

# DIANA

## THE MYTH, 10 YEARS ON

Was she shy, or just sly? Compassionate, or coldly calculating? The queen of hearts, or the self-promoting chief executive of Brand Diana? It all depends, of course, on which books you choose. **Peter Conrad** has read all the latest crop, from two novels set on the day of Diana's death to Paul Burrell's latest hagiography. In all of them he finds a ghost that still haunts us all

Ten years later, what I recall most vividly is the stench of the flowers. I never went near Kensington Palace, the destination of all those maudlin pilgrims who deposited bouquets, but on the way up Exhibition Road to a Prom at the Albert Hall a few nights after Diana's funeral I was assailed by a sweet, sickly, cloying odour that spread through the air from a mile away. The blooms that symbolised eternal life were dankly rotting. My nasal reverie may be the most concise summary of Diana: a festering lily, not – as Elton John warbled in Westminster Abbey – a candle abruptly snuffed out.

In her *Panorama* interview she prophetically threatened that she would not go quietly. Already she was speaking of herself in the third person, as if posthumously. A decade after her death, she is still not silent. Or rather her proponents and detractors continue to jabber and exchange insults on her behalf. Recent books about the self-appointed queen of hearts suggest that the wounded, compassionate Diana was a mentally unstable slag, a spendthrift wag and a bigot whose politics were far to the right of Mrs Thatcher. The royal family tries to white her out of its history; the rest of us are left wondering whether the spasm of grief after her death was the start of a republican revolution that Tony Blair suppressed, or a sodden, soggy collapse of national morale.

Caught in the argument, Diana no longer controls her own image, as she did with such cunning when she was alive. In the photographs Mario Testino took a few months before her death, now on exhibition at Kensington Palace, she expertly projects the contradictory persona that beguiled us, shy but sly, vulnerable but implacably glamorous. At the time she was shedding official emburances by auctioning off dresses worn on stuffy ceremonial occasions. The decision to de-acquisition the frocks was telling: royalty for Diana was about costume, not constitutional duty. Sending a favourite Victor Edelstein gown to be sold at Christie's, she remarked, 'When I put this on, I actually felt like a princess.' In Testino's photographs she dispenses with gloves, bares her feet and, almost scandalously relaxed, lolls on a sofa. The woman can be seen emerging from the constraints of a role that cramped her. No longer relying on rank and its haughty distance, she had begun to perform for our amusement, like every other celebrity.

She shimmied and writhed as Testino directed and wistfully pouted to simulate sadness. A royal personage is meant to be

monumental and immobile, like a statue on its plinth. Diana, mercurially moody, had turned into a series of happenings, reinventing herself every time she changed hairstyles or lovers. Yet when Testino sent the prints for her approval, she was incredulous. Paul Burrell, the most loyal of her lapdogs, remembers she looked at the spangled slyph in the photographs and said, 'Is that really me?' Of course it was not – at least not all of her.

Diana remains mysterious, as is the prerogative of mythic beings, those deities who hide behind a legend and replace a face with an image. Her brother began the myth-making process at her funeral, when he said that the goddess after whom she was named had turned in her case from huntress to hunted. It was a smart point, but also a mendacious one: Diana teasingly beckoned to the paparazzi who pursued her and knew that her power depended on them. Myth, according to Jean Cocteau, is a lie that becomes the truth, whereas history is truth that becomes a lie. During the past decade, Diana has undergone both transformations, so it's not surprising to find her as the pretext for two new novels, by Eoin McNamee and Tom Cain, both set on the day of her death and both determined to represent a chaotic, avoidable calamity as part of a sinister global conspiracy.

In a few of Testino's photographs, Diana seems to be dematerialising, vaporising into a haze that resembles the smell of those wilting flowers: a blonde on a white sofa, wearing pearls or silver beads. In Stephen Frears's film *The Queen* she stays out of sight, except for snatches

of television news film, while the other characters obsessively discuss her. In the recent Channel 4 documentary *The Witnesses in the Tunnel*, she disappeared behind a grey blob, which obscured the body the doctors were trying to resuscitate. Her minders in McNamee's *12:23* reduce her to a target, tersely and dismissively referred to as 'Spencer'. On her final day she is tracked through Paris by a hitman hired by arms dealers who resent her campaign against landmines. Cain's thriller, *The Accident Man*, relies on the same paranoid hypothesis of assassination: accidents are philosophically intolerable because they make our world a playground of chance, whereas conspiracies pleasingly restore intention and localise blame.

