

Lise Jaillant
The New Publishers of the 1920s

In a series of oral history interviews given at the end of his life, Bennett Cerf of Random House presented himself as part of a closely-knit group of Jewish publishers who had changed the face of American publishing. Cerf had started his career in the 1920s, and he mentioned his contemporaries – Donald Klopfer, Harold Guinzburg, Richard Simon and Max Schuster – and those who had predated him: B. W. Huebsch, Alfred and Blanche Knopf. Cerf’s former employer, Horace Liveright, as well as Albert Boni, Charles Boni and their uncle Thomas Seltzer could be added to this list. For Cerf, their success was “an affront to the old guard who didn’t think that Jews belonged in the publishing business.”¹ This sense of exclusion from the centre of the publishing business was a defining element of the new publishers of the 1920s. And according to an oft-repeated narrative, this marginalization led them to sign authors rejected by established publishing houses – including modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

The story of the New Publishers opposed to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment originated in the 1960s and 1970s. Cerf gave the oral history interviews at Columbia University in 1967-1968. Walker Gilmer’s *Horace Liveright: Publisher of the Twenties* appeared in 1970, followed by important studies by publishing historians John Tebbel and Charles Madison (including Madison’s 1976 monograph *Jewish Publishing in America*).² After Cerf’s death, his widow, Phyllis Cerf Wagner, and Random House editor Albert Erskine edited *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*, based on the Columbia interviews.³ Richly illustrated and marketed for a general audience, the book was also widely reviewed in scholarly journals. Paul Boyer put

¹ Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf, 5 Feb. 1968, p. 918, Oral History Research Office collection, Columbia University Library (hereafter referred to as OHRO).

² Walker Gilmer, *Horace Liveright: Publisher of the Twenties* (New York: D. Lewis, 1970); John William Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 4 vols (New York: R. R. Bowker Co, 1978), Vol. III: The Golden Age between Two Wars 1920-1940; Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) and *Jewish Publishing in America: The Impact of Jewish Writing on American Culture* (New York: Sanhedrin P, 1976).

³ Bennett Cerf, *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf* (New York: Random House, 1977).

Cerf's memoirs in the continuity of Tebbel's and Madison's work: "It fleshes out and personalizes the account . . . of the process by which a genteel profession dominated by a coterie of elderly WASP conservatives was transformed in the 1920s by a heterogeneous group of brash young newcomers."⁴ By the end of the 1970s, the defining elements of the story were in place: the anti-Semitism of the old publishing elite, the social marginalization of the new guard, their appetite for controversial books, the fights with anti-censorship groups, and the eventual triumphs and recognition (for example, Random House's victory in the 1933 trial to publish Joyce's *Ulysses*). Cerf and others were presented as heroic figures who had overcome prejudiced publishers, aggressive anti-vice campaigners and a benighted legal system.

This narrative is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the new publishers did not publicly identify as "Jewish" in the interwar period. Cerf later said that his family was not religious: "Both my mother and father were Jewish, but I never was inside a Temple."⁵ And he added: "the German Jews were quickly assimilated" (his mother's family was originally from Germany and his father's family from Alsace).⁶ Cerf also kept his distance from Jewish groups. When he was studying at Columbia University, he campaigned to be elected on the student board and nearly lost after a Jewish fraternity called him "the biggest Anti-Semite on the campus."⁷ There are hardly any other references to Jews in his diary and correspondence until the late 1930s and the arrival of refugees fleeing Nazism. Like Cerf, many authors and publishers then identified with an assimilationist American narrative. As Barbara Will points out, Alice B. Toklas (Gertrude Stein's partner) "once responded tersely to a question about her Jewishness by saying that she and Stein 'represented America.'"⁸ Likewise, Alfred Knopf and his wife Blanche "were decidedly secular," as Amy Root Clements notes. "Alfred candidly recalled feasting at the Plaza Hotel on Yom Kippur

⁴ Paul Boyer, "Review of *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*," *American Historical Review*, 83.3 (1978), 831.

⁵ *Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*, 20 Sept. 1967, p. 12, OHRO.

⁶ *Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*, 20 Sept. 1967, p. 16, OHRO.

⁷ Diary, 17 May 1919, box 11, Bennett Cerf papers, Columbia University Library.

⁸ Barbara Will, *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Fay, and the Vichy Dilemma* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), p. 22.

when he was a child, rather than fasting on the Day of Atonement.”⁹ And when Knopf was unable to join the Publishers’ Lunch Club (which had no Jewish members), he created a rival club, the Book Table, open to everyone.¹⁰

The myth of the New Publishers appeared at a time of changing identity for American Jews. As the historian Peter Novick points out:

Beginning in the late sixties, and increasingly in the course of the seventies, influential Jewish leaders began to insist that a ‘new anti-Semitism’ had arisen; that in contrast with the previous period, American Jews were now threatened, isolated, and vulnerable. Formerly, Jewish organizations had had an outward orientation, had emphasized building bridges between Jews and gentiles, had stressed what Jews had in common with other Americans. Now there was an inward turn, an insistence on the defense of separate Jewish interests, a stress on what made Jews unlike other Americans.¹¹

Cerf was representative of this “inward turn”: after the Second World War, he publicly presented himself as Jewish – whereas he had previously put forward his American identity.

