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HEADLINE: Review: Mrs. Edwards has her say -- to a point

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BODY:

Resilience: Reflections on the Burdens and Gifts of Facing Life's Adversities by Elizabeth Edwards

(Broadway Books)

Readers of her new book probably won't be surprised that Elizabeth Edwards is angry, but those wanting her to dish dirt may be surprised that she doesn't.

She does address the affair that her husband, former U.S. Sen. John Edwards, had with a campaign videographer during the early stages of his unsuccessful run for the Democrats' 2008 presidential nomination, referring to it mostly as an "indiscretion" while never using the name of the other woman, Rielle Hunter. But she doesn't meet the expectations of juicy details created in many readers' minds by the hype surrounding "Resilience."

The 1996 death of her first-born son, Wade, at age 16 in an auto accident caused by a fierce North Carolina wind, and her ongoing struggle with breast cancer, found in spring 2007 to have metastasized into a terminal illness, leave no doubt that Mrs. Edwards is a woman who has suffered much. And that makes it harder to be critical of her without being seen as mean-spirited.

"Resilience" is not a long book -- 213 undersized (4.75 by 7.5 inches) pages of fairly large type -- and that makes "Resilience" both an easy one-sitting read and a book that couldn't possibly cover all the points readers would wish for.

The book's nonlinear structure makes it somewhat choppy and, overall, "Resilience" reads more like a collection of well-written (for e-mails) e-mails than like a well-written book. Perhaps that's why, when Mrs. Edwards refers repeatedly to topics such as Wade's death, her prose gives the impression that she doesn't recall prior references. It's not a deal-breaker of a flaw, but it is annoying.

There's also at least one inexplicable error of fact: a reference to a classic Ray Bradbury tale, which "Resilience" calls "Sometimes Evil This Way Comes" instead of "Something Wicked This Way Comes." Minor? Perhaps. But in the minds of those who approach "Resilience" looking for critical ammunition, that slip-up can cast doubt on all of Mrs. Edwards' other factual assertions.

The book takes frequent detours for vignettes from her childhood as a Navy aviator's daughter and other stages of

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her life, which may frustrate some readers who'd prefer she get to her point. And all those detours mean that not much of "Resilience" -- a book that's much more personal narrative than political memoir -- actually is about her husband's "indiscretion."

To be fair, Mrs. Edwards has tried while promoting the book to reduce expectations of scandalous gossip. She told CNN's Larry King, pretty accurately, that "seven-eighths of the book is about other things." And she mentioned to King that "Resilience" includes this explicit warning: "If you have picked up this book in hopes that in it there will be details of a scandal, you should now put the book down."

What she didn't tell King is that though she first mentions the affair as readers turn from Page 21 to Page 22, she doesn't get around to issuing that warning until Page 171. Had that warning opened the book, how many readers might have put it down right then and there, never to pick it up again?

By her own lights, the placement of that warning seems to be part of saying just what she wants to say in just the way she wants to say it, which she certainly has the right to do. She follows that warning by asserting that this book is her version of her story and it's "quite a different story" from the versions put forth by supermarket tabloids.

Just about every reasonable supposition regarding "Resilience," the form it takes and its author's motivations follows from that assertion: She hopes to help others by sharing how she has coped with her life's crises, wants to ensure that her children have an account from her perspective and, knowing she could die at any time, wants to set the stage for those children and her husband to find a way to carry on in the best way they can once she's gone.

Mrs. Edwards does what many readers will consider a good enough job of justifying her decision to not end her marriage in the wake of her husband's affair, saying essentially that she continues to believe strongly in the liberal causes and policies to which they both are devoted, marriage is a mix of good and bad and there's too much that's good about him to dump him.

Reading between the lines, one also has to believe that Mrs. Edwards accepts that as things stand, her need for the love and support of her husband and children as she battles to extend her life must outweigh whatever anger-driven desire she may have to trash him publicly, which surely would hurt her children.

Even so, the rationale she offers about why she stayed publicly silent about the affair while her husband continued to campaign for the presidency is less than fully persuasive.

Her husband told her of the affair in late December 2006, just after he'd returned home from a tour announcing his 2008 candidacy, and at that time insisted only a single incident of infidelity was involved, which she believed. She told King that she thought "a single night probably would not come out."

She writes that she wanted her husband to drop out of the race, but he persuaded her otherwise: "It would only raise questions, he said, he had just gotten in the race; the most pointed questions would come if he dropped out days after he had gotten in the race. And I knew that was right, but I was afraid of her. And now he knows I was right to be afraid, that once he had made this dreadful mistake, he should not have run. But just then he was doing, I believe, what I was trying to do; hold on to our lives despite this awful error in judgment."

