



Review: Tina Brown's Me Decade

She perfected the mix of high and low—art, Hollywood, dictator chic—that can make a glossy magazine irresistible. Edward Kosner reviews 'The Vanity Fair Diaries' by Tina Brown.

By Edward Kosner

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Tina Brown has fashioned a glittery career out of brains and flair, a rarer combination among magazine editors than you might think. Arriving in New York from London's Tatler in 1983, she jump-started Vanity Fair and performed CPR on the New Yorker, then oversaw the train wreck Talk (bankrolled by Harvey Weinstein) and, briefly, the husk of Newsweek when it was merged with her Daily Beast website. She's now in business with the New York Times as the impresario of the Women in the World global gabfests. She has lost lots of money for most of her mogul backers but rewarded them with ample "buzz," the prized chatter among the cognoscenti that her efforts invariably produce.

People tend to settle into two camps about Tina Brown. One school hails her brilliance as a pitch-perfect, inventive editor and quicksilver writer, the author notably of a 2007 best seller about Diana, Princess of Wales. The other acknowledges her manifest talents but giggles at her penchant for self-dramatization and relentless self-promotion.

Both Tinas are on offer in "The Vanity Fair Diaries," billed as the journal she compiled during the eight-plus years she turned the stillborn Condé Nast slick into a hot magazine of the roaring 1980s. For those of us who toiled in magazines during the last decades of the 20th century—what is increasingly loomed like an Augustan Age—reading "The Vanity Fair Diaries" is like a stroll down memory lane or through nightmare alley, depending on your point of view.

The conceit of the "Diaries" is that Ms. Brown scribbled the entries in blue school notebooks at odd moments, sometimes after middle-of-the-night feedings for her two infants. When she excavated the notebooks years later, she writes, she discovered that she had compiled a publishable record of her Vanity Fair adventures. If that's the case, she's an even more accomplished writer than any of us imagined, because nearly every sentence in these off-hours jottings is polished to such a high sheen that the reader risks blindness from the glare.

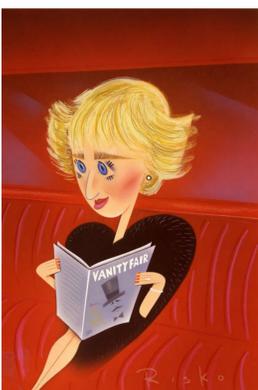


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THE VANITY FAIR DIARIES

By Tina Brown

Holt, 436 pages, \$32

The master diarist Samuel Pepys could record the epic events of London in the 1660s—the restoration of Charles II, the Great Fire, the Great Plague—and the Goncourt brothers' Parisian journals of the 19th century were full of Baudelaire, Flaubert and Zola. Ms. Brown has to make do mostly with the social flotsam and jetsam of the 1980s. But, characteristically, she gives it her all.

I'm at both an advantage and a disadvantage in writing about this book: I know everyone (except her Britpack of imported staffers) in the diaries. So I can judge how fairly Ms. Brown captures her vast dramatis personae, but my interest in them may not reflect civilian fascination, such as it may be, with the Alexes, Clays, Kays, Henrys, Toms, Normans, Gays, Ralphs, Joan Juliets, Calvins, Abes, Bens, Sallys, Morts and Irises that stud its pages. There are dozens of other late-20th-century luminaries here, but you get the idea. I'm in there, too, but briefly and generally benignly.

Ms. Brown has a David Levine-like touch for caricaturing her subjects. Si Newhouse, the proprietor of Condé Nast and her patron at

Vanity Fair, is "nebbishy" and occasionally a "happy chipmunk"; Henry Kissinger, "a rumbling old Machiavelli"; Tom Wolfe, "tall and thin like a candle in his white suit"; Oscar de la Renta, "a sleek panther"; Gore Vidal, a prancer with "a high-stepped pussycat walk." But she can be off-key, too. She egregiously misreads Charlotte Curtis, the no-nonsense Midwesterner who revolutionized the New York Times's social coverage in the late 1960s and '70s, as "a bogus grandee . . . a coiffed asparagus, exuding second-rate intellectualism." At another point, she portrays Clay Felker, the renowned creator of New York magazine, as jealous of her Vanity Fair success—theoretically possible but distinctly unlikely.