Another issue with the New Publishers story is its reliance on simplistic binary oppositions: small Jewish firms versus large WASP corporations, difficult texts versus crowd-pleasing books, open-minded readers versus conservative audiences. Yet, the publishers of the 1920s issued all kinds of books for diverse publics. Take Boni & Liveright’s list, for example. In 1922, they brought out T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* but also Harry Kemp’s autobiography *Tramping on Life*, which became a bestseller. Since the success of this book, declared one advertisement, “Kemp has his hair cut, shoes shined, and nails manicured, regularly.”¹² This humorous tone is characteristic of Boni & Liveright’s marketing strategy. Mixing “highbrow” and popular books, they addressed a broad

⁹ Amy Root Clements, *The Art of Prestige: The Formative Years at Knopf, 1915-1929* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2014), p. 6.

¹⁰ John B. Hench, “The Publishers Who Lunch: The Social Networking of American Book Publishers,” *Book History*, 18.1 (2015), 284.

¹¹ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), pp. 170-71.

¹² Advertisement for Boni & Liveright, *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 1922, 255.

audience (*The Waste Land* eventually sold 5,000 copies,¹³ much more than the version published by the Hogarth Press in Britain).¹⁴

When the New Publishers myth emerged, large corporations increasingly dominated the publishing industry. In 1960, Knopf sold his business to Random House, which was acquired by RCA five years later. The firm that Harold Guinzburg and George Oppenheimer had founded in 1925, Viking Press, was bought by Penguin Books in 1975. That year, the conglomerate Gulf & Western acquired Simon & Schuster. The heroic story of the New Publishers is infused with nostalgia for, in Tebbel's words, a "golden age" of small-scale publishing enterprises that issued quality literature.¹⁵

This chapter has two main objectives. First, it offers a more subtle account of the positioning of the new publishers. They certainly took risks by selecting overlooked authors that later became part of the canon of modern literature. But in doing so, they were competing not only between themselves, but also, to a certain extent, with traditional publishers. Scribner, one of the most conservative publishing houses, signed both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. The second point is that the new publishers were *commercial* publishers interested in selling their titles to the widest possible audience while preserving an aura of exclusivity and sophistication. Even B. W. Huebsch, who was reluctant to sell his books aggressively, nevertheless recognized the market value of modernism.¹⁶ The new publishers made no difference between books that we now see as "high," "low" or "middlebrow." They sold modern literature not as a difficult movement for an elite, but as an appealing product that anyone could enjoy.

¹³ Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 97.

¹⁴ "Its 443 copies, published on 12 September 1923, did not sell out until 11 February 1925, seventeen months later." In Lawrence Rainey (ed.), *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), p. 36.

¹⁵ Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. III.

¹⁶ At the end of his life, Huebsch described James Joyce's *Dubliners* (that he had first published in 1916) as a long-standing commercial success: "*Dubliners* has been selling here for almost forty years, and is one of the most widely anthologized volume of short stories there is." Reminiscences of B. W. Huebsch, [1954-1955], p. 178, OHRO.

If we define the “new publishers” as the young Americans who set up independent firms at the beginning of the twentieth century and published often-daring books, we move the focus away from the experience of social marginalization brought by anti-Semitism. Some new publishers were not Jewish (Alfred Harcourt of Harcourt Brace, for example), and those who were Jewish did not necessarily experience anti-Semitism in their professional life. Jewishness was not what tied the new publishers together. What tied them together was their appetite for fiction and non-fiction that the old firms refused to publish. This is why Harcourt identified so easily with this group, and later said: “while Boston publishers were bringing out sets of Longfellow and Emerson in new bindings, new publishers sprang up in New York, notably Huebsch, Knopf, and Liveright, who began to publish translations of contemporary foreign authors and books by young American authors who had broken away from the Victorian point of view.”¹⁷

The opposition between old and new publishers epitomized the clash between “Victorian” and “contemporary” ideologies or, to use Andrea Friedman’s terms, “moral absolutism” and modernity. As Friedman points out, “moral absolutism had several components: the assertion that morality (including sexual morality) was both knowable and timeless, that it was ordained by God and essential for public and private order; the belief that social authority derived from one’s position at the top of a moral hierarchy, determined by religion, age, class, race, and gender; and agreement that the moral standards established by those at the top of this hierarchy should be enforced upon the larger society through public policy.”¹⁸ Although moral absolutism continued to be the dominant ideology well into the twentieth century, it was increasingly challenged. Theodore Dreiser’s first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) exemplifies the confrontation between pro- and anti-censorship activists. As James L. W. West III points out, “the story of its suppression by Doubleday was a rallying point for forward-looking intellectuals and a paradigm for the suppression of artistic

¹⁷ Harcourt, “Publishing in New York” in Gerald Gross (ed.), *Publishers on Publishing* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1961), p. 255.

¹⁸ Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000), pp. 3-4.

freedom by the forces of puritanism and Comstockery.”¹⁹ While traditional publishing firms had allied themselves with anti-vice organizations such as Anthony Comstock’s New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the new generation of publishers valued individual freedoms and rejected the authority of moral guardians.

B. W. Huebsch (1876-1964) was the first of this new generation of publishers to become prominent.²⁰ The son of a rabbi, Huebsch received his early education at home. When he was thirteen, he went to business school for a few months and then became errand boy at the New York Engraving and Printing Company. “When they needed good proofs of some of the cuts they made, they sent them into the printing office of my brother and uncle, who were right next door to them in the same building,” Huebsch remarked. “And so, it seemed logical – as I came to see it myself – I should eventually go into that business.”²¹ In 1894, he started helping his older brother Daniel and uncle Samuel with the promotional side of their enterprise. Although the slogan of D. A. Huebsch and Company had been “We Print Everything,” around 1895 the firm started to specialize in diaries and appointment books. In spring 1901, B. W. Huebsch succeeded his brother as president of the firm. Having developed an interest in avant-garde culture and politics, he decided to sell the printing plant and to become a book publisher. During a four-year transition period, he published several books by E. H. Griggs, while continuing to distribute the “Huebsch’s Yearbooks” and acting as a part-time printing contractor. As Catherine Turner notes, it was not until 1906 that “his advertising expenditures for literary books beg[an] to exceed his expenditures for the yearbook.”²²

¹⁹ James L. W. III. West, “The Composition and Publication of *Sister Carrie*,” *Dreiser Web Source*, 2000, <<http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/scpubhist.html>> (accessed 20 April 2016).

