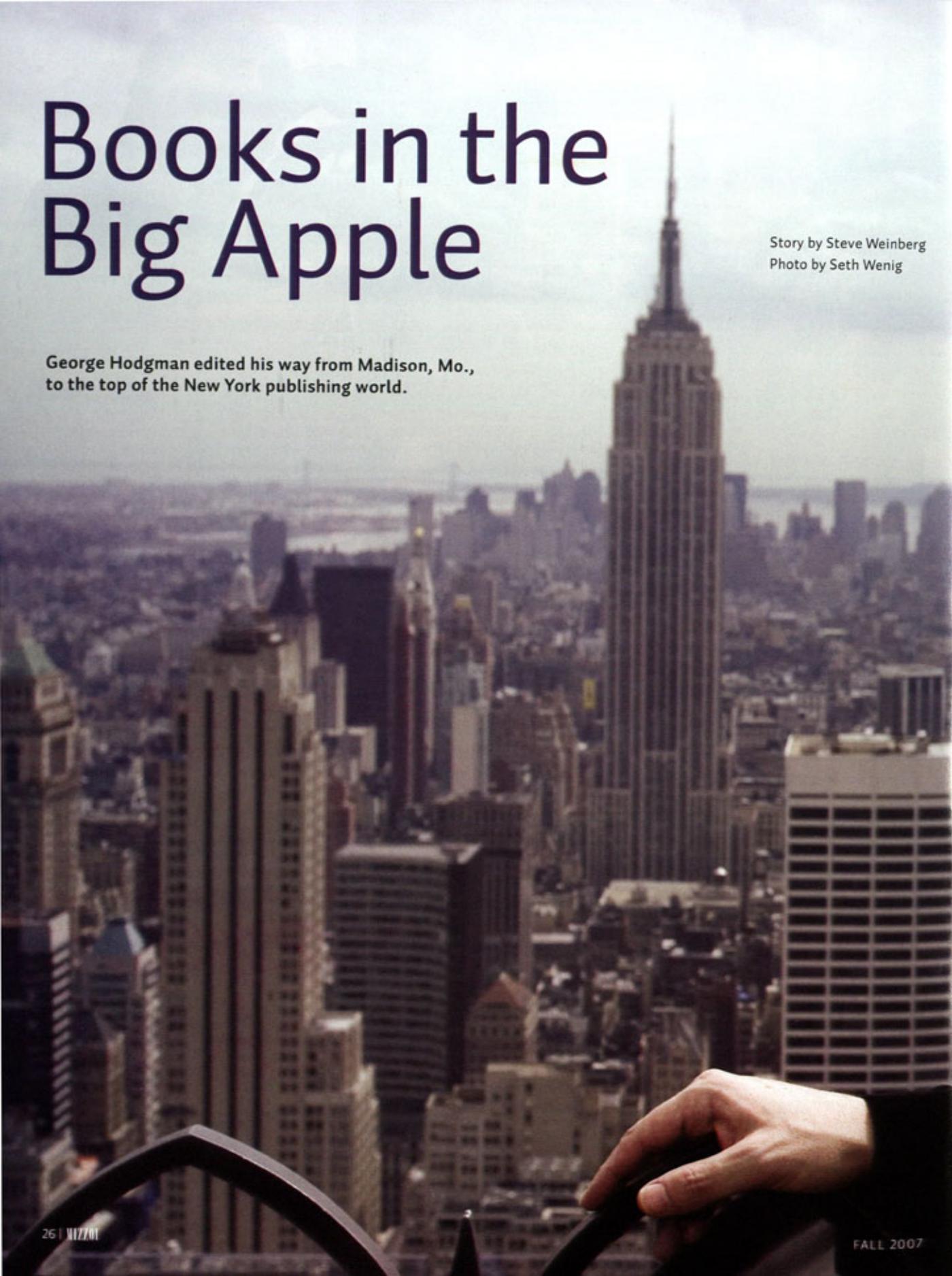
