

LIVING

Peter Freedman on the king of cult magazines, John Brown, owner of *Viz* and, from this week, the weird *Fortean Times*

THERE is a defining moment in the career of every great man. For Churchill, it was his call to 'fight them on the beaches'; for Napoleon, the decision to invade Russia, the moment of his greatest ambition and folly. For John Brown, the publisher of *Viz* and soon a clutch of other magazines, it was the moment that a Danish journalist turned to him in honest bafflement and asked, 'Why is it that you British find farting so funny?'

'I said, "Come on, if you're in a lift and someone farts, it's funny," recalls Brown. "And she said, "Yes, I suppose, if you are in a lift and someone suffers social embarrassment, then... " And it was crossing. The whole thing was like a Python sketch. But she's quite right of course. It is pathetic."

Farting, none the less, has made John Brown a rich man and the most successful British publisher of his day. Or, at any rate, *Viz*, in which farting and other bodily functions loom large, has done so.

Brown, 38, is now ploughing back some of the unfassibly large profits coined by *Viz* into four little-known magazines. Last week, he relaunched a small but strange magazine called *Fortean Times*. 'I landed on my desk, rather like *Viz* did. I hadn't heard of it before,' he says. 'But it made him laugh and, more important, it caught his fancy.'

'What *Viz* and *Fortean Times* have in common is that they were both started for the amusement of the people involved, with no calculated, commercial aim. But both also have this core of mass interest.'

Also like *Viz*, *Fortean Times* could be said to concern farting—the comic farts of a dyspeptic universe. It is a sort of thinking person's *Sunday Sports*, covering that hinterland between fact and folklore inhabited by such creatures as the Enfield Poltergeist, lizard monsters, bleeding statues, exploding telephones, human tribes with tails and Filipino women prone to giving birth to fish.

Fortean Times is named after Charles Fort (1874-1952), an American philosopher and iconoclast, who hated the way that scientists acted like priests in dismissing phenomena that did



John Brown manages to keep a level head in a mad comic world: 'If you're in a lift and someone farts, it's funny.'/Photograph by Richard Mildenhall.

Guffawing all the way to the bank

not fit their theories. He therefore spent his life collecting reports of strange phenomena. This is the work the magazine was set up in 1973 to continue.

It has been produced until now in the grand tradition of penicillin specialist magazines and read by an handful of what Brown calls 'international nutters'.

His own favourite part of it are the reports of strange hap-

penings from across the world. 'I like the one about the New Zealand woman who was arrested dancing naked at midnight on her husband's grave singing, "Who's Sorry Now?"' But it also carries more considered articles on such mysteries as the Turin Shroud and crop circles.

Last week's rebirth of *Fortean Times* follows last month's unveiling by Brown of *Blast!*, a

magazine aimed at comic addicts and collectors, along with the relaunch of a Scottish answer to *Viz* called *Electric Soap*.

John Brown's father, who is also a director of his company, is Sir John Brown, the former chairman of Oxford University Press. Brown junior comes across like a street-smart prep-school boy. Never top at Latin verbs, I'd guess, but the-only

guy to see in the playground about swapping the hot bubble-gum cards.

'I've always liked pop music rather than classical,' he says. 'I've always liked *Gerry On* as opposed to French films. I've always liked *Billy* as opposed to *Panorama*, and I still do.'

Brown lives in a Victorian square in Hammersmith with his wife, Claudia Zeff, an art director in publishing, and their

two-year-old daughter, Lily. If they have a son, he too will be called John, in continuation of a family tradition going back hundreds of years — 'Long enough, anyway, for me not to want to break it.'

Yes, he lives comfortably, but the wads of money are mostly in the company. He has enough, at least, to indulge a passion for classic cars. He currently owns a souped-up BMW and a 1983

Alfa Romeo. 'I go to car auctions like a child goes to sweet shops. I usually resist the urge to buy.' He says he's a 'relaxoholic' rather than a workaholic.

He might now be the king of cult magazines but he began his working life as a management trainee on the printing side of Oxford University Press. He moved into publishing, then into music, as a production assistant with Eton John, and then into chauffeuring vintage Rolls-Royces during a stay in America. It was as head of Richard Branson's Virgin Books that he first encountered *Viz* in 1985 and immediately struck a deal to distribute it.

Then, it was selling 4,000 copies an issue. By the time he left Virgin two years later, to set up on his own, it was selling 22,000. It now sells 1.2 million and, after *Radio Times*, *TV Times* and *Reader's Digest*, is Britain's best-selling magazine. It is also the comedy phenomenon of the age, which, like Python before it, baffles and amuses as many as it amuses.

Brown's one failure to date has been a cricket fanzine he took over called *Sticky Wicket*. 'My reaction was, "It's funny. I like cricket. Let's do it." It closed after a year and a half. "I sometimes let over-enthusiasm get the better of me." Not that he seems a big risk-taker. Nor, he claims, does he aspire to building a media empire. 'I'd like to be publishing six or seven magazines and to be making three or four TV or video projects a year.'

To this end, he has also set up a production company, which is managed by Miles Ross, brother of the more famous Jonathan. It has so far worked on *Viz* TV projects ranging from cartoon versions of *Billy the Fish* and *Roger Mello* to a planned live-action comedy series based on *Sid the Seaside*. 'The only feature film I would ever get involved with would be a *Viz* film.'

For now, Brown's attention is focused on *Fortean Times*, whose circulation he wants to increase from 2,000 to 20,000. 'But I have a sort of golden aim of 50,000.' And an ultimate aim of getting a whole new class of people saying, 'No F. T. No Comment.'

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