

FROM THE WRITER OF *HEARTBURN*
AND *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*

NORA EPHRON

*The most
of Nora
Ephron*

'The perfect
introduction to
the iconic writer'
STYLIST

'I don't know how
she did it'
**PHOEBE WALLER
BRIDGE**

'She is wit without
cynicism, the
ultimate romantic'
**NEW YORK
TIMES**



INTRODUCTION BY
CANDICE CARTY-WILLIAMS

*The most
of Nora
Ephron*

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BY NORA EPHRON

Fiction

Heartburn

Essays

I Remember Nothing

I Feel Bad About My Neck

Nora Ephron Collected

Scribble Scribble

Crazy Salad

Wallflower at the Orgy

The Most of Nora Ephron

Drama

Love, Loss, and What I Wore (with Delia Ephron)

Imaginary Friends

Screenplays

Julie & Julia

Bewitched (with Delia Ephron)

Hanging Up (with Delia Ephron)

You've Got Mail (with Delia Ephron)

Michael (with Jim Quinlan, Pete Dexter, and Delia Ephron)

Mixed Nuts (with Delia Ephron)

Sleepless in Seattle (with David S. Ward and Jeff Arch)

This Is My Life (with Delia Ephron)

My Blue Heaven

When Harry Met Sally . . .

Cookie (with Alice Arlen)

Heartburn

Silkwood (with Alice Arlen)

The most
of Nora
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TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Black Swan edition published 2015
Penguin Books edition published 2022

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781804991381

Typeset in 10/13.5pt Giovanni Book by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

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Introduction by Candice Carty-Williams

What does a south-London-born Black woman in her early thirties have in common with a white (non-practising) Jewish woman born in Manhattan in 1941? I have tried, desperately, to liken myself to Nora Ephron, and have failed to find any practical commonalities. Our upbringings were entirely different. We don't share a zodiac sign. But the answer is simple: we both go where the humour and the anxiety are.

When I sat down to write this introduction, I began to type out facts about Nora Ephron. Where she was born. To whom she was married. The sixteen screenplays she wrote and co-wrote. The three plays, six essay collections and one novel she penned. I realized I was writing a run-of-the-mill biography about a writer who was so much more than her work. And that was because Nora and her work became largely interchangeable. Her genius of humour was the lens through which she saw the world, and the trade-off of existing in a world that was such *hard work*, was putting that genius of humour into her writing.

It feels important to mention my own first encounter with the writer whose *Most Of* you're about to dive into. A few years ago, a best friend of mine kept telling me to read 'this book called *Heartburn* that I think you'll just *love*'. We both

worked in publishing at the time and spent a good number of evenings drinking cheap wine at book launches in various branches of Waterstones. Every time she spotted a copy, she'd remind me, but I shrugged her off; I took the title at face value and had very little interest in a novel about gastric issues. But she persisted in her prodding until one day, before we embarked on a long train journey, she thrust a copy into my hands.

On the train, I didn't say a word. Ephron's voice had me in a chokehold of humour. Which other writer could even *think* about putting this sentence together: 'I can't begin to tell you how it sent me up the wall, the idea of my two-year-old child, my baby, involved in some dopey inscriptive way in this affair between my husband, a fairly short person, and Thelma Rice, a fairly tall person with a neck as long as an arm and a nose as long as a thumb and you should see her legs, never mind her feet, which are sort of splayed.' I can almost guarantee that you've never seen anyone insulted the way Ephron does it, a gentle dragging that the recipient needs a few minutes to process, before seeing it for the snub that it is. By then, Nora's got away with it and she's out of the room.

I'd like to propose a Venn diagram of Nora Ephron. In the left-hand circle we have anxiety, neuroses, deepest fears realized, etc. Ephron's lamentations on these horrors were never presented through panic; instead, they were measured, often resigned musings. It just was what it was, and, more often than not, she was going to make a joke out of it. The right-hand circle contains food; Ephron's food writing is as delicious as her subject. She effectively made herself a student of eating, of gastronomic discovery. In the middle of the Venn, very satisfyingly, sits *Heartburn*, both metaphorically and literally. In her essay 'The Food Establishment: Life in

the Land of the Rising Soufflé (Or Is It the Rising Meringue?)’ Ephron begins: ‘One day, I awoke having had my first in a long series of food anxiety dreams (the way it goes is this: there are eight people coming to dinner in twenty minutes, and I am in an utter panic because I have forgotten to buy the food, plan the menu, set the table, and clean the house, and the supermarket is closed).’ And that, readers, perfectly demonstrates the sweet spot of humour that Ephron absolutely dominated.

Heartburn, written in 1983, six years before I was born, is the funniest book I have ever read. This will sound like a cliché, and I absolutely despise clichés, but as I turned the pages I could barely believe that each paragraph I read was even funnier than the last. I couldn’t stop laughing at the neuroses of the main character. Rachel Samstat (who is based on Ephron herself) is describing the breakdown of her marriage, and she’s telling it to you as though you’re on the phone to her, nodding profusely and gathering all the pieces of the tale with *mmms* and *oh reallys*, as she unwinds the story of her husband’s infidelity with Thelma, a friend close to her. But the fact of the affair is in many ways the last of her worries; what bothers her are all the details *surrounding* the affair – that she’d *discussed* with her husband, by way of post-party gossip, the possibility of Thelma having an affair with perhaps ‘a congressman’, and that she’d previously sent Thelma, the *homewrecker*, a recipe for her carrot cake and had decorated it with a little smiley face.

When I got off that train, the obsession began in earnest: I was officially a die-hard Ephron fan. But I soon realized that her work had been a large part of my life before I even knew her name. *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You’ve Got Mail* always seemed to be on the telly on a Saturday afternoon when I

was growing up. Ephron's dialogue had been ringing out in the Williams household for years. Let me take you back to the Nora Ephron Venn diagram again, summarized in this snapshot of dialogue:

SALLY: I'd like the chef salad, please, with the oil and vinegar on the side. And the apple pie *à la mode*.

WAITRESS (writing): Chef and apple *à la mode*.

SALLY: But I'd like the pie heated, and I don't want the ice cream on top, I want it on the side. And I'd like strawberry instead of vanilla if you have it. If not, then no ice cream, just whipped cream.