²⁰ For an overview of Huebsch’s career, see Daniel Borus, “B. W. Huebsch” in Peter Dzwonkoski (ed.), *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980: Trade and Paperback* (Detroit: Gale, 1986), Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 46; and Ann T. Keene, “Huebsch, B. W.,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000.

²¹ B. W. Huebsch, “Footnotes to a Publisher’s Life,” *The Colophon*, new series, 2, 3 (Summer 1937), 410. Qtd in Ann Catherine McCullough, “A History of B. W. Huebsch, Publisher,” unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison (1979), p. 6.

²² Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2003), p. 48.

With little formal education and capital, the odds of Huebsch succeeding in a highly-competitive publishing business were low - but he cleverly positioned his firm in the avant-garde niche. His list included daring non-fiction, including books on radical political theory and psychoanalysis. Among the earlier titles Huebsch published were John Spargo's *The Spiritual Significance of Modern Socialism* (1908) and *Karl Marx: His Life and Work* (1910), as well as Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1912). In 1919, he issued *Psychoanalysis: its History, Theory, and Practice* by André Tridon (described in the *New York Times* as "the foremost psychoanalyst in America").²³ The publication of the radical weekly *The Freeman*, from 1920 to 1924, exemplifies Huebsch's passionate defence of civil liberties.

Huebsch also brought out controversial modernist fiction, including D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* in 1915 (shortly after it was banned in Britain), James Joyce's *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Many of the authors he championed eventually left the firm, disappointed by the lack of advertising and problems with distribution. After a long professional association and friendship with Huebsch, even Anderson left in 1925, accepting a generous offer from Horace Liveright. At the end of his life, Anderson reminded Huebsch that *Winesburg, Ohio* "did not begin to have a wide circulation until it got into the Modern Library," a cheap series of reprints created by Liveright and Albert Boni.²⁴

Unlike Liveright, Huebsch was never comfortable with bold marketing strategies. At a time when most publishers used dust jackets for advertising, Huebsch published *The Rainbow* in plain packaging – the front cover included only the title, Lawrence's name, Huebsch's address and a list of other Lawrence books (which disappeared in the 1922 edition).²⁵ Huebsch preferred to address a small audience of readers for at least three reasons. First, he lacked access to a wide distribution network and would have found it difficult to cater to large orders (Anderson complained that his

²³ "Tridon Dictates Death Notice, Dies," *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 1922, 21.

²⁴ Anderson to Huebsch, 30 Nov. 1940, box 8, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago. For more on Anderson's relationship with Huebsch, see Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 41-62.

²⁵ See Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars*, pp. 65-68.

books were often unavailable in bookstores, for example). Second, small print runs and discrete advertising carried less risks of attracting the attention of the censor. As an under-capitalized firm, Huebsch could not afford a potentially ruinous trial to defend a book against charges of obscenity. He once advised Anderson to avoid using sexually-loaded language when writing his novel *Many Marriages*: “though I do not advocate compromising with the vice societies, I believe that in most instances a work of literary art can be presented without employing a style or vocabulary offensive to the great many people who have not yet abandoned the Victorian tradition.”²⁶ The third reason lies in Huebsch’s “commitment to the older, more genteel business world.”²⁷ He believed that the Scribners (founders of one of the most staid publishing firms of the time) “were rather attractive personalities” who “never pressed themselves forward.”²⁸ As a newcomer in the publishing business, Huebsch modelled himself on dominant norms of behaviours – while at the same time publishing texts that the older firms considered improper. But targeting limited audiences made it difficult to achieve financial stability. In 1925, Huebsch sold his firm to the new Viking Press. He remained actively involved in publishing as Viking’s vice president and editorial director.

Like Huebsch, Alfred A. Knopf (1892-1984) and his wife Blanche (1894-1966) avoided clashes with anti-vice organizations and members of the old publishing establishment.²⁹ Both came from wealthy, well-connected Jewish families – it was thanks to his father that Alfred got his first job at Doubleday, Page and Company in 1912, after graduating from Columbia College. He then worked for Mitchell Kennerley, a New York publisher who often published controversial fiction.³⁰ In 1915, Alfred Knopf opened his own publishing firm with the assistance of his wife and father.

²⁶ Huebsch to Anderson, 11 Feb. 1922, box 1, B. W. Huebsch papers, Library of Congress.

²⁷ Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars*, p. 49.

²⁸ Reminiscences of B. W. Huebsch, Spring 1955, Vol. 2, p. 277, OHRO. Qtd in Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars*, p. 49.

²⁹ For an example of Knopf’s efforts to build good relationships with John S. Sumner of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, see Cathy Henderson and Richard W. Oram, *The House of Knopf, 1915-1960: A Documentary Volume* (Detroit: Gale, 2010), Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 355, p. 42.

³⁰ In 1913, Kennerley was tried for publishing Daniel Carson Goodman’s novel *Hagar Revelly*, and was successfully defended by the lawyer John Quinn.

