

Helen Gurley Brown, Terry McDonell, and the Glossy Glory Days of Magazines

As two new books take on the strange art of magazine editing—a biography of *Cosmopolitan*'s Helen Gurley Brown and a memoir from Terry McDonell (of *Esquire* and *Men's Journal*, to name two)—James Wolcott reflects on the age of endless expense accounts and the legacies these magazine giants left behind.

BY JAMES WOLCOTT | | AUGUST 2016



Terry McDonell on the town in 1989 (with Amy Lumet and P. J. O'Rourke).
By Marina Garnier.

A great magazine editor is a Diaghilev commanding an executive desk, a miniature aircraft carrier from which ideas launch into the wild yonder, which isn't as wild as it used to be, but let's save the wistful notes for the last paragraph. Like the founder of the Ballets Russes or a golden-age Hollywood producer, the ideal alpha magazine editor is an impresario, talent spotter, and snake charmer, a schmoozer *extraordinaire* possessed of iron stamina (capable of sitting for hours at luncheons and awards ceremonies without losing the last rope-hold on hope), and a master of minutiae who never loses sight of the big picture—the final production. . .then has to whip up another batch all over again. Book editors have their own war stories and victory sagas to tell, but their relationships with authors resemble long marriages that sometimes capsize into bitter divorce (witness the ongoing acrimony of the Gordon Lish-Raymond Carver controversy, even though only one of its combatants is still alive). Magazine editors have to conduct a magic show every week or month, juggling a battery of tender or prickly egos—not just authors' but also those of art directors, photographers, illustrators, the advertising department, and editorial staffers—and avoiding burnout from the constant churn while staying in tempo with the times. To fall out of fashion may be professionally fatal. The subjects of the biographies and memoirs of magazine editors earning a spot on the Wall of Fame tend to divide into the long-haulers and the blazing comets—the institution builders and the rebel iconoclasts.

Long-haulers are often the founders of publications that they infused with their personalities, ambitions, and pioneer spirit from the spark of conception. To wit: Hugh Hefner, the epicurean philosopher, entrepreneurial genius, and Pepsi-swigging harem master, whose *Playboy* magazine converted the American libido into a hi-fi bachelor pad from its debut issue, in 1953, featuring Marilyn Monroe in the beckoning altogether as its first centerfold sweetheart. Hef and his Bunny empire have been the subject of countless books, ranging from social studies (Elizabeth Fraterrigo's *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*) to more specialized probes (Patty Farmer and Will Friedman's musical appreciation, *Playboy Swings*; Ron Dirsmith, Jim Wade, and Suzanne Roe Dirsmith's fascinating architectural tour, *Inside Hefner's Pleasure-Domes*) to that unique contribution to nonfiction narrative, the Playmate tell-all (Holly Madison's *Down the Rabbit Hole*, Kendra Wilkinson's *Sliding into Home*, and so many other hopping tales). No steamy hot-tub escapades or baby-oil writhings bawdy up the archives devoted to another visionary founder, William F. Buckley Jr., whose conservative *National Review*, started in 1955, paved the yellow brick road for the triumphal presidency of Ronald Reagan and served as "a finishing school for young apostates" such as the then unknown Joan Didion, Arlene Croce, John Leonard, and Garry Wills. As a Buckley obsessive, I've read everything about him and *National Review*, the best inside-mag accounts delivered by Richard Brookhiser (*Right Time, Right Place*), Jeffrey Hart (*The Making of the American Conservative Mind*), and Buckley's sister, Priscilla (*Living It Up with National Review*). If there is a masterpiece devoted to a totemic figure who left a breathing monument behind, it may be Thomas Kunkel's *Genius in Disguise*, the biography of *The New Yorker's* founding editor, Harold Ross, a gangly, ungainly roughneck of craggy contradictions who improbably refined the taste and sensibility of generations of readers and writers by assembling a galaxy of idiosyncratic originals: E. B. White, Janet Flanner, James Thurber, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, countless more. *Genius in Disguise* and Ross's hilarious, exasperated letters, edited by Kunkel, are the pillars of any journalistic education in the magazine trade. (Missing and necessary for the canon: a biography of Ross's eggshelled Yoda successor, William Shawn.)

Some editors didn't linger in the saddle but made their moment in the sun the emblem of an era and an undimmed inspiration. It was the electrical storm of Harold T. P. Hayes's decade-long (1964–73) reign at *Esquire* that altered long-form reporting forever through the virtuoso proseanship of the New Journalism performed by Tom Wolfe, Nora Ephron, Gay Talese, John Sack, et al. and the taboo-breaking covers of George Lois—a glory run commemorated in Carol Polsgrove's 1995 book, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, but Didn't We Have Fun?*, and collected in the epic anthology *Smiling Through the Apocalypse: Esquire's History of the Sixties*, my personal Upanishads and the basis for a 2014 documentary. Earning his own patch of editorial immortality in that stardust decade was Willie Morris, the subject of Teresa Nicholas's 2016 biography, *Willie: The Life of Willie Morris*, a decorous look at an undecorous life. In 1967, at the age of 32, Morris became the youngest editor in chief in the history of Harper's magazine and swiftly delivered a one-two wham-bam punch that knocked the dust bunnies out of that venerable monthly with William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and the thunderbolt that was Norman Mailer's *The Steps of the Pentagon*, which revolutionized the art of personal reportage and made rival editors sit bolt upright.

