TINA BROWN INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

TINA BROWN
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Tina Brown

Editor, *Vanity Fair*

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

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TINA BROWN:

Well, Ben Bradlee was a friend of my husband's for many years before I actually met him. And, of course, I was in—instantly seduced by this massive alpha charisma. I mean he defined the alpha man. He really did. And it was just this sunshine presence that was so utterly seductive in every way. So, of course, like every single woman who ever met Ben, I fell hopelessly in love with him.

Ben Bradlee's charisma

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TINA BROWN:

I think what Ben had was this huge vitality, this irreverence, this sense of loving life, and a kind of man-about-town sophistication, too, which was very movie star and very unlike anybody else, really, in newspapers. You know, yhe man brought— you felt that he'd lived the kind of life that—you know—only happens in the—kind of the Hemingway era, you know. Paris and journalism at its most carousing and swaggering and big scoops and big stories and women and fun. And it was all fun. And I think the fun that Ben brought to the job was one of the things that people just loved him, it—was—to be around him—was serious fun. You know, you were doing important things. But this man had such a sense of humor, such a kind of wonderful—you know—insouciance that it was really great to be around him. And it made people—you know, it lifted you up. It made you feel buoyant.

What made Ben Bradlee such a successful editor

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TINA BROWN:

I would not describe him as an intellectual—Ben, no. He—he really—he had this great—you know, viscera, this great gut, this great—sense and nose, you know, for—a great story. But he also had something else, which is knowing who should write the story, too, which is a very, very important thing an editor needs to do is to cast that talent for the story involved. And that's a big thing to be able to do. You need to say, "No, put so-and-so on it and not

him—or her," and know instinctively that's the right match, that this guy or this woman has got what it takes to bring that story out that you have in mind. And then, he wouldn't interfere. He—and actually, once he'd done the big things, say the story was what he wanted to do, pursue it—cast it. And then, he would, like, leave it to the people concerned and come back in when it needed to be just tilted this way.

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TINA BROWN:

I think a journalist or a great editor has to have just incredible sense, a curiosity, you know, a real curiosity that's piqued by that story that's buried in there, in the news, you know, that you say, "Wait a minute. Why did this happen?" To have a genuine instinct for an unanswered question is a very important thing for an editor. And I really think that Ben had that. He listened. He was—enormously—you know, had social—great social skills. So, he would be talking. And he would listen. But he would get what the angle was, what the new angle was. And, you know, he also had a great sense of, you know, where to get the next follow up, where to get the information. Because he was a man who moved in the corridors of power. And he could-- you know, he would fling the tips out to his reporters. And, you know, again, many editors are kind of reclusive. They're hermetic. But not Ben Bradlee, you know. He was very much a man of the world. He was in the corridors of power, but he wasn't seduced by them. He always was the irreverent—you know, the iconoclastic one who could move in those corridors, who was absolutely a man about town. But at the same time he never lost the sense of what he was doing there, was getting the stories. What he was doing was bringing back—you know, the gold for the newsroom. And he did a lot of that.

The real Ben Bradlee

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TINA BROWN:

Ben was very much a man of taste and refinement. And sometimes he would hide that in a sort of—his profane, you know, sort of swaggering stance. But actually, understand that he had enormous taste-- you know—a real sense of a sentence—a tremendous interest in—and appreciation of the refined moment in a piece that was just—made it special, or the-- or the phrase that the writer had—nurtured that—you know, that they knew were really—was the best thing about the piece, but others of less discernment might not have seen. And it really sort of ran in his blood. Because his great-- uncle, of course, was—Frank Crowninshield, who was the founder of *Vanity Fair*, the great *Vanity Fair* in the '20s. Ben was Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee. And—Ben was, you know, tremendously helpful to me when I took over *Vanity Fair*. I mean, he sat me down and talked to me about Frank Crowninshield, what made him great, his incredible sort of mix of—the high-low mix of *Vanity Fair,* which was the-- the mischief combined with—the depth, you know, the acerbic-- writing combined with the seduction of the photographs and how, you know, the—the whole voice of the magazine was so important. Ben really understood about voice, which, of course, is something he brought to the Style section. So, this was wonderful when I came to New York.