Cain's killer, having briskly eliminated Diana, sees her immediately resurrected as a blank, blissful image on the TV news, still cawing with Dodi. McNamee's Diana has her own metaphysical life beyond the grave. *12:23* caters to her mythomania by sending her on a mystical visit to the tomb of Princess Grace in Monaco and by suggesting that, like the cultists in *The Da Vinci Code*, she flirted with the Priory of Sion. Ultimately McNamee's dying goddess floats off into the sky. Perhaps this is where she always belonged: Piers Morgan, who got to know her when he edited the *Daily Mirror*, marvelled at her hysterical self-obsession and decided that she lived on 'Planet Diana'. Celebrities are almost extraterrestrial creatures, and as doctors prod and manipulate Diana's body in the crashed Mercedes, McNamee says that she resembles 'an unknowable being, an

entity with a domed forehead' like the aliens who supposedly landed at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947.

The images for which she knowingly posed objectified her. Do we have any inkling about her subjective life? McNamee dares to write a brief monologue for his heroine as she mopes in the Imperial Suite at the Ritz. But the novelist proves unable to penetrate her head, which may indeed have been a vacant place; he can only describe her studying her image as she stands 'in front of the gilt-framed mirror in the bedroom'.

Burrell valiantly attempts to supply Diana with some mental furniture in his latest cooing, cloying memoir *The Way We Were*. As everyone knows, Diana flunked all her O-levels and cheerily boasted of being 'thick as a plank'. Burrell, however, insists: 'She was a deep thinker.' It's a pity that, when giving details, he equates her capacity for 'introspective analysis' with her habit of 'spending hours on the telephone'. Burrell lists Diana's 'pearls of wisdom'; luckily pearls are jewels, but her intellectual nuggets prove to be glass beads. Apparently 'she believed in God and embraced all faiths, from the Church of England to Roman Catholicism, Islam to Hinduism'. It might be truer to say that she embraced men of all faiths, ecumenically advancing from the starchy Anglican Prince of Wales to heterodox lovers like the Pakistani physician Hasnat Khan or Dodi al-Fayed.

With camp followers like Burrell, Diana needs no enemies: naively besotted, he seems unaware that most of his

stories show her in a less than flattering light. She often sounds like a grabby starlet stockpiling goodie bags. 'He's so generous!' she shrieked whenever Versace's latest consignment of outfits was trundled into Kensington Palace. She pocketed a seed-pearl bracelet given to her by Dodi, along with a diamond necklace, Bulgari earrings and a Jaeger watch, while claiming not to want the engagement ring she expected him to produce. Naffer and more official gifts she disposed of to Burrell himself, who curtsied gratefully.

Not content to feel the pain of others, she appropriated their tragedies. When the journalist Dominic Lawson's wife gave birth to a stillborn child, Diana insisted on burying the baby in her walled garden at Kensington Palace, and – after Burrell's digging proved to be a little effete – she grabbed the spade and excavated the grave herself. Burrell told her the idea was 'tremendous'; to me it sounds like a monstrous impertinence, since it means that the site can now never be visited by the parents. After the ceremony, Diana disclosed her devious private agenda. The illicit interment was her way of ensuring she would go on haunting the Windsors and fascinating posterity: 'People will find this baby one day and say it was mine.'

The most inadvertently damaging of Burrell's stories is about Diana's desire to move to America. Prosecuting the scheme, she took up with the New York financier Teddy Forstmann, 'a politically well-connected billionaire' who offered her 'a lifestyle with private jets'. Like a Lady Macbeth of Sloane Square, she considered Forstmann 'capable of running for office'. 'How could we fail?' she added, paraphrasing Lady Macbeth who, as she brandishes the daggers, boasts to her husband: 'We'll not fail!' She made premature plans to redecorate the White House living quarters and dreamed of presiding as 'the new Jackie O' (just as she wanted Prince William to succeed his grandmother, with herself as regent). She must have been aware that Jackie O was the President's widow, although she may not have realised that bereavement would entail eviction. Diana, as this bizarre project suggests, could be a killer. Eventually she iced the candidate, having decided that he was too old for her.

