

Canada's most venerable women's magazine has burned through two editors-in-chief and dozens of staffers in the past three years. The inside story of the battle over *Chatelaine*
By David Hayes

Who's the Boss?

LAST SUMMER, ON FRIDAY, JULY 13, the staff of *Chatelaine* assembled in the glass-walled boardroom on the eighth floor of the Rogers building on Mount Pleasant. The meeting had been called by the magazine's publisher, Kerry Mitchell, but no one knew quite what to expect. The past few years had been difficult for the editorial crew, and on this overcast morning they were wary and beleaguered.

Mitchell sat at the head of the table and announced that, effective immediately, editor-in-chief Sara Angel was "no longer working with us at *Chatelaine*." No explanation was offered. The rest of Mitchell's speech stuck to the future. Nothing had changed (although, in fact, everyone in the room knew very much had), there would be no other personnel realignments, and everyone should continue on course, putting out a very good magazine that's getting better and better. The company's support was behind *Chatelaine*, she continued, and Lise Ravary, Rogers' editorial director of women's titles and new magazine brands, who was sitting beside her, would help out until a new editor could be found.

Make that another new editor, since *Chatelaine* had burned through two in three years, not to mention dozens of staff members. Canada's largest magazine by revenue (\$56.3 million in 2006) and second largest by circulation (only *Reader's Digest* is larger),



The women of *Chatelaine* (clockwise from top): publisher Kerry Mitchell, former editor-in-chief Sara Angel and acting editor-in-chief Lise Ravary

Chatelaine is one of two flagships in the Rogers empire (*Maclean's* is the other), and for much of its 80-year history it has had a reputation for being a pretty stable place. Sometimes staid, not exactly setting journalism on fire, but steadily, predictably delivering what its loyal readers wanted.

Ever since Rona Maynard stepped down as editor-in-chief in 2004, things inside *Chatelaine* had been anything but predictable, the mood in the office pitched somewhere between anxious and neurotic. The publication that provided tips to women about how to make the best of themselves and their families had itself become dysfunctional.

Like a bad marriage, the *Chatelaine* story is messy and convoluted—an unhappy tale of miscommunication and naiveté. It features personality clashes between a wilful, controlling publisher and two editors: one a veteran who wouldn't tolerate interference, the other a headstrong and high-strung talent who had never edited a magazine before. Most sadly, it features

a slew of victims—staffers trying to do the best job they could in an increasingly untenable situation—and a corporation that tolerated, or ignored, the turmoil for a surprisingly long time.

THE CHATELAINE WAS FOUNDED in 1928 (“The” was dropped two years later) as the first Canadian general interest, mass-market magazine aimed at women. From the beginning, the mix of articles included a few that dealt with social issues along with a great many providing a service to women—helpful stories about food preparation, clothes, home decor, budgeting and health. The focus stayed the same for decades, with a different emphasis depending upon the era. In the post-war ’50s, content was geared to young parents raising children; from the ’60s to mid-’70s, editor Doris Anderson transformed it into a progressive voice for women’s rights and social justice (even today, this is the period most admired by young journalists attracted to *Chatelaine*); through the ’80s and early ’90s, under Mildred Istona, it struck a more be-

her ruthless. Pittaway, meanwhile, had a reputation for being pragmatic when it came to advertising. But according to Pittaway, the chemistry was volatile, and just 15 months after being named editor, she abruptly resigned, citing irreconcilable differences with Mitchell. Exasperated at the memory even today, she says, “The conversation often boiled down to ‘I don’t like the typeface on the photo captions. I don’t like the colour palette you’re using on bullets.’ Jesus Christ, that’s micromanaging, and layered in with ‘Why do we have so many depressing stories?’ and ‘Why wouldn’t we put the Dove soap models on the cover?’”

What also changed around this time, however, was the corporate landscape at Rogers. Several years ago, the company adopted what is known as a matrix structure, a centralized chain of command that, when it works, streamlines the management ranks and encourages collaboration. For example, where advertising sales directors once reported to the publishers of the magazines they worked for, they now reported to a senior VP of sales. While it makes sense to centralize this side of the business—advertisers would rather see just a few sales reps than many, and it’s easier to coordinate package deals—the matrix can complicate the workings of a magazine. As one senior manager said, it can leave publishers with less direct control over their sales departments, allowing them to focus more intensely on the editorial product.

In publishing, “church and state” describes the unspoken understanding that the editorial content and business opera-

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According to Mitchell and Lise Ravary, Pittaway never formally expressed her concerns, either to them or to upper management, and her resignation took them by surprise. “Kim’s departure was totally unexpected,” says Ravary. “We never saw it coming.”

