

Been there,

There's nothing American high society can do without Dominick Dunne knowing, including murder. But the \$1 million-a-year journalist's own bittersweet story is just as juicy, says Jeffrey Podolsky. Photographed by **François Dischinger**



Dunne that



PHOTOGRAPH: JONATHAN BECKER

Dominick Dunne with
Monica Lewinsky at the
2001 Vanity Fair
Oscar party. Opposite,
at home in Connecticut

Every Thursday, Dominick Dunne struts into Turnbull & Asser on Manhattan's East 57th Street and treats himself to a new tie – provided he feels he has worked hard enough that week. As the most famous reporter in America, on a *Vanity Fair* salary of around \$1 million a year, he can well afford them. He is an American institution, chronicling the crimes and misdemeanours of the rich and famous. For Dunne, crime does pay. Thirty years ago, though, things couldn't have been more different. He was a down-and-out Hollywood executive using Turnbull & Asser ties to find a vein to shoot up cocaine.

Narcotised by a life of Hollywood glitter, Dunne had become a failure, whose life was mired in a self-defeating pattern of drugs and alcohol. For most of his career, Dunne was a film and television producer – until he lost everything: his job, his family, his apartment, even his dog. The turning-point came in 1982, when he received a call saying that his 22-year-old daughter, Dominique, a budding actress who had already landed a memorable role in Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist*, had been strangled by a former boyfriend, John Sweeney, and lay near death in a Los Angeles hospital. 'I didn't recognise her at first, because they had shaved off all her hair and had put some kind of bolt in her head,' recalls Dunne. 'I absolutely worshipped my daughter, and she worshipped me. I kissed her shaved head and said, "Give me your talent."' Four days later, Dominique was taken off life support and died.

A year later, Dunne, a struggling novelist, was preparing to leave New York for Los Angeles for the trial of Dominique's murderer when, at the last moment, he decided to attend a dinner at the home of writer Marie Brenner. He was seated next to Tina Brown, then a visiting editor at *Vanity Fair*, who suggested that he keep a diary of the trial. The resulting article, 'Justice', was a heartbreaking account of Dominique's death and of how Sweeney, with the help of an insensitive defence attorney and an inept judge, served only two and a half years for his crime. Dunne soon became *Vanity Fair*'s first contract writer, earning about \$75,000 a year, a



huge amount at the time. He covered Hollywood's back corridors and scored scoops such as landing the first interview with Imelda Marcos after her husband's fall from power ('I knew what a climber she was, so I said to her, "I bring you love from Reinaldo and Carolina Herrera."' Dunne recalls. 'And you know what? She melted'). He became a fixture at the country's most infamous murder trials and a hugely successful author, publishing *The Two Mrs Grenvilles* in 1985, followed by *People Like Us*, *An Inconvenient Woman*, *A Season in Purgatory* and *Another City, Not My Own*, all of which were bestsellers.

'All that has happened to me in the years since her death, I attribute to her,' Dunne, 76, says of his daughter. 'I just believe she has guided me whenever I've been in a tight situation. She helped me find my own talent. She redirected me.' Yes, but at what price? 'I think he's much happier than he was,' says Tina Brown, 'but I think that he will always be haunted by what happened to his daughter. Her murder defined him, really. But he'd trade it all to have her back.'

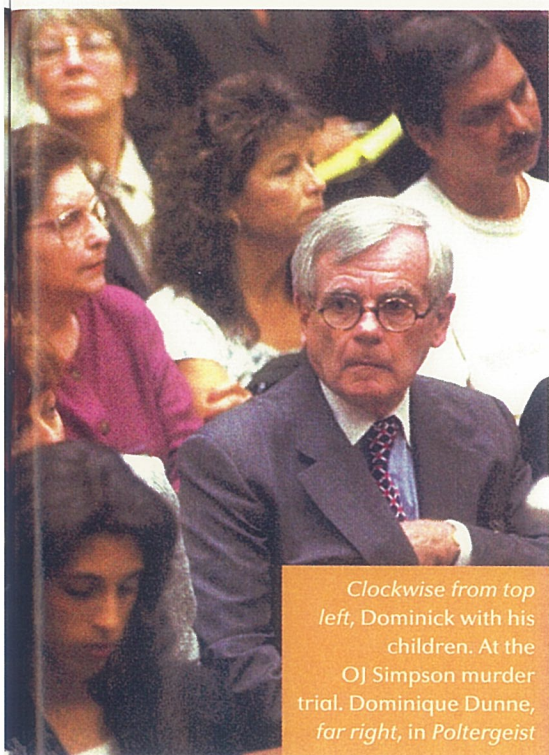
What is remarkable is that it was only at the age of 50 that Dunne found his mission in life: to see that the rights of the victim equal the rights of the defendant. He rails about how victims become lost in murder trials as