Television advertisements for Tina Brown's *The Diana Chronicles* have described her as one of Diana's confidantes; actually their meetings were few and rather formal. Nevertheless, as an unrivalled analyst of society's hissy subtexts and the ruthless politics of fame, Brown gets closer to understanding her



First royal steps: Prince Charles announces his engagement to Lady Diana Spencer in February 1981; their wedding the following July at St Paul's Cathedral; her first official engagement in wet Wales. Hulton/Getty, Tim Graham, Tim Graham/Corbis

than any other biographer. The book, packaged in flaming and fabulous pink, beadily scrutinises its subject from the other side of the Atlantic. Brown, who went to New York to edit *Vanity Fair* in 1984 and has been there ever since, treats royalty with an expatriate's liberated exasperation. She chuckles over the pedantic protocols of Buckingham Palace, where 'tea trays for members of the royal family have their own personal map', showing how the milk jugs and sugar tongs and jam pots must be placed; she moans when describing the fusty antiquity of Balmoral, where Diana spent her time vomiting while Cherie Blair, allergic to the fur and feathers of the stuffed hunting trophies on the walls, pitifully sniffled. The male gargoyles who clustered around Diana are skewered in satiric epigrams. Her sclerotic father resembles a 'raw sausage', and her would-be father-in-law Mohamed al-Fayed is an 'importunate bullfrog'.

**From all this Diana**, like Brown, is a refugee. Brown applauds her plan to move to America and says she could 'only ever feel at home in the culture that invented fame the size of hers'. That fame literally seems to inflate Diana and makes her too large for these shrunken islands: gazing up at her as she stalks 'on three-inch high heels across the high-ceiling grill room of the Four Seasons' in New York, Brown describes her as a tanned tower, emitting 'a flashing cone of artificial light'. As in McNamee's novel, it is as if an angel or an alien had delevitated for lunch. Some besotted admirers regarded Diana as a divinity. For Brown she was a diva, which is the next best thing: the personification of imperious whim and 'superstar entitlement', propped on spiky stilettos.

At the end of her book, Brown quotes a conversation with Tony Blair, who praises Diana for showing us 'a new way to be British'. Blair, elected a few months before Diana's death, tried to modernise the country and failed. In Brown's estimation, Diana did a better, swifter job of it. After her separation from Charles, she capriciously revolutionised her office, modelling it on a Madison Avenue ad agency. Here she 'set about administering her celebrity like a global brand, promoting and conserving the Diana franchise'. Despite Brown's enthusiasm, that sounds like a desolately empty endeavour: was Diana really no more than Victoria Beckham in excelsis? When she had second thoughts just before she married Charles, her sister Sarah told her she had to go through with it because her face was already on the tea-towels. In time, as a

global self-marketer, she might have come to a commercial understanding with the tea-towel manufacturers – and of course she would have ensured that Calvin Klein designed them. Brown shrewdly observes that Diana based her power on a 'three-way marriage of commerce, society and philanthropy', a corporate phenomenon that in the London of the 1990s was 'new and directly Diana-related'. This is the most acute and original section of her book: as a sleek expert on 'media relations' and 'the media era', Brown can only gawp at the way Diana abandoned royal neutrality and approached public appearances as 'a CEO whose distinctive marketing concept is the personal touch'.

Possessed by a mad evangelism, Diana told Hasnat Khan that he should give up cardiology and join her in a mission to uplift and redeem the world. This magical agenda was easier than curing heart disease, case by onerous case. Diana was an eager convert to the American creed that expects life to be a wish-fulfilment fantasy, so it's sadly apt that Brown, describing James Hewitt's seamy sale of erotic confidences, should allude to Fitzgerald's elegy for the disillusioned hero of *The Great Gatsby*: 'Foul dust floated in the wake of all Diana's romantic dreams.' Because Brown herself is busily pursuing happiness, slimness and celebrity on the other side of the Atlantic, it doesn't occur to her to wonder whether the American dream might be a meretricious illusion.

