

BOOKSHELF

'Fighting Words' Review: Explaining the World

A biography of four American reporters abroad as they chronicled the perilous period between the wars.



Passport photos of (clockwise from top left) Rayna Raphaelson, Vincent Sheean, Dorothy Thompson and John Gunther. BASIC (4)

By Edward Kosner

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They were young and restless, with a world to conquer. Risking their lives in exotic war zones and losing their innocence in erotic adventures, they were a lost generation that found itself between the great wars of the 20th century. They taught themselves how to be reporters and instructed their fellow Americans back home about the perilous days that lay ahead.

Each set sail for Europe and Asia in the 1920s with barely enough money for passage. With grit, relentless energy and more than a few lucky breaks, they became famous foreign correspondents and bestselling authors. Their bylines—Vincent Sheean, Dorothy Thompson, John Gunther and Rayna Raphaelson—are forgotten by all but the oldest Americans these days.

FIGHTING WORDS

By Nancy F. Cott
Basic, 403 pages, \$32

Now, they are restored to vivid life in "Fighting Words," a group biography by Nancy F. Cott, a professor of American history at Harvard. Full of evocative detail, with a sophisticated grasp of the politics of the time, it reanimates a harum-scarum journalistic age all the more appealing for its raffish ambition and often misguided idealism.

At the time, Americans got their news almost exclusively from the papers. There were more than 2,500 dailies in America, as well as dozens of magazines. Expatriates could land freelance work abroad and parlay that into better assignments that paid their keep. Thompson snagged a sensational interview with Hitler in 1931, Gunther got himself psychoanalyzed in Vienna and then wrote "Inside Europe," a runaway bestseller claiming, among other things, that Hitler was "a prisoner of infantile fixations."

One of the virtues of "Fighting Words" is that it plunges the reader into the great issues of the era—the Chinese civil war, Roosevelt's New Deal, the Spanish Civil War and the onslaughts of fascism and communism, Chamberlain's Munich pact with Hitler, the Hitler-Stalin pact. "Their writings ranged like searchlights across rising threats," Ms. Cott observes of her correspondents. Retrospect has made the right reading of these events seem obvious, but to those in the midst of history being made, the questions could be devilishly hard to parse.

The eldest daughter of a Methodist minister from upstate New York, Thompson was 27 when she sailed to Europe in 1920 on the rebound from a platonic love affair. She scuffled along with freelance work, then got a by-the-word deal from the Philadelphia Ledger for articles from war-ravaged Vienna. Soon, she was a staff correspondent, then Berlin bureau chief. She witnessed the rise of Hitler, watched his brownshirts strut in mass demonstrations and splashed her interview with the Führer—"the very prototype of the 'Little Man.'" Just a year before he seized power, Thompson concluded that he was going nowhere. Still, her career flourished. She returned to the U.S. and joined Walter Lippmann as a syndicated columnist for the New York Herald Tribune, held forth with regular radio commentary on NBC and wrote a monthly column in the Ladies' Home Journal, the biggest magazine in America.

Ms. Cott deals as frankly with the emotional lives of her subjects as with their careers. Thompson was a frustrated 28-year-old virgin when she met a handsome Hungarian intellectual in Vienna. They were soon lovers and then husband and wife. But the marriage faltered. Before long, against the advice of all her friends, she married Sinclair Lewis, the author of "Main Street," a tempestuous drunk she adored but could live with only precariously until they, too, broke up. Along the way, she startled herself with a febrile liaison with a beautiful Hungarian artist named Christa Winsloe.

Jimmy Sheean—who used Vincent as a byline—led with his heart, too. A gangly redhead from a small Illinois town, Sheean was a closeted homosexual who first fell in love with a man as a student at the University of Chicago. After a stint on the tabloid New York Daily News, Sheean signed on with the Chicago Tribune in Paris. Over the next decades, he chased stories across Europe, the Middle East and China. For his greatest scoop, he shaved his head, donned Arab garb and joined a mule train to reach Muslim rebels fighting for independence in North Africa. He barely escaped with his life, but his dispatches were a sensation. In Palestine in 1929, he presciently predicted that the indigenous Arabs and the Zionist Jews trickling into the Holy Land would never get along.

Sympathetic to the left, Sheean turned freelance to escape the objectivity expected of staff correspondents for the American papers. In China, he promoted the faction aligned with Moscow after the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-purged the communists from his forces. Sheean never really made it as a novelist, but his 1935 memoir, "Personal History," was a bestseller. That same year, the 36-year-old Sheean suddenly married a 20-year-old girl. He pronounced marriage "the perfect state" and nine months later was a father. Barely six months after that, he had a devastating nervous breakdown. Recovered, he desperately wanted to cover the Spanish Civil War but was beaten to it by Ernest Hemingway. "You stay here and be comfortable, kid," Hemingway gibed. "I'll go to Spain for you."

Rayna Raphaelson, the flame-haired daughter of a middle-class Jewish family in Chicago, had a bleeding heart to match Sheean's, but while his life was a giddy ride, hers was an express to disaster. In 1923, at 27, with no journalistic experience, she sailed to China—"the biggest struggle that is taking place in all the world"—leaving behind a failed marriage. She had palled around with a left-wing crowd in college and soon lost her heart to the communist faction of the Kuomintang collaborating with Chiang to unify China. Like Thompson, she had fallen in love on the rebound—to Bill Prohme, a divorced San Francisco newspaperman, who promised to follow her to China.

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Thus began a six-year adventure in which Raphaelson and Prohme dedicated themselves to the pro-communist Chinese leadership, taking low-paid writing and editing jobs to advance the cause. With the Russians booted out of China in 1927, Raphaelson headed to Moscow, escorting Madame Sun Yat-sen, the widow of the founder of the Kuomintang, who sided with the communists. There, she struggled to find work and began to suffer from excruciating headaches. Thompson and Sheean were also in Moscow for the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution when Raphaelson died, likely of encephalitis. She was 33.

John Gunther was a journalistic dervish and the most successful of the group. Born and reared in Chicago, he graduated from the University of Chicago a year after Sheean and worked as a reporter and correspondent for the Chicago Daily News, then as a crack European desk editor for the United Press. Like Sheean and Thompson, he was in Europe as war broke out. But he made his name and fortune writing a series of stupendously successful, fact-crammed "Inside" books: The "Inside Europe" formula—"Guntherizing," as the New York Times had it—was repeated for Asia, the U.S., Latin America and Africa. His love life was frenetic, too: He had a long secret affair with the wife of one of his closest colleagues, squired around a young socialite nicknamed Bubbles and the actress Miriam Hopkins, and was a regular at a chic New York bordello named Polly's. His most enduring work turned out to be a memoir, "Death Be Not Proud," about the death of his teenage son from a brain tumor.

Gunther stayed active until his death in 1970. Thompson and Sheean's careers faded as they aged, and their lives ended in Europe, where they had made their fame. Thompson died of a heart attack in Lisbon in 1961, Sheean of cancer in Italy in 1975. Stars in their time, they witnessed and shaped history in careers that would be impossible to match in today's media whirlwind.

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

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