the focus of attention shifts to the defendant. 'It was disgusting,' he says. 'My daughter's trial made me know what I was going to do for the rest of my life. I'm a victims' advocate. Anything can be said about the dead victim who has no rights and is forgotten. Truth is like a fuckin' joke at these murder trials.'

He is a former board member of the National Victims Center founded by Claus von Bülow's stepchildren – and he writes unabashedly biased pieces in which the guilt of the defendant is declared long before a verdict has been handed down. He breaks all the conventional rules of balanced journalism, so much so that some writers believe he practises bad journalism. 'I don't give a shit!' Dunne responds. 'I say what's on everybody's mind. I don't care if they call it bad journalism, as long as I turn out to be right.'

Dunne's novels, thinly veiled romans à clef, are equally controversial and sometimes land him in hot water with his fancy friends. He based *An Inconvenient Woman* on the marriage of the powerful Los Angeles socialite Betsey Bloomingdale – and her husband Alfred's mistress. She forgave him, as did the slice of New York society that he parodied in *People Like Us*. The

'I just have to stand in the lobby of Claridge's and people I don't even know tell me stuff'



Clockwise from top left, Dominick with his children. At the OJ Simpson murder trial, Dominique Dunne, far right, in *Poltergeist*

character of the WASP-loving, insecure shoe designer Mickie Minardos was widely believed to be based on fashion designer Oscar de la Renta; and the horrifically nouveau riche social climbers Ruby and Elias Renthall so closely resembled, among others, society mavens Judy and Alfred Taubman that Taubman threatened to sue unless Dunne altered his manuscript. Dunne complied and became friends with Taubman – until he wrote about the former Sotheby's chairman's price-fixing scandal in *Vanity Fair* earlier this year. 'It's amazing how they all forgive me,' says Dunne, who believes Taubman is guilty of what he calls a 'sissy crime' but regrets falling out with him. 'If I were a flop, they'd never speak to me again. You get the pic?'

Upper East Side hostesses certainly do. The prevailing wisdom in Park Avenue

drawing rooms is that it is far better to have Dunne as a friend than as a foe. 'He is bitter and unleashes his hatred by taking up the causes of certain people,' says a prominent socialite who, like her contemporaries, doesn't dare allow her name to be used. 'I don't want him speaking nastily about me.'

The Kennedy family, however, has no such qualms. In 1993, Dunne, who had attended the wedding of Ethel and Robert Kennedy in 1950, published *A Season in Purgatory*, which received national attention for its striking similarities to the unsolved 1975 murder of Martha Moxley and its chief suspect, Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel. By that time, Dunne had become friends with Martha's mother, Dorothy, and had also arranged for former Los Angeles police detective Mark Fuhrman, of OJ fame, to investigate the murder. 'I restarted that whole fucking case,' Dunne says. 'I feel good about what I did. I made something happen. Somebody was getting away with it.'

There is no laziness or mental waste in Dunne's day. Even on weekends at his beloved country house, he rises before dawn, smooths the Porthault sheets on his bed (a habit he picked up in the army) and is at the country store by 7am for the morning papers and his requisite two cups of black coffee to go. He has no hobbies except for a love of books, theatre and film: he recently contributed hundreds of videos to the town library. In his dining room lies a stack of this year's Oscar-nominated films, which townspeople are welcome to borrow as long as they follow the house rules: two movies, two days, no third-party loans, no exceptions. 'I don't have time,' Dunne says. 'I mean, really, my life is work all the time.' There is no time for dwelling on the past or on the prostate cancer for which he successfully underwent chemotherapy last year. Besides, there's the Skakel trial to cover, a new novel, *A Solo Act* (a sequel to *People Like Us*) to write, and a Court TV show premiering in June, *Dominick Dunne's Power, Privilege and Justice*, which he's hosting and which will profile – what else? – crimes of the rich and powerful.