From the start, Blanche was fully involved in the firm: she worked full-time even after the birth of their son, and in 1916, she devised the Borzoi logo, which “appeared not only on cases jackets, and title-pages but also in varying colors on endpapers.”³¹ The Borzoi device unified the Knopf list, signalling superior book production and literary quality.³²

The firm published many modernist writers at the start of their career. In 1918, for example, Knopf brought out the first American edition of Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr*. The *New York Times* described it as “possibly . . . a Cubist novel,” before criticizing “its turgid style, its gargoyle characters, its incoherences, and perpetual suggestion of a something struggling through, deterred from manifesting itself by the writer’s lack of skill.”³³ The novel probably did not sell well, as no cheap reprint appeared in America while Lewis was still alive. In 1920 and 1921, the Knopfs published both T. S. Eliot’s *Poems* and his essay collection *The Sacred Wood*. They also issued poetry by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, and several D. H. Lawrence titles. In 1924, they launched a monthly magazine, the *American Mercury*, edited by George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken. A long-time friend of Alfred Knopf, Mencken vocally opposed puritanism and censorship. His 1927 book *Selected Prejudices*, published by Knopf, included a chapter on birth control, at the time when contraception was still illegal in the United States.

The Knopf list included controversial fiction and non-fiction, but also many books that we now see as “middlebrow” or “popular.” These bestsellers were often advertised alongside books by “highbrow” writers. One 1926 advertisement declared “Take a Borzoi book over Labor Day,” before listing Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and Warwick Deeping’s immensely successful

³¹ Amy Root, “Designing the Borzoi: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Creates a Brand of Excellence, 1915-29,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 103.4 (2009), 505.

³² For more on Alfred and Blanche Knopf, see Alan Kelly, “Knopf, Alfred A.,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000; Lois A. Marchino, “Knopf, Blanche Wolf,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000; Herbert H. Johnson and Margaret Becket, “Alfred A. Knopf” in Peter Dzwonkoski (ed.), *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980*.

³³ Review of *Tarr* by Wyndham Lewis, *New York Times*, 21 July 1918, 45.

Sorrell and Son (which Knopf also advertised on huge billboards in New York City).³⁴ A well-known figure of the New York artistic scene, Van Vechten was always on the lookout for the exciting and the new – he was an early champion of Gertrude Stein’s work, and later became her literary executor. But Van Vechten did not live in a highbrow ghetto. As Barbara Tischler points out, “he sought to bring an awareness of popular American culture to a wide audience” and “was among the few critics early in the twentieth century to pay serious attention to the blues, ragtime, early jazz, musical theater, and music for film.”³⁵

Van Vechten also introduced the Knopfs to several Harlem Renaissance writers, including Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Rudolph Fisher and Nella Larsen. Hughes’s collection of poems *The Weary Blues* was published in 1926 and advertised next to Fannie Hurst’s “great story of family life in New York” *Appassionata* (Figure 1). As the drawing of Hurst shows, Knopf did not hesitate to use an author’s physical appearance to sell books. “The high-profile authors of the twenties and thirties,” Faye Hammill notes, “were constructed in relation to new models of fame emerging from Hollywood. Literary celebrity was increasingly predicated on forms of public performance.”³⁶ Hurst’s commercial success and participation in celebrity culture place her in the sphere of the middlebrow or “middlebrow modern.”³⁷ This mainstream position in the literary field was of course very different from that Hughes, a little-known Black poet. In short, the advertisement playfully juxtaposes diverse genres and writers (Hughes and Hurst, but also Katherine Mansfield and Arthur Machen) to appeal to the widest possible audience.

³⁴ Advertisement for Alfred A. Knopf Inc., *New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1926, 14. For more on Knopf’s publication of *Sorrell and Son*, see Henderson and Oram, *The House of Knopf, 1915-1960*, p. 60.

³⁵ Barbara L. Tischler, “Van Vechten, Carl,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000.

³⁶ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2007), p. 2.

³⁷ Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003), p. 11.

Borzoiana
Crimes and Mysteries for
Future Reference

The *Borzo* is new on the trail of mysteries. Any little thing like an unexplained murder or an unsolved abduction sounds interesting to him after seeing what *Arthur Machen* has done in THE CANNING WONDER, with that eighteenth century puzzle, the disappearance of Elizabeth Canning. In fact, *The Borzo* has resolved to save up a few of the contemporary crimes for a couple of hundred years and then give them to the *Arthur Machen* of 2153 to write a fascinating chronicle about the case and the trial as well as about our humorous manners and morals.

Another mystery that *The Borzo* intends to ponder over in the leisure hours of his dotage is how *John P. A. Werner*, all of whose associations have been with the smart literary set, can find the soulful stuff in MORE IN AMERICAN that expresses the yearnings of the baref; washed.

At the same time the same question will naturally arise in connection with *Katherine Mansfield*, one of the most detached as well as one of the greatest of English women authors, who nevertheless seem to have probed in A GERMAN PENSION all the depths as well as all the strength of a motley crew of characters.

And the inquisitive can further seek the answer to the riddle of when *Langston Hughes* found time to write THE WEARY BLUES, those haunting melodies that sum up the experiences of his entire race. *Young Hughes* has, at the age of twenty-three, rambled from Missouri to the City of Mexico, from Topoka to the Canary Islands, from New York to Burma, from Holland back to Indiana, from Paris to Washington, earning his living in taxing and engrossing occupations. Nevertheless he was able to write and polish some of the loveliest lyrics of our day.

What are the modern girl's ideals?

**FANNIE
HURST**



answers this question
in her great story of
family life in New York

APPASSIONATA

\$2.00 WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

In addition to the regular edition of APPASSIONATA, there will be 220 copies, of which 210 are for sale, octavo, on Borzoi all-rag paper, signed by the author and numbered 1 to 210, at \$10.00 the copy.