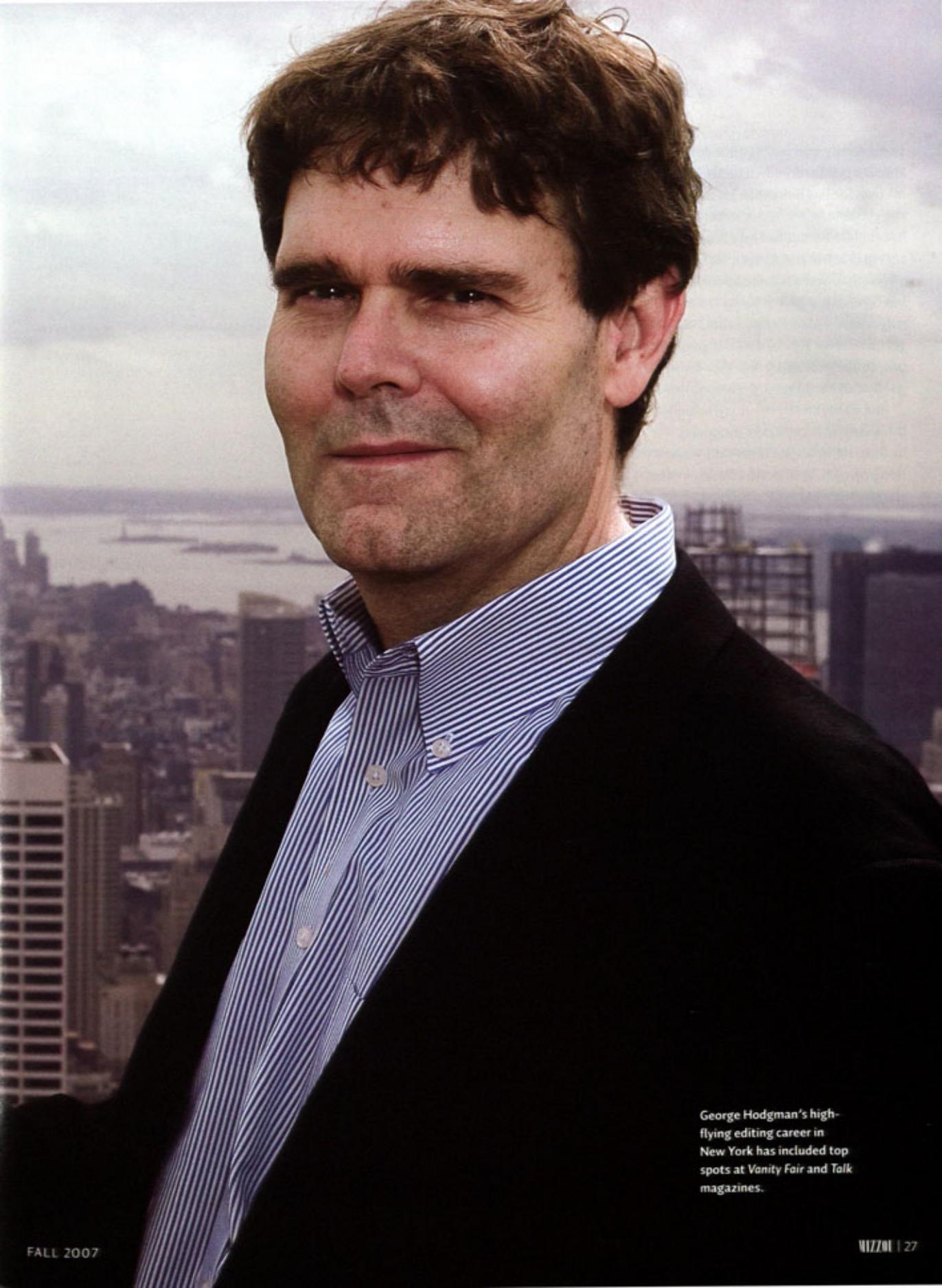