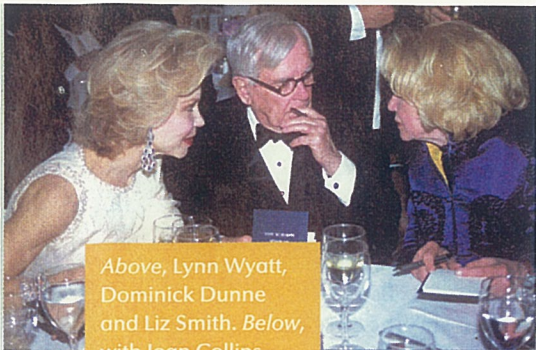
The diminutive writer, who could pass for a pre-war public-school master, dishes

the dirt while also conveying the underlying social fabric. His enemies dismiss him as a tragic character obsessed with avenging his daughter's murder and whose deeply partisan, investigative pieces – on Claus von Bülow, OJ Simpson, the parent-slating Menendez brothers – unjustly taint public perception of those on trial. They consider his monthly *Vanity Fair* diary to be nothing more than aimless meanderings on some oh-so-famous friend he bumped into at the party of one fabulously rich socialite or another. 'He's the Jacqueline Suzanne of journalism,' says *New York Times* Style writer Bob Morris. 'I'm not a shameless name-dropper,' Dunne says. 'I always wanted to be with famous people from the time I was a kid and I've known 'em for 50 years. You take any piece that I've written and it's about social history, explaining the world of the rich and powerful and how they live. I'm like this outsider on the inside. Nobody, or very few people, has this kind of access.'

Dunne weaves together his social life, his reporting and his novels so that one nourishes the other. Unlike most successful novelists who began their career in journalism, Dunne hasn't abandoned the craft. He has remained a magazine writer, which keeps him on edge, renewing his contacts and honing his observations, all of which become grist for his novels. 'I just have to stand in the lobby of Claridge's, the Ritz, the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, and people come up to me and tell me stuff,' Dunne says with an impish grin. 'People I don't even know! It's the most amazing thing.'

Blow Horn Before Entering. Dogs May Be Out' reads the sign outside the driveway leading up to Dunne's grey, white-shuttered country house in rural Connecticut.

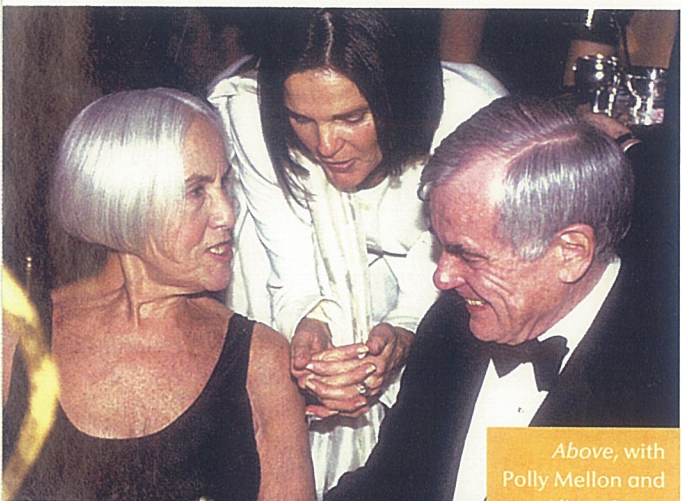
It is an unsettling but necessary warning. The only problem is that there are no dogs. Dunne received several death threats following the OJ Simpson trial, and, in his 20 years of reporting for *Vanity Fair*, he has made his share of enemies. Friends and neighbours feel that Dunne should be a little more wary about who may be lurking outside his door. 'Yeah, I guess I have to be careful,' says Dunne, who skirts around his English-antique-and-chintz-laden home with the spryness of a 20-year-old. 'There's so many