ALFRED A. KNOPF, 730 FIFTH AVE., NEW YORK
In Canada from The Macmillan Co. of Canada, St. Martin's House, Toronto.

Figure 1: Advertisement for Alfred A. Knopf Inc., *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1926, BR16

The Borzoi trademark unified a diverse list, which also included hard-boiled fiction by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. The violence of Hammett's first novel *Red Harvest* (1929) was used as a selling point. As one advertisement declared, the story "contains gunplay and murder and sudden death, combined with an element of reality so harsh that it reads like the latest news from Chicago."³⁸ A drawing of a skull reinforced this description of brutality, inspired by real-life events. The Knopfs went on to publish Hammett's major works, including *The Dain Curse* (1929), *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), *The Glass Key* (1931) and *The Thin Man* (1934). *The Maltese Falcon* was then included in the Modern Library series and marketed as a modern classic, alongside titles by modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway (to whom Hammett was often compared).³⁹

The success of the Modern Library had launched the publishing career of Horace Liveright (1886-1933) and Albert Boni (1892-1981). Created in 1917, the cheap series specialized in

³⁸ Advertisement for *The Red Harvest* by Dashiell Hammett, *New York Times Book Review*, 17 Feb. 1929, 29.

³⁹ See Jaillant, *Modernism*, pp. 71-81.

copyrighted texts, unlike traditional series of classics such as Everyman's Library. In the early years, the series reflected Boni's interest in European literature, including subversive texts such as Andreas Latzko's *Men in War*, an anti-war novel barred from the mails under the wartime legislation. Among the bestsellers in the early Modern Library were French novels with a racy reputation: Theophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (issued in an abridged edition until 1935) and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. While the Modern Library has often been seen as a "highbrow" series, it published a wide range of texts – including ghost stories and scientific essays. American literature also occupied an increasingly important place on the list, especially after the publication of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1921) and James Branch Cabell's *Beyond Life* (1923).⁴⁰

The wide sales of the series helped to fund Boni & Liveright's riskier publications. A former bond salesman, Liveright was more interested in literary coups than in building his backlist. From 1919, he worked with the publicity consultant Edward Bernays, devising new ways to promote books such as free review copies and ready-made reviews sent to newspapers across the country. In 1925, the year he sold the Modern Library to Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, Liveright published Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. The cover of the latter included testimonies by well-known writers arranged in eye-catching text boxes (Figure 2). Donald Ogden Stewart, a noted Broadway playwright in the 1920s, wrote: "After trying to make a meal out of the literary lettuce sandwiches which are being fed to this country, it is rather nice to discover that one of your countrymen has opened a shop where you can really get something to eat." At the time when American literature was starting to be taught in schools and universities, Hemingway was presented as an important new writer. Edward J. O'Brien, the editor of *The Best American Short*

⁴⁰ For more on Boni & Liveright, see Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright*; Gilmer, *Horace Liveright*; and Carmen R. Russell, "Boni and Liveright" in Peter Dzwonkoski (ed.), *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980*. For more on the Modern Library, see Jaillant, *Modernism*; and Jay Satterfield, *The World's Best Books: Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2002).

Stories, declared: “I regard this volume of short stories as a permanent contribution to the American literature of our time – a brave book not only for us but for posterity.”

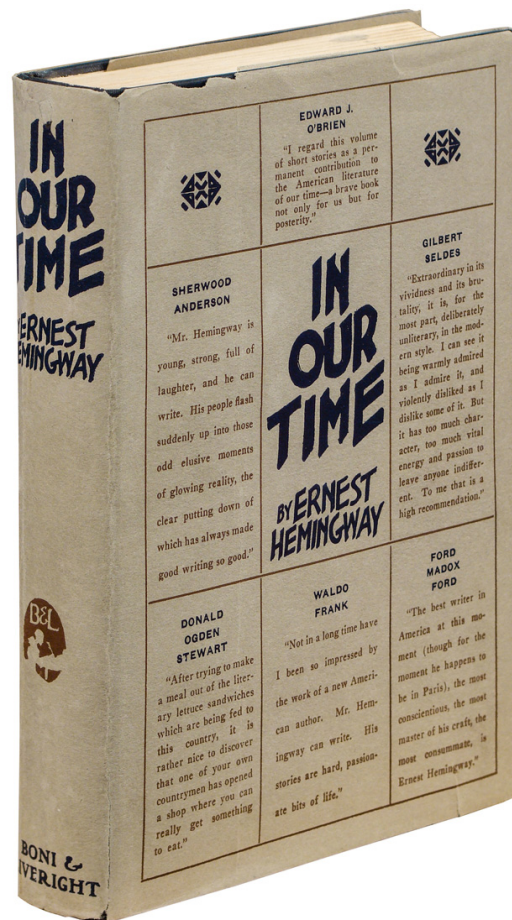


Figure 2: Dust jacket, *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway (Boni & Liveright, 1925)

The example of Hemingway shows that Liveright was competing not only against his fellow new publishers, but also against established firms. When Hemingway submitted *The Torrents of Spring*, a satire on Sherwood Anderson, Liveright rejected it and lost the rights to the author’s next novel (*The Sun Also Rises*). Scribner published both books in 1926, starting a long collaboration between Hemingway and the editor Maxwell Perkins. Two years before, F. Scott Fitzgerald had recommended Hemingway to Perkins. The association between Fitzgerald and Perkins went back to 1920, when the editor persuaded the conservative heads at Scribner to publish *This Side of Paradise*. Perkins then edited Fitzgerald’s major works, including *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). “Did F. Scott Fitzgerald have the right publisher?,” asked James L. W. West III in a 1992 article, before adding: “Scribners never really attempted to realize

maximum or continuing income from his books, nor did it promote his subsidiary rights imaginatively or energetically.”⁴¹ West does not suggest that Liveright would have been a better publisher for Fitzgerald, since the bankruptcy of the firm in 1932 left authors stranded. However, he notes that other companies – including Edith Wharton’s publisher Appleton, a firm “even older than the Scribner imprint” – might have done a better job at selling Fitzgerald titles.⁴²

