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# Call Me Ted

**Ted Turner with Bill Burke (Grand Central; 433 Pgs.; \$30)**

By DIANE GARRETT

**The Mouth of the South** is surprisingly understated as narrator of "Call Me Ted." Anecdotes gathered by co-author Bill Burke provide expected color and emotional shadings, but the overall portrait can't help but disappoint those expecting more a lively discourse from Turner himself. This brisk chronicle does, however, serve as a poignant reminder of his many showbiz accomplishments before AOL Time Warner architect Gerald Levin unceremoniously pushed him to the sidelines.

Turner, a restless entrepreneur who wasn't afraid to color outside the lines, transformed his father's regional billboard biz into a large showbiz concern that he fatefully sold to Time Warner in 1996. Never easily cowed, he overcame countless obstacles, matter-of-factly outlined in the book, while building his broadcast biz: He turned an Atlanta UHF channel into a cable SuperStation, created the first cable 24-hour news station a few years later and won sailing's America's Cup in between. Thwarted in his attempts to buy CBS, he nearly bankrupted himself buying MGM, outraged film purists by colorizing black-and-white classics from its library, and encouraged New Line toppers to swing for the fences, perhaps to their detriment.

Turner found his match in Levin, an old cable crony who engineered the disastrous AOL deal and soon stripped Turner of power, if not his title.

Frustrated and bitter, Turner stepped down as vice chair a few years

later, finally exiting the company's board in 2006.

This portion of the book is especially frustrating. Turner has frequently sounded off about the merger in conversation but is strangely muted describing the deal in the book itself. Some of this no doubt is due to another Turner foible -- his deep aversion to introspection -- and the fact he didn't have anything to do with the negotiations, conducted while he was distracted by his split with Jane Fonda. Yet one can't help but yearn for some cathartic venting here, or at least greater understanding about the momentous turn of events.

Neither, sadly, is forthcoming. Turner duly notes his initial public support for the merger, initially hailed as a deal for the new millennium, then flatly adds, "Little did I know it would all be downhill from here." His description of the company's restructuring a few months later is equally disappointing: Outraged buddy John Malone recalls telling Turner he was stabbed in the back, but Turner only says that he was in shock.

"It's hard to know how I would have felt if the company had been doing well, but standing on the sidelines while our stock and my personal fortune cratered was hard to take," he blandly adds.

Turner has been considerably more forceful on the book tour, sounding off about Levin and Parsons with occasionally salty language.

Nor is "Call Me Ted" particularly illuminating about Turner's decision to approve the merger. Several associates, including Malone and Michael Milken, offer conflicting accounts of Turner's attempts to seek counsel before giving thumbs up, but the episode remains awfully murky. It's certainly interesting to read Levin's take on the situation, but one wishes Burke's familiarity with the events -- he quit his job as a Turner exec a few days before the merger -- paid off more here.

Burke's decision to weave "Ted stories" throughout the narrative works better in some cases than others. There are surprise entries by famous figures such as Bill Gates (discussing an abandoned merger)

and Jimmy Carter (on religion), jaw-dropping anecdotes (Dick Parsons recalls Turner telling him, "You were born black -- bad break!") and humanizing tales from friends and family. The technique is especially effective with family members: An aunt's description of his father's abusive behavior is far more potent than anything Turner would have written. His kids' comments about his absent parenting style -- something Turner clearly regrets -- convey their love and understanding.

These days, the former media mogul devotes his time to charitable endeavors and his chain of bison restaurants. He has even made up with former rival Rupert Murdoch.

Showbiz, however, is a lot less colorful without him in it.