Sarah Bradford's *Diana* offers a more stolidly British appraisal, which gets its gravity from the author's long experience as a royal biographer. The book starts on a note of schoolmarmish tetchiness: Diana's turbulent childhood left her, Bradford clucks, with a tendency to self-dramatisation and 'a reputation for lying'. But the biographer's disapproval is equitably apportioned. She deplores the narcissism of the spoiled Charles, who relied on advantages he had done nothing to earn, and contrasts his shiftlessness with Diana's conscientious attitude to her chores. Bradford pitilessly documents the emotional anaesthesia of 'the Germans', as Diana called her in-laws, who cope with problems by denying their existence. In her distress, Diana begged the Queen to act as a marriage-guidance counsel-

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

**In Testino's pictures she seems to be vaporising into a haze that resembles the smell of those wilting flowers**

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

lor. 'I don't know what you should do,' shrugged the mother of us all. 'Charles is hopeless.' One of the skulking operatives in McNamee's novel admires the way the royals talk without opening their mouths, 'as if to do so would permit a howl of the damned to spew forth'. Or is their enunciation throttled because they use the teeth as a portcullis, chopping up any emotion that might try to escape? When told by a courtier about the murder of Mountbatten and half his family, the Queen's poised response was 'Thank you very much'.

While Blair was affecting a misty eye and a choked vocal delivery in his churchyard eulogy, at Balmoral orders were given that no mention of Diana should be made in that morning's church service and the minister was authorised to proceed with a sermon containing 'unsuitably jokey references to Billy Connolly'. She had already become unmentionable, erased from the record like one of Stalin's victims blanked out of official photographs. The ban left Prince Harry bewildered, and made him ask, 'Are you sure mummy's really dead? I never thought I'd feel sorry for such a privileged hooligan; this anecdote, however, left a hairline crack in my leathery old heart.'

Bradford writes well about the way Diana's life mimicked tacky fiction. She was brought up on the gauzy romances of Barbara Cartland; her fairytale marriage, however, turned out to be a saga of infidelity and skulduggery. Charles, incorrigibly pretentious, sighed to a friend that he was living through a Greek tragedy. But no inimical gods or arbitrary fates decreed the misery of this incompatible couple, who drifted apart into their separate solipsisms. Charles became dotty, Diana turned nutty. He cultivated his organic vegetables, she irrigated her colon. While he stiffened his lip, she liquefied in cascades of histrionic tears: during one row, William squeezed wads of Kleenex under the bathroom door while she sobbed. To

call all this tragic dignifies it (which was Charles's intention); despite the weeping and eventual bloodshed, the unravelling relationship was a messy farce, differing from a million suburban break-ups only because these tantrums and treacheries happened in public view and at public expense. As Bradford describes Diana's burial on a private island in a lake at Althorp, she seems genuinely sorry for her loneliness and her needy, abused naivete.

## She is accused of psychotic violence: of knocking her stepmother down the stairs; of threatening to have Camilla killed

The subtitle of Howard Hodgson's *Charles: The Man Who Will Be King* announces its more cravenly partisan intention. Kipling wrote about a pretender who would be king; Hodgson's confident change of verb banishes such equivocations. But he can only establish Charles's moral right to the succession by vilifying Diana. He compares Andrew Morton with the 16th-century historians who posthumously blackened Richard III to justify the Tudor putsch. If Morton, abetted by Diana, committed regicide in advance, Hodgson volunteers to be a king-maker.

His qualifications for his task are quaint: he made a fortune as an undertaker and claims to understand ethnic communities like that of Handsworth in Birmingham because 'I was their personal funeral director'. He didn't quite get to bury Diana (who, thanks to the Queen's intransigence, was almost brought back

from Paris in a Harrods van rather than on a royal aircraft). As second best, he takes a sour pleasure in interring her reputation. She dominates a book that is supposedly about Charles and is subjected to an ugly battering. First, the family title of which she was so proud is stripped from her, to complete the punitive withdrawal of the HRH. Bradford enjoys Diana's snobbery: she rejoiced in her ancient English ancestry and viewed the Windsors as jumped-up foreign princelings. She even sniffed at Highgrove, 'small by Althorp standards, with only three usable bedrooms'. Hodgson leaves her no grounds for feeling superior: the Spencer coat of arms is a fraud, as their pedigree was purchased from a hard-up James I. Hodgson overlooks what this tells us about the monarchy itself, which used to sell honours and now more airily invents them, as when the Queen rustled up a spare earldom as a marital bauble for her youngest son.