The publishing landscape of the 1920s was therefore much more complex than the New Publishers myth tells us: established firms sometimes published new writers, and established authors (Theodore Dreiser for example) sometimes accepted offers from new publishers. The flexible boundary between “new” and “traditional” publishing houses could also be seen at a geographical level. New publishers did not set up their firms in a ghetto: they chose to be close to older firms in New York. Two parts of Manhattan were particular popular among the publishers of the 1920s: Midtown and Greenwich Village (see map in Appendix). Scribner had its headquarters at Fifth Avenue and 48th Street – a two-minute walk from the offices of Thomas Seltzer (1920-1926) and a five-minute walk from Boni & Liveright (after 1924) and the Modern Library (1925-1927). When the firms moved (generally to larger premises), they often stayed close to their former headquarters. Knopf, the Modern Library and Boni & Liveright remained in Midtown. Huebsch and E. P. Dutton (a much more traditional firm) moved from Midtown to Greenwich Village, where Macmillan was based. In 1926, after buying the firm of their uncle Thomas Seltzer, Albert and Charles Boni moved to 66 Fifth Avenue – in offices that had previously been occupied by Macmillan. Being close to the traditional firms allowed new publishers to have easy access to staff and suppliers (including printers). This geographical proximity also facilitated a wide range of social interactions with writers and their literary agents. Scribner, for example, kept a close eye on Hemingway – whose publisher Liveright had its offices nearby.

It is difficult to know exactly the role anti-Semitism played, if any, in the transactions between writers and publishers. Being published by Liveright did not bother Ezra Pound, who

⁴¹ James L. W. III. West, “Did F. Scott Fitzgerald Have the Right Publisher?,” *Sewanee Review*, 100.4 (1992), 649.

⁴² *Ibid*, 650.

described him as “a pearl among publishers.”⁴³ In contrast, when William Faulkner left Liveright for Harcourt Brace, he wrote that he was “going to be published by white folks now,” alluding to the fact that he was leaving a Jewish firm for a Christian one.⁴⁴ But from 1936, Faulkner’s main publisher was Random House, the firm created by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer. He stayed with them until the end of his life – even though his immense success after the Second World War would have allowed him to move to another publisher. Faulkner’s anti-Semitism was never strong enough to prevent him from working with Jewish publishers.

Although Liveright’s alcoholism and erratic behaviour alienated many people, he had a long-lasting influence on the publishing business. “Scratch a middle-aged publisher today,” wrote the editor and novelist Edith Stern in 1941, “and very likely you’ll find a Boni and Liveright employee of the 1920’s.” Stern herself had joined the firm as a manuscript reader in 1923, after a few months working for Alfred Knopf. “Coming as I did, from the bleak orderliness of Knopf’s, where efficiency methods were applied to the melange of business, profession, and gambling that is publishing,” Stern declared, “the Boni and Liveright office burst upon me like a disturbing new world.” This new world was chaotic but also highly creative:

The Boni and Liveright office was the Jazz Age in microcosm with all its extremes of hysteria and cynicism, of Carpe Diem, of decadent thriftlessness, and of creative vitality. To recapture its atmosphere one would not, like Proust, dip a madeleine into a cup of tea, but a canape into bathtub gin.

Yet through the madness, the extravagances, the orgies, the empty bottles that occasionally littered the stairs in the morning and the parties that cut into office hours are the truth, they are by no means the whole truth.⁴⁵

The “whole truth,” for Stern, was the devotion to literature shared by Liveright and his employees. After Liveright’s premature death in 1933, Bennett Cerf celebrated the “flair” of his former boss,

⁴³ Qtd in Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), p. 82.

⁴⁴ Faulkner to Alabama McLean, [Oct. 1928], in Joseph Blotner (ed.), *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 41.

⁴⁵ Edith M. Stern, “The Man Who Was Unafraid,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 28 June 1941, 10, 14.

while deploring the “wild, reckless manner” in which he conducted his affairs. For Cerf, Liveright’s firm was bound to fail: “Intensified competition, the rise of young men who breathed fresh life into doddering, but financially impregnable, old houses, and, above all, the spectre of diminishing outlets and narrower profit margins, left no chance for a madhouse like Liveright’s.”⁴⁶ Once radically different from the new publishers, the old firms were now being transformed by a younger generation eager to publish new voices. In this environment, only the most professional and innovative publishing houses could survive.

