



THE MAGAZINE

Books

The Reinvention Chronicles

Two publishing mavens write about losing jobs at the height of their careers—and getting back on track.

by: Lindsay Van Gelder | from: [AARP The Magazine](#) | June 17, 2010

Those who've read *The Devil Wears Prada* know the perks at the top of a luxury fashion magazine: the designer clothing allowance, the chauffeured limo, the universal deference to one's position at the center of the universe.

At least that's how it was in the Old Economy.

Two Manhattan magazine monarchs—former *Self* editor-in-chief Alexandra Penney and former *House & Garden* editor-in-chief Dominique Browning—have brought out memoirs that have much to say about successful women of a certain age who suddenly find themselves on the skids. Of the two books, Browning's is the more thoughtful and gracefully written.

At the start of *The Bag Lady Papers: The Priceless Experience of Losing it All* in 2008, when her story begins, Penney—who worked for *Glamour* and *Vogue*, as well as *Self*—had largely retired from magazines to become an artist and photographer (and a talented one at that). That lifetime's worth of publishing gigs had enabled her to amass a tidy little nest egg, which she then lost to Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme.

As a young woman, Penney had developed an irrational fear of becoming a bag lady. So severe was her phobia that she spent years in therapy over the issue. In a stroke of irony worthy of a *telenovela*, the shrink who cures Penney of her bag-lady anxieties also steers her to Madoff.

Despite her claims of having been "wiped out," Penney still owned homes on the Upper East Side, in the Hamptons, and in Florida. That didn't stop her bag-lady demons from banging on multiple doors. "You'll be holding your moth-eaten layers of old clothes together with rusted safety pins," she hectors herself. "Your hair will be grayish yellow and dirty and stringy and you'll be cold and lonely and alone."

In truth—and here lies a major, near-inexcusable flaw of *The Bag Lady Papers*—Penney enjoyed a support system far beyond the scope of most readers. When she starts blogging about her financial straits for *The Daily Beast*, for example, a stranger offers her a room in her country house. Penney's friends take her out to dinner. They buy her yellow roses and Cristal champagne. One friend volunteers to pay for her highlights with a top stylist; another offers to foot the rent on her downtown art studio; a third donates professional financial planning.

As a young mother, Penney once left *Glamour* to work at a fish market that offered her more flexible hours. "Now that I look back and remember the big chance I took in my twenties," she writes, "I think surely I can find a way out of the mess I'm in now." And, with a little help from her friends (and no mean boost from the contract for *The Bag Lady Papers*), that's precisely what she does.

But we can't shake the feeling that the book in our hands is Penney's latest slab of halibut. She uses so many quirky terms and acronyms that her account often reads like a journal. (Madoff is the "MF," her mantra is "SNT" for "Stop Negative Thinking," and so on.) *The Bag Lady Papers* is also padded with lists, descriptions of shopping for dinner parties, e-mails from friends, and similar filler. You can almost see the author checking the word-count so she can finish the book and return to what really interests her.

If Penney's survival depended on relearning the skills of her earlier life, Dominique Browning had to unlearn the habits of a lifetime. As an employee of Condé Nast (where—full disclosure—I worked for 18 years), she was such a workaholic goody-two-stilletos that she didn't tell the company when she was being treated for cancer.

After the publishers pulled the plug on Browning's cherished *House & Garden* in late 2007, she became unmoored. "I've lost the very thing that defined my days, paced and regulated my life," she reveals in *Slow Love: How I Lost My Job, Put on My Pajamas & Found Happiness*. "The wind is knocked out of me. Suddenly

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I'm floundering." She also ushers a bad boyfriend out of her life, but that leaves her feeling "unemployable *and* unlovable, a lethal combination."

There follows an unsettling description of the minutiae of a depression. Browning eats, then eats some more. She goes on "muffin-invention" binges, eventually gaining 15 pounds. She drinks too much. She hoards things. She sleeps all the time, then becomes an insomniac. She spends endless hours online.

Rather than fearing her inner bag lady, Browning embraces her. She does indeed put on her pajamas for a year, wearing them 24/7 (even when shopping!). She alternates between lacking the concentration to read and gulping down the King James Bible in the middle of the night: "There, in Psalm 22, I find an anthem for the season of sleeplessness. *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.*"

Months into her downsized ordeal, Browning becomes obsessed with music, particularly Bach's *Goldberg Variations*—and especially the "repeats" typically omitted in concerts to move the piece along more briskly. The concept of taking the time to do the repeats "turns out to have a big impact on the rest of my life.... I find myself taking the repeats in conversation so that I am listening more carefully. I want to take the repeats in relationships with people; I am becoming more patient, less judgmental."

As Browning learns to slow down and savor the beauty of the moment, she realizes that "'Nothing to do' is not the same as 'Nothing can be done.' One is hopeless; the other, the place from which hope becomes possible."

I was not always persuaded that Browning would rather contemplate the purple sea snails on the beach than have a lover and a few more deadlines. But whatever the goad, the fog of depression eventually lifted. Browning chucked her unhealthy habits—and describes the process with nary a New Age cliché. She spent her newfound time with her grown children. After a career advising others how to decorate their homes, she moved to a new house—and made the space her own in ways that have more to do with contentment than design.

"I am a stay-at-home mom," she remarks in her penultimate chapter, "but my children are no longer at home." It's a line that Penney, Browning, and many of their readers could sew on a sampler.

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