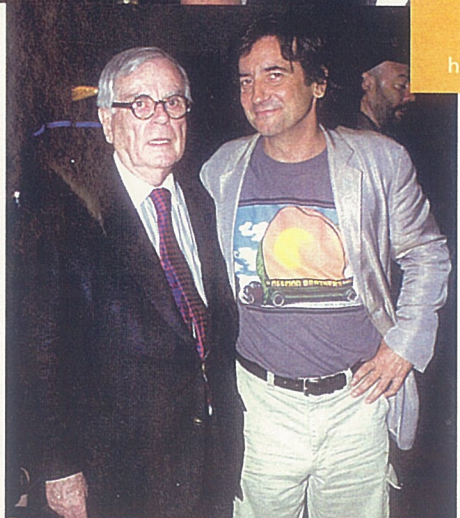
Above, Lynn Wyatt, Dominick Dunne and Liz Smith. Below, with Joan Collins



‘He raises gossip to an art form but his social life isn’t as important as his writing life. In the end, he’s not there for the dinner party’ **TINA BROWN**



Above, with Polly Mellon and Ali McGraw. Below, with his son, Griffin



people who really have it in for me. I’ve had some very big people hate me.’

Some, like Frank Sinatra, are dead. Others, like the Kennedy family, are more difficult to avoid. Not that Dunne cares. They’ll just have to give him a wide berth, which isn’t so easy these days. Dunne’s

fame allows him to champion the cause of underdogs like Martha Moxley and Ted Maher, the lone nurse held by the Monte Carlo police for billionaire banker Edmund Safra’s mysterious death. During the Claus von Bülow trial, he took up the cause of the comatose Sunny von Bülow’s children, Princess Ala von Auersperg and Prince Alexander von Auersperg, who invited him to spend the night at their mother’s Newport mansion, Clarendon Court. Dunne traipsed

through Sunny’s bedroom and eyed her unwrapped Christmas presents and he also lunched with her husband at her Fifth Avenue apartment. ‘Claus hated me, and I hated him, too,’ Dunne says. ‘I never found him witty. He had heavy-furniture charm. I’ve since seen him in London, and he looked the other way.’

Dunne’s coverage of the von Bülow trial gave him his first opportunity to mix the elements of the criminal world and the world of high society, which he knew so well. The OJ Simpson trial was another

opportunity. What other reporter dined with Hollywood’s elite every evening, lunched with Nancy Reagan every Saturday, spent Sundays at Elizabeth Taylor’s home, and flew over to brief Diana, Princess of Wales, on the trial? ‘I was overwhelmed by her presence,’ Dunne says of Diana. ‘She was one of the greatest stars I’d ever been in the presence of. She walked into the room with her hand out

and said, “Don’t tell me that they’ve let you out of that trial.” She was very serious about OJ. She knew the case.’

Dunne’s topsy-turvy life began in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was one of six children of a prominent Irish Catholic heart surgeon.

He grew up wanting to be a ‘child saint’ but began to see himself as an outsider at an early age – a ‘short mick’ infatuated with WASPs and movie stars. His father, a disciplinarian who beat Dunne until he had welts on his back, never understood his son’s predilection for playing with puppets instead of with bats and balls. ‘I had a terrible time with my father,’ Dunne says. ‘I was a sissy, I wasn’t a good athlete. He made me feel so inadequate. He made me feel like a failure.’ Dunne belatedly earned his father’s respect after he was drafted into the army, aged 18, and fought in Europe in the Second World War, where he earned a Bronze Star. But he never got the chance to discuss his ‘demons of inadequacy’ with his father, who died while Dunne was a freshman at Williams College.

Dunne dreamed of being an actor but instead became a TV stage manager. In 1954, he married Ellen ‘Lenny’ Griffin, a rich cattle heiress, and three years later they moved to Hollywood, where he became a producer at 20th Century Fox and a vice-president at Four Star (a television studio owned by David Niven, Charles Boyer and Dick Powell). The Dunes settled in Beverly Hills and had five children (two of whom died shortly after birth): Griffin, 44, an actor-director (*Practical Magic*, *Addicted to Love*) and a former boyfriend of Sophie Dahl; Alex, 42, a schoolteacher living in northern California; and Dominique. ‘He seemed to have the dream life,’ says a close friend, screenwriter Mart Crowley (*The Boys in the Band*). When they hosted a grand gala, the invitations were engraved by Smythson’s and their children were ensconced in a hotel with a nanny to make room for such guests as the Ronald Reagans, the Billy Wilders, Natalie Wood, David Niven, Gina Lollobrigida and Truman Capote. ‘They were the Fitzgeralds of Hollywood in the Sixties,’ Crowley says. ‘Their library was celebrity city. Warren Beatty would be playing the piano. We were all doing the twist, the frug and the monkey – everything but dancing on tabletops.’

