

Becky Sharp Comes to America

Judy Bachrach shows how fallen editrix Tina Brown is the reincarnation of Thackeray's seductive, social-climbing heroine.

MOST OF MY LIFE I've wanted to write *Vanity Fair*—the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray; in fact, I recall reading it in Rome (for about the twentieth time) during eleven hours of labor, until foreseen circumstances put an end to that amusement. What could I tell the hospital nuns who hovered around my bed, perplexed that I was neglecting my breathing exercises in favor of this page-turner? "But she had never been a girl," Thackeray wrote about Becky Sharp, his archetype of feminine shrewdness and social manipulation. I longed to leap out of my hospital bed and meet someone exactly like that, a person devoted exclusively to self-advancement. And, I am sorry to say, I never ever did.

Instead, I wrote about her. In the summer of 1999, Tina Brown, a crafty and implacably ambitious English woman who had come to the New World to try her luck and become the most famous magazine editor in the world, left the helm of the *New Yorker* to start her own publication. It had always been a bad idea to put her in charge of a literary magazine, anyway. Tina, I realized at once, possessed a number of promising Sharpesque characteristics. "I was never young," she in-

formed people. "I was born thirty." True to her nature, the new magazine was intended to be a lot less literary than the *New Yorker*. It was to be called *Talk*, but nobody back then seemed to have the vaguest notion what kind of magazine it would turn out to be. Nobody, Tina included, ever would either, but how was I supposed to guess that at the time?

Of course anyone reflecting on the rapid rise and then the dizzying downward trajectory of the fictional Becky

Sharp might have drawn certain conclusions. But back then I was easily influenced, as vulnerable as anyone to buzz—"buzz" being Tina's favorite word, one she lassoed in the service of her many incarnations. It was buzz that cantilevered Tina out of dull old Britain into the United States; buzz that brought her to the Condé Nast empire in 1984, where she took over the stewardship of the failing magazine *Vanity Fair*, and summoned to her famous parties all the would-be buzzers. And it



was, finally, buzz that would eventually be her undoing. In her Oxford days, Tina had majored in Victorian literature; she might have been expected to glean certain moral lessons from what she read. However, she was an indifferent student, then as now, and what lessons she absorbed from her nineteenth-century studies were selective. Whatever Becky wants, Becky gets. It was a simple formula, and it worked for a very long time.

In Tina's Oxford days, for example, there were quite a few men vulnerable to her charms. I am using the word "charms" here euphemistically, although it would be wrong to assume she was blandly promiscuous. All of Tina's targets were well chosen, sometimes from afar. "Who's that?" she inquired of one beau, spying an odd Dickensian figure in a frock coat.

"That's Lord Neidpath," she was told. Within a week, it was observed, the two were lovers, although Lord Neidpath would later recall their relationship with a distinct lack of fervor. "Let's say it was clear the career was going to come before anything. If one wasn't going to fit in with her career, one wasn't going to remain popular with her for very long." In short order, Neidpath reflected, Tina dumped him and took up with the writer Martin Amis: "It was obvious," he told me bitterly, "that he was going places."

Other discarded beaux echoed similar sentiments all over Britain, a country where untrammelled ambition has never received a particularly warm reception. Tina's penchant for trading up at the drop of a title (or, for that matter, a book contract) was considered decidedly *déclassé*. Had she been born wealthy or, better still, aristocratic such slights might have been forgiven. But like her fictional antecedent Ms. Sharp, who possessed from the start, as Thack-

eray tells us, "the dismal precocity of poverty," she was considered unfit for bigger things by reason of parentage.

Tina was by no means born poor. But she inherited from her parents the dismal precocity of thwarted dreams. The daughter of the gentlemanly B-movie producer George Hambley Brown (*The Chiltern Hundreds* and *Terror from Under the House*), who retired, when the jig was up, to Spain, Tina spent the better part of her early years attempting to compensate for deficiencies of that paternal career. From her mother, Bettina, she acquired more particular talents: how to throw massive parties on a budget.

