



Eagle Eye Editing / MY SERVICES: Writing / Portfolio

Out On A Limb

The launch of the new women's magazine *Elm Street* has the world of Canadian journalism buzzing – and readers wondering what Stevie Cameron will deliver.

By Antonia Morton

(*Ryerson Review of Journalism, Summer 1997*)

"I'm not really a magazine editor," Stevie Cameron announces firmly over the lectern. "I don't know what I'm doing. I have to pattern myself after you guys."

The audience laughs. It's September 1996, and a hundred-odd members of the Canadian Society of Magazine Editors are sitting over the remains of a buffet lunch. Many know Cameron personally; a few – such as Anne Collins of *Toronto Life* – she acknowledges as role models; all are aware of her reputation as a tough investigative reporter and best-selling author. And most have spent the last hour leafing curiously through the glossy advance copies of *Elm Street*, the new women's magazine of which Cameron is editor-in-chief. This is the premiere issue, the editors' first chance to view Cameron's foray into their field – and to judge the truth of her self-deprecating disclaimer.

From advance publicity and trade gossip, most are already familiar with the *Elm Street* story: how Greg MacNeil, charismatic vice president of women's magazines at Telemedia Communications Inc., set up his own shop; how his team courted Cameron – to all appearances an odd choice – as editor; and how he set out to produce what was billed as a magazine for the thinking Canadian woman.

The editors' curiosity had been piqued by this anomalous concept: "intelligent" and "women's" are usually considered mutually exclusive qualities in magazines. Would the result look like *Chatelaine* shorn of its fluff (the 10-Minute Beauty Fixes and Suppers That Say Pow), or like *Ms.* with the politics lightened by great risotto recipes? Conventional publishing wisdom has it that comfort reading (fashion, food and decor) and hard-hitting journalism blend as reluctantly as oil and vinegar. Could even Cameron combine the two?

Now here is *Elm Street*, perfect-bound on heavy paper (the editors' practiced fingers gauge it as 48-pound stock, weightier than most rivals). An exploratory flip shows it to be fat with ads, the T-cell count of a healthy magazine. Canadian actor Matthew Perry, of *Friends* fame, is on the cover; inside are front-of-book snippets, profiles of achieving women, and features exploring serious topics such as corporate wife-beating. Cameron's inaugural editorial tells readers she wants "the best Canadian journalism to inform you [and] entertain you.... We'll have politics and crime and scandals and gossip; we'll have fine recipes to try, and beautiful houses and gardens to inspire you."

Indeed, the browsers find the food and homes sections (along with the fashion and beauty features) to be suitably stylish. What disappoints, surprisingly, is the much-hyped "intelligent journalism." A couple of articles, such as the story of David and Linda Frum manipulating their mother's memory, stand out. But others, though good of their kind, read like standard women's magazine fare. On this first viewing, *Elm Street* looks to be more compromise than synthesis.

Cameron's vision of superlative journalism, it seems, has simply been shoehorned into the traditional format – a fact she freely admits. During her speech, she tells the crowd her aim is to make *Elm Street* a hybrid of *Vanity Fair*, *Toronto Life*, *The New Yorker* and the former *Saturday Night*.

"So why is it a women's magazine?" one puzzled editor asks her.

"Because that's what Greg MacNeil wants," Cameron answers candidly. Again there's laughter, but several editors shake their heads. Maybe the concept will work; but Cameron will have to find her stride first.

Elm Street had been on the drawing-board since early '96. Greg MacNeil had conceived it after he left Telemedia in '95 and started Multi-Vision Publishing Inc (MVP) with partners Lilia Lozinski and Bill Wolch. A maverick with a golden business touch (and a talent for self-promotion – *Canadian Living* editor Bonnie Cowan pegged him as "a great guy, but his own best PR man"), he had several ideas for his new venture. The crown jewel, though, was to be a new full-service women's magazine.

