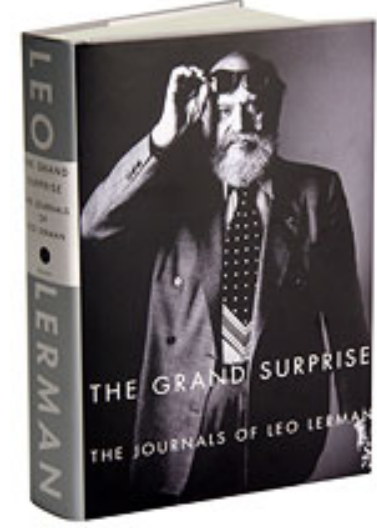


## Celebrity Society's Secret History

By Edward Kosner  
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Leo Lerman was the last of the Cond&eacute; Nast mandarins -- an industrious aesthete with a lapidary eye for the latest nugget of high culture that could be polished up for the slick pages of Vogue. For more than a half-century, he knew everybody in the incestuous world of the arts and the rich in Manhattan and beyond, entertained most of them, loved many of them, and gossiped about all of them.



Always hungry for one final snatch at life, Lerman arranged a farewell that managed to combine the conviviality of a Jewish shiva with the pagan pomp of a pope's funeral: His embalmed body, clad in his favorite nightshirt, was propped sitting up in his mahogany sleigh bed, a Turkish needlepoint cap on his head, his white beard peeping over the purple sheets. "Leo, here's Si Newhouse," Lerman's companion informed the corpse, each guest stepping forward. "Here's Mikhail Baryshnikov... Carol Channing... William Shawn... Beverly Sills... Philip Johnson..."

### Hidden Notebooks

After Lerman's death at 80 in 1994, his lover, Gray Foy, and his assistant at Vogue, Stephen Pascal, discovered hundreds of notebooks hidden in his apartment -- a surreptitious journal in purple ink covering five decades. Confronted by Mr. Pascal from these notebooks, along with snippets from hundreds of letters that Lerman wrote to Marlene Dietrich and others he loved the most, "The Grand Surprise" is an evocation of a lost world of the arts that rivals the Goncourt brothers' portrait of 19th-century Paris.

Through Lerman's pages parade Truman Capote ("Little T" to Leo, "Tru-sy" to the preening Gore Vidal) and Tennessee Williams, Hemingway and Faulkner, Maria Callas and Greta Garbo, Norman Mailer and Dietrich, a drunken Marion Davies, a gaga Evelyn Waugh and a flabby-armed Nancy Reagan. Diana Vreeland and Leonard Bernstein make appearances, as do W.H. Auden and Judy Garland, ballerinas, impresarios, critics and legions of faded luminaries. At one of his parties, Lerman was able to say, "Rita Hayworth, I want you to meet Alger Hiss."

Delicious giblets bob in the soup of names. Maria Callas refusing to spend time alone with Winston Churchill on Aristotle Onassis's yacht -- "too boring." The great Greta Garbo possessing only two pairs of underwear and washing them out herself every three days -- according to Dietrich. Eudora Welty stalking Garbo up Madison Avenue like a groupie. The venerated historian Henry Steele Commager wearing a bread wrapper on his head instead of a hat. Cary Grant making flirtatious phone calls to Lerman. Marion Davies braying to Albert Einstein at a fancy Hearst dinner: "Why don't you get a haircut!"



A 1957 picture of Leo Lerman with the burlesque performer, author and talk-show host Gypsy Rose Lee.

On his rounds in the early 1950s, Lerman catches a reading at the 92nd Street Y by T.S. Eliot, who is stooped, in heavy black shoes, "an odd-looking giant" full of donnish little asides. The audience swoons as Eliot intones "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," but Lerman seethes: "I thought how indecent this all was -- this reading of passionate poetry by its author." Less fastidious, Marianne Moore takes in the show "googly-eyed."

And Lerman offers a Hollywood glimpse of Judy Garland crying "Am I such a monster?" as the zippers on her dress burst because boozing has thickened her seemingly overnight. Garland, Lerman confides, was so terrified that "A Star Is Born" in 1954 would be her last movie that she stalled the final scenes of the film, working only at night while hundreds waited for her on the sound stage. Penniless, she and her husband, Sid Luft, had to scrounge furniture from the movie set when they entertained. When they went out, to a party at Jack Warner's house, she had to borrow a dress -- and after arriving, Lerman reports, the tipsy Garland fell flat on her face.

At once charming and insufferable, Lerman was a rhapsodic collector of pals, lovers, knickknacks, talent, wit and memories. He never hid his lower-middle-class Jewish roots or his homosexuality, but he could be bitchy. He found Andy Warhol "craftier and craftier, filling with... cunning." Jacqueline Onassis was "Snow White grown up." Told that the architect Philip Johnson, gay and an early Nazi sympathizer, had once had a nervous breakdown that left him hiding under tables, Lerman couldn't resist adding: "I know of other reasons than a nervous breakdown that sent him under tables." The dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille was "a tenth-rate talent" and the virtuoso photographer Richard Avedon hadn't "a shred of humanity."

### 'A Murderous Russian'

But Lerman saves his true venom for Alexander Liberman, the &eacute;migr&eacute; Russian sculptor who ruled the Cond&eacute; Nast magazine empire for decades as editorial director and eminence gris to the proprietor, Si Newhouse. Lerman toiled under Liberman as features editor of Vogue and hated every minute: "He is monstrous... hard, hollow, cold, shrewd and the enemy.... A murderous Russian of the blackest blood."

**DETAILS**  
**THE GRAND SURPRISE**  
By Leo Lerman  
(Knopf, 654 pages, \$37.50)

Indeed, a subtext of Lerman's book is the dumbing down of slick magazines. As features editor of Mademoiselle in the 1950s, he had published the full text of Dylan Thomas's verse play "Under Milk Wood." In the early 1970s, he introduced E.M. Forster, Nabokov, Vonnegut, Iris Murdoch, Rebecca West and Graham Greene to the pages of Vogue. By the 1980s, that literary sensibility was well on its way to magazine heaven. Fittingly, Lerman's last big job at Cond&eacute; Nast was a few months in 1984 as the second editor of the revived but sputtering Vanity Fair. He was promptly kicked upstairs in favor of Tina Brown, who, he reports, announced in a meeting that she would save the magazine by filling it with "high-class trash."

Most magazine careers end in tears, but Lerman was more than a Cond&eacute; Nast hack. He was a brilliant and authentic self-invention -- little Label Lerman, son of a house painter, born on East 107th St. in Manhattan and raised in Jackson Heights, Queens, proud graduate of Newtown High School (and the Feagin School of Dramatic Arts), who lived the life he dreamed of and wound up leaving us a superb secret history of the culture of our times.

Mr. Kosner's memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, "It's News to Me," was published last year.

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