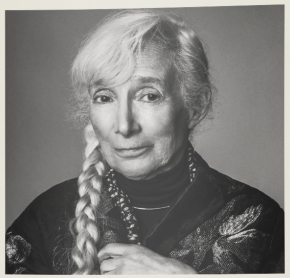
MICHELLE DEAN

Peer Review

Michelle Dean, author of *Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion* celebrates *Renata Adler.*



The first time I remember encountering Renata Adler, she was mid-skirmish in the pages of *Harper's Magazine*. It was the year 2000. She had just published a book called *Gone: The Last Days of the New Yorker* and apparently everyone in New York was angry with her. *The New York Times*, she reported, had published no fewer than eight pieces rebutting the book. She wrote of it as "institutional carpet bombing." Never one to shy from drama, I was intrigued.

That said, for a person like me, from the provinces (read: Canada), much of the piece was impenetrable. I didn't live among people who tracked bylines, let alone mastheads. No one I knew had opinions about which regime at *The New Yorker* was best. The idea that a magazine could so closely resemble a soap opera, or perhaps a Roman epic—fiefdoms and rivalries and hard-set preferences for umlauts that would shape generations of readers and writers—still counted as a revelation.

Adler was so blunt and funny that I went out and bought a copy of *Gone* at my Montreal bookstore. Which marked the first but not the last time I'd get lost in untangling the institutional history of the literati. In New York, of course, Adler's gadfly ways were known long before *Gone* was published. Born in 1937 to a Jewish couple who had fled Nazi Germany, she began working at *The New Yorker* in 1962. Before she was 30, she was taking aim at Norman Podhoretz and any number of other fatuous figures that the hothouse of New York media and publishing produced. In the late '60s she briefly moved over to *The New York Times* to write some of the most blistering film reviews of all time. Her first began, "Even if your idea of a good time is to watch a lot of middle-aged Germans, some of them very fat, all reddening, grimacing, perspiring, and falling over Elke Sommer, I think you ought to skip *The Wicked Dreams of Paula Schultz*."

After a year, Adler returned to *The New Yorker* where she remained until the early 1990s. She'd eventually attack the magazine's own film critic, Pauline Kael, at length, go to law school, and write a number of simultaneously infuriating and brilliant pieces about law and culture. You'll have to read *Gone* to find out why she ended up leaving *The New Yorker* again, though the book is out of print and difficult to find. But the search will be worth it.

NOTE

Late in a critical career where she'd never been known to pull punches, Adler began writing fiction. Her first novel, *Speedboat*, was both formally challenging—it is a novel-in-anecdotes, paragraphs describing discrete events with the reader left to divine the link between them. The story, such as it is, chronicles the life of Jen Fain, a young journalist, in 1970s New York. Jen is just as simultaneously disinterested and brilliant as the writer who created her, a woman more prone to observing the absurdities of her life than to living fully in the moment. And for that reason, *Speedboat* can be riotously funny. A boyfriend, for example, is described as a "Calvinist in reverse; that is, he was uncompromisingly bohemian."

Left Photograph: Sebastian Doz / Agence Image. Book Photograph: Courtesy of Renata Adler. Published by the New York Review Books.

A potted history of the bonsai tree.

KATIE CALAUTTI

Object Matters

The impulse to bring the outside in is centuries old, a fact that bonsai trees are testament to. Beginning in the first century A.D., the Chinese practice of *penjing*, "pot scenery," replicated the natural world in realistic miniature. Enthusiasts believed that scaling down landscapes gave them access to nature's powers, which they felt became more potent in the process.

The horticultural technique of raising trees in small landscapes was first only indulged in by the elite using natively collected specimens. Ancient images from around 700 A.D. show the tiny universes being given as gifts. According to artistic depictions, the practice was adopted by the Japanese around the beginning of the 14th century. But the Japanese style focused only on trees instead of on full landscapes. In fact, "bonsai," the Japanese word for the craft, means "a tree planted in a shallow container," reinforcing how the art form hinges largely upon the symbiotic relationship between plant and tray.

Gardeners train bonsai trees into diminutive natural shapes through a combination of planting in small containers, pinching buds, wiring branches and restrictive root and branch pruning—most bonsai trees are under four feet. Bonsai plants can be made from any tree species, and because they're cultivated from full-sized tree seeds, they can grow full-sized fruit. Their value is inherent in their need for meticulous care—most bonsai trees must be maintained daily.

By the late 18th century, bonsai was enjoyed by people of all social classes in Asia. And the practice had evolved from a mythical, esoteric approach to one of hobbyists focusing on design. As travel to the East and migration to the West increased in the late 19th century, the bonsai practice spread.

Since World War II, Western influence has altered the types of trees cultivated and the plants' aesthetic shapes. The release of the *Karate Kid* movies in the 1980s spurred a younger generation to take up bonsai, and now plants are mass-produced in over a dozen styles. But however they come to fruition, bonsai trees may just outlast us all—one of the longest-living bonsai trees, a ficus, is estimated to be 1,000 years old.

Photograph: Dasha Afanasik. Styling: Andrew Mitchell