Like everyone else in the noughties in that murky cognitive middle ground between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, I stayed up late watching TV when five channels were the norm and the marvel that was Freeview was yet to exist. On Channel 5 at a certain time of night (and it was always Channel 5), a specific type of show would play. It was always at least three hours long, and felt like a filler while the people on the evening shift at the channel were changing over and letting the night shift in. This show was always called something like *Fifty Greatest Movie Moments*, *Iconic Scenes of the Twentieth Century* or *Best Film Performances of All Time* – you get the point, we've all fallen asleep to it. Anyway, I would always fall asleep to it, and on several occasions awoke to the sound of a woman having an orgasm. I wouldn't have time to blink as I scanned the sofa for the remote to silence whatever porn show was blaring into the room.

My panic and confusion would quickly subside when I realized: *Ah. This is the scene from that film where the blonde*

woman is pretending to come instead of eating her breakfast at the diner opposite the man whose hairline is fading fast. Imagine my delight when I learned that the writer of this scene was the same person who'd given me a stitch from laughing on the train from London to Ramsgate. When I finally watched *When Harry Met Sally* in full, I laughed and cried in equal measure. Here we have a writer who truly, deeply understands the complexities of love, and how it refuses to follow our rules.

So much of Ephron's work demonstrates this, but *When Harry Met Sally*, in particular, refuses to conform to the familiar structure of the rom com. Instead, its structure follows, more closely than anything else I've seen, what love actually is. It's meeting someone and disliking them before realizing that they're the only person you want to spend time with. It's caring about someone so much that you self-sabotage and run away, when you should fight your demons and run towards them. It's about saying 'I love you' to a friend, when you love them as *more* than a friend but maybe neither of you know it yet. It's painful. It's frightening. It's always at the front and the back of your mind. Love is impossible to predict and to track, and love will do what it's going to do when it's good and ready. I have so many memories of sitting cross-legged, heartbroken and sobbing on my best friend's sofa, and laughing through tears because she'd just delivered the most incredible insult about the person I was in pieces over. The darker parts of love will take you down, but they *are* funny. And Ephron knew this, the way she knew that night follows day.

What you, oh lucky reader, have here in *The Most of Nora Ephron* are gems from a writer who was *always* at her peak. A writer who could turn her pen to any subject or form she

wanted to, who pulls you in, and isn't much bothered whether or not you care about what she's saying (but knows, *always* knows, that you do). A writer who won't let you go until she's good and ready. Until she's said her piece on a subject and broadly convinced you to come round to her way of thinking. Because reading Nora's words feels like you're having a conversation with the friend you trust the most, the one who always makes you laugh and blindsides you into agreeing with them. This extraordinary skill – to be so captivating while being brilliantly meandering and often deliciously *laissez faire* – I haven't found in any other writer. It might be the time that Ephron was writing in; things were different back then. The internet wasn't what it is now. Everyone was more chill. People smoked in the office. Nora Ephron was like *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw, only with a lot more self-awareness, and possessing the ability to laugh at herself, at least *once*.

It has to be said, though, that Ephron's contemporary writing – about herself and about celebrity culture – zings just as her screenplays do. The titles of her essays are stories in their own right. My top three are 'A Few Words About Breasts' ('After I went into therapy, a process that made it possible for me to tell total strangers at cocktail parties that breasts were the hang-up of my life, I was often told that I was insane to have been bothered by my condition'); 'I Feel Bad About My Neck' ('According to my dermatologist, the neck starts to go at forty-three, and that's that . . . short of surgery, there's not a damn thing you can do about a neck. The neck is a dead giveaway. Our faces are lies and our necks are the truth') and 'White Men' ('White men cannot be relied on, as all of us know who have spent a lifetime dating them').

My own writing, my many neuroses, my ways of dealing

with the world and the extreme variables it throws at me, of making sense of love and all its complications, are so closely informed by the words and the ways of this remarkable, anxious and hilarious woman. In essence, Nora Ephron is such an idol of mine that all that's left to say is: I'll always, always, have what she's having.

—*Candice Carty-Williams*

Introduction to the Original US Edition
by Robert Gottlieb

A couple of years before Nora's death in 2012, she and I sat down to begin putting together the table of contents for this book. Then other things got in the way – her play, *Lucky Guy*; a movie script she was working on – and it was set aside. Perhaps, too, knowing how ill she was, she began to see the book as a memorial and that made her uncomfortable – she never said. But although I was aware of her dire medical situation, the original impulse behind the book was not to memorialize but to celebrate the richness of her work, the amazing arc of her career, and the place she had come to hold in the hearts of so many readers.

The reaction to her death was an outpouring of disbelief and grief. Before the publication of her two final collections – *I Feel Bad About My Neck* and *I Remember Nothing* – she was, of course, admired and enjoyed for both her writing and her movies, but the readership of these last books seemed to me to be on another level. It was personal. Her readers not only felt that they knew her but that she knew them. Obviously, not all the people – more than a million of them! – who bought *Neck* were women who identified with her or sensed her identification with them, but certainly many of them were. She had become a model, an ideal, or at the very least, an example – she was telling them things about herself

that were also about them, and giving them permission to think these things and feel these things. And she was also telling them what to look out for, what lay ahead. Her honesty and directness, and her unerring prescience, had made her a *figure* – someone whose influence and authority transcended her individual achievements, extraordinary as they were.

In her later years, her movies brought her tremendous response and reward, both for their quality and because she was the first woman of her time to become a successful commercial film director. How did she do it? By her talent, naturally – her uncanny ability to give us romance as seen through a gimlet eye. Some people complained that her movies were sentimental – those happy endings! But those happy endings were actually realistic: She had lived one herself, through her long third marriage, one of the happiest marriages I've ever witnessed.

The determination and persistence – and clarity – that saw her prevail in Hollywood were the qualities that earlier had propelled her to the heights of journalism, first as a reporter, then as an outspoken commentator. Her abiding principle was the reality principle. And of course she had a not-so-secret weapon: She was funny, even when she was furious; funny through thick and (as we know from *Heartburn*) thin. And she was openly and generously personal without being egotistical. She saw everything wryly, including herself. She also looked great.