Ben Bradlee's own unique style

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TINA BROWN:

Ben's invention of the style section was a greater legacy for him, I think, as– as Watergate, which he's, of course, much more famous for. But with Style—you know, he took this very sort of timid thing, which was called—*For and About Women*, I think, at the time. And—he really broke out the notion of a kind of women's pages and that kind of timid, like, you know, spinstery sound and turned it into this great jazz band of a section, you know, which was—about doing your best—most flamboyant work. It was about bringing high-low mix. It was about features done with a lot of literary style. It was about combining—a sense of the society with a sense of politics with a sense of literature and being able to mix them all together in this great sort of choreography that was the Style section. And in that section, you know, he—he brought all these terrific writers who created their own sort of ethos of—literary journalism.

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TINA BROWN:

I mean, people like Remnick were writing about, you know, Gorbachev's first girlfriend, you—you know. It was Tom Shales doing TV. And there were people like Nicholas von Hoffman doing incredible work. And, of course, Sally Quinn, who sort of invented the strip-the-bark-off profile where she brought her wonderful social eye to the world of politics and power. So—you know, the Style section was—was then emulated by every newspaper in America. I mean, he totally revolutionized—the way American newspapers covered features, in a sense. And I think that that legacy sort of remains. I mean, frankly—nothing is as lively right now as his—as Ben Bradlee's Style section, which became the must-read of the newspaper. It was the kind of beating

heart of, you know, the must-read factor of *The Washington Post* under Bradlee.

The bond between Ben Bradlee and JFK

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TINA BROWN:

Undoubtedly, they were sort of brothers in style, you know, brothers in ethos—brothers in man-about-town-ness, and also brothers, I think, in-- in the Democratic ideals, you know. I think they—he really felt that Kennedy was—if he'd been in politics, he woulda been Kennedy. The interesting thing about Ben was that he was so much more charismatic than any movie star, you know, that played him. He was more charismatic—than—Jason Robards. And I think a bit of him probably also felt a little competitive, in some ways, with JFK, you know. That-- this is—this was one of the things that sort of gave Ben his edge, which is that he himself clearly could've been presidential material had he decided to go into politics. I think he would've always thought journalism was a lot more fun. But there was probably a little piece of him that looked at JFK at the time and thought, "That coulda been me."

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TINA BROWN:

I think everyone around JFK was seduced by his style, the style of Jackie and JFK. I mean, here were two people that were young. They were elegant. They were cultured. They were—sexy and alpha in every way. And so was the Washington they created. I mean, I think the glamor of Kennedy was that he always picked the best minds who also had a sense of sophistication and worldliness and—an ability to live a life that was also interesting and wasn't

some kind of—you know [unclear] existence, but was actually people who were in the arena. And all of that came to Washington at the same time and created a real moment, socially, that was probably more exciting than we've ever seen before or since.

His Ben-ness

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TINA BROWN:

I think Ben often played Ben Bradlee. And I think the most interesting way that he deployed his Ben-ness was in his relationship with Katharine Graham. Because that was a kind of a chemistry that he kept in very careful calibration. It could've blown up into something unmanageable. Because Ben was so wildly attractive. I am sure that Kay Graham must have been really in, you know—at heart, in love with Ben. But he would've never let that get to a point where it was somehow an issue. And for him, he knew that to keep that relationship in the equilibrium of her obvious—you know—attraction to him and her—her sense that he's irresistible with also a sense of his respect for her as the owner of *The Washington Post*, which could not go awry. And I know that there was a moment when Ben fell in love with Sally. There was very tricky passage in the relationship with Katharine Graham. And frankly—I think the tacitness of that was that she was probably jealous, you know. I mean—it was one thing for Ben to be a married man with whom she had that calibration, Kay; and another thing when he left his wife—for a younger woman who he clearly was absolutely crazy about. That was threatening to Kay. So, I think that was a difficult passage that both of them had to play with a great deal of care.