Books in the Big Apple



Story by Steve Weinberg
Photo by Seth Wenig

George Hodgman edited his way from Madison, Mo., to the top of the New York publishing world.



George Hodgman's high-flying editing career in New York has included top spots at *Vanity Fair* and *Talk* magazines.

George Hodgman is a big-time editor. He knows a great story when he sees one, and his own life has more than its share of storybook stardust. He's the kind of guy who lives in Manhattan and eats lunch with literary types at hot restaurants. He has edited a book that won a National Book Award. He has up and quit jobs at *Vanity Fair* and *Talk* magazines — places most editors can't even get interviews. He can dole out gossip about people like publishing diva Tina Brown, gossip that could singe eyebrows.

But all the literary-luminary, behind-the-scenes, glamour-career-in-turmoil material is the tail end of his yarn. When Hodgman, BA, BJ '81, relates the story of his life, he's selling a classic small-town-boy-makes-good script. Granted, it's a cliché. But clichéd plots sell — Ever heard of boy-meets-girl? — and it plays even better if it's nonfiction.

Talk about real-life small towns. Try Hodgman's hometown of Madison, Mo. When Hodgman was born there in 1959, his presence increased the total population considerably. The only child of Betty Anne Baker, BS Ed '47, and George Albert Hodgman, young George grew up in Madison until high school. Sensing his intellectual potential, his parents wanted to offer him greater academic variety, so they moved up the road to the larger town of Paris, pop. 1,300.

George tuned in to current events, and during his senior year he made national news of his own. He took exception to a critical comment that CBS broadcast journalist Morley Safer made about Barbara Walters, so he wrote a letter to Safer. A few weeks later, CBS called Hodgman at school to talk about the letter; the network broadcast part of the discussion on national radio.

Hodgman moved to Columbia to attend MU in fall 1977 and entered the School of Journalism two years later. As a student at Mizzou, he initially felt outclassed. As a reporter, he shied from asking sensitive questions and soon began thinking that editing might be his best way of working with words. He certainly understood a

strong story line when he saw it. In 1980, sent by a *Columbia Missourian* editor to write about a Loretta Lynn country music concert in Jefferson City, Hodgman was so nervous that he arrived four hours early. He noticed Lynn groupies hanging around her tour bus. Hodgman hung out, too, listening to the groupies discuss their singing idol. "I've always been fascinated with obsessions," Hodgman says. "I realized they were the story more than Loretta Lynn." His story about the groupies earned him a grade of A.

After graduating from MU, Hodgman

'I was afraid that if I heard her [editor Tina Brown] say, "I've got to have something hot" one more time, I would throw a bucket of water on her.'

earned a master's degree from Boston College in 1983, majoring in English and American literature. He also attended the Radcliffe Publishing Procedures program, thought to be *de rigueur* for young publishing hopefuls.

After all that, the small-town boy was still in the humble-start part of his story. His first publishing job involved editing computer books, but the company crashed after a year. Then he found himself slogging through writing chores at the venerable stock brokerage firm of E.F. Hutton. "I'm probably the most inappropriate person who ever worked at Hutton," he recalls. "My shirttail wouldn't stay tucked in, and I couldn't balance my checkbook."

But the stability of the Hutton firm allowed Hodgman to plan for his next move along the path to becoming a presence on the Manhattan literary scene. He finally got in at publishing giant Simon & Schuster. His task: Writing the summaries for dust jackets and sales catalogs. It wasn't exactly literature, but Hodgman found himself in

meetings where higher-ups discussed the editorial and marketing processes.

"I began to understand all aspects of a book editor's job," Hodgman says. "I began to think I could do that." Alice Mayhew, the successful editor of serious nonfiction who counts Bob Woodward and the late Stephen Ambrose among her authors, liked Hodgman's writing. She promoted him to become her editorial assistant. Suddenly, Hodgman was talking to authors regularly, editing some of their manuscript pages and acquiring a few books from literary agents with Mayhew's guidance. One of these, Abraham Verghese's *My Own Country*, the story of a young India-born doctor treating AIDS patients in the southern United States, remains among his proudest accomplishments.

Five years later, Hodgman decided to expand his horizons by entering magazine editing. In 1992, he started at the top, inside *Vanity Fair*. The magazine circulates nationally, attracts the world's top writers and creates buzz almost every month.