In 1966 Lenny, tired of the social whirlwind, separated from Dunne (she eventually divorced him in 1970). They remained friends until Lenny, who suffered from multiple sclerosis and became an invalid, died in 1997. But Dunne's career as an independent film producer was unravelling. When his film *Ash Wednesday*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, bombed at the box office, Dunne's fate was sealed: he was branded a failure, Hollywood's most unforgivable sin. It didn't help that Dunne was drinking heavily, smoking pot and using cocaine. During a Thanksgiving holiday, he had been busted at the Los Angeles airport, in full view of two of his children, for having 'a lid of grass' in his possession. 'They strip-searched me, handcuffed me behind my back and walked me past my children,' Dunne recalls. 'My cellmate was a killer.' The downward spiral had begun. He set a hotel living room on fire while using amyl nitrate and went to his daughter's high-school graduation stoned. He could no longer support himself, let alone his children. Unemployed and broke, Dunne contemplated suicide three times: he almost jumped in front of a train in Santa Barbara; he took a kitchen knife to bed, hoping to roll on top of it; and he flirted with overdosing on pills.

In 1979, he left town in a cheap Ford and headed for the Oregon hills, where he rented a one-room cabin. 'We knew he was at the lowest point of his life,' says his then landlady Joyce Osika. She recalls how Dunne would hold a very heavy cross, given to him by Elizabeth Taylor, which he wore around his neck. 'We didn't know at the time how close he was to destroying his own life,' Osika says. His salvation was to begin writing 'I am like this outsider on the inside. Very few people have my kind of access' his first novel, *The Winners*, about Hollywood corruption and failure. 'When you're alone, the bullshit stops,' Dunne says. 'I was full of shit even when I went broke. Oregon really brought me to my knees.' He considered becoming a shoe salesman but, after six months, Dunne returned to Los Angeles, invited all his rich friends over and sold everything he owned (Dodi Fayed purchased a French chest) with the exception of his photo albums (he had already sold his West Highland terrier, Alfie, for \$300 to a friend). With one suitcase and a typewriter, he moved to New

York City, regularly began attending AA meetings (he hasn't touched a drink since) and finished his novel, which was a terrible flop. 'It was sheer willpower. I was determined to do it,' he says, clenching his fists. 'Just determined to get back on my feet again and not just get a job. Then, of course, it happened beyond my wildest dreams.'

A fire, which Dunne's caretaker has built, blazes behind a leather fender that Dunne sold during his garage sale to his great friend, *Vanity Fair* contributing editor Wendy Stark, and bought back for \$800. Although Dunne has divulged intimate details of his difficult life in his *Vanity Fair* diary and his memoir, *The Way We Lived Then*, he is not one to muse over life's misgivings. 'Nick is very private in the end,' Tina Brown says. 'He doesn't want to share his inner being.' Ask him to share whether he's conquered his youthful fantasies of hobnobbing with the stars and he grows exasperated. 'Well, of course I have!' he declares. 'I mean, please! Look, what's happened to me! I've had a murdered child. I've gone completely broke. I'm a celebrity myself. If you've had terrible things happen to you, life changes you.' By all accounts, no one relishes his hard-earned stardom more than Dunne – and he isn't afraid to say so. 'I'm quite pleased with myself,' he admits. 'I've worked hard for this. And I got it.'

He hopes to die on the job, and, celebrity that he is, he doesn't envisage a quiet death: "Dominick Dunne, novelist and journalist, was shot to death on Fifth Avenue yesterday." I always think that's in the works for me.' He has already planned his funeral, including the church, the music, the pall-bearers, the five speakers (who will get four minutes each), the wake afterwards at the 21 Club and his grave across

the cove from his house. Perhaps it is no more than the Catholic spiritualism of his youth but Dunne doesn't fear the future because he knows he is not a solo act. 'I truly feel that my life has been guided by my daughter, and that's why I'm not afraid to die,' he says. 'I just know she's going to be there for me to get me through it.' □

DUNNE OVER

'There are so many people who really have it in for me. I've had some very big people hate me'



OJ Simpson Dunne covered the six-month trial and called the verdict 'one of the greatest shocks of my life'.



