

Will the Real Sarah Palin Please Stand Up?

A biographer says it's too soon to write off the maverick from Alaska

BY CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI

ASK ANYONE WHO'S paid even scant attention to politics in the last two years, and you'll find starkly conflicting opinions when it comes to Sarah Palin.

"She's either portrayed as an idiot by people who hate her or this godlike figure by the people who love her," says Shushannah Walshe (COM'01), a journalist who has published a biography of the former Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee. Walshe says she and coauthor Scott Conroy tried to flesh out the details that define the real Sarah Palin in their book, *Sarah from Alaska: The Sudden Rise and Brutal Education of a New Conservative Superstar* (PublicAffairs, 2009).

The authors had spent two months covering Palin's bid, Walshe as a reporter and producer at Fox News Channel and Conroy as a campaign reporter for CBS News.

Walshe, who left Fox in January 2009 after more than seven years, spoke with *Bostonia* about the book, which chronicles Palin's rise to the governorship of Alaska, her campaign as John McCain's running mate, and the events leading to her resignation as governor.



Shushannah Walshe (COM'01), coauthor of a book about Sarah Palin, says the former vice presidential nominee has a gift for connecting with voters, but is also thin-skinned and vindictive.

VERNON DOUCETTE

***Bostonia*: Do readers automatically think your book is pro-Palín because you worked at Fox?**

Walshe: They don't, actually, because Scott works for CBS. But it's not just that. People were worried that any book about her would be negative. Now that the book has come out, sources who are close loyalists and people who don't like her, who were skewered by her in her book, were also really happy with our book. Conservative media, liberal media have embraced it as a fair book, a fair analysis of this person.

What was your reaction when John McCain chose Palin as his running mate?

I was stunned. I knew very little about her. There were these lists out there, but she was always a long shot.

I also thought, this is an incredible story. Nobody knows anything about this woman, and it's my job as a journalist to tell people as much information as I can get about her.

What was Palin like as governor of Alaska?

When she was governor she was a reformer. She took on the oil and gas companies, which had never been done before in Alaskan history. She worked with Democrats — they were her allies. She wasn't this dyed-in-the-wool Republican. She had an agenda, and she got it done.

Another thing we found in our research was that she was really a media darling. The governor before her, Frank Murkowski, had an antagonistic relationship with the media. She was a breath of fresh air. The media had her cell phone number, and she was really accessible. Now you see how antagonistic she is with all media, except for the conservative media, frankly. It's an incredible change.

Why did the media become the enemy during the campaign?

I'm sure you remember, in the primary, John McCain had the Straight Talk Express, this freewheeling conversa-



tion with the media. He'd sit for hours. But during the general election, toward the time Palin was picked, the media was starting to get more shut out.

She came in, and there was absolutely no media access for the first half of her candidacy, and she didn't like that. She had a very good relationship with the Alaska press, and she felt if she was allowed to talk to the press, she'd be able to add this personal touch. The McCain campaign felt very differently. They thought that she wasn't ready to freelance, in their words, and they thought she should study for these big network interviews.

When did she start to go rogue?

I think the beginning was when she felt she wanted to speak to the media and they wouldn't let her. That was when she first said, "Maybe I should follow my instincts more than these campaign operatives."

But then you see it just get worse when it comes to Michigan. Polling data show there's no way they can win Michigan. We have e-mails in our book that say, "We need to concentrate on Pennsylvania and Ohio." She says, "It's a quick trip [to Michigan] on the bus; I'll even pay for gas." And this is really annoying to people who are running the campaign. But she felt that she would be able to convince Michiganers to vote for her. She wanted to go there in the middle of the night and surprise them.

Reverend Wright is something that was absolutely banned on the campaign. John McCain said he did not want to bring it up, and she felt very passionately that that was a mistake. So, she had an interview with *New York Times* columnist William Kristol, who asks her about it. And instead of swatting it away, she says, "I don't know why that's not dis-

cussed more." And that really upset the McCain campaign.

What impact did *Saturday Night Live's Tina Fey* have?

I think it was really a brutal satire. That famous line — "I can see Russia from my house." How many Americans thought that Sarah Palin had said that when it was Tina Fey? It became part of the American consciousness, and you can't just laugh that off.

How had things changed when she returned to govern Alaska?

Her poll numbers, which had been extraordinarily high before the campaign, were declining. The Democrats, who were her allies beforehand, saw this hyperpartisan talk on the campaign trail, and that relationship was not there anymore. You have to remember, the Republicans never liked her to begin with. They didn't like that she had bucked the party. They thought she was fiscally liberal because she hiked those taxes on the oil companies. Then you saw all those ethics complaints mount. She had a hard time coming home, but she was also fed up with the everyday grind of governing.

Do you think Palin will be a presidential candidate, rather than a kingmaker, in 2012?

We do believe that. We believe that she wants to be president, but I have to tell you honestly, her book does change our opinion about whether that's possible. She had a real opportunity here to write a hopeful book, looking forward, describing an America that she wants, that she thinks would be best. And she spends almost the entire book trying to get back at people and settle scores. I do think it changed whether she can be viable.

But we can expect some kind of second act from Palin?

I don't think she's going anywhere. And I think that anybody who writes her off right now, they do it at their own peril.

REVIEWS

Fiction

Americans in Space

Mary E. Mitchell (SED'83)

Thomas Dunne Books

"SOMEWHERE IN THE COCOON of sadness of the last two years, I misplaced all of my niceness," says Kate Cavanaugh, the grieving widow and mother of two at the center of Mitchell's third novel. That may explain her decreasing tolerance for her rebellious teenage daughter, her overly maternal (but childless) next-door neighbor, her four-year-old son, who won't stop hoarding ketchup bottles, and just about every other person who floats in and out of her half-lived life. Still trapped in her emotional bubble two years after her husband's death, Kate struggles to reconnect with those closest to her without projecting her sorrow onto them.



Kate may not be particularly pleasant, but Mitchell gives her protagonist just the right amount of caustic wit and human weakness to draw the reader into her chaotic world. The book is full of tragedies both small (Kate's awkward first dates with a soccer dad) and large (the suicide of one of the students she counsels at the local high school). But Mitchell's deft handling of the final stages of grief — that light at the end of the tunnel that sometimes seems like an oncoming train — rarely wavers in this account of a woman trying to put her family, and her own life, back together. *Katie Koch*

Candor

Pam Bachorz (COM'95, CAS'95, GSM'03)

Egmont USA

CANDOR, FLORIDA, THE setting of Bachorz's debut young-adult novel, is a modern-day Stepford,