

# Editor's outlook: cheeky and very topical

By Rich Perlberg  
staff writer

Tina Brown can be a cheeky sort, the type of woman once described as the Joan Crawford of journalism. She can edit a cheeky magazine, one that can "cover the glamorous" without losing a "sense of skepticism."

She can also be successful in a hurry. At 34 she had been editor of a rejuvenated Vanity Fair for three

years, bringing its circulation well over the half-million mark and frequently making the magazine and its contents a source of stories in other publications.

Brown talked about the celebrities that make and grace the pages of Vanity Fair Monday night at the Birmingham Theatre as part of the Talk of the Town series to benefit the Michigan Opera Theatre.

A polite if not overly large audience seemed mostly to be admirers

of the magazine and its business-woman-mother-wife editor.

Some, however, were dissatisfied with the magazine's direction.

NOT BROWN. She thinks her magazine has never been better now that it has convinced skeptics that it is here to stay.

Now, she said, the magazine is covering meatier topics (such as crack and AIDS) and attracting serious writing (such as Gail Sheehy's continuing series on presidential candidates) to complement its outstanding gallery of photographers and the coverage of the "social cabaret" of American culture.

"The (magazine's) agenda is everything people talk about at dinner parties," she said. Such a smorgasbord of topics needs a blind view-point, one that Brown sees as "a literate sophisticated outlook with a topical point of view."

THE HEART of any such publication is its editor.

In this case it's a British-born, Oxford-educated daughter of a film producer. She quickly made her mark in the publishing world by editing England's oldest magazine (the irreverent "Tatler" whose circulation tripled under her guidance), publishing two books, and having two plays produced by the time she was 30.

Then, while she and her husband



JOHN STORMZANO/staff photographer

Tina Brown, Vanity Fair editor, still runs glamor but makes the magazine topical for the dinner table.

were vacationing in Barbados, she was called to lunch in New York and offered the editorship of Vanity Fair, a magazine with a storied past that was struggling to resurface. Its glory years.

That was three years ago. She has not returned to London since.

IN THE MAGAZINE'S first life, from 1914 to 1939, it was "acerbic and witty" and "the leading taste maker in America," she said. Flipping through old Vanity Fairs gives a vivid picture of culture in America, she added.

But the new magazine wasn't making it. Instead of fun, romance and glamor, it was pompous and,

even worse, not taken seriously.

It may not have been the stuff that Pulitzer Prizes are made of, but Brown said the magazine earned its stripes when she convinced President and Nancy Reagan to dance for a cover shot. A long screen kiss from the First Couple turned into a double-page spread.

A star, the new Vanity Fair, was launched.

THE MAGAZINE today meets the smorgasbord standard and certainly provides grist for the dinner table. The December issue features Bette Midler on the cover and leads off a 15-page spread of 1987 newsmakers with a portrait of Madonna.

But there is also a firsthand account of a crack cocaine victim and a compelling column of a promising young woman killed by a drunken driver.

Still, the magazine and its editor do not please all. Allen Ross of Birmingham walked out of Brown's Monday talk because he found it "socially irrelevant."

But Linda Roach, managing editor of Market Place, vigorously protected her place in line to talk with Brown at a reception at the Robert Kidd art gallery in Birmingham.

"She's a hero of mine," said Roach. "She's achieved a lot of things I hope to achieve."

"She is an inspiration to any young woman," added Ellen Ciepiela. "At 34, her education and background are very impressive."

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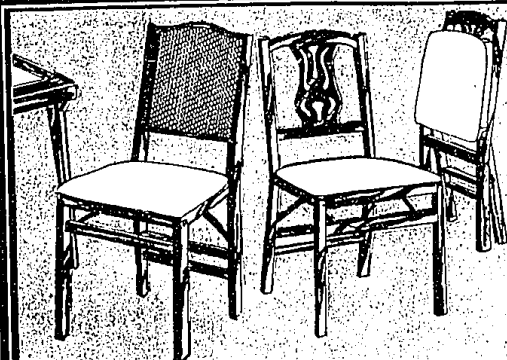
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