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## The Jazz Age's Back Pages

In a collection from Vanity Fair's first incarnation, tales of bootlegging, a Parisian executioner and the Variety scribe who coined 'bimbo' and 'gams.'

By *Edward Kosner*  
Dec 12, 2014 11:14 pm ET

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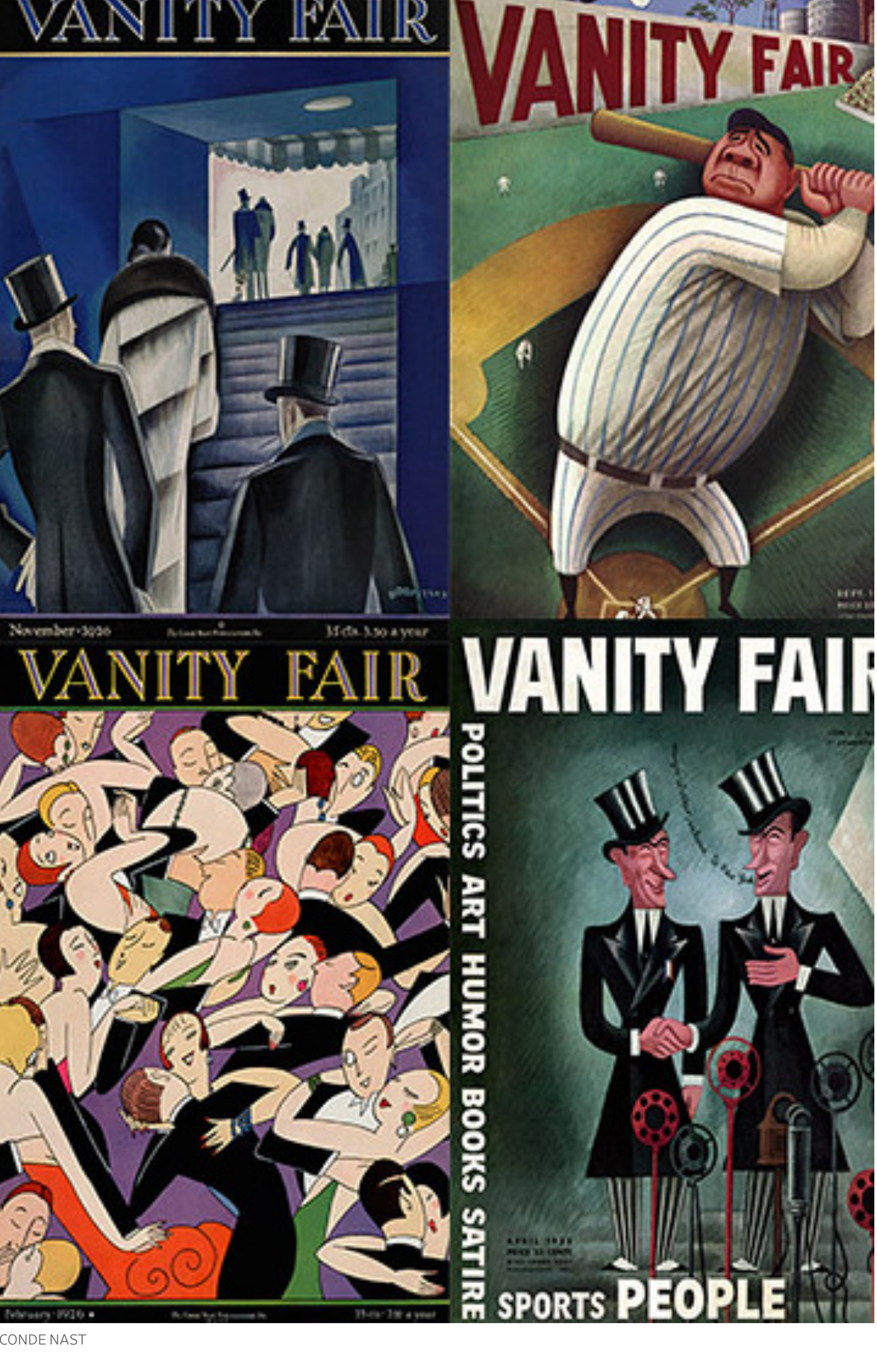
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CONDE NAST

Come with me to Magazine Heaven—it's only an imaginary leap away. Look, that's Henry Luce and Brit Hadden on that corner cloud, cobbling together their first issue of Time. There's the New Yorker's William Shawn worrying a comma in a J.D. Salinger story; Harold Hayes and Clay Felker jousting at Esquire; Helen Gurley Brown writing cover lines for Cosmo; Oz Elliott ordering up a special issue of Newsweek on race in America. And over here, it's Frank Crowninshield and the beautiful young Clare Boothe (later Luce) putting out the original Vanity Fair.

Gone, all gone now. But their brilliance helped shape American popular culture, and their influence can still be felt even in these diminished days for once proud magazines.

Vanity Fair was launched in 1914 when the impresario of Vogue, Condé Nast—yes, he was a person before a media brand—bought the name of a periodical published in the 1890s, put Crowninshield, a veteran magazine hand and clubman, in charge, and gave him free rein. "Crownie," as his idolaters called him, produced America's first sophisticated slick. It would be nine more years before Luce and Hadden's Time made its debut, and 11 before Harold Ross's New Yorker was published "not for the old lady in Dubuque." It was a true golden age for American magazines, not to be matched for four decades.