So when she first learned of the affair, her husband's political considerations and her own desire to believe in a "best-case scenario" for his infidelity dovetailed in a way that led her to accept continuation of the campaign without publicly mentioning the affair. And even now, having learned many months after her husband's initial admission that the affair involved more nights than one, she seems to accept at least some blame for the campaign's continuance, and in so doing stops short of the ringing "I told you so" she could have written.

Late in the book, Mrs. Edwards relates how a male, low-level campaign staffer's development of an unhealthy obsession with her husband helped her understand, at least somewhat, how the affair happened -- another pulling of a

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punch she could have thrown full-force. Many disturbed by the potentially disastrous political scenarios that the affair and the Edwards' silence about it raised for her husband, the Democratic Party and the nation no doubt would have liked to see Mrs. Edwards connect for a knockout.

The fact that she doesn't strongly implies that, for the sake of whatever's left of her own life and the lives her husband and children will have after she's gone, she doesn't want to be blamed if voters make it impossible for him ever to hold elective office again. As she does in regard to their marriage, she refuses to utterly doom his political prospects.

Whether there's more behind her public handling of the affair than the understandable wish of a dying woman to have her say without making her family's life after she dies even harder than it already is likely to be, only Mrs. Edwards knows for sure, and she's not telling. And if "Resilience" turns out to represent her last words on that matter, no one else may ever know, either.

Snark bait: Palin and Vonnegut

Predatory pundits who attack from both ends of the political spectrum have long been taking bites out of the reputations of Sarah Palin and the late Kurt Vonnegut.

Now, there's fresh prey on the way for further such snark attacks.

Palin, the Republican Alaska governor who became an object of left-wing ridicule as Arizona Sen. John McCain's running mate in the 2008 presidential election, has a book deal.

And though Vonnegut's left-wing politics made him a target for those on the right, he nevertheless wrote a classic short story, "Harrison Bergeron," that resonates strongly with conservative concerns and serves as the basis for a new short film that has a different title.

Neither HarperCollins nor Palin is divulging just how much she's being paid for the book, but estimates put her haul in the seven- to eight-figure range. The deal was brokered by Robert Barnett, the same Washington, D.C., lawyer who negotiated big-bucks deals for books by Bill and Hillary Clinton, Alan Greenspan and George W. Bush, among others.

Palin's book is due next spring. As to why she's writing it -- with a collaborator, according to the Anchorage Daily News -- she told The Associated Press: "There's been so much written about and spoken about in the mainstream media and in the anonymous blogosphere world, that this will be a wonderful, refreshing chance for me to get to tell my story, that a lot of people have asked about, unfiltered."

The left already has thrown lots of jabs at Palin's latest project, but one thing's clear to all across the political spectrum: If she's serious about a 2012 run for national office, a book is a pretty good way for her to stay in the spotlight in the meantime. And once the book is out, the blogosphere can amuse itself by speculating on whether it'll be made into a movie and if it is, whether the movie can succeed with anyone but Tina Fey in the starring role.

There are no A-list stars in "2081," the year in which Vonnegut's classic science fiction tale is set and the title of the new short film based on it.

The tag line after "2081" is "Everyone Will Finally Be Equal," which is in keeping with the original story, first published in the October 1961 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and widely anthologized since.

"Harrison Bergeron" used hyperbole to send an early warning signal about America's trend toward favoring such

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practices as giving all children on every soccer team a trophy so none will feel inferior, regardless of how they or their teams perform -- the sort of thinking that underlies liberal-pleasing, heavy-handed government interference to compensate for supposed disadvantages.

The movie's Web site, finallyequal.com, which offers a trailer, says it "depicts a dystopian future in which, thanks to the 212th Amendment to the Constitution and the unceasing vigilance of the United States Handicapper General, everyone is finally equal. The strong wear weights, the beautiful wear masks and the intelligent wear earpieces that fire off loud noises to keep them from taking unfair advantage of their brains."

Scheduled for its world premiere two days ago at the Seattle International Film Festival, "2081" won't wipe away Vonnegut's many expressions of his leftist sympathies, but it should remind his detractors on the right that those expressions were not the be-all and end-all of his politics.

Their interest should be piqued, too, by the fact that "2081" largely was funded by The Moving Picture Institute (thempi.org), which "identifies and nurtures promising filmmakers who are committed to protecting and sustaining a free society" and has David Zucker, director of "An American Carol," the 2008 big-screen comedy that aimed for laughs from a right-wing perspective, on its Creative Council.

