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Tina and Disney Elope

By FRANK RICH

A few weeks ago I went with the last surviving habitue of the Algonquin Round Table, the artist Al Hirschfeld, to his old stomping ground in search of the past. The Algonquin Hotel has just been lovingly refurbished, but the past wasn't there. "They make no attempt to recreate the table exactly," said Mr. Hirschfeld, 95, who pointed out the spot in the room where he used to dine with Dorothy Parker, Charles MacArthur and Robert Benchley. Not that the unsentimental Mr. Hirschfeld minded. "The round table was square anyway," he said.

If the Algonquin Round Table isn't coming back, neither are Harold Ross, William Shawn or any other patron saint of the magazine that made the Algonquin its canteen, The New Yorker. But this week, as Tina Brown made her exit from the editor's chair, New York's media world was once again consumed with nostalgia about The New Yorker's history and florid speculation about its future. Will Ms. Brown's successor make Mr. Shawn, often said to be spinning in his grave, spin even faster than he has been since Lillian Ross told all about their extramarital affair? Or might there be a return to the buzz-free days when a New Yorker reader could open the magazine knowing that the babes in a Peter Arno cartoon would peacefully coexist with Hannah Arendt?

Consider this column a nostalgia-and-speculation-free zone about The New Yorker, because the real story of the week isn't where Tina Brown is leaving but where she is going: Disney. Her arrival in the Disney empire – through the auspices of Harvey Weinstein of its Miramax Films division – is yet another coup for a corporation whose vision, invented by Walt Disney and perfected by Michael Eisner, is as consistent as it is relentless and, at times, ruthless.

The roots of Ms. Brown's new venture in a way date back to the old New Yorker. It was Shawn who in 1965 published Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood," the prototype of the novelistic, narrative-driven New Journalism that could be spun off as both book and Hollywood movie. By creating a new company within Disney-Miramax that can handle all possible incarnations of today's heirs to "In Cold Blood" – Ms. Brown's operation will publish a magazine and books, and produce movies and TV – Disney can seamlessly control and own such content from the cradle of editorial inception to the graveyard of syndicated TV reruns. In theory, Disney-Miramax-Brown will cut out a non-Disney middleman like, say, The New Yorker from the process and the profits.

"She will be the guinea pig of synergy," said Peter Kaplan, the editor of The New York Observer, in the most accurate summation of Ms. Brown's new business paradigm. Disney is betting on her ability to attract talented writers – and to keep them happier than the old studios did the New Yorker writers it lured West (like Benchley and Parker).

Succeed or fail, Ms. Brown and even Miramax (whose recent track record includes "Good Will Hunting") are but a small part of a corporation that has in the past few years alone proved it can absorb everything from a once-intractable neighborhood (42d Street) to a network (ABC) as it figures out new synergistic ways to acquire, slice, dice and merchandise content – whether "The Lion King," news or architectural commissions by the likes of Michael Graves. It has every medium, from the virtual world of the Web to the real world of theme parks, at its disposal. Just last month Disney bought a gateway to the Internet, Infoseek, that will soon be

transformed into a one-stop entry for popular sites as various as abcnews.com, ESPN Sportszone and Disney Stores. Just today Disney is opening in Baltimore's Inner Harbor the huge prototype for a national chain of ESPN-themed dining and entertainment complexes.

Disney's implications for our culture – whether that culture be journalism, sports, movies, TV, radio, publishing, Broadway, cyberspace, zoos, museums or urbanology – are far too vast and complex to be categorized simply as "good" or "bad." It's the biggest ongoing cultural story of our time. But in the Tina maelstrom, incredibly enough, all media eyes stayed glued to the fate of a magazine with a circulation of 808,000. While they played guessing games, Disney had found yet another new way to advance its goal of reaching each of the six billion potential customers on earth.