### BOHEMIANS, BOOTLEGGERS, FLAPPERS & SWELLS

Edited by Graydon Carter  
Penguin Press, 420 pages, \$29.95

Crownie's Vanity Fair flourished for 22 years before the Depression finished it off. The magazine, Cleveland Amory wrote later, was "America in mid-passage... between the old Four Hundred and the new Smart Set." S.I. Newhouse Jr., Condé Nast's ultimate successor, revived the title in 1983, partly out of frustration at initially not being able to buy the New Yorker. The new Vanity Fair droned along until Tina Brown rescued it with an injection of London pizzazz. Graydon Carter, a Canadian founder of the snarky Spy magazine of the late 1980s, took over Vanity Fair 22 years ago. He has done so well that he is assured a masthead spot in Magazine Heaven when his time comes.

Among other things, he has made a cottage industry out of repurposing Vanity Fair material into books, including one celebrating "Oscar Night." Now he has turned out an anthology of pieces from the original magazine called "Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers and Swells." In his introduction, Mr. Carter calls Crowninshield's VF "the quintessential Jazz Age magazine," whose writers "took the pulse of the period—in real time—with an unrivaled sense of taste."

With that buildup, the actual anthology comes as a distinct letdown. All the great names are here, either as writer or subject: P.G. Wodehouse, Dorothy Parker (née Rothschild), Robert Benchley, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Noël Coward, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Jean Cocteau, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Colette, Alexander Woollcott, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Mann, Thomas Wolfe, Walter Lippmann, even Walter Winchell. But many of their contributions are dry, musty, trivial—even boring—when read today. Hemingway, Picasso, Fitzgerald and Stein may have sparkled when reincarnated in Woody Allen's ingenious "Midnight in Paris." They fall flat here.

This is especially true of the pieces from the magazine's first decade, 90 to 100 years ago. Part of the reason is that the voice, pace and content—the sensibility—of periodical writing have inevitably evolved over the century. An arch Wodehouse essay on physical fitness, a Benchley sendup of bohemians or a Douglas Fairbanks satire on archetypal movie roles may have some historical curiosity value, but little else. Dorothy Parker's first published poem is close to doggerel, and her series of poems declaring "I hate men / actresses / the office" is simply tiresome. Gertrude Stein's dadaish poem, written while she served as a voluntary ambulance driver in France in World War I, makes "a rose is a rose is a rose" sound coherent by comparison. Nor are Noel Coward's, Bertrand Russell's or Thomas Mann's legends enhanced by the throwaway pieces included here.

There is some good reading. The ur-gossip columnist Walter Winchell chips in a boffo report on Broadway slang that, among other things, identifies the Daily Variety scribe who gave the world "bimbo," "stems" and "gams." There's a classic Colette short story about a married man trailing his liberated-for-a-night wife at a masked ball; poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay and T.S. Eliot (including the debut of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales"); and a compelling portrait by Janet Flanner of "Monsieur de Paris," France's official executioner, and his trusty guillotine. Djuna Barnes writes an affectionate sketch of James Joyce, and Dalton Trumbo, later a blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter, explains the lucrative economics of bootlegging during Prohibition.

The most prophetic sentence in the collection comes from the commentator Walter Lippmann. Writing in 1927 about popular journalism, Lippmann predicts that "it will have become mechanically perfect when anyone anywhere can see and hear anything going on anywhere else in the world"—a perfect vision of our Internet world of tweets, posts, Instagrams and Vimeoos.

Still, an embarrassing number of Vanity Fair's sages turn out to be tone-deaf or just plain wrongheaded. The novelist Ford Madox Ford, writing about Lost Generation expat writers in Paris, hails Hemingway's "extremely delicate prose"—which might have prompted Papa, had he read it, to punch Ford in the nose. "Jay Franklin," the nom de plume of a columnist and speechwriter, proclaims in the postcrash rubble of 1931: "Never again will we take for granted that a banker must necessarily be right... in his approach to public problems."

But the cloudiest crystal ball belongs to the novelist Theodore Dreiser, who went gaga over the Soviet Union after a 1928 trip. He anoints Vladimir Lenin "the greatest of all modern leaders." "Here is a thinking people," he exults. "And out of Russia, as out of no other country today, I feel is destined to come great things mentally as well as practically." No fools, the VF editors prefaced Dreiser's paean with a disclaimer: "Famous as an observer of life, his name stands behind his reporting of facts, but Vanity Fair must emphasize the fact that the opinions expressed in the article are not its own, but Mr. Dreiser's."

As it happens, magazine connoisseurs turned off by this new anthology can get their fix for a few bucks on Amazon. There they will find dozens of available copies of "Vanity Fair: A Cavalcade of the 1920s and 1930s," a sumptuous coffee-table book edited by Cleveland Amory and Frederic Bradlee (Crownie's grandnephew and the brother of the Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee), originally published by Viking in the 1960s. It contains more than a hundred pieces from the original magazine, plus dozens of dramatic photographs of the foremost writers, entertainers, composers, artists, moguls, politicians and statesmen of the era. The book is organized chronologically, and there's a roster of VF's Hall of Fame for each year, with pictures and text blocks of the nominees, from Henry James (1914) to Clifford Odets (1935).

There's little overlap between the two books, but, somehow, even the duplicate entries seem remarkably compelling in the earlier volume. Perhaps it's the energy radiating from the remarkable black-and-white portraits of Vaslav Nijinsky and George Bernard Shaw, Billie Burke and Paul Robeson, Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich. The book replicates the look and feel of the pages of a great magazine, which is, after all, where magazine articles were written to be read.

—*Mr. Kosner's "It's News to Me" is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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