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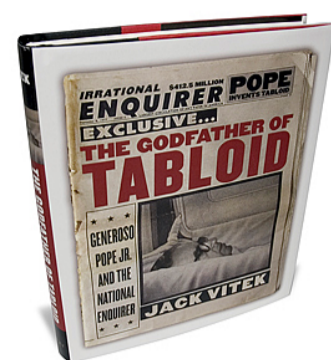
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Inquiring Minds Still Want to Know

By Edward Kosner

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The Godfather of Tabloid

By Jack Vitek

(University of Kentucky Press, 290 pages, \$29.95)

Long after its fabled Elvis, O.J. and Monica splashes, the National Enquirer made news last week when Democratic pol John Edwards admitted that he'd cheated on his cancer-stricken wife with a blond campaign aide and lied about it, although he insisted he wasn't the father of what the Enquirer inevitably called her "love child."

Like people and anthrax spores, publications have their unique DNA. And, as it turns out, the Enquirer is still true in its fashion to the genetic heritage Generoso Pope Jr. endowed it with 55 years ago.

Pope was the oddball New Yorker who created the National Enquirer, the rag that gave the world headlines like "Mom Uses Son's Face for an Ashtray" and sold 6.7 million copies in August 1977 with a sneaked cover photo of Elvis Presley laid out in his coffin at Graceland. Pope, who went to the Horace Mann prep school in New York and to MIT and worked in psy-ops for the CIA before starting the National Enquirer in 1952, is the subject of a respectful biography that argues that he belongs in the populist-press pantheon with William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer.

Maybe not. Still, "The Godfather of Tabloid" is an engaging saga of one man's obsessive devotion to creating an entertaining alternative universe each week for four or five million Americans clutching their quarters at the supermarket check-out racks (which he conveniently owned). Pope's Boswell, Jack Vitek, a onetime newspaperman now a journalism professor, gives him a little too much of the dubious credit for the tabloid bent of much of American pop culture today. But it's fair to say that the man who sold 6.3 million copies with the headline "Drinking Beer Prevents Heart Attacks" deserves his due.

Pope was certainly peculiar. His interest in journalism started early: Pope's father, a gravel entrepreneur who was cozy with the Mafia, founded Il Progresso, the Italian-language daily in New York, and helped bankroll Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. Casting around for something to do after MIT and the CIA, Pope borrowed money from mobster Frank Costello to relaunch the Enquirer, then a Gotham scandal broadsheet with a circulation of 17,000, as a national tabloid.

Over the next 36 years, Pope tinkered with the formula to suit the times and economic realities. Murder, hard-core gore ("Digs Up Wife's Rotting Corpse and Rips It Apart") and grotesqueries like Lee Harvey Oswald's autopsy photos took him to a circulation of a million or so, but no further. So Pope reinvented the paper as a supermarket tabloid, imported swarms of Fleet Street hacks and set up shop in a dozy suburb of Palm Beach, Fla. Armed with satchels of money to buy sources and sensational pictures -- and blissfully free of stodgy American journalism ethics -- Pope's killer Brits swarmed the world in chartered jets to capture celebrity scandal and tragedy.

When Princess Grace drove her car off a Riviera corniche, the Enquirer jetted a small army to Monaco and found an eyewitness, who obligingly pointed to the death spot for a photo. An Enquirer reporter donned a clerical collar to infiltrate Bing Crosby's family-and-a-few-friends funeral. Hot-footing from the building with his exclusive, the reporter-priest was greeted on his way out -- "Good evening, Father" -- by another Pope man ... posing as the doorman.

The apotheosis of all this was the death of Elvis Presley in 1977. The porcine, druggie Elvis was a newsstand dud for the Enquirer in the months before he overdosed at Graceland, but Pope knew tabloid heaven when he glimpsed it. He lavished \$1 million in today's dollars on Elvis-is-dead coverage, scrambling the jets and deploying 40 staffers until he got his prize: a shot of Elvis in his coffin snapped by a Presley cousin using a tiny Minox spy camera supplied by one of Pope's minions.

Two years earlier, the Enquirer had begun trolling the intersection of politics and celebrity scandal when one of its reporters filched Henry Kissinger's garbage bags outside the secretary of state's Georgetown home. The straight press treated it as a big story even though the most exciting item in the trash was an empty bottle of Maalox. From Kissinger's curb it was a relatively short hop to the 1987 Enquirer picture of Donna Rice in her Monkey Business T-shirt perched on Gary Hart's knee, which effectively ended his political career. A decade later, the Enquirer paired up with Time magazine to buy the priceless shot of Bill Clinton embracing Monica Lewinsky in her beret on a ropeline on the White House lawn.

Perhaps because Mr. Vitek has moved from journalism to academia, he feels obliged to inflict literary deconstruction on poor Pope and his paper. Footnotes and pages are studded with semiotic -- or, more properly, semi-idiotic -- insights from Foucault, Derrida and like-minded obfuscators. He also commits a couple of celebrity gaffes of the sort the Enquirer would never tolerate. He says, for example, that Jacqueline Kennedy and Aristotle Onassis were married "in name only," which doesn't jibe with insiders' accounts. And he has Tina Brown teaming up with Rupert Murdoch instead of Harvey Weinstein and Hearst to launch the ill-starred Talk magazine.

After Pope's death at 61 in 1988, the Enquirer and its lower-rent stablemate, the Weekly World News, which specialized in Elvis sightings and alien abductions, passed into other hands for \$412.5 million. The paper had a revival of sorts in the mid-1990s with its exclusives during the O.J. Simpson murder trial. But in 1999, the Enquirer and other tabloids were sold again, to a group headed by magazine impresario David Pecker. He brought in the newsstand dynamo Bonnie Fuller for \$2 million a year, but nothing has stemmed the business-side decline of Pope's creation.

Pope would have been saddened by tabloid economics nowadays. But the master at least got an appropriate sendoff from the New York Post, which headlined his obituary: "National Enquirer Owner Goes to Meet Elvis."

Mr. Kosner, who started out as a rewriter on the New York Post, went on to become the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.

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