Alfred Harcourt is one of those who managed to build a sustainable firm. Born in 1881, Harcourt studied at Columbia, a breeding ground for the new generation of publishers. As we have seen, Alfred Knopf also studied there, as did Bennett Cerf, Richard Simon, Max Schuster and Harcourt’s future partner Donald Brace. It is likely that Harcourt’s interest in subversive literature was born during his student days. After graduation, however, Harcourt went on to work for an established publishing house, Henry Holt and Company. Starting as a salesman, he quickly climbed up the corporate ladder: he was not yet thirty years old when he became head of the trade book department and a director of the firm. Yet, in May 1919, Harcourt resigned after Holt refused to publish Bertrand Russell’s *Roads to Freedom*, a study of radical movements. Unlike Bennett Cerf or Alfred Knopf, Harcourt did not come from a wealthy family, but his small capital as well as investments from his friends and partners allowed him to launch the house of Harcourt, Brace and Howe (later Harcourt, Brace and Company). Early successes such as Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) firmly established the new house.⁴⁷

Harcourt also had a talent for recruiting European authors who combined cultural prestige and commercial appeal. After buying the rights to Lytton Strachey’s bestseller *Queen Victoria* in 1921, Harcourt went on to publish other members of the Bloomsbury group, including Virginia

⁴⁶ Bennett Cerf, “Horace Liveright – An Obituary, Unedited,” *Publishers’ Weekly*, 7 Oct. 1933, 1229.

⁴⁷ For more on Harcourt, see Elizabeth Dzwonkoski, “Harcourt Brace Jovanovich” in Peter Dzwonkoski (ed.), *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980*; and Jennifer Parchesky, “Harcourt, Alfred,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000.

Woolf. But he was never comfortable with the most difficult modernist texts. Instead, he selected books he considered readable and advertised them as bestsellers. One advertisement in *Publishers' Weekly* presented Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) as "a literary masterpiece" and "a POPULAR book" – "here is the real chance to increase her audience."⁴⁸ Harcourt used a similar strategy for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), a book advertised as Gertrude Stein's first engaging, reader-friendly book.⁴⁹ Woolf and Stein were already well-known names, and Harcourt capitalized on their celebrity to target a large audience.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the decline of anti-vice organizations offered up new opportunities for publishers eager to widen the market for subversive modern books. Previously, these texts had often been issued in limited editions published in Continental Europe, particularly in Paris. In 1922, the year Shakespeare & Company brought out Joyce's *Ulysses*, B. W. Huebsch wrote to Sherwood Anderson:

The various publishers who have been bringing out limited editions at robber-baron prices have pretty nearly worked the subscription graft to death. To issue a book in that manner is to stamp it as pornography. This new feature in bookselling has resulted in the creation of a class known as book-leggers. They sell books with a wink and a leer. If the book happens to be a work of art they handle it with slimy fingers. For you to bring out a book in that manner means to limit its reading to one or two thousand persons interested mainly in the collector's value, or the obscenity value, and to withhold it from your real audience, ninety-eight per cent of which consists of people who can afford to pay only the normal market price of books.⁵⁰

Other new publishers did not share Huebsch's dislike of limited editions. Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer's firm Random House began by publishing luxury books manufactured by the Nonesuch Press in England. In 1922, Pascal Covici (1885-1964) also started his book-publishing career by issuing lavish editions intended for collectors. Along with his first partner Billy McGee, he brought out controversial books such as Ben Hecht's *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (1922), which

⁴⁸ Advertisement for Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, *Publishers' Weekly*, 27 Oct. 1928, 1745.

⁴⁹ See Lise Jaillant, "Shucks, We've Got Glamour Girls Too! Gertrude Stein, Bennett Cerf and the Culture of Celebrity," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39.1 (2015), 149–169.

⁵⁰ Huebsch to Anderson, 11 Feb. 1922, box 1, B. W. Huebsch papers, Library of Congress.

was confiscated on grounds of obscenity. In December 1928, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* appeared under the new Covici-Friede imprint (Donald Friede was a former vice-president at Boni & Liveright). This was a daring choice for a new firm: Hall's novel on lesbianism had been banned in Britain, and Knopf renounced publishing it in America for fear of prosecution. Undeterred, Covici and Friede sold it for \$5 – “twice that of the usual novel,” as Fanny Butcher declared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.⁵¹ This price strategy was a clear signal that the book was not intended for the lower classes and other readers that the anti-vice societies saw as vulnerable. Likewise, the introduction by the sexologist Havelock Ellis, and the quote by the critic Arnold Bennett on the dust jacket (Figure 3) downplayed the scandalous reputation of the book. Despite the high price and aura of seriousness, the book was an instant bestseller. In January 1929, when the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice pressed charges, 20,000 copies had already been sold.⁵² The firm turned to Morris Ernst, the attorney who would later represent Random House in the *Ulysses* trial. The defence argued that *The Well of Loneliness* should “be judged by the mores of the day,” but failed to convince Magistrate Bushel. When the firm was convicted in February, Covici told the press that he would “fight to the bitter end.”⁵³ The conviction was later overturned on appeal.⁵⁴ Covici-Friede was now free to sell the book in the \$5 trade edition, as well as a \$25 “Victory edition” limited to 225 copies signed by the author. The publicity brought by the trial allowed the firm to maximize profit, while at the time boosting its image as defender of free speech.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Fanny Butcher, “Radclyffe Hall Book Written in Fine English,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29 Dec. 1928, 13.

⁵² “Police Seize Novel by Radclyffe Hall,” *New York Times*, 12 Jan. 1929, 3.

⁵³ “Novel ‘Loneliness’ Is Ruled Obscene,” *New York Times*, 22 Feb. 1929, 11.

⁵⁴ “‘Well of Loneliness’ Cleared in Court Here,” *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 1929, 25.

⁵⁵ For more on Covici-Friede, see Alan J. Filreis, “Covici-Friede” in Peter Dzwonkoski (ed.), *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980*; and Ronald S. Marmarelli, “Covici, Pascal Avram,” *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000.