Positioning his book-to-be was no problem: MacNeil had spent most of his working life in the publishing business, and knew how to analyze other magazines' comparative strengths and weaknesses. His knowledge of Telemedia books *Homemaker's* and *Canadian Living* made it easy for the shepherd to turn wolf, using his former defensive skills to attack. If *Canadian Living*,

Homemaker's and *Chatelaine* attracted the rural and down-market demographic, then *Elm Street's* niche would be monied urban women. It would woo advertisers by promising readers with deep pockets, and would lure those readers with interesting stories, quality writing and the magazine's character.

All the team needed was the right editor. The man who had hired Sally Armstrong at *Homemaker's* (and encouraged her to go to the Persian Gulf) knew he wanted a strong personality. So did Lilia Lozinski, who had been a fan of Cameron's work for years. She had kept an enthusiastic eye on her career: newspaper food and lifestyles editorships, *Globe and Mail* columns, writing for *Saturday Night* and *Maclean's*, a stint in television and her reincarnation as best-selling political muckraker. She had raised Cameron's name on the two previous occasions when *Homemaker's* had been looking for a new editor. But the timing hadn't been right, and they had never actually approached Cameron. Now, thrilled to finally be in a position to offer Cameron a job, Lozinski told MacNeil: Call her.

In April 1996, when Cameron first entered the building on Bay Street at Elm, she was partly impatient and partly curious: why had these people she had never heard of called to ask her to edit a new women's magazine? Even when she refused, they insisted on meeting to talk.

The 11th-floor offices of Multi-Vision were spacious, with lots of glass and floor-to-ceiling wood doors, and nearly deserted. MacNeil and his partners were delighted to see Cameron, and poured her coffee while energetically pitching the job.

"I'm flattered, but I'm not interested," she told them frankly. "I don't read this kind of magazine; I'm not into reporting on women's issues any longer." Sure that she was wrong for the job and that they were wasting each other's time, Cameron tried to steer them toward somebody more suitable. "I was happy to tell them who they should look at," she says. She had been around, she knew everybody. She could find them writers. And she liked the idea of a new women's magazine, provided it improved on the existing ones.

That was the idea, Lozinski said: they wanted to do something new, a magazine style MacNeil termed "mass with class." Cameron had class, obviously, as well as a background in women's books; and her household-name status as a political writer might help a new magazine stand out in a crowded field. "The very reason why you don't want to be in the women's market is why we want you – we want to treat women like adults," MacNeil explained. And he dangled a carrot: what kind of magazine would Cameron like to edit? Taken aback, she mentioned her favourites, her ideal combination. She was even more taken aback when MacNeil said: "What if we let you do it?"

Obviously, this still meant: within the format of a women's magazine. But Cameron was tempted despite her misgivings. MacNeil promised her editorial freedom, with no interference from the publishers; and whatever the subject, she would still get to work on good stories with writers of her own choosing. She could help encourage new talent, broaden the cultural landscape.

The friend she asked for advice told her she had “horseshoes up her ass,” and chided her for even hesitating. What clinched it for her was the urging of Bob Lewis, editor-in-chief at *Maclean's*. He told her to go for it – it would be a great experience, and she could still keep her foot in his hard-news door. That did it: though she described herself as “grumpy” about the decision, Cameron took the job.

Once the news got out, others were more convinced of her suitability than she was. “Stevie’s fantastic – I thought she was an inspired choice,” says *Toronto Star* columnist (and former *This Magazine* editor) Naomi Klein. “Most people don’t have the kind of balance Stevie has. She’s an incredible homemaker as well as an impressive journalist. She doesn’t condescend to the fact that women do care about food, fashion and decor. But she also doesn’t think investigative journalism is boys’ stuff. To find those two key areas in one person is unique.”

Aware of Cameron’s concern about her lack of magazine expertise, MacNeil offered her a compensatory hiring spree. (“We know you haven’t done this before,” he soothed. “Let’s find you a team.”) Multi-Vision already had a basic staff, culled from the 500 résumés produced by the Help Wanted ad in *Marketing* magazine. Now MVP hired Charles Oberdorf (veteran gardening, decorating and travel writer, and former managing editor of *City & Country Home*) as second-in-command; high-profile art director Georges Haroutiun, founder and owner of *Applied Arts* magazine, to establish *Elm Street*’s look; and Julia Aitken, also a *Homemaker’s* alumna, as food editor. For the clothes department, Cameron (who once called herself “Mrs. Frump”) picked *Globe and Mail* fashion reporter David Livingstone.