This book is structured around the many genres and subjects she explored and conquered. As you'll see, it's autobiographical, sociological, political. It adds up to a portrait of a writer, a log of a writer's career, and an unofficial – and unintended – report on feminism in her time. She's a

reporter, a profilist, a polemicist, a novelist, a screenwriter, a playwright, a memoirist, and a (wicked) blogger – blogging came along just in time for her to lash out fiercely at the bad old days of Bush/Cheney. And let's not forget that she was an obsessed foodie. Even her novel has recipes.

What was she like in real life? To begin with, she was a perfect spouse: She and her Nick could have given lessons to that earlier exemplary Nick-and-Nora, the Thin Man and the Thin Man's lady. She adored her two boys, and nobly tried not to micromanage them. (A real sacrifice: Managing things was one of her supreme talents – and pleasures.) She was a fanatical friend, always there for anyone who needed support, encouragement, or kindness. She was also, I can report, a wonderfully responsive colleague. We worked together on all her books after her first collection, *Wallflower at the Orgy*, without a single moment of contention. As a result, I think I know what she would have wanted this book to be, and her family allowed me to shape it. My immediate reward was having a professional excuse to reread everything she ever wrote. No other editorial job I've ever performed has been so much fun.

A few notes on the text. Since almost all of this material has previously appeared in print but in a variety of venues, we've justified such technical matters as spelling and punctuation. There are some places (surprisingly few, actually) where, over the years, Nora repeated certain stories (sometimes with minor variations) or remade certain points – as in her memories of her early role model, 'Jane.' We've left these as they originally appeared so that they can be read in context. The brilliant introduction she wrote for the published version of *When Harry Met Sally* . . . originally preceded the text of the script, but now it follows it – I felt it gave away

too many of the surprises to come. The recipes – she might not have been pleased – remain untested.

—*Robert Gottlieb*

The Journalist

Introduction to Wallflower at the Orgy

Some years ago, the man I am married to told me he had always had a mad desire to go to an orgy. Why on earth, I asked. Why not, he said. Because, I replied, it would be just like the dances at the YMCA I went to in the seventh grade – only instead of people walking past me and rejecting me, they would be stepping over my naked body and rejecting me. The image made no impression at all on my husband. But it has stayed with me – albeit in another context. Because working as a journalist is exactly like being the wallflower at the orgy. I always seem to find myself at a perfectly wonderful event where everyone else is having a marvelous time, laughing merrily, eating, drinking, having sex in the back room, and I am standing on the side taking notes on it all.

I am not, I must tell you, entirely happy with this role. There are times when I would much prefer to be the one having the fun; there are times when I am seized with an almost uncontrollable desire to blurt out, in the middle of interviews, ‘*Me! Me! Me!* Enough about you. What about *me?*’ But then I remember that, like so many journalists, I am stuck on the sidelines not just because I happen to be making a living at the job but because of the kind of person I am and the reason I was drawn to this business.

Everyone I know who writes has an explanation for it, and for years I went around collecting them, hoping that someone else’s reason would turn out to be mine. The first person who gave me what seemed like a good one was a colleague on the *New York Post* (where I worked for five years), who told me

during my first week there that the reason she loved her work was that every day, on the way home from work, she could see people on the subway reading her articles. For four years I looked around the subway to find someone reading mine. No one ever was. And finally, one day, it happened: the man next to me opened to a story of mine, folded the paper carefully back to settle in for a long read, and began. It took him exactly twenty seconds to lose interest, carefully unfold the paper, and turn the page.

Then I remember asking a man who had no real reason for working at a daily newspaper why he was there. 'I'll tell you,' he said. 'I can't think of any place I would rather have been the day the president was killed than in a newspaper office.' And that seemed like a wonderful reason – and I thought of the day President Kennedy was shot and the perverse sense of pleasure I got from working under deadline that day, the gratitude for being able to write rather than think about what had happened, the odd illusion of somehow being on top of the situation.

But in the end, the reason I write became quite obvious to me – and it turned out to have much more to do with temperament than motivation. People who are drawn to journalism are usually people who, because of their cynicism or emotional detachment or reserve or whatever, are incapable of being anything but witnesses to events. Something prevents them from becoming involved, committed, and allows them to remain separate. What separates me from what I write about is, I suspect, a sense of the absurd that makes it difficult for me to take many things terribly seriously. I'm not talking about objectivity here (I don't believe in it), nor am I saying that this separateness makes it impossible to write personal journalism. I always have an

opinion about the orgy; I'm just not down on the floor with the rest of the bodies.

I feel that I should tell you a little about myself before letting the book begin. I feel this largely because I have just read the introductions to nine other collections of magazine articles, and all of them are filled with juicy little morsels about the people who wrote them. I think, however, that there is quite enough of me in most of these articles for me to forgo telling you how I love eating McIntosh apples and Kraft caramels simultaneously. That kind of thing. I should say that almost everything in this book was written in 1968 and 1969, and almost everything in it is about what I like to think of as frivolous things. Fashion, trashy books, show business, food. I could call these subjects Popular Culture, but I like writing about them so much that I hate to think they have to be justified in this way – or at least I'm sorry if they do.

One night not too long ago I was on a radio show talking about an article I had written for *Esquire* on Helen Gurley Brown and I was interrupted by another guest, a folk singer, who had just finished a twenty-five-minute lecture on the need for peace. 'I can't believe we're talking about Helen Gurley Brown,' he said, 'when there's a war going on in Vietnam.' Well, I care that there's a war in Indochina, and I demonstrate against it; and I care that there's a women's liberation movement, and I demonstrate for it. But I also go to the movies incessantly, and have my hair done once a week, and cook dinner every night, and spend hours in front of the mirror trying to make my eyes look symmetrical, and I care about those things, too. Much of my life goes irrelevantly on, in spite of larger events. I suppose that has something to do with my hopelessly midcult nature, and something to do

with my Hollywood childhood. But all that, as the man said, is a story for another time.

—May 1970

Journalism: A Love Story

What I remember is that there was a vocational day during my freshman year in high school, and you had to choose which vocation you wanted to learn about. I chose journalism. I have no idea why. Part of the reason must have had to do with Lois Lane, and part with a wonderful book I'd been given one Christmas, called *A Treasury of Great Reporting*. The journalist who spoke at the vocational event was a woman sportswriter for the *Los Angeles Times*. She was very charming, and she mentioned in the course of her talk that there were very few women in the newspaper business. As I listened to her, I suddenly realized that I desperately wanted to be a journalist and that being a journalist was probably a good way to meet men.

