A Conversation with
Penelope Rowlands

Penelope Rowland’s biography of Carmel Snow, *A Dash of Daring: Carmel Snow and Her Life in Fashion, Art, and Letters* was one of the books that was most valuable to the curatorial team that put together *The Women of Harper’s Bazaar, 1936-1958*. In became the heavily Post-it noted Bible for all things *Bazaar*. In a fitting twist, Rowlands used FIT’s copies of *Harper’s Bazaar* that date from Snow’s tenure for her research, just as the curators did. Because Rowlands, a journalist, was working on a project in Paris, she wasn’t able to attend the exhibition. However, she made time to speak on the phone with one of the curators, Nancy MacDonell, also a journalist, to talk about Carmel Snow, the importance of a good editor in chief, and the current state of fashion journalism. The following is an edited, condensed version of their conversation.

**Nancy MacDonell:** Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me.

**Penelope Rowlands:** Oh, you’re welcome. I was thrilled to hear about the show. As you can imagine, I have a bias towards Carmel and I’m always happy to hear her getting some attention.

**NM:** If someone has heard of any of these three women they’ve probably heard of Diana Vreeland. I think Carmel Snow was a more gifted editor, but she didn’t get the recognition that Vreeland got.

**PR:** Well, that’s exactly true, and when I met with Richard Avedon that was one of my questions, and he’s quoted in the book—that Carmel came along before fashion editors were stars. She was famous, of course, in New York and in Paris at the couture, and all of that. But it wasn’t the way Vreeland was. So Vreeland would have overshadowed her—but I think Carmel scared her, too.

**NM:** She could be tough.

**PR:** Carmel kept her in her place. At some point, wasn’t there a meeting at which Diana said, “We’ll make the whole issue pink,” and Carmel said, “Diana, we’ll do four pages”? She was constantly bringing her down to earth. God knows Diana was a genius. But she did need someone to tell her to calm down.

**NM:** I think that’s why *Bazaar* was a more successful magazine than even Vreeland’s *Vogue*. Looking at it as a journalist, I appreciate the *Bazaar* that Carmel Snow put together. Vreeland’s *Vogue* was very flashy, and it certainly had some great things in it, but it didn’t have the continuity that Carmel Snow’s *Bazaar* did.

**PR:** I was thinking recently about when I was a teenager in New York when Vreeland’s *Vogue* was around—you know, the Beatles and Swinging London and Avedon. I was thinking of what an influence Vreeland had on my life because her *Vogue* was aspirational. I wanted to be a glamorous
woman. I was a flat-chested kid and I wanted to live the life she made up. The genius of Bazaar was that it was so sophisticated but Carmel kept it down to earth. She was constantly thinking, I think, of girls like her daughters. What they should be exposed to. It wasn’t as chic and it wasn’t as snobby—

NM: It wasn’t as exclusionary as Vogue was.

PR: Exactly.

NM: What do you think makes a great editor in chief and how did Carmel Snow exemplify that?

PR: Anna Wintour said recently, “I owe it to my staff to be decisive.” Carmel Snow was very quick with decisions. She was very authoritative. Whether she’d made a mistake or not, everybody followed it, and they followed it to the end. She was not afraid to be really pushy and tough. The other thing she did was, she respected people. She knew what people were good at. Her niece Kate White says, “She was a genius at picking other people of genius.” She really knew who could work, and how they could work for the magazine, and how the pieces would go together. She’d be a terror if she had to be but she was also very affectionate. People who worked for her loved her. I remember one editor saying, “You’d do anything for her.” She didn’t care if she put you through hell to get a certain something for a fashion shoot. But it was so professional an operation.

NM: She wasn’t afraid to be disliked.

PR: Oh, no. And she was single-minded. The other thing that really brought the magazine together was she had a fabulous visual sense. Brodovitch was a screaming genius. She recognized that, brought him in, and the look of the magazine was revolutionary. But he also deferred to her on a lot of visual decisions.

NM: One thing that really strikes me about Bazaar is that the text and the photos work together throughout the magazine. It’s really a unified publication. It has flow. It has rhythm. Vogue looks like it was edited by people who didn’t really work together.

PR: You know the whole story of how Brodovitch and Snow would have the magazine laid out on the floor—

NM: Yes!

PR: They’d sit with a photographer and say, “Now, Louise, you’re going to have a color spread, but make sure you know you’re following a black and white one.”

NM: It’s incredible that they put that kind of care into it. Louise Dahl-Wolfe said that Snow trusted her photographers and writers completely and she fought commercial interests to produce a quality magazine. Do you think editors in chief today have that kind of freedom?
PR: No, they don’t. I think they’d be the first to tell you that. And I don’t think most editors in chief had it in that day, either. It’s just that she was so tough. Can you imagine someone coming in and saying, “You need to put a blonde on the cover. They sell better”? She would have thrown them out the door.

NM: One thing I really appreciated by going back and really reading the Bazaars—not just looking at them—is that it wasn’t just great photography. The writing, the fiction, and the reportage that was published, is really good. Even the copy that accompanies the fashion spreads is tongue-in-cheek. The image has completely taken over the written word in fashion today.

PR: I agree. It’s partly the web. You know, try to read a newspaper without having to watch a video.

NM: And people who have backgrounds as writers—and I’m thinking here of Kate Betts and Sally Singer—when they became editors in chief... neither of them had a chance to establish themselves before they were forced out.