Cameron’s own great strength is the high regard the close-knit world of Canadian journalism has for her. She called a few old colleagues; when news of *Elm Street* hit the grapevine, others called her; and soon a network of seasoned writers – respected names such as Naomi Klein, Robert Mason Lee, Alanna Mitchell, Robert Collison and Ian Austen – was mobilized on behalf of *Elm Street*. Vancouver-based writer Robert Mason Lee, with whom Cameron once worked at *The Ottawa Citizen*, expresses the common feeling. “Stevie’s a quality person,” he says. “I signed up on the strength of her concept of a mag that bridges the gender gap – she can put my name on the masthead any time.”

In mid-September '96, a few days after the editors’ lunch, 700,000 copies of *Elm Street* went out in newspapers to the top 15 urban markets across the country (25,000 went to newsstands, from which they sold briskly). Through the wizardry of controlled circulation, the magazines were sent to city and suburban neighbourhoods whose residents matched the profile of the prospective readers: women, aged 25 to 54, with household incomes of \$50,000 and over.

A high-profile launch with a controversial figure at the helm will always generate gossip. (Think of the buzz over Frank Stronach’s business magazine, *Vista*, back in '89.) *Elm Street* was big news among both suits and journalists, and everyone had

an opinion. Radio spots for *Elm Street* gushed: "Finally, a woman's magazine with an IQ." (This irked *Chatelaine* editor Rona Maynard, who protested that her magazine had an IQ too, along with its tips on How to Blow-Dry Like a Pro.)

Other responses were less effusive; some were downright hostile. Probably the most considered response was offered by Antonia Zerbisias, *The Toronto Star's* media reporter, who says that although *Elm Street* wasn't "the slick and sophisticated women's mag the Canadian market is missing," it was still "a refreshing change from all those earnest features" the others offered. She also claimed that *Elm Street* was making the competition nervous. If that's true, nobody's admitting it. The Three Sisters of Canadian women's magazines (little *Homemaker's*, with a circulation of 1.3 million; *Chatelaine*, with 900,000; and *Canadian Living*, with around 600,000) are all healthy, with well-established readerships; and their editors shrug off the suggestion that the new arrival is any real threat. *Homemaker's* editor Sally Armstrong admits, "They're certainly competition for advertising dollars – anyone who says they're not is naive." But since *Elm Street's* editorial is more upscale than that of *Homemaker's*, she's not overly concerned about competition for readers.

Neither is Maynard, who points out that *Elm Street's* service component is much higher-end than hers. *Chatelaine* readers, she says, have told her they want affordable clothing of the chain-store genre and easy, fast weekday meals, rather than painterly layouts of expensive clothes and "elaborate company meals for serious cooks."

(Masthead's irreverent "Code Breaker," which translates trade doublespeak, says the proper diplomatic formula for the old books is: "We welcome the new magazine in our market. Competition is good for everybody." Decoded for industry insiders, this becomes: "Who do these bastards think they are?")

So *Elm Street's* rivals were discreet in public, graciously conceding the first issue's appeal. In private, though, post-hype disenchantment reigned – perhaps simply because Cameron's reputation had aroused high expectations for all aspects of the magazine. She had little to do with the art direction, for instance, but many felt let down by it. One senior magazine editor says he'd expected "something a bit more energized – frankly, I thought the look was a bit staid." Don Obe, another old-timer, agrees. "Haroutiun is brilliant, but I don't think *Elm Street* is integrated enough visually – it looks like a whole bunch of different magazines," he says. "You may like *Chatelaine* or not, but page by page you know you're reading *Chatelaine*."

Another major criticism was that *Elm Street* lacked a clear focus. Veteran writer and editor Jim Cormier shrewdly attributed the "hodge-podge" to Cameron's balancing of personal interest and editorial expedience, "a mix of what the owners wanted and her own impulses." His own experience at *Equinox* had taught him that just publishing interesting stuff isn't enough: if the material isn't "filtered with discipline, it may have difficulty finding an audience."

