

# New York at its showy best by an Anglo-American star

*The Vanity Fair Diaries 1983-1992*

By Tina Brown

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 436 pages, 2018

*Vanity Fair* had once been a fashionable magazine. But in the early years of the Reagan presidency it was losing money. Then its owners had an inspired idea.

Tina Brown was a brilliant young journalist in London. Born in 1953, she went up to Oxford at age 17 to read English at St Anne's College, then worked hard until, at age 25, she was invited to edit the obscure society magazine *Tatler*. She turned it around spectacularly, and created from it a lively, cheery, visually interesting must-read that caught the fashion and cultural buzz of London life.

The owners of *Vanity Fair* recruited Tina as its new editor and relaunched the magazine in 1984. By 1991, when she left it, the title had increased its readership sixfold and was turning a fat profit for its owners. *The Vanity Fair Diaries* tells the real-time story of how she did it, in day-by-day format but already as readable and fun as any novel, and bursting with amazing cameos of New York high society in the late Reagan and early Bush years.

Back in 1981, just weeks after the Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana, Tina Brown had married Harold Evans, the renowned former editor of *The Sunday Times*, in New York. During her *Vanity Fair* years, Tina gave birth to their two children. This story too is retold with all its human drama in the diaries.

Those were the years when New York City was at its edgy, lawless best, before zero tolerance, when Woody Allen's movies were the talk of the town, and Tom Wolfe's brilliant comic novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* and Donald Trump's ghosted book *The Art of the Deal* caught the mood of the moment. Donald and Ivana Trump were showy presences in the local night life, Trump Tower was a glittering new spike on the Manhattan skyline, and the ambitious young brokers on Wall Street were the brash new Masters of the Universe.

For Tina, the Oxford years were not far behind and the connections were everywhere visible. Her former boyfriend Martin Amis was cutting an Anglo-American dash with his sizzling 1984 novel *Money* and she still kept in touch with him.

Another Oxford friend, Allegra Owen, was the girlfriend of "a young fogey with a thatch of blond hair and a plummy voice called Boris Johnson" who then published words so nasty about Tina in *The Sunday Telegraph* that she confided in 1986: "Boris Johnson is an epic shit. I hope he ends badly."

Tina Brown was a glamorous star on the New York social circuit. Her reports of innumerable social and editorial encounters with such celebrities as the Trumps, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, the Reagans, the Kissingers, and all the biggest names in the arts and show business world make her diaries an inexhaustible epic of name-dropping. But her magazine featured epic images too.

Only the best photographers worked for *Vanity Fair*. Helmut Newton shot Claus von Bulow in black leather in 1985, Harry Benson created a classic 1985 cover of Ronald and Nancy Reagan dancing in the White House, and Annie Leibovitz shot numerous covers, including Michael Jackson in 1989 and, as a bold symbol of womanhood in 1991, a gloriously controversial cover image of Demi Moore naked and pregnant, which many newsagents would only sell if it came in a plain wrapper.

To round off the story, in 1992 Tina became the editor of *The New Yorker*, which was bleeding money fast, and proceeded to turn that around too. In 2000, she became a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. And in 2007 she published a spectacularly good book, *The Diana Chronicles*, telling in her uniquely lively style the story of Diana Spencer's romance with Prince Charles, her apotheosis as Princess Diana, and her shocking death in 1997.

*The Vanity Fair Diaries* is history at its best, real and vivid. Read it!

Andy Ross

A version of this review was published on the Amazon page for the book.