For the next nine months, while senior execs at Rogers searched for a new editor—a search that was said to have included the U.S. and Europe—responsibility for the editorial department ostensibly fell to Ravary, but also, to some extent, to Mitchell, as well as a senior VP, Marc Blondeau. But they were all distracted by other things: Ravary was based primarily in Montreal and was responsible for more than a dozen other magazines. Mitchell had her ad sales departments to oversee, and Blondeau, also based in Montreal, was in charge of all the consumer publications. The editorial department had been left without a leader, and as a result, Rogers’ flagship, responsible for at least 20 per cent of the company’s publishing revenue, was floundering.

CHATELAINE FACES A CHALLENGE common to women’s magazines everywhere: how to evolve with the times while remaining relevant to readers who generally like things as they are. Coming up with a winning strategy isn’t easy. Do you target younger women with families or follow loyal boomers deeper into middle age? Do you rely on experts dispensing advice or emphasize women sharing their experiences with each other? Do you put celebrities on the cover or ordinary women? The wrong strategy could alienate core readers and fail to attract new ones. Though they may not have agreed on the exact approach, everyone around Rogers seemed to feel that *Chatelaine* needed modernizing.

In May 2006, Mitchell announced the appointment of Sara Angel as editor-in-chief. Though most people outside of book publishing—including the staff of

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nign but profitable middle ground—heavy on quick-and-easy recipes with a pinch of reporting and commentary.

Maynard, one of *Chatelaine*’s long-time writers and editors, succeeded Istona in 1994. Sensing that the concerns of women were shifting, she described the magazine as “the biggest kitchen table in Canada,” a monthly conversation among women across the country. Along with edgy feature writing (environmental illnesses, single mothers on welfare, lesbians in the workplace), she increased health and “personal growth” coverage at a time when interest in these areas was rising among *Chatelaine*’s readers.

Just as both Istona and Maynard had worked in the trenches at *Chatelaine* before assuming the editor’s role, Maynard’s successor—hand-picked by her and then-publisher Donna Clark—came from within. Kim Pittaway, managing editor at the time of her appointment, was a respected journalist who had contributed to the magazine

tions must be kept separate to maintain credibility with readers. Publishers are like mini-CEOs, responsible for the sales and marketing side; editors are mainly concerned with the quality and originality of stories and the intense bond between reader and magazine, although the best ones care about revenue and budgets as well. The indefinable, delicate chemistry between editor and publisher is the most important relationship at any magazine.

Although *Chatelaine*’s newly appointed publisher, Kerry Mitchell, hadn’t hired Kim Pittaway, there was no reason to think they wouldn’t work well together. Mitchell had started her career in editorial (she once worked as a research assistant at *Chatelaine*) before moving to ad sales. By the time she was named publisher of *Chatelaine* in 2004, she’d held the same position at both *Style at Home* and *Canadian Living* (*Chatelaine*’s main competitor). She’s frequently described as smart, strategic and relentlessly goal oriented, though some have also called

Chatelaine—didn't know who she was, it seemed an inspired choice, a leader who was a quintessentially modern Canadian woman. At 36, Angel was a publisher and writer who ran her own book-packaging company, specializing in lush, oversized pictorial books; she was married to a neurologist and about to have her second child; and she was interested in everything from home decor and food to health issues and the environment. Better known by her maiden name, Borins, she is the daughter of Edward and Eva Borins, who operated a small, upmarket chain of Toronto shops called Edwards Books & Art from the late '70s until the business went bankrupt in 1997. Armed with an art history degree from McGill, she started her career at Toronto publisher Madison Press, where veteran writer and editor Rick Archbold remembers her as a prodigiously smart and talented perfectionist. "She was my research assistant, but it didn't take her long to pole-vault over me, and soon I was working for her."

Angel drew up a proposal for *Chatelaine*, leaked to me via a third party, that impressed most people who read it at Rogers (a group already dazzled by her glowing list of champions, which included *Maclean's* editor Ken Whyte, former governor general Adrienne Clarkson and other luminaries). It contained a critique of the magazine as it was during the six months prior to her hiring. She wrote, "Current content in *Chatelaine* lacks timeliness, buzz and a packaging that matches the sophistication and style of the magazine's competitors. Therefore, while *Chatelaine* is touching on all of the right subject matter, since its editorial and visual selections fall short, the magazine looks like a poor second cousin to the world of smart and glamorous large-circulation women's magazines.... [*Chatelaine*] is like a great old house with terrific bones... [but it] needs a 21st-century update."

By all accounts, upon first meeting, Angel was as impressive as her proposal. Articulate and always smartly dressed—a self-described "hard-core girly girl"—she was, despite her inexperience, the kind of person Mitchell had been looking for. And although it may seem counterintuitive, it doesn't necessarily matter whether an editor-in-chief has run a magazine before, so long as their instincts are sound. But there are two things that do matter: Angel would need to be open to learning what she didn't know; and Rogers would have to help her adjust to running a staff of 30 within a major corporation.

