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Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers, And Swells: The Best Of Early Vanity Fair



Synopsis

For the magazine's centenary celebration, an anthology of pieces from the early golden age of Vanity Fair. In honor of the 100th anniversary of Vanity Fair magazine, *Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers, and Swells* celebrates the publication's astonishing early catalogue of writers, with works by Dorothy Parker, Noël Coward, P. G. Wodehouse, Jean Cocteau, Colette, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Benchley, Langston Hughes and many others. Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter introduces these fabulous pieces written between 1913 and 1936, when the magazine published a murderers' row of the world's leading literary lights. *Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers, and Swells* features great writers on great topics, including F. Scott Fitzgerald on what a magazine should be, Clarence Darrow on equality, D. H. Lawrence on women, e.e. cummings on Calvin Coolidge, John Maynard Keynes on the collapse in money value, Thomas Mann on how films move the human heart, Alexander Woolcott on Harpo Marx, Carl Sandburg on Charlie Chaplin, Djuna Barnes on James Joyce, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., on Joan Crawford, and Dorothy Parker on a host of topics ranging from why she hates actresses to why she hasn't married. These essays reflect the rich period of their creation while simultaneously addressing topics that would be recognizable in the magazine today, such as how women should navigate work and home life; our destructive fascination with the entertainment industry and with professional sports; the collapse of public faith in the financial industry; and, as Aldous Huxley asks herein, "What, Exactly, Is Modern?" Offering readers an inebriating swig from that great cocktail shaker of the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, the age of Gatsby, *Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers, and Swells* showcases unforgettable writers in search of how to live well in a changing era.

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Customer Reviews

Today, many consider Vanity Fair to be the arbiter of modern society. But it was not always so. Vanity's reputation was established in the 1920s and most of the essays contained in this volume were written in that decade. And reading them, you can see why. And I don't mean just the essays written by the famous people. To be sure, I found Huxley's essay (for example) "What, Exactly, Is Modern?" interesting if a bit naïve. (But then I am not entirely convinced that what distinguishes our age from previous ones is an enormously enhanced mental elasticity and freedom - "call me a cynic if you wish.") But it was the less-known (at least to me) writers who had me chortling and nodding by turn. And so it was that Samuel Chotzinoff's "Jazz: A Brief History" had me laughing out loud from the very beginning - after all the essay opens thus "America does nothing for its native Music while, while the smallest nation on the Continent builds opera houses, grants subsidies, and altogether considers music an important enough business for government interference. The result is that, while the German peasant goes about his work whistling the Andante from Brahms's Fourth, the American man in the street goes about whistling "Stumbling" or "Yoo-Hoo" or whatever vulgarity is at the moment in the ascendant. What a wonderful way to critique the moaning and the groaning about our own vulgar music! And having read this, I am quite interested in now reading his *A Lost Paradise* and *Day's at the Morn*. Or how about Randolph Dinwiddie's splendid "High-Low Controversy" about the controversy over the appropriate length of the woman's skirt which ends with the bit of wisdom that well-dressed women (and one might add men) will wear what Paree tells 'em to inside of six months.

I expected something big with this book. Some of the greatest authors wrote essays for Vanity Fair. The list is impressive. I expected to read interesting, deep essays that would give me insight into these authors. I had high expectations. Instead this book is a collection of what amounted to wonderful essays of the time. They didn't age very well. Without context of the day, the essays are hard to understand. My expectation was to make myself some wonderful bootleg era drink, maybe a monkey gland, and read insightful works from important authors. Instead, the book is of the era - almost incomprehensible today. It turns out; this is no different than current magazine writing, in twenty years nobody will remember what happened to Beyoncé's sister in the elevator.

References to that event are witty today, in the future; they will be nothing - simply confusing. I feel the same way about this book, so many things that were important in the 10's to 30's - culture everybody understood, but are lost without reference today. There are excellent essays, funny, witty, and intelligent essays. The book is like hors d'oeuvres, it's OK to pick one up and eat it, then choose another someplace else. It isn't a meal; instead it is a number of disconnected essays meant to be read any time. Don't like one, move on to another. Frank Crowninshield, the editor of Vanity Fair, chose things he loved. He had fabulous taste and recruited amazing authors. He had a magazine to sell, and the articles were entertainment. There is only one magazine today that comes even close, The New Yorker. My problem with this book, I expected something like The Atlantic - serious, well written, engaging articles. Instead I read the entertainment magazine from a long past era.

I'm not too proud to admit that I would have preferred Vanity Fair's take on its earliest decades complete with copious annotations and illustrations to help give context. It's not a sign of weak-mindedness; we read Shakespeare annotated in school even if later we lie to our friends that we recall enough to have understood even three lines of Joss Whedon's "Much Ado About Nothing". It's like that with this book. I wanted to dive into Vanity Fair's past the way I dive into old issues of Life Magazine at yard sales - the ads, the classified, the artwork of the magazine and all the little signposts of the times. Failing that, I wouldn't have minded a little more annotation for context, and I do suggest that as you read these brief pieces that you thumb through to the list of contributors. It only means something to read Douglas Fairbanks Jr.'s piece on his (at the time) wife, Joan Crawford, if you know who either of these people were. A little giggling doesn't go amiss either. I'm something of a Dorothy Parker fan (her best work, in my opinion, was not for Vanity Fair), and I'd forgotten details about how she had a falling out with the magazine and her Algonquin Round Table cohorts Robert Benchley and Robert Sherwood resigned in protest of her firing. Parker's humor at the expense of Important Broadway Producers may have been legend, then, but what there may have been of that skewering wit in the poems included in this collection, is wit that flew right over my head. A little side comment, a little slang, a mention of a particular starlet, stands as indecipherable cuneiform, the references lost to history - or just to more googling than I'm willing to do.

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