After humbling Diana, Hodgson goes on to accuse her of psychotically violent behaviour. She knocks her stepmother down the stairs at Althorp and gloats that no one would put the Princess of Wales on trial for murder; she phones Camilla to say that she has sent someone round to kill her. Mostly she takes out her ire on the property of those who have crossed her, egging James Gilbey's Alfa Romeo, glueing the locks of a car of another false friend, adding water to someone else's petrol tank. She even extends the feud with her husband to helpless animals. Hodgson stops short of claiming that she kicked Charles's fawning Labrador but insists that she made him get rid of the dog, on which he doted. Burrell sees Diana hagiographically; for Hodgson she is little more than a venal hag. Her good works are dismissed as exhibitionism. Attending a heart operation to impress Hasnat Khan, she outraged surgical protocol by making herself up, wearing gold earrings and allowing her fringe to peep fetchingly from under her antiseptic cap.

Hodgson has a pious faith in the blather of medical experts and quotes one who told him Diana, intent on blocking Charles's accession to the throne if she could not be queen, suffered 'from an acute case of what psychologists call envy'. Did he really need to consult a man in a white coat to learn about envy? Diana's craziness is attributed to borderline personality disorder. Ticking the boxes, Hodgson decides she exhibited the eight major symptoms.

He derides Diana as a consumerist bimbo. Even the loyal Burrell admits that, when possessions were divided at the time of the divorce, she splurged unnecessarily on a new washing machine, dishwasher, microwave, kettle and juicer, giggling. 'Let's spend a bit more of his money while we can!' The pleasure of destruction was even more intense than that of acquisition: Burrell describes her filling a bin bag with a set of monogrammed Prince of Wales china, then smashing it with a hammer. Before leaving Highgrove, she ignited a funeral pyre of Charles's fuddy-duddy tweeds.

When she is not shopping, Hodgson's Diana occupies herself by having sex. The nastiest seam of innuendo and aspersion in his book, gathered from anonymous informants, concerns her supposed promiscuity. Rumour has it that Diana's maidenhead was verified by the court gynaecologist at the time of her engagement. Hodgson, however, claims that she lost her virginity at 17, having suborned a boy three years younger. She was on the pill when she met Charles and allegedly aborted a child during her affair with Oliver Hoare. Hodgson describes a fling on a beach with King Juan Carlos during a Spanish holiday, which infuriated Queen Sofia. Back at home, he snarls that she had sex with 'half of Kensington and Chelsea' and produces a cockneyfied

palace employee, nameless of course, to declare: 'Blimey, it was like a red-light district round here at times.' Who knows whether any of this sordid and ultimately trivial tattle is true? Diana is an enigmatic, astral absence, a white hole into which such stories unverifiably vanish.

Not content with cuckolding Charles, she additionally unmanned him, Hodgson says, by coaxing a valet to implicate him in gay hanky-panky at St James's Palace. Brown adds that when Hewitt sold his story, she called down a curse on his penis, telling one of her soothsayers that she hoped it would shrivel up. The demure deb had become an emasculating maenad.

If Hodgson were a better writer – or at least a literate one, rather than the dunce who says that resignations are 'tended', describes a Buckingham Palace 'aid' who serves in an 'advisory' capacity and gloriously economic policy, in an aside on Thatcher's economic policy, that 'flogging a dead horse was economic suicide' – he might have found a brittle, brilliant comedy of manners in the story he tells. Two incidents in particular call for treatment by Oscar Wilde, with his understanding of aristocratic dissimulation. When Hewitt and Andrew Parker Bowles convivially chat in the officers' mess, the multiple connections between them require an excursion into structural anthropology: Parker Bowles was the husband of Hewitt's lover's husband's mistress. A class that sleeps together keeps together, I suppose: sex for these people is about social adhesion, not desire (which is just as well, given how unaphrodisiac they all are). Equally good is the showdown between queening divas when, at a party given by Lady Annabel Goldsmith, Diana upbraids Camilla for pilfering Charles. Camilla listens to the tirade, then stalks out after making a deep and mocking curtsy. Where are Bette Davis and Joan Crawford when we need them?