So I can't remember which came first – wanting to be a journalist or wanting to date a journalist. The two thoughts were completely smashed up together.

I worked on the school newspaper in high school and college, and a week before graduating from Wellesley in 1962 I found a job in New York City. I'd gone to an employment agency on West Forty-second Street. I told the woman there that I wanted to be a journalist, and she said, 'How would you like to work at *Newsweek* magazine?' and I said fine. She picked up the phone, made an appointment for me, and sent

me right over to the Newsweek Building, at 444 Madison Avenue.

The man who interviewed me asked why I wanted to work at *Newsweek*. I think I was supposed to say something like, 'Because it's such an important magazine,' but I had no real feelings about the magazine one way or another. I had barely read *Newsweek*; in those days, it was a sorry second to *Time*. So I responded by saying that I wanted to work there because I hoped to become a writer. I was quickly assured that women didn't become writers at *Newsweek*. It would never have crossed my mind to object, or to say, 'You're going to turn out to be wrong about me.' It was a given in those days that if you were a woman and you wanted to do certain things, you were going to have to be the exception to the rule. I was hired as a mail girl, for \$55 a week.

I'd found an apartment with a college friend at 110 Sullivan Street, a horrible brand-new white-brick building between Spring and Prince. The rent was \$160 a month, with the first two months free. The real estate broker assured us that the South Village was a coming neighborhood, on the verge of being red-hot. This turned out not to be true for at least twenty years, by which time the area was called SoHo, and I was long gone. Anyway, I packed up a rental car on graduation day and set off to New York. I got lost only once – I had no idea you weren't supposed to take the George Washington Bridge to get to Manhattan. I remember being absolutely terrified when I realized that I was accidentally on the way to New Jersey and might never find a way to make a U-turn; I would drive south forever and never reach the city I'd dreamed of getting back to ever since I was five, when my parents had thoughtlessly forced me to move to California.

When I finally got to Sullivan Street, I discovered that the

Festival of St. Anthony was taking place. There was no parking on the block – they were frying zeppole in front of my apartment. I'd never heard of zeppole. I was thrilled. I thought the street fair would be there for months, and I could eat all the cotton candy I'd ever wanted. Of course it was gone the next week.

There were no mail boys at *Newsweek*, only mail girls. If you were a college graduate (like me) who had worked on your college newspaper (like me) and you were a girl (like me), they hired you as a mail girl. If you were a boy (unlike me) with exactly the same qualifications, they hired you as a reporter and sent you to a bureau somewhere in America. This was unjust but it was 1962, so it was the way things were.

My job couldn't have been more prosaic: mail girls delivered the mail. This was a long time ago, when there was a huge amount of mail, and it arrived in large sacks all day long. I was no mere mail girl, though; I was the Elliott girl. This meant that on Friday nights I worked late, delivering copy back and forth from the writers to the editors, one of whom was named Osborn Elliott, until it was very late. We often worked until three in the morning on Friday nights, and then we had to be back at work early Saturday, when the Nation and Foreign departments closed. It was exciting in its own self-absorbed way, which is very much the essence of journalism: you truly come to believe that you are living in the center of the universe and that the world out there is on tenterhooks waiting for the next copy of whatever publication you work at.

There were telex machines in a glass-enclosed area adjacent to the lobby, and one of my jobs was to rip off the

telexes, which usually contained dispatches from the reporters in the bureaus, and deliver them to the writers and editors. One night a telex arrived concerning the owner of *Newsweek*, Philip Graham. I had seen Graham on several occasions. He was a tall, handsome guy's guy whose photographs never conveyed his physical attractiveness or masculinity; he would walk through the office, his voice booming, cracking jokes, and smiling a great white toothy grin. He was in a manic phase of his manic depression, but no one knew this; no one even knew what manic depression was.

Graham had married Katharine Meyer, whose father owned the *Washington Post*, and he now ran the *Post* and the publishing empire that controlled *Newsweek*. But according to the telex, he was in the midst of a crack-up and was having a very public affair with a young woman who worked for *Newsweek*. He had misbehaved at some event or other and had used the word 'fuck' in the course of it all. It was a big deal to say the word 'fuck' in that era. This is one of the things that drives me absolutely crazy when I see movies that take place in the fifties and early sixties; people are always saying 'fuck' in them. Trust me, no one threw that word around then the way they do now. I'll tell you something else: they didn't drink wine then. Nobody knew about wine. I mean, someone did, obviously, but most people drank hard liquor all the way through dinner. Recently I saw a movie in which people were eating take-out pizza in 1948 and it drove me nuts. There was no take-out pizza in 1948. There was barely any pizza, and barely any takeout. These are some of the things I know, and they're entirely useless, and take up way too much space in my brain.

Philip Graham's nervous breakdown – which ended

finally in his suicide – was constantly under whispered discussion by the editors, and because I read all the telexes and was within earshot, even of whispers, I was riveted. There was a morgue – a library of clippings that was available for research – at *Newsweek*; morgues are one of the great joys of working in journalism. I went to it and pulled all the clips about Graham and read them between errands. I was fascinated by the story of this wildly attractive man and the rich girl he'd married. Years later, I read their letters in Kay Graham's autobiography, and realized that they'd once been in love, but as I went through the clips, I couldn't imagine it. It seemed clear he was an ambitious young man who'd made a calculated match with a millionaire's daughter. Now the marriage was falling apart, before my very eyes. It was wildly dramatic, and it almost made up for the fact that I was doing entirely menial work.

After a few months, I was promoted to the next stage of girlhood at *Newsweek*: I became a clipper. Being a clipper entailed clipping newspapers from around the country. We all sat at something called the Clip Desk, armed with rip sticks and grease pencils, and we ripped up the country's newspapers and routed the clips to the relevant departments. For instance, if someone cured cancer in St. Louis, we sent the clipping to the Medicine section. Being a clipper was a horrible job, and to make matters worse, I was good at it. But I learned something: I became familiar with every major newspaper in America. I can't quite point out what good that did me, but I'm sure it did some. Years later, when I got involved with a columnist from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I at least knew what his newspaper looked like.