Initially treated as a southern rube by the sniffy elite of New York intelligentsia (which actually existed back then, swimming through cocktail parties like barracuda), Morris was soon able to boast that there were eight million names in the Manhattan phone book and not one of them would have refused to take his call. Press coverage and prizes weren't enough to satisfy the abacus-clickers who owned *Harper's*, who were offended by the explicit pyrotechnics of Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex* (which broke newsstand sales records for the magazine), and the title's chronic deficits put the squeeze on their golden boy until Morris resigned, much of the *Harper's* staff leaving with him in solidarity. Morris's classic account of his magazine years, *New York Days*, gives off an amber glow that earns it keepsake status as a literary romance. It also has a perfect laconic sidekick: *In Search of Willie Morris*, by Larry L. King, a friend and *Harper's* contributor whose irreverent yarns and spiky anecdotes are like shots of tequila after Morris's elegiac bourbon cadenzas.



Helen Gurley Brown in her *Cosmopolitan* office, 1968.

By Santi Visalli/Getty Images.

Tales from the editorial desk show no sign of tapering off even as newsstands go the way of telephone booths. Before me are two new books devoted to the craft, rigor, career highs, and sudden pressure drops of being big chief, Gerri Hirshey's biography *Not Pretty Enough: The Unlikely Triumph of Helen Gurley Brown* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and Terry McDonell's memoir, *The Accidental Life: An Editor's Notes on Writing and Writers* (Knopf), with a third on the way (Robert Gottlieb's *Avid Reader*, being published in September, a memoir of a spectacular career spanning the editing of the cuneiforms to the bustling present). The Helen Gurley Brown biography and the McDonell memoir are both chronicles of the long-haul editorial life, both are instructive, entertaining, and briskly told, but they are not a matching set—more like parallel universes. Where H.G.B. is associated solely with one magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, which she assumed control of in 1965 and raised from the dusty crypt and snazzily sexed up into the publishing sensation of the go-go decade and beyond (as McDonell himself observes,

“In the late sixties and early seventies, Helen's *Cosmo* made greater profits than all the dozen or so other Hearst magazine titles combined”), McDonell has had a more peripatetic journey, with stays at *Rolling Stone*, *Us Weekly*, *Esquire*, *Men's Journal*, *Sports Afield*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Where H.G.B. had a guiding vision for *Cosmopolitan* and a fail-safe formula that she hewed to with only minor course corrections, her magazine addressing the reader with a singular, confiding voice (hers was a success story she could share: the former mouseburger who achieved marriage, money, and bushels of yummy orgasms), McDonell has had to be more pragmatic, adapting to each new vessel while letting the distinctive voices of his writers venture across the page. But the real split-mirror effect is over gender.

The H.G.B. biography occupies a career women's world, a theater of office romances, dating tips, guilt-free flings, self-improvement regimens, and take-it-from-me advice, her monthly editor's note titled "Step into My Parlor" (which *National Lampoon* spoofed as "Step into My Panties"). "Helen wrote cute," says Hirshey, "but took the enormous step of starting the conversation on women's sexual needs and rights." The Cosmo Girl—the enduring creation and self-creation of an unlikely string bean from a broken home beset by depression, illness (her sister's polio), mortifying poverty (gophers trying to push up through the floorboards), and body issues (flat chest, ravaging bouts of disfiguring teenage acne)—became the go-get-'em, borderline-wacky prototype of everyone from Marlo Thomas in *That Girl* to Ally McBeal to the *Sex and the City* quartet, of whom Samantha was the most wittily bodacious and unashamed. Brown's was a kingdom that overlapped those of other grandes dames, such as the leopard-print empress of best-seller-dom, Jacqueline Susann, a friend, ally, and sister pop avatar (Hirshey: "a fabulous pair of media molls . . . a bright, binary constellation"), the equally scandal-dishing novelist Judith Krantz (whom, Hirshey informs us, does daily workouts on customized pink-leather-upholstered Pilates machines at the age of 88), Gloria Vanderbilt, and the unsinkable Liz Smith. It was a great act H.G.B. had going in print and off (the best acts are utterly sincere), but it couldn't go on forever, and her perky positivity failed her badly when the Sexual Revolution was no longer a parade float; Brown was tragically obtuse about AIDS and downright dense about sexual harassment in the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill showdown. Demoted from her editor-in-chief position, H.G.B. maintained the pantomime pretense that she was still on deck by going daily to an office that Hearst publications reserved for her, where she often napped. Beset by infirmity and loss, her last years were wobbly, bereft (her husband and bulwark for over half a century, the producer David Brown, died in 2010), and discomposed, but the Helen Gurley Brown who will be remembered is the one who beams from the cover of Hirshey's book, a bony dynamo with missionary zeal and pep-rally enthusiasm who left her lipstick mark on history. As befits the former editor of *Esquire*, *Men's Journal*, and similar sensitive-dude salons, McDonell dwells in a muskier, masculine sphere, where no one says "pippypoo" or "prezzies" or calls someone else "pussycat," and devotes many of the chapters here to friendships and interludes with guys' guys such as Tom McGuane, Jim Harrison, Richard Ford, Richard Price, James Salter, and Hunter S. Thompson: hunting-lodge portraits that are generous, perceptive about the fluctuations of fame and fortitude, occasionally eulogistic (though I've reached my fill of reading about Hunter Thompson's drama-queen, bushwhacker antics). The twilight melancholy that creeps through the book is due not only to the ghosts of those now gone—Salter, George Plimpton, as well as Liz Tilberis, the gallant editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, and Elaine Kaufman, whose Elaine's was the watering hole of choice for accomplished menfolk playing hooky from spouses and deadlines—but also to the waning of an entire way of life, the shrinking power, prestige, glamour, and advertising clout of glossy print in the Digital Age beneath the Death Star of Silicon Valley hegemony and the loss of journalistic comradeship. Everything McDonell writes rings sad and true, but the marvel is (as I'm sure he'd agree) that so much superb, adventurous work is still being done in magazines in the encroaching void of such adversity. If you're going to go down with the ship, might as well go down swinging.