, the son of a music critic and a Wall Streeter-turned-country gentleman, entered the University of Chicago at age 15, graduated in two and a half years and in his early 20s served briefly as a press secretary to Connecticut Governor Chester Bowles. In 1954 he landed at *The Paris Review*. A few years later, he was working at *Harper’s* when he befriended the Epsteins and the paper was born.

In order to raise funds for their debut issue, Lowell took out a \$4,000 bank loan and Silvers and Epstein sold ad space to book publishers. One of the publication’s biggest early supporters, remembers Silvers, was Brooke Astor. “Barbara and I went around to see her, and she said she thought it was great and that she’d like to invest.”

Over the years, Silvers himself has become an entrenched member of elite society. He and his longtime companion, Grace, the Countess of Dudley, live on Park Avenue and count Sid and Mercedes Bass and Oscar and Annette de la Renta as close friends. But Silvers’s posh social life hasn’t hurt his reputation with literary types. “He’s the best person I could ever hope to work with in my entire life,” says Joan Didion, who wrote her first piece for the *Review* in 1973.

If Epstein’s passing has made Silvers think about slowing down, he isn’t letting on. He regularly toils in the office past midnight and on occasion even sleeps there on his couch, which he describes as “a perfectly nice bed, with a lovely blanket.” (“I’ve had him at my house for dinner, and he will leave and go back to the office,” marvels Didion.) And when he talks about editing a difficult piece, he gets a determined look in his eye. “The only thing you can do is look at every single sentence,” he says, tapping his pen on a table for emphasis. “Very carefully.”

—CATHERINE HONG

Robert Silvers in his office