Given that "2081" isn't a full-length feature, Pittsburghers who want to see it probably have to hope it'll be screened as part of a local film festival. In the meantime, those who haven't read "Harrison Bergeron" -- or haven't reread it in years -- can find the story's text online at instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/hb.html

New pages to turn

Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang

by Zhao Ziyang

(Simon & Schuster)

The subject of much media buzz even before its May 19 release, "Prisoner of the State" is a remarkable first-person account of secret inner workings at the highest levels of China's government. Zhao, a reformer who died in 2005, spent the last 16 years of his life under house arrest after falling from political grace by opposing the 1989 military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protesters. After his downfall, he secretly recorded audio tapes that were smuggled out of China, transcribed, translated into English and now are published for all the world to ponder. This book surely will fascinate historians for generations to come as they scour its pages for insight into Zhao's times. But the immediate question is what effect, if any, "Prisoner of the State" may have on China's current leaders, whose taste for economic reform far exceeds their appetite for political reform. Will they heed Zhao's declaration that China should have not only a market economy, but "must also adopt a parliamentary democracy as its political system"? Time will tell, but in their eyes, Zhao's posthumous thoughts surely represent a great deal of extremely inconvenient truth.

The Housing Boom and Bust

by Thomas Sowell

(Basic Books)

Familiar to readers from his columns in the Trib, Thomas Sowell, senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and author of "Basic Economics," which has been translated into six languages, tackles concerns as up-to-the-minute as book publishing can address in his newest volume, which hit shelves on May 11. He calls it "a plain-English explanation of how we got into the current economic disaster that developed out of the economics and politics of the housing boom and bust," according to the publisher. There's plenty of blame to go around, in Sowell's

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view. In the preface, he writes: "A whole series of very questionable decisions by many people, in many places, over a period of years, built up the pressures that led to a sudden collapse of the housing market and of financial institutions that began to fall like dominoes as a result of investing in securities based on housing prices." A snapshot of a crisis still unfolding, "The Housing Boom and Bust" offers valuable perspective today and surely will be of interest years from now as historians look back on today's economic turmoil.

Dred Scott's Revenge: A Legal History of Race and Freedom in America

by Judge Andrew P. Napolitano

(Thomas Nelson)

The youngest life-tenured judge in the history of New Jersey Superior Court may be best known these days in his TV role as Fox News senior judicial analyst, but Andrew P. Napolitano also is a best-selling author. "Dred Scott's Revenge," his fourth book, released on April 21, examines what the publisher calls "the twisted legal history of racism in America," including how actions of the Framers of the Constitution failed to live up to their words. Readers will learn about the origins of American slavery and Jim Crow laws, unfair application of laws by appointed judges, segregation in the military, politicians' use of racial rhetoric and other aspects of U.S. history that show how government too often puts freedom at risk. And though too much shouldn't be made of celebrity blurbs, the chorus singing the praises of "Dred Scott's Revenge" indicates its appeal to a broad-spectrum audience: Juan Williams of National Public Radio, Geraldo Rivera and Glenn Beck of Fox News, Nat Hentoff of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Cato Institute, and Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele.

Losing Mum and Pup: A Memoir

by Christopher Buckley

(Twelve)

Christopher Buckley is back with this May 6 release, a heartfelt, bittersweet and, yes, hilarious account of a yearlong period spanning 2007 and 2008, during which both his mother, New York socialite Patricia Taylor Buckley, and father, conservative-movement icon and National Review founder William F. Buckley Jr., died. The publisher's bio notes the author's work as journalist, satirist and critic, but what matters most in regard to "Losing Mum and Pup" is that the Buckylys' only child was uniquely equipped and situated to tell this story. Widely praised, the book of course cannot and does not ignore his parents' political and social significance, but at its core, it's a deeply human, personal account of a privileged family, the sometimes thorny relationships of its members, and the universal struggle to come to terms with parental mortality. Even hard-core "movement" types who excoriated Christopher Buckley for supporting Barack Obama during the 2008 campaign will find much of value here, as "Losing Mum and Pup" portrays his father and mother as beloved, endearing, delightful, difficult and flawed, giving a fuller picture of them than conservative hagiography or high-society columns possibly could.

Joseph P. Kennedy Presents: His Hollywood Years

by Cari Beauchamp

(Knopf)

Long before he'd be famed as the patriarch of one of America's premier political families, Joe Kennedy was a Hollywood titan who played a leading role in film's technological leap to "talkies" and, by 1928, was running three movie studios simultaneously. He made millions, changed how Hollywood did business and was surrounded by the biggest stars of his era. He even had an affair with Gloria Swanson that left her deep in debt. Author Cari Beauchamp is among the first people who aren't members of the Kennedy family to gain access to Joe Kennedy's personal papers and

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interviewed many figures who were close to him, according to the publisher. This book occupies a niche at the nexus of film history, U.S. history and political history, and regardless of one's feelings about the politics of Joe Kennedy, his children and subsequent generations of the family, the Kennedy clan can't be ignored. For readers whose fascination with the Kennedys began with JFK, "Joseph P. Kennedy Presents" offers additional insight into the personality and influences that shaped the founder of an American political dynasty.

A Page of Books, written and compiled by Alan Wallace, appears on the last Sunday of each month.

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