Ben Bradlee's relationship with Kay Graham

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TINA BROWN:

I think the critical relationship of anyone who's an editor is with the proprietor of—of the paper, the magazine. Because if this goes awry, it just can't work. The great successful publications have always been where the editor and the owner or the proprietor have—have been in sync in such a way that there was mutual respect, a sense that the editor really was in charge of the daily, you know, vitality of the—of the news entity. But the editor had enough care and enough shrewdness, frankly, to be able to kind of manage up and to be shrewd about at what point to flout that—responsibility and to not get too big-headed about thinking that, "Okay, I am in charge. But at times, I have to make it clear that I have said no, I'm an employee." And Ben was very, very smart about the way he played Kay Graham.

The personal attacks on Ben Bradlee during Watergate

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TINA BROWN:

I think being attacked by power is something that Ben completely had the assurance to deal with. I mean, I think at times it must have been very difficult for him. But—also, I think he never had any doubt this is what he should be doing, that this is what he was for, that this—his toughness, this is--you know, his whole swagger had been kind of made for this moment to have it tested. I mean, was he really—a person of steel? Or was he somebody who was playing one? But I think that the—Kay Graham's backing was

enormously important to him. He knew that he had—that Kay Graham had his back. And knowing that gave him the fortitude—to tough it out. I mean, she was the critical—you know, figure behind him. Because had she not, it would've all been over. Because if they could've gone over his head to Kay, they would've done. And they tried. But—you know, she wasn't having any of it. And that is where Kay's absolute loyalty to Ben and, frankly, her—love of Ben, I think, was such an enormously important factor in the success of that whole Watergate period.

Similarities between Nixon and Trump

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TINA BROWN:

It's too early for us to say whether Nixon and Trump, you know, are soul brothers. I actually think Trump is a far cruder kind of a strongman. I think Trump is gonna be seen to have more in common—with—Erdoğan in Turkey, you know, frankly—than, really, with Richard Nixon. Who was a far more complicated and, really, intellectually—formidable opponent than Trump was—with dark flaws that were then playing out on the national stage. Trump, though, has absolutely no—regard for the truth, you know, and I think has far less control of his own impulses than Richard Nixon did.

Janet Cooke and the story that never happened

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TINA BROWN:

Well, I think every editor dreads having a Janet Cooke story. I mean, most editors have some horrific passage they go through where something

happened that they just wished to God that they had been more vigilant. I definitely think that the Janet Cooke—thing happened because, you know, *The Post* had been riding the waves of success. There was a heuristic—feeling dawning there in which they'd had so much acclaim, so much attention, so much—applause that inevitably makes you a little cocky. So, in a sense, Janet Cooke was something of an accident waiting to happen, which, you know, is not a bad thing to sort of be a little humble for—you know, and remember that everything is about building on, you know, the—rigor of your reporting. Otherwise, you can be caught as people have been so many times since.

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TINA BROWN:

I mean, Janet Cooke was—was a horrible passage for Ben because it unleashed all the schadenfreude out there. I mean, of course everybody was so jealous of *The Washington Post* and of its glamorous editor and its stylish style writers and its huge scoop with Woodward and Bernstein and the movie that was made of them with the two big movie stars. I mean, there was a real sense of, like, "We wanna bring them down." And, of course—he was trashed. I mean, it reminded Ben—strongly. 'Cause you had a sense, Ben, always of the knives being out. He was—he was aware of it, you know. And he knew that jealousy was a dangerous thing. He was a little—paranoid in some ways, at times, I think, deep down about—certainly Sally has been, about—what was awaiting out there if you stumbled. And—although he had such insouciance and he was so above it, nonetheless, he knew that the forces of destruction were there. And I think he never really forgot that. He certainly didn't ever forget it after Janet Cooke.

