

‘Make her skin a little lighter’: Editor Justine Cullen exposes realities of decades in mags

By Zoe Samios
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Elle Australia's former editor-in-chief Justine Cullen has laid bare some of the realities of working in the magazine industry, including a request to lighten the skin of US celebrity Beyoncé and Photo-shop celebrity heads onto preferred bodies. Cullen, who left the helm of fashion bible *Elle* after five years in 2018, has claimed her decision to leave the title was over concerns it would not survive a year under its then-owners Bauer Media.



Former *Elle* editor-in-chief Justine Cullen has released a new book.

“I love *Elle*. For many years I thought I’d be one of those editors that died there or that they’d have to build me an office and I’d be turning about 80,” she told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* ahead of the release of her new novel, *Semi-Gloss*. “But when I was looking at the industry, and particularly [Bauer Media] ... I had to make some tough calls. One of those was where would *Elle* be in five years under Bauer or even one year? And where did I want to be? And did those places collide? Sadly, as much as I loved the job, the answer was no.”

The print edition of *Elle Australia*, which launched in 2013, was axed mid-last year by Bauer due to significant advertising downturn related to the coronavirus pandemic. A digital version of the product was revived by its new owners, Mercury Capital, later that year.

In her book *Semi-Gloss*, Cullen talks about the challenges of spending three decades in an industry that is suffering from advertising and distribution decline. Cullen says that magazine editors were often trying to put out quality magazines despite cutting budgets to a quarter of what they were originally.

But she also unveils other expectations – referencing a time when she pitched a story as her boss went to the toilet, and a separate occasion when she took a front cover of a magazine featuring Beyoncé to her publisher.

“The publisher held the cover in her hands and looked at it approvingly. ‘It’s wonderful,’ she nodded. I gave a relieved little sigh and turned to leave the room. But just as I got to the door, she glanced back up from her computer screen and piped up, nonchalantly, as though having an afterthought, ‘Are you going to make her skin a little lighter?’”

Cullen said that sort of behaviour was very common when magazine publishers became capable of retouching images through technological developments.

“Celebrities’ heads would be cut off and replaced with another head, or there was one instance – not on one of my magazines, but on one of the other magazines – where a fashion assistant got shot in a pair of jeans so that they could put that brand of jeans on the celebrity on the cover,” she says. “There were some horrific things that happened in those days and when you look at that through a modern-day lens, it’s really hard to swallow.”

Cullen’s book also discusses the challenges of breaking down stereotypes and cultural barriers. The book mentions a proposal by management to use a single Google-translated story across magazines including *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, *Belle* and *Cosmopolitan*.

“I talk a lot in the book about some of the other challenges around the perception at the time that black people didn’t sell on the cover, or that Asian people wouldn’t sell on the cover and not being allowed to run people like Rebel Wilson for a long time because they thought she wouldn’t sell on a cover,” she says.

“One of the things that we tried really hard to do at *Elle* was to break down some of those barriers and to prove that people wanted more than just a regular TV blonde on every single cover of every magazine.”

Cullen is currently editor-in-chief of *Jones Magazine*, a paid-for publication that’s filled with products found at David Jones. It’s owned by Medium Rare, an agency dedicated to creating magazines that are paid for by brands.

“I do think it’s the future in many ways,” she says. “It’s where the budgets are there to make a great product, to fulfil innovation, to do things that are new and exciting.”