

Why Don't You Read D.V.?

By George Smith

"Vreeland — with a V! V as in victory! V as in violent!" the former editor of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, Diana Vreeland, would say when she gave her name to telephone operator. The autobiography of this captivating, ambitious woman is filled anecdotes rich and luxurious as the Parisian clothes she adores, and draped in such vivid detail one's forced to take her version of events with a pinch of salt, unless her memory truly was superhuman.

The book is a barely organised recollection of her life in somewhat chronological order. Reading it forces into your mind the image of Mrs. Vreeland laid dramatically on a gilt chaise lounge with her prominent nose to the ceiling, whilst George Plimpton writes down every word that leaves her lips with a quill pen (she is said to have a particular devotion for quill pens after having swept the *Vogue* copy rooms of all other writing utensils on her first day as editor). One can almost visualise the gestures and elaborate facial expressions she would make during a particularly passionate description of an item of clothing or a scenario she's experienced. "These women's clothes in the Bois were of colours as sharp as a knife, red red, violent violet, orange — when I say "orange" I mean red orange, not yellow orange." Her enthusiasm escapes the printed word.

Such is her enthusiasm that her stories seem to bounce from one to another. A regalement about why one should never be nostalgic can swiftly switch to an anecdote on back plasters, in the most hilarious way. Vreeland shares opinions that seem like they should never have been published, but were published anyway, such as her justification for her

frustration at white people. "We're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Blacks are almost the only people I can stand to look at nowadays." Coming from an 80-something-year-old white woman in the early 1980s, she was astoundingly progressive. Former editor-at-large, André Leon Talley, often remarks in interviews that she was constantly ahead of the curve.



Diana Vreeland posing for Cecil Beaton in February 1978, from the 'Cecil Beaton Studio Archive'.

Diana Vreeland had a very particular upbringing; one that exposed her to experiences not many people can relate to. She barely speaks of her mother apart from a few direct passing comments. "All I knew was that my mother wasn't proud of me. I was always her ugly little monster." Hearing this from your mother at a young age proved that she had to be a woman who would overcome adversities, and she was one who didn't let them get the best of her. She'd dust negativity under the carpet and carry on. At peace with the fact she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the room, she became her own work of art, and her aesthetic flaws became the things she'd celebrate most.

She carried this philosophy into her own work. It was Vreeland after all who would make Barbra Steisand's nose the focal point of her portraits, telling her "you don't have to be a beauty, to be attractive." Her white powdered face, her rouge painted cheeks and her bold red lips, paired with her slicked black hair (dyed using a product imported from Paris) became her instantly recognisable look, her signature. She explains respectfully it's a subtle ode to the geishas of Japan whom she'd spend a lot of time with in her early adulthood; disciplined yet kind, beautiful women who lived a lifestyle she wished more would adopt.

Her idiosyncratic, often bonkers talent projected her to a central space in the hall of fame of fashion's best; even after death she's one of the most dazzling figures in fashion history. An all-round genius and social sponge that journalists and socialites alike knew would have stories to tell, including *Interview* in September 1976. No one else could have given a more exciting insight as to why Coco Chanel was so important. Where so many interviewees stutter and fumble through responses to questions, Vreeland gives a cornucopia details and stories, recalling history in gorgeously vivid clarity as she throws you amidst the spectacle of Chanel's past; a true story teller of the 20th century.

"I usually know when I'm repeating myself," she says in her autobiography, "in other words, the inspirations aren't coming. There's only one thing in life, and that's the continual renewal of inspiration. Mmm... but as I never seem to know what I'm saying, the chances are I've repeated myself occasionally." It's true by the end of the book she repeats some stories, but like that fantastic aunt you see maybe once a year, you indulge her small peculiar mannerisms. Diana Vreeland was fabulous. And even that's an understatement. Rarely is an eccentric also so underrated, but she might be just that. Her autobiography isn't mere pithy entertainment, the advice she gives is essential and still relevant over 30 years on, and her years proved that V really is for victory.