Three months later, I was promoted again, this time to the highest rung: I became a researcher. 'Researcher' was a fancy

word – and not all that fancy at that – for ‘fact-checker,’ and that’s pretty much what the job consisted of. I worked in the Nation department. I was extremely happy to be there. This was not a bad job six months out of college; what’s more, I’d been a political science major, so I was working in a field I knew something about. There were six writers and six researchers in the department, and we worked from Tuesday to Saturday night, when the magazine closed. For most of the week, none of us did anything. The writers waited for files from the reporters in the bureaus, which didn’t turn up until Thursday or Friday. Then, on Friday afternoon, they all wrote their stories and gave them to us researchers to check. We checked a story by referring to whatever factual material existed; occasionally we made a phone call or did some minor reporting. Newsmagazine writers in those days were famous for using the expression ‘tk,’ which stood for ‘to come’; they were always writing sentences like, ‘There are tk lightbulbs in the chandelier in the chamber of the House of Representatives,’ and part of your job as a researcher was to find out just how many lightbulbs there were. These tidbits were not so much facts as factoids, but they were the way newsmagazines separated themselves from daily newspapers; the style reached an apotheosis in the work of Theodore H. White, a former *Time* writer, whose *Making of the President* books were filled with information about things like President Kennedy’s favorite soup. (Tomato, with a glop of sour cream.) (I ate it for years, as a result.)

At *Newsweek*, when you had checked the facts and were convinced they were accurate, you underlined the sentence. You were done checking a piece when every word in it had been underlined. One Tuesday morning, we all arrived at work and discovered a gigantic crisis: one of the Nation

stories in that week's *Newsweek* had been published with a spelling error – Konrad Adenauer's first name was spelled with a C instead of a K. The blame fell not to the writer (male) who had first misspelled the name, or to the many senior editors (male) and copy editors (male) who had edited the story, but to the two researchers (female) who'd checked it. They had been confronted, and were busy having an argument over which of them had underlined the word 'Conrad.' 'That is not my underlining,' one of them was saying.

With hindsight, of course, I can see how brilliantly institutionalized the sexism was at *Newsweek*. For every man, an inferior woman. For every male writer, a female drone. For every flamboyant inventor of a meaningless-but-unknown detail, a young drudge who could be counted on to fill it in. For every executive who erred, an underling to pin it on. But it was way too early in the decade for me to notice that, and besides, I was starting to realize that I was probably never going to be promoted to writer at *Newsweek*. And by the way, if I ever had been, I have no reason to think I would have been good at it.

The famous 114-day newspaper strike (which wasn't a strike but a lockout) began in December 1962, and one of its side effects was that several journalists who were locked out by their newspapers came to *Newsweek* to be writers, temporarily. One of them was Charles Portis, a reporter from the *New York Herald Tribune* whom I went out with for a while, but that's not the point (although it's not entirely beside the point); the point is that Charlie, who was a wonderful writer with a spectacular and entirely eccentric style (he later became a novelist and the author of *True Grit*), was no good at all at writing the formulaic, voiceless, unbylined stories with strict line counts that *Newsweek* printed.

By then I had become friends with Victor Navasky. He was the editor of a satirical magazine called *Monocle*, and it seemed that he knew everyone. He knew important people, and he knew people he made you think were important simply because he knew them. *Monocle* came out only sporadically, but it hosted a lot of parties, and I met people there who became friends for life, including Victor's wife, Annie, Calvin Trillin, and John Gregory Dunne. Victor also introduced me to Jane Green, who was an editor at Condé Nast. She was an older woman, about twenty-five, very stylish and sophisticated, and she knew everyone too. She introduced me to my first omelette, my first Brie, and my first vitello tonnato. She used the word 'painterly' and tried to explain it to me. She asked me what kind of Jew I was. I had never heard of the concept of what kind of Jew you were. Jane was a German Jew, which was not to say she was from Germany but that her grandparents had been. She was extremely pleased about it. I had no idea it mattered. (And by the way, it didn't, really; those days were over.)

I could go on endlessly about the things I learned from Jane. She told me all about de Kooning and took me to the Museum of Modern Art to see pop art and op art. She taught me the difference between Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. She'd gone out with a number of well-known journalists and writers, and long before I met them I knew, because of Jane, a number of intimate details about them. Eventually, I went to bed with one of them and that was the end of my friendship with her, but that's getting ahead of things.

One day after the newspaper strike was about a month old, Victor called to say he'd managed to raise \$10,000 to put out parodies of the New York newspapers, and asked if I would write a parody of Leonard Lyons's gossip column in

the *New York Post*. I said yes, although I had no idea what to do. I'd met Lyons – he appeared nightly at Sardi's, where my parents often had dinner when they were in New York – but I'd never really focused on his column. I called my friend Marcia, who'd recently babysat Leonard Lyons's son's dogs, and asked her what the deal was with Lyons. She explained to me that the Lyons column was a series of short anecdotes with no point whatsoever. I went upstairs to the morgue at *Newsweek* and read a few weeks' worth of Lyons's columns and wrote the parody. Parodies are very odd things. I've written only about a half dozen of them in my life [see pp. 112–14]; they come on you like the wind, and you write them almost possessed. It's as close as a writer gets to acting – it's almost as if you're in character for a short time, and then it passes.

The papers Victor produced – the *New York Pest* and the *Daily News* – made their way to the newsstands, but they didn't sell. Newsstand dealers really didn't understand parodies in those days – this was long before *National Lampoon* and the *Onion* – and most of them sent them back to the distributor. But everyone in the business read them. They were funny. The editors of the *Post* wanted to sue, but the publisher, Dorothy Schiff, said, 'Don't be ridiculous. If they can parody the *Post* they can write for it. Hire them.' So the editors called Victor and Victor called me and asked if I'd be interested in trying out for a job at the *Post*. Of course I was.

I went down to the *Post* offices on West Street a few days later. It was a freezing day in February and I got lost trying to find the entrance to the building, which was actually on Washington Street. I took the elevator to the second floor and walked down the long dingy hall and into the city room.

I couldn't imagine I was in the right place. It was a large dusty room with dirty windows looking out at the Hudson, not that you could see anything through the windows. Sitting in a clump of desks in the winter dark was a group of three or four editors. They offered me a reporting tryout as soon as the lockout was over.