FOR HERSELF, YOUNG TINA was not without abilities. She was a fine early writer, a wicked mimic. She knew, without having to be reminded, who to stroke—Princess Margaret, Kingsley Amis, Dudley Moore—and who to choke (anyone she didn't need). Becky Sharp possessed these very same qualities, but as the product of a Victorian writer, her efforts were confined to the social arena, where she excelled. On receiving a letter revealing that her aristocratic father-in-law had died, Becky's first act is to jump and shout "Hurray!" while waving the sad note around her head. She and her husband have been left nothing in the old man's will, but undaunted, she has plans: "I mean that Lady Jane shall present me at Court next year. I mean that your brother shall give you a seat in Parliament, you stupid old creature," she informs her dull-witted husband. "And that you shall be an Irish Secretary or a West Indian Governor or a Treasurer or a Consul, or some such thing."

Tina, luckier and in some ways more modern, was permitted a more expansive landscape. At twenty-five, she was offered the editorship of *Tatler*, a Lon-

don society rag teeming with duchesses in disastrous yellow satin and damp-eyed earls on horseback. Within months these unfortunates were replaced by pot-smoking parvenus and titled babes in Manolo Blahniks. Circulation tripled—and, not coincidentally, Tina was by then living with the catch of the day, Harold Evans.

How to explain Harry Evans, once the dashing and noble editor of the *Sunday Times*, and now. . . . Well, now, someone who, unlike Tina, needs explaining. To start with, at the time of their early courtship, Harry was in his private life not all that noble: Enid Evans, mother of their three children, was still his wife, and by all accounts most unhappy about his defection to a woman twenty-five years his junior. But Harry was indubitably someone special. To call him the Ben Bradlee of his day is to belittle his accomplishments. It was Harry's newspaper that broke the Thalidomide scandal, a truly formidable achievement in a country of entrenched power and ruthless libel laws; it was he who insisted on revealing to the British public exactly how the drug had been marketed to pregnant mothers, resulting in scores of deformed children. Young reporters worshipped Harry. Women adored him. Tina got him.

They were married, not coincidentally, at Grey Gardens, the summer home of Ben Bradlee and his much younger, extravagantly blonde wife, Sally Quinn. That was in 1981. Months later Harry was out of a job—fired from the *Times* of London by Rupert Murdoch. Gone were his family, his position, and fame in a society that resolutely turned against him. In their place was Tina Brown. You could say, with justice, that like Thackeray's adventuress, Tina harbored grand hopes of being presented at Court—only her

vision of what constituted a royal audience went far beyond anything Becky ever dreamed of. By 1984, all her friends were advised to start spreading the news. That was the year she turned up in New York, the queen of *Vanity Fair*. By her side was Harry, less royal, in search of an American job.

"Harry was Harry," the British publisher Lord Weidenfeld once told me. "Tina was a buccaneer." Of all the epithets anyone ever offered, this seemed to me the most apt. Those on whom Tina depended for support early in her American incarnation—a long list that included Nancy Reagan, Pat Buckley, Nan Kempner, and the socialite Gayfryd Steinberg whose career proved shorter than Harry's—were coddled within the pages of *Vanity Fair*, its pages perfumed with the scent of money and the language of self-abasement.

Much of this language was, I'm afraid, Tina's own. "In a future episode of my script," Tina wrote, "Gayfryd Steinberg, literary lion, hallowed benefactress, grande dame, receives excellent notices as the year 2025's Brooke Astor." (It is just as well that the author never took up work as a psychic. Fourteen years after those lines were written, the fortunes of Gayfryd and her green-mailing husband Saul declined to such a degree that the couple were forced to hawk their penthouse triplex, along with sixty-one Old Masters. However, by that time, Tina of course didn't know them anymore.) Tina was not entirely unaware of her knack for self-advancement, nor the literary antecedent who inspired it. Her final gift to Si Newhouse, the head of the Condé Nast empire, was an early edition of Thackeray's novel.

Conversely, those who were unlikely to be of substantial use to her were thrown without a qualm to the dogs. Princess Diana and her husband

Charles ("Pussy-whipped from here to eternity," in Tina's felicitous phrase), Nicaraguan strongmen and Haitian dictators, the literary musings of her erstwhile friend Sally Quinn, savaged in the pages of *Vanity Fair*—all these were fodder, taken up or discarded as Tina thought fit. Magazine writers met with depressingly similar treatment. On the one hand, they were the best-paid hacks in the business: Thanks to Tina, \$150,000 salaries were not unusual. On the other, they had about as much job security as an Enron auditor. Their fortunes advanced or declined depending on the fluttery trajectory of her whims.