There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence



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that Angel, for all her creativity, was a mercurial boss, a controlling micromanager who never understood how to delegate nor how to modulate her exceptionally high expectations of herself when dealing with employees. People left meetings in tears after listening to her harsh indictments of their work. Although none of her former employees are willing to speak for attribution, many described her behaviour as unpredictable and even cruel. “It would be really bad for a week,” says a former editor, “but then you’d be told you were amazing and for two minutes you would forget that you were awful for a week. It was emotionally abusive.”

When I talked to people who had worked with or for Angel outside *Chatelaine*, a pattern emerged. Although some—like Dianna Symonds, a former editor of *Saturday Night* (now managing editor at *Maclean's*), New York-based designer Leanne Shapton and author Charlotte Gray—speak of happy and collegial working relationships with Angel, many others confirm her volatility and unreasonable expectations. One publishing figure who worked with her on book projects says, “She could be supportive and even likable, but it’s like something was out of control just beneath the surface.” (Asked for a response, Angel said, “I am not in a position to make any comments.”)

Readers, of course, wouldn’t have known about editors crying in the office, but they probably noticed the magazine improving. It was almost immediately evident that Angel supported quality issue-oriented journalism. People were talking about the magazine for the first time in years, and there was excitement among freelance writers. On her watch, features were published on Louise Russo’s life after falling victim to a drive-by shooting, and how Reena Virk’s family came to forgive their daughter’s killer. There was a substantial state-of-Canadian-women package, as well as a story about women in Afghanistan (by long-time contributor Sally Armstrong). There were moving personal essays and consistently strong columns from contributors Katrina Onstad, Heather Mallick and Wendy Dennis. The look of the magazine was also improving, and a major redesign was in the works.

But before Angel’s new design was fully realized, a number of staff members complained to management—either to Mitchell, Ravary or human resources—about her erratic behaviour. Whether this triggered Angel’s departure or was merely one scene in a drama whose final act was already written is unknown. It’s likely that the complaints

added to management concerns over the direction of the magazine, which in turn led to some final confrontation. There were reports of Angel losing her temper during a meeting in Mitchell’s office. Not long afterward, she resigned.

How had it come to this? How could such a promising appointment lead to such turmoil? Angel may have felt pressure to reinvigorate the magazine, quickly and under tight deadlines. Like many entrepreneurs, she was freewheeling and intensely creative, accustomed to having complete control over her own boutique firm. Perhaps the demands proved overwhelming, and it manifested in her dealings with her staff. More than 15 staff members left during her 13-month tenure. As one well-placed insider told me, “You’ve got somebody who’s never managed a lot of people, never run a magazine, and never been a part of Rogers having to simultaneously learn about people, magazines and the company. And having no apparent support or guidance.” Some say Ravary tried to give guidance but Angel was unreceptive. Others say Ravary was so busy with two start-ups (*Chocolat*, the design and decor title, and *Hello!*, a celebrity magazine) that she was seldom available.

STANDING OUTSIDE THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF’S office last November, Ravary, who has a big, bold French-Canadian voice and a personality to match, faced a wall that was covered in pages for the upcoming issue. “Look at this story,” she said. “It’s by our production editor, Jennifer. It’s about how becoming a mom made her face up to the fact that she was overweight, so she lost 130 pounds. I defy anyone to read that story without crying. What a spiritual journey!” Then she pointed to the cover, bearing the image of soprano Measha Brueggergosman, and proudly said, “How many black women do you see on the covers of magazines in Canada these days?”

Ravary—a former editor of Air Canada’s inflight magazine, *enRoute*, *Elle Québec* and *Elle Canada*, explained a new policy at *Chatelaine* (“We won’t retouch people on our covers anymore, unless it’s temporary, like a pimple”), but she made it clear she would talk only about the present and future—not touch on any personnel issues. (Translation: anything to do with Sara Angel.) Though she’s used to travelling back and forth between Montreal and Toronto, she’s now here much of the time helping *Chatelaine’s* staff—led by the deputy editor, Maryam Sanati—get the magazine out until a new editor-in-chief is named.

Like most magazines, *Chatelaine* con-

ducts research to identify its readers' main interests. In this case, food is at the top of the list, closely followed by health and journalistic features (everything from profiles of prominent women to articles on social issues). Ranked somewhat lower are fashion, beauty and decor. However, this alone tells you little. To better understand their magazine's core readership, editors and publishers imagine a typical reader. In many cases, this is a fictitious composite, but *Chatelaine* uses a real woman, named Robin, identified through its extensive market research.

