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The Chain Gang



Synopsis

"They're closing in on me, Dick, and I'm afraid they're going to get me," said Frank Wood, publisher of the Green Bay News-Chronicle, in a phone call to his friend and colleague, Richard McCord. Drained of cash and spirit, Wood could not hold out much longer against a devouring giant, the Gannett Company. As editor and publisher of the nationally distinguished weekly Santa Fe Reporter, McCord had successfully fended off Gannett's "Operation Demolition" when it moved into town. Now Wood was seeking the help of a survivor. Startling case histories of the dubious tactics practiced by Gannett, unsparing insights into the newspaper industry, and harsh conclusions all come together in the dramatic story of these two men's efforts to save the small Green Bay daily from being obliterated at the hands of the nation's largest newspaper chain. Their success is a metaphor for one of the oldest triumphs of the world: that of David over Goliath. "McCord has done something marvelous with this. He's taken a deeply disturbing nationwide trend and put it on a small midwestern stage with real characters. The Chain Gang's message needs to be heard by as many Americans as read newspapers. Already Gannett's monopoly tactics have impoverished communities across the country. McCord is one man fighting back, coolly, rationally, creatively, and stubbornly. Let's join him." — Michael Shnayerson, Contributing Editor, Vanity Fair "More graphically than almost any other available record of the era, the Gannett piracy is what has happened to this country, tolled where the price is truly paid, in the lives of communities and people." — Roger Morris, winner of the Investigative Reporters and Editors' National Award for Distinguished Investigative Journalism "Richard McCord's *The Chain Gang* takes the losing battle for the soul of American newspapers from the euphoric accounts on financial pages to show what corporate news chains can mean in human terms to the people and the vitality of the victimized cities and towns. His is a unique account of the power and depredations of the Gannett Chain under its glib empire builder, Allen Neuharth. It goes behind the facade of slick public relations and financial killings for investors to show what happens when a ruthless and ambitious wheeler-dealer gets control of our news." — Ben H. Bagdikian, media critic and Pulitzer Prize winner --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

You don't have to be in the newspaper business to find this book interesting. Even if all you do is read newspapers, or use them to line the rabbit cage, you will be astonished. This exhaustively researched, extremely well-written account demonstrates in graphic detail the lengths to which a desperate monopolist will go to achieve and preserve its monopoly profits. This is a really important book.

Well, I am the writer of this book, so naturally I like it quite well. I hope others do too.

After reading a recent interview of Mr. McCord published in the Santa Fe Reporter, I purchased this book. It is quite a story, based upon good solid research and good solid judgment. Mr. McCord started the Reporter in 1974, and not long after, feared for his paper's existence due to the voracious appetite of the Gannett organization. His research of Gannett's practices in other non-competitive markets allowed him to conduct a pre-emptive strike which enabled his paper to live to fight another day (even currently, as we read this). The second part of this book tells the battle Mr. McCord waged on behalf of a long-time industry friend near Green Bay, Wisconsin. Planning, researching, trusting the right people, and having the strength to do the right thing are at the core of this story. Mr. McCord is a great storyteller, who knows which details he needs to justify his expose and which he should use to construct a report that even the non-journalist will be outraged by. In this day of "buy local", Mr. McCord's efforts on behalf of independent newspapers is must reading. Then, go out, do a bit of your own research, and buy a paper written by good, honest reporters and ethical publishers who know your region best. The Chain Gang is a riveting story, which should be required reading for every journalism student. Indeed, it should be required for anyone who reads newspapers or their current electronic incarnations.

Author Richard McCord brings to life a disturbing nationwide trend in which a huge conglomerate corporation sets out to destroy a locally owned competitor. It's happening throughout America as local businesses of all kinds are increasingly forced out by national and international corporations. McCord's book documents how a small local daily managed to fight off a large newspaper chain bent on its destruction. There are survival lessons for all locally owned businesses in this book.

As a newsroom employee of a once-proud independent newspaper that was bought by the Gannett chain in 1997, I was told by colleagues who had read "The Chain Gang" that the book was a cautionary tale which would reveal the dark side of the corporation that had become my new employer. Unfortunately, I didn't take those warnings seriously enough, and I took my time about picking up the book. Now that a few years have gone by, and the newsroom staff at the paper I worked for has been decimated by the kind of cutbacks the bean-counters at unscrupulous corporations like Gannett delight in, I wish I'd read "The Chain Gang" much sooner. If you're in the newspaper business and not working for Gannett yet, the chances grow greater each year that you will be. "The Chain Gang" helps explain why, and it's a sordid story. By the way, I now refer to the newspaper mentioned at the beginning of this review as the paper I "worked" for, because after I challenged whether the paper and Gannett were living up to a corporate "ethics policy" Gannett professes to have adopted in 1999, I was transferred, against my wishes, to a much smaller newspaper the company owns. I'm continuing to try to fight that action -- not that I hope to have any kind of career with Gannett, of course -- but it would probably help to have someone like Richard McCord on my side, in his feistiest, most energized mode. Having said that, my only real complaint with "The Chain Gang" is the melancholy, defeatist tone of much of McCord's epilogue, in which, despite the admirable personal triumphs he scored in battling Gannett, he ultimately depicts his efforts as gestures bordering on futility. But I can hardly fault McCord for his candor -- something any Gannett employee is bound to find refreshing. It's truly appalling that such a shady company is among the corporations to which Americans apparently will be entrusting an increasingly disproportionate responsibility for upholding a freedom as precious as the First Amendment. Can I give "The Chain Gang" any higher praise than to say that upon reading it I immediately bought a half-dozen copies to distribute to friends in the journalism business? But you needn't be a reporter or editor to appreciate this book. In fact, the focus is less on the journalism side of the newspaper business than it is on the advertising and marketing side. But that's appropriate, since that's clearly where Gannett's focus is too.

The Chain Gang, written by Richard McCord, was an interesting synopsis featuring the undermining practices of the Gannett Empire. He tells his own story of his dealings with this masterful mega-chain and also his personal crusade against it. Overall the book was an excellent read and a necessary reference for any community journalist. The information McCord produces with this book is almost overwhelming. He has no problem showcasing everything he discovered about Gannett, no matter how ugly. The shocking quality and amazing clarity of his words would grab even those who are not at all interested in the details of the newspaper. Another great aspect of the book is the way it lets the reader flow through it. The words are not unnecessarily difficult and the tone keeps the pages turning. The book leaves room for more than just journalism issues. I think you can even substitute the newspapers for other kinds of businesses and still get the point across. We always need to fight for the underdogs, if not for them than for our own good. There was one part of the book that I did not particularly care for. I thought McCord repeated some things too many times. I know he wanted to instill Gannett's crimes into our minds, but I found myself skipping over parts where it seemed like I had already heard about them. Besides this, I think the book was great and I am very glad I was able to purchase it.

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