WELL, LET ME AMEND THAT. For a while, during the better part of the 1990s in fact, the fortunes of many, many writers rested on one couple. This was when the career of Harry Evans was temporarily revived: He ran Random House for seven problematic years (until his profligacy got the better of corporate profits), while his eager young wife moved from *Vanity Fair* to editing the *New Yorker*. Of the twenty-six books that were excerpted or reproduced in the *New Yorker* in 1996, over half hailed from Random House. Imagine the exuberance of those writers who were thus twice blessed. Ponder the degree of independence manifested by recipients of two fat paychecks from two fat publishing outlets—or the anguished jealousy of their rivals. If you didn't hear a lot of criticism of Tina Brown in those days from traditionally doughty journalists—and believe me, you didn't—there was a good reason behind such uncharacteristic restraint.

And so we come now to *Talk*, Tina's last, most fitful venture. It was a really terrible magazine, its purpose, as ever, to promote the ambitions of its creator rather than appease the curiosity of its

readers. Once again those she needed were admirably feted: the heirs of Rupert Murdoch, the wives of advertisers, the children of Al Gore whose presidential ambitions she and Harry nourished. This is not, however, entirely why it failed. *Talk* failed because, quite simply, people got fed up with Tina. This is a harsh assessment, but true. Becky Sharp was repeating herself, only this time on cheap paper with far cheaper writers. She had become, in other words, a downmarket bore.

It is accepted wisdom these days that the press was out to "get" Tina from the moment she stepped out of the shelter of the lavish Condé Nast empire and launched the new magazine with the more meager backing of Harvey Weinstein, emperor of Miramax and the flinty old Hearst Corporation. Indeed, the person who expresses such sentiments most often is Tina herself. She had, she explains, fired too many writers, rejected too many bad stories, made too many enemies. Si Newhouse was out to ruin her, she claimed, as was Graydon Carter, her successor at *Vanity Fair*. Then Osama bin Laden came along and—as final proof of his fiendishness—dashed the magazine's remaining hopes. Or so Tina claimed, insisting that bin Laden had, foremost among his transgressions, pulverized the advertising budgets of the six or so souls still willing to try their luck in *Talk*.

As it happens, I am in a pretty good position to judge the merits of such excuses, since I launched my research for a dual biography of Tina and Harry by phoning a lot of journalists who knew them well. All this took place in 2000, well after Tina had left her perches at Condé Nast. And there is only one way to describe their general reaction to my pleas for interviews. Terror. Stark, unadulterated terror. No writer I ever met was out to

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Disarming Women

An iconoclastic, new brand of “individualist feminism”—ifeminism—suggests that abused women might do well to put their trust in Smith & Wesson. *Richard W. Stevens, Hugo Teufel III, and Matthew Y. Biscan agree.*

SINCE 1968 Americans who face criminal attack have been advised to “dial 911” and rely upon the emergency police response for protection. Indeed, according to a study of 911 calls, “the public has built up extraordinary levels of expectation and reliance on the [911] system’s effectiveness.” Meanwhile, a story in *U. S. News & World Report* magazine in 1996, headlined, “This is 911, please hold,” reported that “in recent years, many law enforcement executives have questioned the entire foundation on which 911 is built—the idea that police can stop crimes by responding rapidly to citizens’ ‘emergency’ calls.”

In practice, does dialing 911 actually protect crime victims? Fewer than 5 percent of all calls dispatched to police are made soon enough for officers to stop a crime or arrest a suspect. Even when it functions at its best, the 911 system cannot adequately protect crime victims. When citizens rely solely on 911 and police protection from imminent criminal attacks, their risks of harm increase because of slow police response times, clogged emergency telephone lines, and occasional partial or total 911 system outages. More striking is the position of the law in nearly every state: The police have no legal obligation to protect citizens from crime.

In one landmark California case, a woman separated from her husband, and he retaliated with threats and violence. Over a period of a year, Ruth Bunnell had called the San Jose police at least twenty times to report that her estranged husband, Mack, had violently assaulted her and her two daughters. Mack had even been arrested for one assault.

One day Mack called Ruth to say that he was coming to her house to kill her. Ruth called the police for immediate help. The police department, according to court documents, “refused to come to her aid