There were seven newspapers in New York at that time, and the *Post* was the least of them, circulation-wise. It had always been a liberal paper, and it had had glory days under an editor named James Wechsler, but those days were over. Still, the paper had a solid base of devoted readers. Seven weeks into the lockout, Dorothy Schiff bolted the Publishers Association and reopened the paper, and I took a two-week leave of absence from *Newsweek* and began my tryout. I'd prepared by studying the *Post*, but more important, by being coached by Jane, who'd worked there briefly. She explained everything I needed to know about the paper. She told me that the *Post* was an afternoon newspaper and the stories in it were known as 'overnights'; they were not to be confused with the news stories in the morning papers. They were feature stories; they had a point of view; they were the reason people bought an afternoon paper in addition to a morning paper. You never used a simple 'Who What Where Why When and How' lead in an afternoon paper. She also told me that when I got an assignment, never to say, 'I don't understand' or 'Where exactly is it?' or 'How do I get in touch with them?' Go back to your desk, she said, and figure it out. Pull the clips from the morgue. Look in the telephone book. Look in the crisscross directory. Call your friends. Do anything but ask the editor what to do or how to get there.

I arrived for my tryout expecting the city room to look different from the way it had on that dark winter day I'd first

come there, but except for brighter lighting, it didn't. It was a relic, really – a period set for a 1920s newsroom. The desks were old, the chairs were broken. Everyone smoked, but there were no ashtrays; the burning cigarettes rested on the edges of desks and left dark smudge marks. There were not enough desks to go around, so unless you'd been there for twenty years, you didn't have your own desk, or even a drawer; finding a place to sit was sort of like musical chairs. The windows were never cleaned. The doors leading into the city room had insets of frosted glass, and they were so dusty that someone had written the word 'Philthy' on them with a finger. I couldn't have cared less. I had spent almost half my life wanting to be a newspaper reporter, and now I had a shot at it.

I had four bylines my first week. I interviewed the actress Tippi Hedren. I went to the Coney Island aquarium to write about two hooded seals that were refusing to mate. I interviewed an Italian film director named Nanni Loy. I covered a murder on West Eighty-second Street. On Friday afternoon, I was offered a permanent job at the paper. One of the reporters took me out for a drink that night, to a bar nearby called the Front Page. That's what it was called, the Front Page. Later that night, we took a taxi up Madison Avenue and we passed the Newsweek Building. I looked up at the eleventh floor, where the lights were ablaze, and I thought, Up there they are closing next week's edition of *Newsweek*, and nobody really gives a damn. It was a stunning revelation.

I loved the *Post*. Of course, it was a zoo. The editor was a sexual predator. The managing editor was a lunatic. Sometimes it seemed that half the staff was drunk. But I loved my job. In my first year there, I learned how to write,

which I barely knew when I began. The editors and copy editors brought me along. They actually nurtured me. They assigned me short pieces at first, then longer pieces, then five-part series. I learned by doing, and after a while, I had an instinctive sense of structure. There was a brilliant copy editor, Fred McMorrow, who would walk my story back to me and explain why he was making the changes he was making. Never begin a story with a quote, he said. Never use anything but 'said.' Never put anything you really care about into the last paragraph because it will undoubtedly be cut for space. There was a great features editor, Joe Rabinovich, who kept my occasional stylistic excesses in line; he saved me from woeful idiocy when Tom Wolfe began writing for the *Herald Tribune* and I made a pathetic attempt to write exactly like him. The executive editor, Stan Opatowsky, came up with a series of offbeat feature assignments for me. I wrote about heat waves and cold snaps; I covered the Beatles and Bobby Kennedy and the Star of India robbery.

The *Post* had a bare-bones staff, but more women worked there than worked at all the other New York papers combined. The greatest of the rewrite men at the *Post* was a woman named Helen Dudar. *Hello, sweetheart, get me rewrite.* In those days, the *Post* published six editions a day, starting at eleven in the morning and ending with the four-thirty stock market final. When news broke, reporters in the street would phone in the details from pay phones and rewrite men would write the stories. The city room was right next to the press room, and the noise – of reporters typing, pressmen linotyping, wire machines clacking, and presses rolling – was a journalistic fantasy.

I worked at the *Post* for five years. Then I became a

magazine writer. I believed in journalism. I believed in truth. I believed that when people claimed they'd been misquoted, they were just having trouble dealing with the sight of their words in cold, hard print. I believed that when political activists claimed that news organizations conspired against them, they had no idea that most journalistic enterprises were far too inept to harbor conspiracy. I believed that I was temperamentally suited to journalism because of my cynicism and emotional detachment; I sometimes allowed that these were character flaws, but I didn't really believe it.

I married a journalist, and that didn't work. But then I married another, and it did.

Now I know that there's no such thing as the truth. That people are constantly misquoted. That news organizations are full of conspiracy (and that, in any case, ineptness is a kind of conspiracy). That emotional detachment and cynicism get you only so far.

But for many years I was in love with journalism. I loved the city room. I loved the pack. I loved smoking and drinking scotch and playing dollar poker. I didn't know much about anything, and I was in a profession where you didn't have to. I loved the speed. I loved the deadlines. I loved that you wrapped the fish.

You can't make this stuff up, I used to say.

I'd known since I was a child that I was going to live in New York eventually, and that everything in between would be just an intermission. I'd spent all those years imagining what New York was going to be like. I thought it was going to be the most exciting, magical, fraught-with-possibility place that you could ever live; a place where if you really wanted something you might be able to get it; a place where I'd be

surrounded by people I was dying to know; a place where I might be able to become the only thing worth being, a journalist.

And I'd turned out to be right.

—November 2010

How to Write a Newsmagazine Cover Story

You Too Can Be a Writer

You can learn, in your spare time, to write articles for publication, and if you master the art, you can be paid to do it on a full-time basis.

Of course, there are all sorts of writers. There are reporters, for example. Reporters have to learn how to uncover FACTS. This is very difficult to learn in your spare time. There are also serious journalists. But serious journalists have TALENT. There is no way to learn to have talent. There are also fiction writers. But fiction writers need IMAGINATION. Either you have imagination or you don't. You can't pick it up in a manual.

But there is one kind of writer you can learn to be and you will not need FACTS, TALENT, or IMAGINATION. You can become a newsmagazine cover story writer. Just master the six rules enumerated below and you will know all you need to about how to write a newsmagazine cover story – or at least the kind of newsmagazine cover story dealing with lifestyle, soft news, and cultural figures.

RULE ONE

Find a subject too much has already been written about.

