

THIS MEDIA LIFE

**Mr. Shawn's Lost Tribe**

The language and rituals and customs of the old 'New Yorker' are fast being forgotten. Renata Adler, with her first book in fifteen years, is the Last of the Mohicans.

By Michael Wolff

There is a point in Renata Adler's new book, *Gone: The Last Days of The New Yorker*, where she talks about being in possession—"because the world is in some ways so small and life is so complicated"—of the wedding ring given by Edmund Wilson to Mary McCarthy (inscribed MM EW). She also tells of going to California to become engaged, in fact leaving *The New Yorker* with William Shawn's blessing—"You only become engaged once in your life." What she does not say is that it was Wilson's and McCarthy's son to whom she was engaged.

Now, it is quite possible that she told me this off the record—although I do not think so. But she goes on and off the record in mid-sentence or mid-thought so often that it is awfully difficult to keep a precise accounting of what is being said in what context, on the record or off the record, friend to friend (although we have just become friends), or in some further more difficult category that seems subject to my own judgment and discretion. Indeed, a week or so after we first meet, she is asking my advice about *The New York Times Magazine*, which wants to do a profile of her. The problem is . . . and she begins to outline aspects of her life that she does not want the *Times* to discuss, until I remember my own job.

In a sense, I think, she is not so much hiding as she is editing—you can see this approach in her own work, weird crypticness versus great lucidity; what is held back versus what is starkly exposed. It is *New Yorker* writing. Her shyness and reclusiveness and evident media discomfort is from the *New Yorker* stylebook, too (she writes of "an aversion to personal publicity for editors and writers" at *The New Yorker*). It is great *New Yorker* affect—a particular Mr. Shawn affect—shunning the finality and vulgarity of public utterances while you tell all on the telephone or at the dinner table. And, of course, there are also the myriad other complexities and doubts and contradictions and fears and second thoughts that go with being a *New Yorker* writer of the old school that I find her drawing me, not unpleasurably, into.

When I came to New York in the early seventies, Adler was the young writer everybody talked about. She was *The New Yorker's* "It" girl. A sort of brainy Candace Bushnell, a bohemian Mia Farrow-ish Platonic ideal. Richard Avedon photographed her. She was a wildly sought-after dinner-party guest.

She'd been hired at *The New Yorker* right out of school and was said to be Mr. Shawn's favorite (indeed, to do much at *The New Yorker* as a woman, you needed to be Mr. Shawn's favorite). She reported from Vietnam, from Selma, from the Middle East. Still in her twenties, she became the film critic for the *New York Times*, replacing the *ancien régime* critic Bosley Crowther, just at the moment when film became the most serious of intellectual, artistic, and political pursuits. (A Hollywood studio took a newspaper ad denouncing her cutting reviews; Strom Thurmond attacked her on the Senate floor for her review of John Wayne's *The Green Berets*). Then, fourteen months later, she quit. Quitting the *Times* made her seem even more writerly, intellectual, fierce. She went back to *The New Yorker* (she had never quite left—a common condition among *New Yorker* writers trying to strike out on their own; Mr. Shawn held your office for you).

Mr. Shawn sent her to report on the civil war in Biafra. Then she went to Washington. The House Watergate committee hired her, more or less secretly, to write committee chairman Peter Rodino's words—to keep Rodino, a famous idiot, from looking

like an idiot (her role was kept secret from Rodino himself). She wrote her first novel, *Speedboat*, which, arguably, invented the genre of urban-chic minimalist angst. Then she up and went to Yale Law School, in restless pursuit of . . . something. There was another novel, *Pitch Dark*, an autobiographical tale—about a young woman running from her relationship with a married man—that came tantalizingly close (but no cigar) to revealing the details of her life among the powerful and influential, which landed her on the cover of this magazine; then came her book *Reckless Disregard*, about the big twin libel lawsuits of the early eighties, Westmoreland suing CBS, Sharon suing *Time*; and then, practically speaking, nothing.

In the late eighties, living in Connecticut, she became a single mother adopting a baby, but wrote nothing—or published almost nothing. It was a very *New Yorker* way of writing (or not writing), to burn with the greatest intensity and then to stop. “The ethic of silence,” Adler calls it. “There began to be the feeling,” she says, “that it was vulgar, perhaps morally wrong to write.” You let the months between pieces run into years. Or you wrote, and Mr. Shawn bought your work and just didn’t publish it; or you wrote, and Mr. Shawn gently suggested that you might think it through a little more. Indeed, you stopped publishing in part because Mr. Shawn was so ambivalent about so many things—including publishing—and you didn’t want to make life more difficult for him. (Adler recounts a conversation with J. D. Salinger, who attributed his reluctance to publish to a reluctance to submit writing about sex to Mr. Shawn, who would have found it distasteful. “A doctrinal circle of pure inhibition seemed to have closed,” writes Adler.)