Claus von Bülow 'Claus hated me, and I hated him too.'



Judy and Alfred Taubman The unattractive protagonists of his caustic novel *People Like Us* closely resembled this society couple.



The Kennedys Dunne practically restarted the case of the 1975 murder of Martha Moxley and its chief suspect Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel by, again, making art mirror life in his acclaimed *A Season in Purgatory*.



Lily Safra In his pursuit of her husband's killers, Dunne even talked to Lily's dental hygienist.

WELL DUNNE

'Dunne's daughter's murder gave him his life's mission: a victims' advocate'



Sarah, Duchess of York For turning her life around 'after the worst publicity in the world and being broke'.



Ted Maher For being held by Monte Carlo's police for the murder of Edmund Safra; to Dunne he represents the archetypal lone underdog facing the wrath of the upper classes.



Camilla Parker Bowles For impeccable demeanour. 'She's really behaved. You can't fault her.'



Dorothy Moxley For losing, like him, a daughter, Martha, to murder.



Nicole Brown Simpson For losing her life, like his daughter, because someone thought: 'I don't want her, but nobody else can have her.'



Princess Ala and Prince Alexander von Auersperg For losing their mother, Sunny von Bülow (still in a coma).

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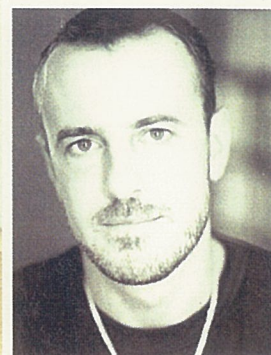
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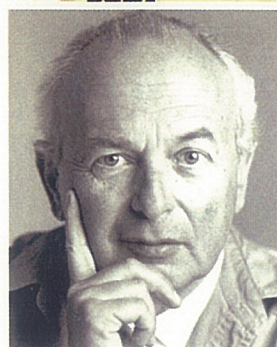
contributors



Jeffrey Podolsky



Patrick Neate



Arthur Elgort



Kinvara Balfour

'Dominick Dunne is a personal hero to me,' says **JEFFREY PODOLSKY** of the celebrated *Vanity Fair* crime writer and novelist who is by far the most recognisable reporter in America. 'He's the ultimate comeback kid whose intriguing life is an inspiration to late-starters everywhere. He's also an eloquent listener. That's what makes him such a great reporter.' Jeffrey lives in New York and can be found in Central Park at dawn, walking his 'son', an ebullient canine called Teddy.

Tatler film critic **PATRICK NEATE**'s last novel, *Twelve Bar Blues*, won the Whitbread Novel Award. More importantly, it got him on *The Weakest Link*, where he developed a crush on Anne Robinson, which he wishes was reciprocated. For ages, he claimed that his favourite film was Fellini's *8½* because 'I thought it made me sound clever'. In fact, he prefers films such as *Joe Versus the Volcano* and *George of the Jungle* 'and most others long of title and short of plot'.

'The whole crew had a great time,' says **ARTHUR ELGORT** of this month's shoot at Elle Macpherson's house on Harbour Island. 'She has the best dinner parties with amazing food and a great crowd of interesting people.' Such was her hospitality that the entire *Tatler* posse overslept on the morning of the shoot and had to be roused by their hostess. Arthur lives in New York with his wife, their three children and his collection of more than 100 cameras.

Writer turned model turned actress **KINVARA BALFOUR** is style and beauty editor of the *Saturday Telegraph* magazine and has modelled for, among others, Italian and Japanese *Vogue* and Italian *Elle*. A graduate of the Central School of Speech and Drama, she has acted in several short films, had a small part in *Entrapment* and, last year, reached the last 30 for *Big Brother 2*. She is addicted to beetroot and will eat four at a time, 'like apples'. For this issue, she profiles fantastic Mr Fix-It, Harry Becher.