"Let me get you some pictures," said Ravary, who left for a minute and returned with a snapshot-covered sheet of bristol board that looked like a Grade 6 show-and-tell project. On it were photos provided by Robin depicting two children sleeping, a handbag, a headshot of Bono, three CDs, paraphernalia covering a fridge, an SUV with a trailer, and the inside of both a closet and a medicine cabinet.

"Robin is 37, lives in Markham, and is a representative for a pharmaceutical company," she explained. "She's married and has two children. Their combined household income is \$75,000 to \$80,000, so they're not wealthy but they have a comfortable life. The last book she read was

The Da Vinci Code. Those are the CDs in her car: Alanis, Diana Krall and U2. They rent a trailer and go off on family trips with the kids. She doesn't have 50 pairs of shoes; she has four or five, and they're scuffed because she doesn't have time to polish them...."

Though Ravary acknowledges that Robin can't speak for every reader, she says that having an actual person in mind does

Robin might have felt "inadequate" under Sara Angel's *Chatelaine*. Some say the new editor-in-chief either didn't understand *Chatelaine*'s core reader or she wanted to attract another demographic altogether. As much as Angel could identify with the broader issues at play in the lives of women today, there were concerns her interests were too urbane, her tastes too

"You've got somebody who's never managed a lot of people, never run a magazine, and no apparent support or guidance"

help them decide "how far to go" in their cultural choices. "She trusts us. We've never lied to her, and we've always made a sincere effort to understand her. If we come up with something she's never heard of, hopefully she'll say, 'Wow, this is cool, I'm going to discover this.' But we don't want to make her feel inadequate for not knowing something."

sophisticated. Commonly cited examples include fashion spreads featuring \$950 Christian Louboutin snakeskin shoes, a \$945 Jeremy Laing jacket and a \$3,200 Diamant watch. There was also a piece on gratuities that advised tipping your nanny a week's salary (with an "insider" suggestion that one family gave their nanny and her daughter return tickets home to England

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for the holidays). The redesign Angel was overseeing was said to have been inspired, but too edgy and upscale for a mass-market magazine like *Chatelaine*.

Angel had hired Leanne Shapton to consult on the redesign. Shapton recalls the meeting at which she realized management was getting cold feet over its direction. "Personally, I felt there were too many cooks in the design kitchen," she says. "There was a design firm, a consultant from Montreal, a consultant from New York, Web panels, and a reader called Robin who they began deferring to, as in 'Robin doesn't like this,' and 'Robin wouldn't be comfortable.' It was clear that decisions were being made by focus groups and committees and everyone was nervous about rethinking the brand." Not long afterward, the redesign was shelved and Ravary took over. Today, another new design is in the works, to be unveiled in May to coincide with the magazine's 80th anniversary.

Kerry Mitchell can't be happy about the way things have played out: under her watch, Pittaway resigned, the much-ballyhooed Angel appointment ended disastrously and, most recently, France Lefebvre quit as editor of the French *Châtelaïne* after just eight months on the job. (All three re-

ported to Mitchell.) Now *Chatelaine* is entering its second extended period without a dedicated editor-in-chief (five months as of this writing). When I met with Mitchell, I mentioned that many people expressed astonishment that Rogers would leave a flagship drifting rudderless again.

"You know, these things don't drift rudderless," she said. "I forget when Lise assumed the role of editorial director, but she certainly is a great editorial leader in our company and in our country. I know there's a presumption we've been without editorial leadership, but, in fact, we've had solid leadership and we're in quite a stable period right now." When I asked Mitchell what type of person she wanted to see as editor of *Chatelaine*, she said her primary concern was finding someone who "has respect for and an understanding of the readership, and who understands the meaning of *Chatelaine* for its community."

So, maybe Sara Angel was just the wrong choice, a round peg being forced into a square hole. It's certainly possible that, having taken so long in their search for a new editor, the need to make an impressive announcement grew more urgent. "I suspect that when they found Sara, there was a blinding hallelujah moment," says

a long-time magazine industry observer. "We've got somebody who's presentable, accomplished, from outside the magazine industry...." Maybe the higher-ups were so thrilled with their find that they overlooked the risks. And yet the obvious question is, how is it that one highly qualified person from within Rogers can be groomed to be editor, and a second high-powered person can be brought in from outside after a long search, and neither of them work out?

Not long ago, I talked to an ex-*Chatelaine* editor who had thought that working for the country's premier women's magazine would probably be the apex of her career. But after living through the upheaval following Kim Pittaway's resignation, the long, puzzling wait for a replacement, and finally the mounting frustrations of the Angel regime, she quit. Several months later, she was stunned to hear about Angel's departure. "My feelings were mixed," she says today. "First I was thrilled. It was about time Sara Angel got her comeuppance, I thought. But in the end, I just felt sad—for her and for the magazine. I couldn't believe that a publication with *Chatelaine's* reputation could get into a state like this, and I have to wonder why Rogers let it happen." **END**

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