Still, of course, even not publishing you were a *New Yorker* writer, perhaps even more so. You were a member of the most elite club of writers in America. At your desk at *The New Yorker’s* offices on West 43rd Street, you occupied the real estate that every writer wanted to occupy (weird real estate at that; at every point where writers and editors might congregate, Adler describes, Mr. Shawn would erect more offices, so staff members could only pass single-file). Every other writer in America had to sell out in some way, but not *New Yorker* writers, who were paid, closeted, protected, and encouraged to think pure *New Yorker*-ish thoughts. You just had no voice (even if you did publish, in all but the rarest cases, *New Yorker* writers tended to end up having *New Yorker*-writer voices).

And then, suddenly, when the Newhouse family bought the magazine from the Fleischmann family, you had not only no voice but no *New Yorker*. Or not *THE New Yorker*, Mr. Shawn’s *New Yorker*.

Adler’s book, breaking her fifteen-year silence, follows Lillian Ross’s memoir, *Here but Not Here*, a gauzy account of her *New Yorker* career and her 40 years as Mr. Shawn’s shadow wife, and Ved Mehta’s equally romantic account of his 28 years of working with Mr. Shawn, his editor-mentor-father figure. Ben Yagoda’s *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, a history of the magazine based on its archives, and John Seabrook’s *Nobrow*, a wicked deconstruction of the Tina Brown era, appear next month, in time for the magazine’s seventy-fifth anniversary.

It is hard to write a book about your own office, which all of these books, except for Yagoda’s (and he wishes it had been his office), are—or hard to write a book about your own office and have other people care. Over the years, though, readers seem to have developed a vicarious relationship with *The New Yorker* not only as a magazine and cultural force but as a specific place—an interesting, eccentric, and charmed way of life. All of these books, then, are, wittingly or unwittingly, revisionist accounts. Adler says of the Ross and Mehta memoirs that even though they both set out to venerate Mr. Shawn, they end up making him look like a naïf and a fool; likewise, that is something of the effect of her book, too—in the land of the passive, the most passive is king. Even the Yagoda book, based as it is on archives of the magazine that were jettisoned (and,

Adler claims, grievously mishandled and, in many aspects, destroyed) when the magazine moved under the Robert Gottlieb regime into new offices, suggests a lost world. Finally, the Seabrook account makes it clear that *The New Yorker* under Brown became another type of enterprise from the one that so many people for so long had dreamed of being a part of.

Perhaps the biggest revision, though, judging from the reception of the Ross and Mehta memoirs, is the evidence that very few people—save for other *New Yorker* alums fighting for the last word, and the media community, which has smelled blood in the water—are very interested anymore in life at *The New Yorker*, old or new.

When I checked just before Christmas, a little more than a year after the publication of Ross's heavily publicized book, Amazon listed it as out of stock and declined to take orders. (It currently lists it on back order without a reprint date.) The book's editor, Kate Medina, at Random House, seemed pointedly not to return calls (and I made many) about the book. The book's disappearance seemed so extreme that I thought perhaps it had fallen victim to the ongoing internecine wars over the memory of *The New Yorker*.

"Has there been a lawsuit?" I asked a Random House publicity person.

"No, the book just did poorly."

"But I can't even order it."

"We don't have any available. We took a lot of returns."

"Well, where are the returns?"

"Pulped."

"Pulped?"

"Gone. Pulped. Period."

It seemed to give him pleasure to say *pulped*.

It is not hard to see why Ross's book, or any of these books, might not find a wide audience. In *Nobrow*, Seabrook argues that *The New Yorker's* identity got lost in the blurring of highbrow and lowbrow culture (i.e., pop culture subsumed those distinctions, hence *The New Yorker's* lost its claim as the arbiter of middle-high culture, is roughly his argument). But there is, really, a much broader and more visceral generational disconnect. *The New Yorker* has aged quickly and badly. Reminiscences of the old *New Yorker* seem not only quaint but vaguely ridiculous or even farcical—from Mr. Shawn's comically obtuse marital arrangements (real or imagined) to Mr. Shawn's dining several nights a week at La Caravelle to Mr. Shawn's Swaine Adeney Brigg umbrellas to Mr. Shawn's institutionalized daughter who can't be mentioned to money matters that can't be discussed to upsetting words that can't be used to the relentless gentility of life lived exclusively on the East Side. It is not only the magazine but that world that is *gone*.

I mean, yikes.