One could speculate that Cameron, sensitive about her lack of experience, is simply unwilling to trust her own magazine judgment yet. That lack of self-confidence may be self-correcting. Observers acknowledge that to find its voice, a new

publication needs anywhere from several issues to several years. Cameron herself, though, insists the magazine already is focused – just in a different direction than critics were expecting. Then again, possibly even she isn't entirely certain yet where that direction is.

It's November '96, and Stevie Cameron is in her office at Multi-Vision. The second issue has come out to favourable reviews, and the third is well under way; so she's at leisure, briefly, to correct rumours and answer questions about *Elm Street*. About the name, for instance – why pick one so redolent of slasher films? "It was the only one we didn't all fight over!" she says. The general favourite was *Mayfair*, until the team heard about the British porn rag of that name. Finally, sales rep Mary Coughlin suggested their street name. Cameron likes it: "It's a nice plain-Jane name, and there's an Elm Street in every town in Canada."

And about the first cover, a monochromatic family portrait of Matthew Perry with four cute siblings. Although MacNeil defended it ("It's kind and warm, people like that"), it evoked an almost universally negative reaction. One forthright editor described it as "among the worst I've ever seen – it looks like an Eaton's catalogue." Others simply felt it was a poor choice; there was gossip that Cameron had wanted a harder-hitting cover, but had been overruled by MacNeil.

In fact, the choice was dictated by timing. For business reasons, the launch – originally scheduled for spring 1996 – had to be postponed until autumn. Because Cameron was committed to be out of the country until mid-June, she had to keep track from abroad and then hustle to assign stories when she got back. As a result, the much-anticipated first issue was put together in unseemly haste: copy was still being added three weeks before press date. And with such a time-crunch, Perry was simply the best of the available cover shots. Cameron, exasperated, flips through the options she and Haroutian had to choose from: this is pick-up art; this is just an old file photo; this isn't good enough quality; this was used already...

What about Barbara Frum, surely the obvious choice? The story itself, she points out, was really about the Frum offspring's reinvention of her. More to the point, *Saturday Night* had beaten them to the cover shot, and they couldn't get photo permissions. Well, the picture of the bloodied cuffs from the corporate wife-abuse story? Cameron looks outraged at the suggestion. "Not if you want people to buy the magazine!"

Inside the book, Cameron concedes ruefully, one item that attracted major criticism was the premiers' makeover feature. With the magic of Photoshop, *Elm Street* had turned cosmetic surgeons loose on eight of the 10 provincial leaders, electronically nipping and digitally tucking their faces. Nora McCabe's prose was lively: would Joe Clark, she mused, "still be prime minister if God – or a good plastic surgeon – had only given him a chin?" But the pictures failed dismally. The difference between before and after was barely visible, and the joke fell flat. That feature, along with the cover, always headed up the list of journalistic cavils at *Elm Street*.

But on the whole, sniping was confined to industry insiders – as Greg MacNeil, knowing journalists for a querulous bunch, had foreseen. “Don’t give it to the writing community, give it to someone in our target group,” he had advised. And it’s true that, except for the few who disliked the premiers piece (“You promised no makeovers!” some complained), readers – both male and female – responded warmly to *Elm Street*. Letters, e-mails and faxes expressing gratitude for the new magazine papered the wall outside Cameron’s office, and few seemed inclined to criticize the magazine’s IQ. Magazine fan Linda Turk, who lives on a farm near Thunder Bay, dismisses the quibbles. “What should it be, an unsellable collection of serious pieces?” she scoffs. “To me it seems a cheeky but solid magazine, and I wish it well.”

The tastes of her new constituency have changed some of Cameron’s own ideas. As a reader, her view used to be: Don’t show me any fourth-generation Muskoka cottages I can’t afford! Now she works in an environment where decor, like fashion, is seen as intensely aspirational: people want to look at things they can dream about having, the theory goes, not at those they can actually have. And her new perspective as an editor had also changed her opinion of advertising. “Baking inserts used to really irritate me,” she confesses. “But now I rejoice, because they give me money to hire good writers.”