Ben Bradlee's philosophy on life and work

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TINA BROWN:

Ben never looked back. It was one of the most appealing things about him, in a sense. He was a creature of the moment—of our times. He didn't believe in looking back. He didn't gloat on his laurels. He was the least—sort of pretentious—you know—standing on his own reputation. He was always moving forward. You know, he—he would say, you know, "Head up, ass down, move forward." That was one of his things he loved to say when—you know, he said, "If things get tough, that's what you need to do." And that's what he did, absolutely, every single day. But, you know, he—his life was greatly changed when—he fell in love with Sally and then had with Quinn a son who, you know, caused—him to really—I think change a great deal, you know. I think that Ben was always a man with a great heart—and was always a person of great personal kindness and—and—largesse towards people. But I think that his love of Quinn was a very transforming thing and a very bonding thing with Sally. And that probably gave him the most cause for, really—you know, more—more introspection and reflection. Because, you know, it—it was a very painful thing sometimes to have to—to, you know, try to figure out ways to make this, you know, beautiful boy they had—as happy as they wanted to make him. Because, you know, you had challenges.

Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn

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TINA BROWN:

Well, when Sally and Ben became a couple, you know, you had the combination of this amazing social energy as well as professional—stardust. So, their drawing room, you know, Sally's a very talented hostess. And she understands how to put together and organize. I mean, she's a general's daughter. And to be socially effective, you need to—you need to be buttoned up, you know. You need to know how to get that done, how to run a dinner party, how to seat a dinner party, how to preside. So, the interesting thing about Sally was that although she was often—as a star reporter, the person who would be, you know, very irreverent about the grand dames of Washington. Actually, she really was a latent grand dame herself. In the sense that – Sally knows how to run—a dinner party. She knows how to be herself, you know, a chatelaine.

Reporting on the President and other officials

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TINA BROWN:

I don't believe for a minute that Ben didn't know that—JFK was a philanderer. But I think he belongs to that generation of gentleman's code, which is that you don't inform on your friends'—peccadilloes. So, I—I certainly don't believe for one moment that he didn't know. 'Cause I think everybody who was a friend of Ben's—of JFK knew. I think when the Vietnam War was getting people so incredibly upset that the link between lying and public officials became such an issue in American life that the whole idea of scrutiny to the Nth degree began to take over as the ethos of journalism. And that included your private life. And the notion that character was now an issue that was in the public domain to be explored, and that issues of character,

including issues such as infidelity of promises you've made to your wife, vows that you now are breaking, then became up for grabs.

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TINA BROWN:

At *Vanity Fair*, at the time, we did a major story on Gary Hart—when-- with Gail Sheehy, who—did a series of political profiles then, which actually examined the private lives of all of the candidates at the time and took the completely personal approach to—the reporting of power and were very successful. I mean, they felt like sort of breakthrough big magazine pieces, which were dealing with politics in different kinds of ways. And I think the Style section was very much doing that kind of coverage.

Ben Bradlee was careful with reputations

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TINA BROWN:

Even though Bradlee was—loved kind of—swaggering, reckless journalism in a sense, he also was very protective and careful when it came to—the average citizen being written about. And although he was willing to be wildly iconoclastic about public figures, about the big shots, about, you know—the people who really could command—the world stage. If the reporters were writing about a citizen, he would say, "Remind me why we're destroying this reputation. You know, is this necessary? Are you sure?" And I think that's a critical difference between—this kind of—bravura and what has really become a sort of reckless tearing of reputations to pieces. He was not reckless about tearing—reputations to pieces.

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TINA BROWN:

I think Ben would have been appalled by the current media environment. Because it was like a travesty of everything he believed in. I mean, he was about rigor. He was about pursuing the big story. He was about-- getting it right. And he was about judgment and taking care, and only by taking care could you do the big stories and the big shots. So, he—I think he would have been extremely disturbed by the fake news phenomenon, by the casual and lazy—pursuit of—crowd think, which is where we're living now. I really regret that there is no Ben Bradlee to be standing up for it.

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