Mr. Shawn—finally, you want to scream at this *Mr. Shawn* business. Why can't they give it up? He is—and I'm picking this up from books that praise him—phobic, fetishistic, passive, depressed, manipulative, controlling. And spooky. Didn't anyone notice? Or is this another time-warp thing—before we had emotional insight? Anyway, judging by these books, it seems clear: At the office, Shawn was a weak father of weak children. Adler rather chillingly points out that, in fact, the writers who did well, who got published, who held their own in *The New Yorker's* no-exit editing process, were not the good children but the un-*New Yorker*-like ones who stood up for themselves (writers with a "forceful disposition," she calls them).

It is an eerie thing about Adler's book that she begins it as a defense of Shawn, and then you watch as that defense dissolves. The portrait is of a man who compelled many people's affection, trust, and deep admiration, but who, on the facts, was a weirdo who may have systematically undermined the people he most supported. And finally, in Adler's telling, there is the inescapable conclusion that *The New Yorker* was sold—lost—precisely because Shawn was too innocent or precious or self-destructive or, well, gone, to grasp the most fundamental notions about who owns what.

And yet what I am drawn to about Adler is a mystique that is quite clearly *New Yorker* mystique. I can't decide if she is a victim of *The New Yorker* or the kind of writer only made possible by *The New Yorker*. Not unself-consciously, I start to think of meeting Adler—lunch on the East Side, frequent phone calls, very small but very interesting revelations, the girlish braid down her back—as a *New Yorker* story. The particularly *New Yorker*-ish part of the story is that she and all the others who were part of *The New Yorker's* accomplishments and dysfunctions are so obviously homeless now.

"I never would have been able to work without *The New Yorker*," Adler says, not to defend it but to describe a level of dependency.

I say, reasonably, "That seems untrue. Look at everything else you've done—the *Times*, the Watergate committee, novels, law school." What's more, she has never seemed to shy away from stepping into large controversies (she famously demolished her colleague Pauline Kael in an essay in *The New York Review of Books*; she makes a frontal attack on *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik in *Gone*).

Obviously, though, she doesn't believe in her worldly skills. She has no commercial confidence.

But again, I am thinking of this as simple skill transference—you take your talents to another buyer—which clearly misses the point about *The New Yorker*. It did not exist in the business world, or did not exist for the people who worked there in any ordinary business context.

Indeed, there is a sense from each of these books that *The New Yorker* had a special business exemption (it was once officially exempted from certain pension rules because of the intercession of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a *New Yorker* writer as well as a United States senator). Each book repeatedly states the fact that *The New Yorker* made money right up until the Newhouses took over as proof of the old *New Yorker's* special qualities rather than as a reflection of the last moment before the market for upscale advertising became increasingly competitive (in other words, the Fleischmanns sold at the top of the market, suckering the Newhouses into a less-than-brilliant deal).

"I've always wondered: How did you people at *The New Yorker* actually make a living?" (It seems, in fact, a little vulgar to bring up the subject—if you had to ask, you'd never have worked at *The New Yorker*.)

Her eyes open wide. "I don't know," she says with sudden intense interest, seeming to look to me for the answer.

"I mean," I press, "there's often months and years between pieces for lots of *New Yorker* writers—what was the economic basis here?"

"I sometimes have thought," she considers, "that Mr. Shawn must have paid people differently, depending on whether they needed it or not. Do you think that's possible? There were writers, of course, who had private incomes."

Private incomes—sheesh!

"Do you have a private income?"

"A very small one."

"Something else I'm dying to ask: How is it that you know so many people? Powerful, connected, rich, influential people?" From the playwright S. N. Behrman, who introduced her to Mr. Shawn, to Edmund Wilson, who was her teacher (and whose son, Reuel Kimball Wilson, she was engaged to) to John Doar, who brought her to Washington, to Arthur Gelb, who brought her to the *Times*, to Brooke Astor and Jackie Onassis to Richard Avedon constantly taking her picture to other names she asks me not to mention, she seems to have known everyone (who was anyone). And yet, she is the least likely social climber you might imagine (and I know something about social climbers).

I am trying to conjure a world in which being a good writer makes you a must-have dinner guest. I am trying to rationalize too the odd or ironic way in which *The New Yorker*, once comfortable with the rich and powerful (*New Yorker* people were

automatically let into that class), became, in its ensuing incarnation, awestruck by the rich and powerful—of course, a different sort of rich and powerful.

“That is a good question. I would have to think about it. Can we put it aside and come back to it?”

If *The New Yorker* is gone, is that good or bad? I finally ask her. What has replaced it, Adler argues, is mostly bad, and what isn't bad is different enough to be another magazine and enterprise altogether. But whether the end itself is good or bad, or perhaps inevitable or natural, is another question.

Which we will take up when she comes to dinner.