PR: Oh, I agree. I mean, look at Kate Betts, who I admire. From the outside it looks like you have two years to turn the numbers around. It’s great you have a vision but it’s the numbers, so...

NM: Two years is not much time to turn a magazine around.

PR: I don’t think anyone ever said to Carmel, “Change the direction.”

NM: She went to Bazaar when it didn’t have the cachet that Vogue did and I think she saw something that she could change. She could make a difference. She started out in the fashion department, and she realized that the art director... I think she was able to get an in there and she took over the way the magazine looked. She started bringing in photographers like Munkácsi. She just spread that effort to the entire magazine. She had an eye, as her niece said, for finding geniuses. Which is a quality good editors in chief have.

PR: I think people forget that she brought in Munkácsi before she brought in Brodovitch, which means she already had revolutionary ideas. That was just not done, having someone running on the beach in a bathing suit. It would have been in a studio with cardboard waves.

NM: Good editors in chief respect talent. They control it in terms of the final product, but they let creative people be creative.

PR: That’s what they’re there for. It’s the ones who don’t have the big-picture vision, or who are competitive somehow with all these talented contributors, who can’t make it work. In the same vein, I think that was the secret of Carmel Snow’s fabulous collaboration with Diana Vreeland, that they were perfectly compatible in what they could do. Diana could just look at an outfit and do that tiny little thing with a scarf that made it drop-dead chic. And yet I think one of the photographers in my book said, in fact I know—I’m just trying to remember which one it is—said “She had no eye for photography.” Carmel Snow was the real connoisseur of photography. She would sit there with
someone like Avedon and say, “Look, this is why this one works and that one doesn’t.” And they all respected it. What Diana brought to the table was very, very different. I don’t know if it’s equally important, but it’s very significant.

NM: I think they respected each other’s talents. The exhibition really focuses on the collaboration between the three women—Snow, Vreeland, and Dahl-Wolfe. Collaboration is a very buzzy term in fashion today. But as we were putting this exhibition together, I really started to wonder what that meant. I’m thinking of what Louise Dahl-Wolfe said about why she decided to quit Bazaar. After Brodovitch left, the new art director came on set and he looked through her lens. For her that was reason enough to quit; she didn’t want anyone telling her what to do. She might be shocked to know how many people look through a photographer’s lens now. The idea of collaboration is so attractive that people pay lip service to it. But you can’t force collaboration. These women worked together really well because they had talents that dovetailed and they respected each other’s talent. You can’t decide that everyone’s going to have a point of view on a photograph or a story and expect it to be high quality.

PR: Exactly. It was very much about giving them distance and giving them the space in which to do their work. I think Diana couldn’t go to Paris. That was Carmel’s turf. That was where she ruled, and I think, though it must have bothered Diana, she was professional enough to just do what was before her, and do it incredibly well.

NM: After Snow’s departure, Bazaar just seemed to slide downhill. Within a decade it was not a great magazine. Why is it so difficult to have a good fashion publication?

PR: It’s hard for me to answer that because I’m so prejudiced towards the kind of magazine that Carmel Snow did. In other words, one that’s heavy on culture, and that talks about issues in an intelligent way. It worked so fantastically, but I think that’s very hard to do. I have to say I think Anna Wintour’s Vogue does that to an extent. She does take you into the world. The other thing that really distinguishes Carmel Snow’s Bazaar is that in those days there weren’t many ways women could get a view of the world. The world of Time magazine was not necessarily a woman’s world. So they weren’t getting the serious stuff necessarily they way you would now. Now that women are more equal I think that’s sort of ironic. In a way she was providing a service that now is perhaps less necessary.

NM: Yet I think we still miss that kind of fashion magazine. It’s just a very positive, joyous magazine. It wasn’t just the fashion; it was Carmel Snow’s whole world view. Everything that interested her was in Bazaar. I was flipping through one issue, I think was in 1939, and there’s Walker Evans shooting at housing projects in New York City.

PR: That would not happen today, I don’t think. As you were talking, I was thinking that’s again the commercial pressure. If your goal is to make X dollars an issue from advertising, you just can’t spend the time, or money, or space to include unexpected things.
NM: Carmel Snow was talking—fashion magazines in general were talking—to a different audience. It was a different conversation. It was smaller, and more homogenous, and fashion was a part of that culture. In some ways, you just can’t compare fashion now with what was happening in Carmel Snow’s time. But do you think there’s anything that today’s magazine editors can learn from Carmel Snow?

PR: One of the things she did to such great effect, and maybe it’s because the boundaries were less rigid then, she basically knew how to do everyone’s job. And even if she respected people, she didn’t hesitate to step in. Kerry Purcell, Alexey Brodovitch’s biographer, said of course he was an art director so he could do this and that. Well, actually that wasn’t the way the position was then; it was much more fluid and a strong editor-in-chief could sort of run you over a bit. Much more than could happen now.

NM: I love the description of her coming in every morning with a bag full of clippings from newspapers.

PR: I would say be like a periscope that’s turning around 360 degrees, just keeping an eye on everything, and don’t think just because it’s fashion that that’s all you should count on. In fact, that’s a clue that you really have to look everywhere. One of the really old guys at Bazaar, Dick Deems, who was one of Carmel’s nemeses at first, I interviewed him at 95 or something, he was saying she was one of the first ones to realize that fashion came from skateboarding, and from Harlem, and from all sorts of places that people didn’t expect. People are doing that, but I guess my prejudice is towards just keeping an eye out for something interesting culturally and bringing that in to the magazine.

NM: Penelope, it’s been such a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you.