Will intelligent readers share her newfound tolerance, though, and reconcile an aspiring *Toronto Life* with 10 pages of Robin Hood recipes? Do they understand the intimate connection between the good writing they enjoy, and the baking inserts that may irritate them too? And can Cameron, with her strong principles, really feel comfortable attempting the extraordinary while being bankrolled by the mundane?

That perceived incompatibility has some observers questioning, if not how *Elm Street* itself will fare, then at least how long Cameron will stay there. So far, MacNeil has allowed her a free hand (somewhat to Cameron’s surprise: “I thought he’d turn into a monster, but he’s been very tolerant,” she confided). Still, he wants her to edit a women’s magazine, and she wants to redefine the concept: “I wasn’t hired to do a gender-free magazine,” she says. “I’m trying to get away with it.”

No wonder insiders like former *Masthead* editor Doug Bennet speculate on “the relationship between Greg and Stevie, hard-nosed commercial publisher and hard-nosed investigative journalist. So far so good, but I wonder if eventually there’ll be a clash.” Another young editor, characteristically blunt, agrees. “It’s unlikely Stevie’s going to hang around for long,” he says. “Her heart isn’t really into magazines. And when she leaves, whatever credibility *Elm Street* had will go with her – people will forget she was ever associated with it.”

Maybe. After four issues, though, she’s still at *Elm Street*’s helm, and still learning by trial and error. The second cover, a head shot of comedian Cathy Jones wearing a towel turban and a saucy smile, made up for the first in audacity. (“How many other magazines would put a woman with a towel on her head on their cover?!” MacNeil demanded proudly.” Inside was more comedy: the genuinely funny Roseanne vs. Skoke mouth-off, the useful and delightful wine-advice article and the cute trophy-

husband column. What wasn't there, unfortunately, was the full profile of Jones that readers might have expected; there was only a photo and a hundred-word blurb. Too late, Cameron realized that a great cover needs backing up.

By the third issue, cover and story were wrestled into congruity: an elegant cover photo heralded a stylish feature on Si Wai Lai, the Chinese businesswoman who's buying up Niagara-on-the-Lake. But beginning with the "Your Break Today" piece, which read more like a history assignment than a diversion, the comedy of the previous issue gave way to sobriety. Serious, tough-women stuff predominated: filmmaker Bonnie Sherr Klein on rebuilding her life after a stroke, Brenda Morrison on the infamous Prison for Women strip-search, and workers at Toronto's McGill Club on fighting exploitation.

With such swings in tone and content, can Cameron be said to have imprinted herself on the fledgling publication? So far, Robert Mason Lee thinks not; he says *Elm Street's* major flaw is that "there's not enough Stevie in it." And it's true she seems to be holding herself back: the magazine is nowhere near as subversive as one edited by Cameron ought to be. From her, people expect incisive commentary, wicked and flamboyant women, naughty humour.

They get some of those, but mostly just an awkward dualism. On the one hand, Cameron recognizes the importance of providing fashion and inspiring role models. On the other, she's not really passionate about clothes herself, and has an aversion to "worthy" stories. She has, she says with a sigh, "this thing about women's magazines. I just want to do a mag that's fun to read, outrageous, informative."

That desire isn't always obvious; rather, one gets the impression she feels it's her duty to the formula (or the owners) to pour her own forceful personality into the existing magazine template. But a new publication needs that strong editorial presence if it's to become a firm voice for readers to recognize and respect. For now, Stevie Cameron's personal ambivalence is hobbling *Elm Street* far more than the practical inexperience she confessed to at the editors' lunch.

On that occasion, Cameron provoked another laugh when she announced that she didn't have a vision yet – she just knew what she *didn't* like in a magazine. And maybe that isn't the worst way for a new editor to feel her way into the job. As the fourth issue of *Elm Street* hits the stands, Cameron seems to be holding her own with her latest work-in-progress. For *On the Take*, she had the luxury of privacy. Editing a magazine, though, means making those first few missteps under public scrutiny.

But no one should be too quick to dismiss what Stevie Cameron can do – as one former prime minister, and thousands of readers, have already found.