It's fair to say that editing a glossy monthly, even salvaging one as moribund as Vanity Fair—a Jazz Age title that initially foundered under two other editors after Newhouse revived it in 1983—shouldn't be one of life's most fraught enterprises. Yet Ms. Brown invests her narrative with so much drama that a layout meeting with Alex Liberman, Newhouse's Russian-émigré consigliere, tingles with heart-stopping angst. So does a sidelong glance from the omnipotent Si. I had conversations much like Ms. Brown's with these two worthies and found them to be soft-spoken suits so low-key that they could have been a couple of funeral directors with exquisite manners. (They asked me to be the first editor of the reincarnated Vanity Fair, but I demurred, knowing that I could never do as good a job as Tina eventually did. I suggested that Tom Wolfe was their man, if they could talk him into it.)

At Vanity Fair, Ms. Brown perfected the art of the mix, that magic blend of high and low—Hollywood and high culture, dictator chic, clever fashion, Eurotrash, true crime and literary reminiscence—that can make an upmarket magazine irresistible. She brings the same touch to this memoir. Her quick take on Harry Benson's 1985 White House cover shoot of Ronald and Nancy Reagan dancing and kissing is a fetching example. Brittle entries about Nouvelle Society grotesques are balanced by affecting passages about her son George, born two months prematurely in 1986, and his developmental struggles, and her marriage to the distinguished British newspaper editor Harry Evans, 25 years her senior. And she makes no secret of her insecurities and ambitions as a new mother and as a British-born editor in cutthroat New York. "I wanted to [get] to Manhattan—and conquer it," she writes. "New York was the big time, the wider world, the white-hot center, and that's where I, a girl of the arena, wanted to be."

There's a great deal about office politics at Condé Nast, which also publishes the New Yorker, Vogue, GQ, Glamour, Architectural Digest and other glossies. Backstabbing, sucking-up, fear and loathing are all routine. At one point she quotes Liberman on "planting the poison"—turning Newhouse against some unfortunate. She soon comes to realize, as all of us do, that working for a billionaire proprietor whose name could be on the building is an updated if déclassé version of life at the Sun King's Versailles, with its rumors, schemes, histrionics and viperish courtiers.

As the "Diaries" progress, Ms. Brown's values come into focus. People she likes, especially those who toiled for her, are invariably "brilliant," "fearless," "creative," "tireless." Those she dislikes get savaged. She twins Andy Warhol with the malevolent Roy Cohn as "the two most amoral men of our times." She calls the aging-bad-boy movie producer Robert Evans "the nearest thing to the devil of anyone I have encountered." By the end of the book she has a bad word for or an embarrassing observation about nearly everyone. The blow is eased for many of her targets because they're dead or so long out of power that they're mostly a blank to readers today.

And that's a central problem with the book. It covers the period 1983 to 1992, which, after all, is 25 to 34 years ago. Ms. Brown does an exquisitely pointillist job of capturing this circus of an era. Exciting as these years may have seemed at the time, they have receded into the murk of memory, taking with them most of the transient characters on which Ms. Brown lavishes her formidable skills. Should anyone today really care about what Reinaldo Herrera overheard Gayfryd Steinberg saying to Betsy Bloomingdale at Alfred Taubman's birthday party? Or whether PR leibovitz once blew a photo tantrum with a starlet? Or whether the terrifying movie Annie Leibovitz staged a tantrum because her pet client Tom Cruise didn't make an early Vanity Fair cover? Probably not.

This is a long book, and by the end readers may feel concussed by the torrent of dropped names and sated by the rich pudding of flash anecdotes. But there are rewards embedded in the dense text, among them this mischievous glimpse of Jacqueline Onassis at a 1991 book party: "She looks into your face, not your eyes . . . In fact, 'crazed' is what I decided about Jackie by the end of the evening. I felt if you cleared the room and left her alone, she'd be in front of a mirror, screaming." Ms. Brown ends the book as she takes over the New Yorker, listing all the choice contributors she brought to the magazine, some of whom are stalwarts of her successor David Remnick's editorship.

As it happens, Ms. Brown's reminiscences appear just as her successor at Vanity Fair, Graydon Carter, is stepping aside after 25 years. VF lost money at the start under Ms. Brown, but Mr. Carter tweaked the formula she'd created and turned the magazine into a dynamo of profit and prestige until it, too, inevitably began to lose oomph. Mr. Carter and the rest of us who love the ephemeral pleasures of magazines owe Tina Brown a debt for, among other things, fine-tuning the insouciant, know-it-all voice that still resounds in the twilight of the glossies.

—Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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