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Book Review: 'One Summer' by Bill Bryson

A seamless history of the summer of 1927, which featured Capone, Coolidge, Dempsey, Ruth and more.

By Edward Kosner
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People tend to think of the 1920s as a jazzy, black-and-white version of the first decades of the 21st century—a booming era of gushing wealth, celebrity, sports heroes, sexed-up glamour and entrancing new media that paved the way for our own unhinged times. Bill Bryson takes a sliver of that decade—the summer of 1927—and shows in his addictively readable new book that the Jazz Age unreeled in a society barely recognizable today.

All the fabled figures of the time are here—Charles Lindbergh and Babe Ruth, Sacco and Vanzetti and Clara Bow, Calvin Coolidge and Al Capone, Charles Ponzi, Henry Ford, Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney—plus a chorus of other luminaries now forgotten, like the cartoonist Tad Dorgan, who first dubbed ballpark wieners "hot dogs."

ONE SUMMER

By Bill Bryson
Doubleday, 509 pages, $28.95

Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth on a postseason barnstorming tour.
© BETTMANN/CORBIS

In "One Summer," Mr. Bryson intercuts their stories and dozens more into a montage of an America bursting with energy, confidence, bigotry and corruption. The country was hurtling toward the Depression just two years away, but the booze and the jazz—"moron music," to Ford—flowed on. This is old-school pop history—shelves of secondary sources puréed into seamless narrative—reminiscent of Frederick Lewis Allen's classic about the 1920s, "Only Yesterday," the first book cited in Mr. Bryson's long recitation of sources.

He makes Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic on May 20-21, 1927, the spine of his chronicle. And the arc of Lucky Lindy's career—from unheralded airmail pilot through boyish world icon and on to his sour fall from grace as a Nazi apologist and America First isolationist—mirrors the country's own wild ride from the giddy '20s to the depths of the Depression.

After the flight, four million New Yorkers nearly smothered their gangly hero with 1,800 tons of ticker tape during his parade up Broadway. To promote aviation, he piloted the Spirit of St. Louis on a cross-country flying tour involving 69 overnight stops and 13 more "meet-and-greet" touchdowns. Everywhere there were motorcades, parades, banquets and speeches.

"It is impossible to imagine what it must have been like to be Charles Lindbergh in that summer . . . , " writes Mr. Bryson. "Every person on earth who could get near enough wanted to grasp his hand or clap him on the back. He had no private life anymore. . . . Shirts he sent to the laundry never came back. Chicken bones and napkins from his dinner plate were fought over in kitchens. He could not go for a walk or pop into a bank or drugstore. . . . Checks he wrote were rarely cashed; recipients preferred to frame them instead. No part of his life was normal."

Lindy may have been the paramount figure of the times—perhaps of modern media times—but there were others. There was Babe Ruth, whose appetite for louche sex and garlicky hot dogs was matched only by his prodigious clouts into the bleachers; Henry Ford, a remarkably ignorant genius who revolutionized modern life with the Model T; Clara Bow, a sexually insatiable gamine who was Hollywood's first female superstar; and the unfortunate Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, immigrant anarchists who were railroaded to the electric chair despite world-wide protests for a murderous robbery they didn't (or maybe did) commit.

Ruth and his teammate Lou Gehrig, whose wife the goatish Babe likely bedded during a postseason barnstorming tour, shared sports glory with Jack Dempsey, whose rematch with the bookish Gene Tunney at Soldier Field in Chicago on Sept. 22 drew the largest crowd ever recorded for any sporting event: 150,000 fans. It was also the era of the great Bill Tilden, who liked to hold five tennis balls in his left hand as he served a game, scoring four consecutive aces and disdainfully discarding the fifth ball.

Ford was an industrial wizard. By 1920, he was producing more than a million Model T's a year by essentially turning his assembly-line workers into robots. They were well paid by the standards of the time but subject to Big Brotherly supervision. The 200 investigators of Ford's "notorious Sociological Department," Mr. Bryson writes, could order workers, many of them immigrants, "to clean their houses, tidy their yards, sleep in American-style beds, increase their savings, modify their sexual behavior" or change anything else the snoops didn't like. Ford long published virulently anti-Semitic screeds in his Dearborn Independent magazine, then claimed he was unaware of the content. Grilled during a libel suit that he'd brought against the Chicago Tribune, Ford thought Benedict Arnold was a writer and that the American Revolution was fought in 1812.

Ford's crudeness and bigotry were characteristic of the era. A visiting reporter came upon President Warren Harding urinating into a White House fireplace. Mining engineer Herbert Hoover, later to be president, concluded in a report that "one white man equals from two to three of the colored races, even in the simplest forms of mine work such as shoveling or tramming." The Ku Klux Klan thrived far beyond Dixie. "In Detroit," Mr. Bryson records, "thousands of happy citizens attended a Christmas rally outside city hall, where a Santa Claus dressed in Klan regalia distributed presents to children by the light of a burning cross."

Chicago was the capital of corruption and the base of operations of "Scarface" Al Capone, whose brief and violent reign made an indelible mark on American popular culture. He held press conferences, attended public events with the mayor and other dignitaries, and was the unrivaled star attraction in the vast throng at the Dempsey-Tunney rematch. The other Jazz Age criminal whose name still resounds is Charles Ponzi, the architect of the pyramid scheme whose fame was finally eclipsed eight decades later by Bernard Madoff's more lucrative but even more primitive long con. As it happened, Ponzi wound up a fellow inmate of Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston's Charlestown Prison in the summer of 1927.

Mr. Bryson's book is full of such intriguing factoids and delicious historical ironies. Al Capone's brother Vincenzo disappeared into the West as a teenager, renamed himself Richard Hart, and ended up as a federal agent who served as one of President Coolidge's bodyguards during his summer vacation in the South Dakota Badlands. New York's downtown Holland Tunnel, opened in 1927, is named not for the Dutch who settled New Amsterdam but for engineer Clifford M. Holland, who died of a heart attack during its construction. Only 8,000 fans were at Yankee Stadium on Sept. 30, 1927, when Babe Ruth slugged his 60th home run. Thomas Jefferson's head is recessed 30 feet on Mount Rushmore because sculptor Gutzon Borglum cracked the presidential nose with his jackhammer and had to start over. Bela Lugosi, who devoted 30 years to playing Dracula on the screen, was buried costumed as the Transylvanian Count (he didn't wake up at moonrise).

Deeper pleasures afforded by "One Summer" are Mr. Bryson's smart takes on the significance of American innovations in the 1920s, especially talking pictures. "Moviegoers around the world," he writes, "suddenly found themselves exposed, often for the first time, to American voices, American vocabulary. . . . Spanish conquistadores, Elizabethan courtiers, figures from the Bible were suddenly speaking in American voices . . . in film after film. . . . With American speech came American thoughts, American attitudes, American humor and sensibilities. Peacefully, by accident, and almost unnoticed, America had just taken over the world."

At first glance, "One Summer" appears to be a beguiling ramble down memory lane—easy-to-swallow history with a rewarding smile or nod of recognition on nearly every page. Instead, it's a skillful lesson on the dynamics and personalities that shaped today's America and on how far the country has evolved from a gaudy era fondly but imperfectly recalled.

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

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