Bradford considers Diana to be the

## Tina Brown shrewdly observes that Diana based her power on a 'three-way marriage of commerce, society and philanthropy'

victim of her own poor judgment. She isolated herself because she cultivated treacherous hacks rather than amassing a network of influential friends who could weigh in against Charles's cronies when they badmouthed her. She squandered her moral and political advantage by blabbing on *Panorama*. In the end she was fatally placed at risk because she dispensed with police protection and entrusted herself to

Dodi's muddling entourage. Bradford's analysis of these piled-up errors is sober and sadly plausible. Hodgson has his own wilder version of Diana's self-destructiveness. Unsubstantiated anecdotes about high-speed chases with paparazzi on the M4, or occasions when Diana hurtled late at night through residential streets in a car without headlights after sexual assignments, lead of course to the final crash; for this she, as a reckless thrill-seeker, takes the blame. Hodgson gives us his word she was yelping with revved-up delight as Dodi's car screeched into the Alma tunnel.

Diana lived fast, died young, but did not, as Hodgson professionally surmises, leave a good-looking corpse. The mortician in him has his final revenge on her by describing – no, imagining – the difficulties of what he calls 'the presentation' when the undertakers laid her out in the Paris hospital. Because her head was injured, he presumes that the last, transfixed image on her face was 'distorted'. He smirks at the distress of Diana's sisters when they saw her; his report is contradicted by Burrell, who was there and saw only a 'serene' expression (after which he checked out her red-painted toenails).

The Press Complaints Commission reprimanded the tabloids at the time of Diana's divorce by accusing them of 'dabbling their fingers in the stuff of other people's souls'. The circumstances of her death ghoulishly intensified this voyeurism. Imagination, in the current array of post-mortems on Diana, penetrates recesses that ought to remain debarred and performs acts that decency and squeamishness instinctively prohibit. In McNamee's novel, a Special Branch snoop watches a surgeon at the hospital who does something more bloodily intimate than reaching into the soul: he has 'his hand inside her chest, reaching into the cavity, the opened torso'. A little later in the mortifying process, Cain's thriller has the pathologist pump formaldehyde into Diana. That leaves only Burrell's fussing over which cocktail dress the corpse should wear (with matching shoes) and Hodgson's itchy-fingered fiddling with the waxen rictus on her features.

Hustled from the Ritz for that last careening ride across Paris, McNamee's Diana is led in and out of service lifts through concrete tunnels where hampers of soiled linen are parked. Utility bulbs flicker on and off in the gloom. 'This,' the character morosely reflects, 'is her domain and realm now.' She reigns in a kingdom of shadows and feels she is being 'trafficked' by the coke-sniffing Dodi's ineffectual guards. Brown refers to a similar twilight zone, in whose lower depths Diana made herself at home: 'a world of secrets, the corollary to her life in a strobe light show'. In both accounts, she is descending into the underworld. Even so, she has not gone quietly. A ghost in teetering heels continues to clackety-clack down the back corridors of the national mind.

To order any of the books reviewed for a special price, with free UK p&p, go to [observer.co.uk/bookshop](http://observer.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0870 836 0885

*Diana*, by Sarah Bradford, Viking £20 (our price £18)  
*The Diana Chronicles*, by Tina Brown, Century £18.99 (£17.99)  
*The Way We Were*, by Paul Burrell, HarperCollins £18.99 (£17.99)  
*The Accident Man*, by Tim Cain, Bantam £12.99 (£11.99)  
*Charles: The Man Who Will Be King*, by Howard Hodgson, John Blake £17.99 (£16.99)  
*12:23*, by Eoin McNamee, Faber £10.99 (£9.99)  
*Diana, Princess of Wales*, by Mario Testino, Taschen £24.95 (£22.95)