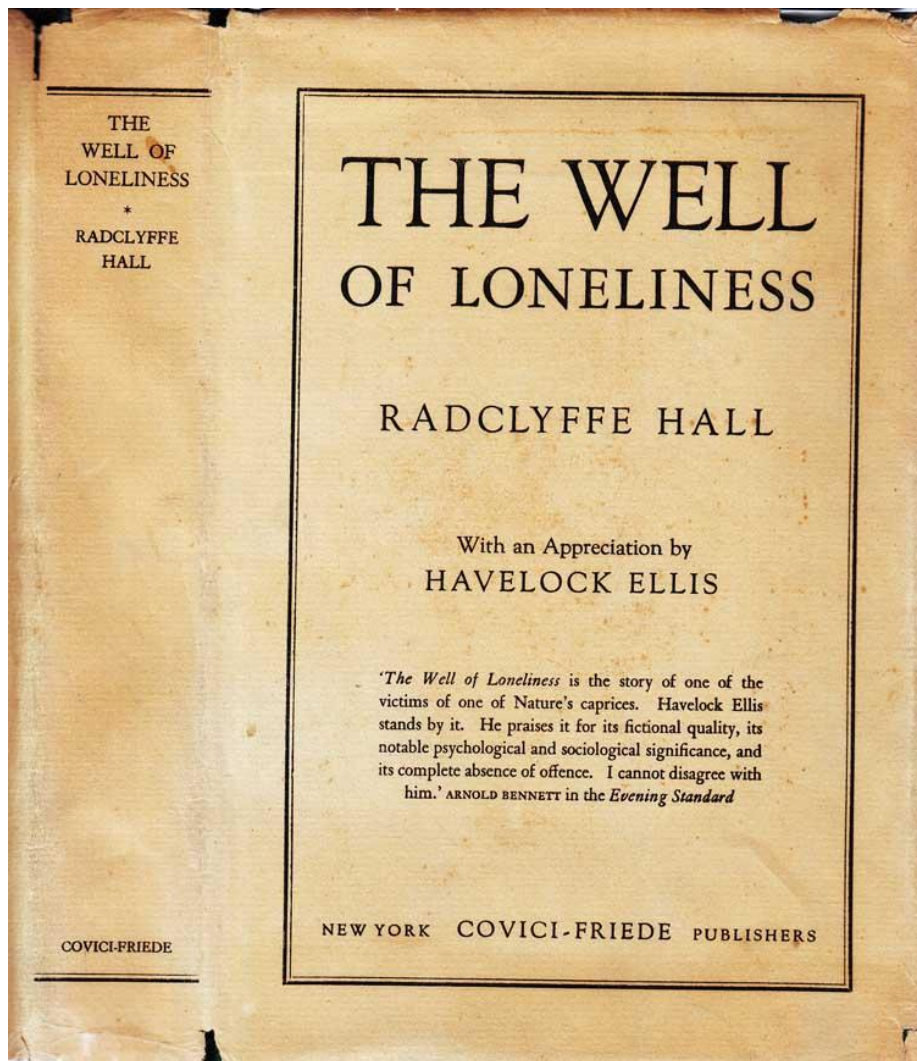


Figure 3: Dust jacket, 1928 Covici-Friede trade edition of *The Well of Loneliness*

Conclusion

Although the group of new publishers was highly diverse, one thing united them: their rejection of the moral absolutism of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the like. Even Huebsch and Knopf, who did their best to avoid any clashes with anti-obscenity organizations, never hid their disdain for “Victorianism.” It is significant that the story of the New Publishers emerged in the late 1960s, after the last trials for obscenity cleared the way for the publication of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. “So far as writers are concerned, there is no longer a law of

obscenity,” wrote the lawyer Charles Rembar in 1968.⁵⁶ In this context, the new publishers were seen as pioneering figures of the fight against bigotry. The books they defended – from *The Well of Loneliness* to *Ulysses* – were now considered major literary works and “life-affirming” books as Paul Boyer put it. They treated “sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, in a context of love, tenderness, and respect for human dignity.” In contrast, the 1960s censorship fights over books by Burroughs, Hubert Selby, Jr., Pauline Réage and the Marquis de Sade underlined a darker side. “The old cheerful faith in the obvious desirability of complete permissiveness has faded,” declared Boyer. “The pornographic carnival is now revealed to have not only an exciting midway and titillating sideshows, but also a rather chilling chamber of horrors.”⁵⁷

Many new publishers and their allies were troubled by the sexual permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, shortly before his death, Donald Friede declared: “When I see some of the books published today, I cannot help but wonder if our fight against censorship in the twenties was really wise . . . *Fanny Hill* in paper! And *Naked Lunch* in any form! . . . But I suppose there are some people still willing to play the piano in the literary brothel. Certainly the pay is good.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Donald Klopfer came to view his role in the *Ulysses* case somewhat ruefully. In his oral history interview, he said: “every porno shop on 42nd St. derives from that!”⁵⁹ The lawyer Morris Ernst, recalling his defence of *Ulysses*, declared in 1970: “Whereas I defended the book and legitimized a four-letter word, that doesn’t mean that the four-letter word, out of context, should be spread and used – or sodomy on the stage or masturbation in the public arena.” And he added that he would not choose “to live in a society without limits to freedom.”⁶⁰ The anti-censorship activists of the 1920s had always defended a highly restrained notion of freedom, an aspect that has not been sufficiently explored.

⁵⁶ Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 490.

⁵⁷ Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd edn (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002), p. xxii.

⁵⁸ Qtd in Boyer, *Purity in Print*, p. 134.

⁵⁹ Reminiscences of Donald Klopfer, 1975, p. 19, OHRO.

⁶⁰ Irving Spiegel, “Censors’ Foe Sees Need for Limits to Freedom,” *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 1970, 46.

Appendix: Literary Publishing Houses in New York, 1920-1930