To do this, read with care the following: *Women's Wear Daily*, *Vogue*, Joyce Haber's column, Suzy's column, the 'Arts and Leisure' section of the Sunday *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and the movie grosses in *Variety*.

Any name mentioned more than four or five hundred times in the last year is a suitable subject for a newsmagazine cover.

RULE TWO

Exaggerate the significance of the cover subject.

Study the following examples to see how this is done by the experts:

'Today, a few weeks shy of twenty-six, Liza has evolved in her own right into a new Miss Show Biz, a dazzlingly assured and completely rounded performer. The Justice Department should investigate her. She is a mini-conglomerate, an entertainment monopoly' (*Time* on Liza Minnelli, February 28, 1972).

'At thirty-five, Coppola stands alone as a multiple movie talent: a director who can make the blockbuster success and the brilliant, "personal" film' (*Newsweek* on Francis Ford Coppola, November 25, 1974).

'Finally, the film confirms that Robert Altman, the director of *Nashville*, is doing more original, serious – yet entertaining – work than anyone else in American movies' (*Newsweek* on *Nashville* and Robert Altman, June 30, 1975).

'At twenty-nine, salty Lauren Hutton is America's most celebrated model of the moment – and the highest-paid in

history, as well . . . Her extraordinarily expressive face and throwaway sex appeal, captured in the strong, spirited photographs of Richard Avedon, have made Hutton a permanent fixture in the pages of *Vogue* and at least a passing fancy in five movies. And in contrast to the exotic stone-faced beauties of the 1960s, her natural gap-toothed, all-American good looks epitomize the thoroughly capable, canny, contemporary woman of the Seventies' (*Newsweek* on Lauren Hutton, August 26, 1974).

'Margaux is the American Sex Dream incarnate, a prairie Valkyrie, six feet tall and one hundred thirty-eight pounds . . . Effortlessly, Margaux stands out in a gallery of fresh young faces, newcomers who are making their names in modeling, movies, ballet, and in the exacting art of simply living well. They add up to an exhilarating crop of new beauties who light up the landscape in the U.S. and abroad' (*Time* on Margaux Hemingway and the New Beauties, June 16, 1975).

RULE THREE

Find people who know the subject personally and whose careers are bound up with the subject's. Get these people to comment on the subject's significance.

'Add to all this her beliefs in the trendy cults of mysticism and metaphysics and she becomes thoroughly modern Marisa, aptly crowned by the *International Herald Tribune's* society chronicler Hebe Dorsey as "the girl who has everything plus"' (*Newsweek* on Marisa Berenson, August 27, 1973).

"This event is the biggest thing of its kind in the history of show business," modestly declared David Geffen, the

thirty-year-old human dynamo, "Record Executive of the Year" chairman of the board of Elektra/Asylum Records, who just pulled off one of the great coups in the music business – signing Dylan away from Columbia Records' (*Newsweek* on Bob Dylan's concert tour, January 14, 1974).

'This is Roy Halston Frowick . . . known simply as Halston – the premier fashion designer of all America. . . . Halston's creative strength derives from personally dressing the most famous and fashionable women in the world, and while his name is not yet a household word, his impact on fashion trend setters is considerable. "Halston is the hottest American designer of the moment," says James Brady, the former publisher of *Women's Wear Daily* and now publisher of *Harper's Bazaar*. Fashion consultant Eleanor Lambert goes even further. "Along with Yves St. Laurent," says Miss Lambert, "Halston is the most influential designer – not only in America, but in the world"' (*Newsweek* on Halston, August 21, 1972).

RULE FOUR

Try, insofar as it is possible, to imitate the style of press releases.

'On the one hand she is very American, with deep roots in the South and an almost apple-pie adolescence (from cheerleader to campus queen). There is about her a touching innocence, openness, expansiveness, and vulnerability. But at the same time she is no bright-eyed square. She breathes sophistication, elegance, grace, passion, experience. Dunaway has become more than a star – she is a style and a symbol' (*Newsweek* on Faye Dunaway, March 4, 1968).

'She is the rural neophyte waiting in a subway, a free spirit

drinking Greek wine in the moonlight, an organic Earth Mother dispensing fresh bread and herb tea, and the reticent feminist who by trial and error has charted the male as well as the female ego' (*Time* on Joni Mitchell, December 16, 1974).

'There are many things gorgeous about Robert Redford. The shell, to begin with, is resplendent. The head is classically shaped, the features chiseled to an all-American handsomeness just rugged enough to avoid prettiness, the complexion weather-burnished to a reddish-gold, the body athletically muscled, the aura best described by one female fan who says: "He gives you the feeling that even his sweat would smell good"' (*Newsweek* on Robert Redford, February 4, 1974).

RULE FIVE

Use statistics wherever possible. Better yet,
use statistics so mind boggling that no reader will
bother to do simple arithmetic to determine their
impossibility.

One example will suffice here:

'[There are] one hundred million dogs and cats in the U.S. . . . Each day across the nation, dogs deposit an estimated four million tons of feces' (*Time* on the American Pet, December 23, 1974).

RULE SIX

Study the examples.

Read more newsmagazine cover stories.

Learn to use adjectives like 'brilliant,' 'gorgeous,' 'ori-

ginal,' 'serious,' and 'dazzling' with devil-may-care abandon.

Learn to use clichés with devil-may-care abandon.

Master this technique and you too will be able to get a job writing back-of-the-book cover stories at a newsmagazine. You too will be able to take a subject, any subject, and hype it to the point where it bears no resemblance to reality. Whoever you write about will never be able to live up to what you write about him, but never mind. The important thing is that people will talk about YOUR STORY. They will talk about it for years. They will say how strange it was that the career of whoever *you wrote* about seemed somehow to slip after the cover *you wrote* appeared. They will allude ominously to the Newsmagazine Cover Curse. But you will know better.

So begin now, before it's too late. If it doesn't work out, you can always go work at a fan magazine.

—October 1975

The Palm Beach Social Pictorial

I am sitting here thinking a mundane thought, which is that one picture is worth a thousand words. The reason I am sitting here thinking this is that I am looking at one picture, a picture of someone named Mignon Roscher Gardner on the cover of the *Palm Beach Social Pictorial*, and I cannot think how to describe it to you, how to convey the feeling I get from looking at this picture and in fact every other full-color picture that has ever appeared on the cover of this publication.