Talk about buzz: On Oct. 15, 1996, Hodgman appeared on ABC-TV's *Good Morning America*, interviewed by Joan Lunden after editing Madonna's reflections of motherhood from her diary kept for the magazine. Hodgman told an audience of millions that Madonna "was always incredibly professional — an incredible amount of fun." He predicted she would be a great mother.

Hodgman left *Vanity Fair* during 1999, after championing a feature taken from Sylvia Naser's award-winning book *A Beautiful Mind*, which served as the basis for the Oscar-winning film. Several magazines and newspapers published stories about his burnout, which came after years of seven-day workweeks and frustrating battles to edit long articles under tight deadlines. One of Hodgman's last pieces turned out to be Gail Sheehy's controversial 12,000-word profile of Hillary Clinton.

"Every month was a major drama, whether it was being caught in the middle of a fight between Madonna and the



Paris, Missouri

Paris High School's Coyote yearbook from 1977 offers evidence of Hodgman's (center) intellectual gifts. The school's first-ever academic bowl team competed in Marceline, Mo., but lost its first match by one point.

magazine over the length of her article or having to come back to New York in the middle of every vacation because some lunatic rich person shot somebody. It wasn't like I was becoming a millionaire there, you know, and I didn't want to wind up editing articles about Julia Roberts surviving menopause," Hodgman says.

Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights*, gloried that Hodgman edited his manuscripts at *Vanity Fair*.

"He works his ass off, has a sense of humor, understands the realities of writers and is good at the inside politics of a magazine." Hodgman possesses great instincts, Bissinger says, as when he suggested an article about controversial police detective Mark Fuhrman of O.J. Simpson trial infamy. "Wouldn't it be great if we could get Fuhrman to talk?" George suggested. No way, I thought. But he did talk. George was right."

Hodgman freelanced his own stories briefly, for *Harper's Bazaar* magazine and *Entertainment Weekly*, among others. But by now he was an Editor, with a capital E, and one of the world's most famous Editors wanted Hodgman on her team. Having left her controversial reign at *The New Yorker* magazine, Tina Brown hired Hodgman to help launch her daring concept, *Talk* magazine. Brown and Hodgman did not click, however. Hodgman became the first of multiple editors to bail; he departed just as the first issue of *Talk* reached mailboxes and newsstands.

"They hadn't really nailed down what the magazine was," Hodgman recalls. "Tina knew that in her heart, and it made her crazy. Clearly, it was going to be a mess. Plus, all they wanted was sensational stuff. I was afraid that if I heard her say, 'I've got to have something hot' one more time, I would throw a bucket of water on her."

Hodgman soon returned to his natural

habitat — acquiring and editing books. He joined Henry Holt and Co., quickly making news by acquiring a proposal by popular narrative journalist Kate Boo for an advance reported to top half a million dollars.

The book by Boo is in progress. (At press time, Hodgman accepted a job at Houghton Mifflin.) Meanwhile, other books Hodgman acquired and edited have won acclaim. The crowning recognition: A 2004 National Book Award for *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age*, set in 1920s Detroit. Kevin Boyle, first-time author and associate professor of history at Ohio State University, had never written narrative for a popular audience. Hodgman "weaned me from academic prose, taught me new ways to write, made me think hard about the structure of storytelling," Boyle says.

Washington Post staff writer Hank Stuever, an already accomplished stylist, says Hodgman had plenty to teach him while they collaborated on the book *Off Ramp*, a collection of Stuever's nonfiction narratives. "George bids for many sought-after books by known writers, but he also tends to like those projects that are hard sells — one-of-a-kind books by unknowns or first timers, books that look sort of hopeless in terms of sales or subject matter," Stuever says. "But as George edits and shapes them, they become quite exciting. I love talking to George when he's deep into a new project. He thinks of authors and their books as his children. When we were arguing about titles for my book, he said it was the most important decision we would make and kept rejecting titles he thought were too banal or too easily looked over in a sea of new releases. He said, in his dramatic way, 'I want to send that little girl off to her first day of school in a bright red dress.'"

He may have been an only child in Madison, Mo., and a single man in New York City, but Hodgman has become the urban father of immortal words. ■

About the author: Steve Weinberg teaches journalism part time at MU and writes books on his own time.