The *Palm Beach Social Pictorial* appears weekly throughout the winter season in Palm Beach and I get it in the mail because a friend of mine named Liz Smith writes a column in it and has it sent to me. There are several dozen of us on Liz Smith's list, and I think it is safe to say that we all believe that the *Palm Beach Social Pictorial* is the most wonderful publication in America. Beyond that, each of us is very nearly obsessed with the people in it. My particular obsession is Mignon Roscher Gardner, but from time to time I am unfaithful to her, and I get involved instead with the life of Anky Von Boythan Revson Johnson, who seems to live in a turban, or Mrs. Woolworth Donahue, who apparently never goes anywhere without her two Great Danes nuzzling her lap. One friend of mine is so taken with Helene (Mrs. Roy) Tuchbreiter and her goo-goo-googly eyes that he once made an entire collage of pictures of her face.

Mignon Roscher Gardner, who happens to be a painter of indeterminate age and platinum-blond hair, has appeared on the cover of the *Pictorial* twice in the last year, both times decked in ostrich feathers. Anyone who appears on the cover of the *Pictorial* pays a nominal sum to do so; Mrs. Gardner's appearances usually coincide with an opening of her paintings in Palm Beach, although the last one merely coincided with the completion of her portrait of Dr. Josephine E. Raeppel, librarian emeritus of Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. Most of the painters whose work appears on the cover of the *Pictorial* are referred to as 'famed, international' painters, but Mrs. Gardner is a local, and the furthest the *Pictorial* will go in the famed-international department is to call her prominent. 'Prominent artist-aviatrix,' for example – that's what they called her last February, when she appeared

on the cover in her hair and turquoise ostrich feathers along with a painting from a new series she called 'The Cosmobreds.' The painting was of a naked young man on a flying black horse, and according to the *Pictorial*, it was a departure from her usual work in animals and sailboats and portraits because 'Mignon wanted to combine her love for horses and for flying.' In the back of the painting of the Cosmobred and Mrs. Gardner herself are some curtains, and if you ask me, they're the highlight of the photograph. They are plain white curtains, but the valances are covered with chintz daisies, and the curtains are trimmed, but heavily trimmed, with yellow and green pompons, the kind drum majorettes trim their skirts and boots with.

Inside the *Palm Beach Social Pictorial* are advertisements ('Dress up your diamond bracelet'), columns, and pictures. The pictures show the people of Palm Beach eating lunch, wearing diamonds in the daytime, eating dinner, attending charity functions, and wearing party clothes. Most of the people are old, except that some of the women have young husbands. It is apparently all right to have a young husband if you are an old woman in Palm Beach, but not vice versa; in fact, the vice versa is one of the few things the columnists in the *Social Pictorial* get really upset about. Here, for instance, is columnist Doris Lilly writing about the guests at a recent party she attended: 'Bill Carter (now U.N. ambassador to U.N.I.C.E.F.) proved he really does love children by bringing his latest airline hostess.' And here from another columnist, Maria Durell Stone, is another guest list: 'Then there were the Enrique Rousseaus, she's Lilly Pulitzer, and even Lilly's ex, Peter, was there with, well, as someone said, "I don't think it's his daughter but she just might be."' Every so often, the *Pictorial* prints pictures of people they describe as

members of Palm Beach's Younger Set; they all look to be in their mid-forties.

There are two types of columnists who write for the *Pictorial* – locals, and correspondents from elsewhere. There are two advantages to being a correspondent from elsewhere: you don't have to spend the winter in Palm Beach, and you get a lofty title on the masthead. Wally Cedar, who writes from Beverly Hills and Acapulco, is the *Pictorial's* International Editor, and Liz Smith, who writes from New York, is the National Editor. With one exception – and I'll get to her in a minute: she's Maria Durell Stone – the local columnists in the *Pictorial* have tended to be relentlessly cheerful women whose only quibbles about life in Palm Beach have to do with things like the inefficiency of the streetlights on Worth Avenue. Cicely Dawson, who owns the *Pictorial* along with her husband, Ed, whom she always refers to as 'our better half,' writes a goings-on-about-town column in which she manages to summon unending enthusiasm and exclamation points for boutiques, galleries, parties, and new savings banks in town. 'Congratulations to Nan and James Egan of the James Beauty Salon on their recent twenty-fifth anniversary,' Dawson once wrote. 'No client would guess from the cheerful attitude of this wonderful couple what hardship they have had these past few months. After an illness-free life, James was diagnosed as having chronic kidney failure last December. Oh that Palm Beach County had an Artificial Kidney Center! . . . because that's what James needs.'

In all fairness, Mrs. Dawson is almost a grouch in comparison to Leone 'Call Me the Pollyanna of Palm Beach' King, who until her retirement in 1973 could not find enough good things to say about the place. Where else, Mrs. King once asked in a long series of rhetorical questions,

‘could you find families offering living quarters to people of low incomes, without at least making some sort of charge? . . . Where could you find friends with splendid flower gardens leaving a message with their gardeners to send certain people bouquets during the winter while they are off on a trip around the world? Where could you find big bags of fruit from a Palm Beach orange grove on your doorstep at regular intervals? . . . Don’t let fabulously rich people throw you. They are just the same as anyone else except they can do what they jolly well please when they jolly well please. They have likes and dislikes, aches and pains, problems. They are just people.’

Maria Durell Stone has left the *Palm Beach Social Pictorial* – she has been stolen away by the West Palm Beach daily paper – but her two years on the weekly coincided, and not coincidentally either, with what I think of as the *Pictorial*’s Golden Era, so I cannot leave her out of this. Mrs. Stone is a Latin-looking lady with a tremendous amount of jet-black hair who is divorced from architect Edward Durell Stone and has taken not one but two of his names along with her. She began writing for the *Pictorial* three years ago, and no one writing in any of the Palm Beach publications comes near her gift for telling it like it is. ‘I’ve done nothing but praise the Poinciana Club since it opened,’ she wrote last year, ‘but being a critic means that every now and then one must speak the truth and I am sorry to say it, but Bavarian Night there was a disaster.’

Mrs. Stone’s main problem in life – and the theme of her column too – had to do with being a single woman in a place where there are few eligible men. There are a lot of us with this problem, God knows, but she managed to be more in touch with it than anyone I know. Not a column passed