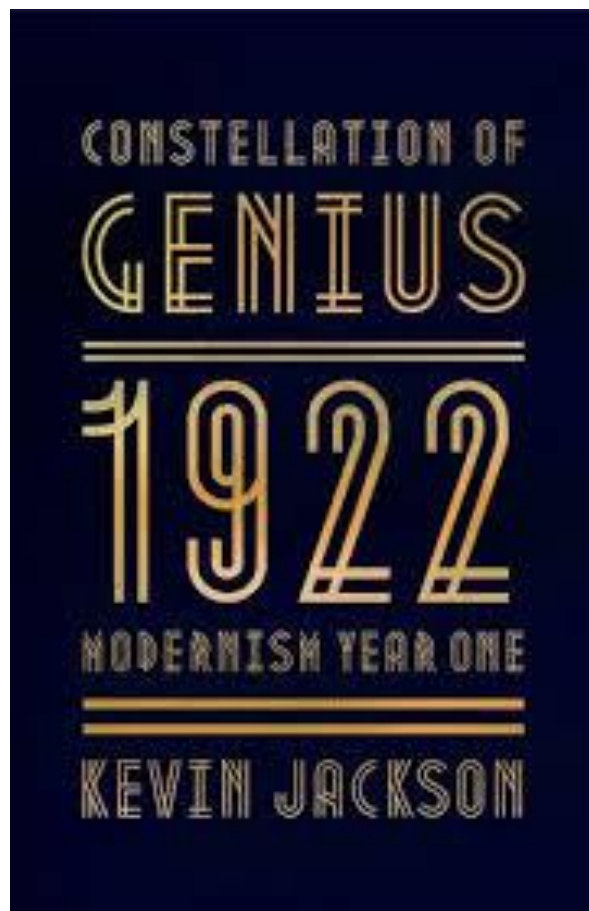


A Double Review:

Bill Bryson One Summer: America 1927

*Kevin Jackson Constellation of Genius: 1922
Modernism Year One.*



Bill Bryson, *One Summer America 1927*. London; Doubleday, 2013.

Kevin Jackson, *Constellation of Genius 1922: Modernism and All That Jazz*.
London; Random House, 2012.

All illustrations are from the public domain

Review by Garry Victor Hill

Both writers use a period of time in the 1920s as their framework and then examine unfolding events within that framework, but they have a different focus.

Although he frequently refers to the economics and politics of the era, Kevin Jackson focuses on the unfolding culture and he only occasionally goes deeply into what was popular in 1922. His interest focuses on the beginnings of modernism that bubbled just below society's surface and only occasionally gained great popularity back at the start of the twenties. Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, Scott Fitzgerald and the early jazzmen were the salient examples of such popularity.

Bill Bryson focuses more on what was popular back then. While he has much in his book about politics, economics and science, his major focus stays on culture, particularly where culture and technology entwine.

Both writers are adept at finding the little known or forgotten aspects of their period and making them interesting. They can both go into the lives of their personages in detail without becoming bogged down in biography: the era not the people dominates in both books.

Bryson does not focus on the whole year, just from May to September and in each month he goes for American events or the Americans who did something remarkable or in some cases had something remarkable done to them. In May he starts with the aviator Charles Lindberg. Often incorrectly described as the first man to fly across the Atlantic, as Bryson points out he was the first to fly from New York to Paris. About sixty people had flown the Atlantic before him, starting with British officers Alcock and Brown, who flew from Newfoundland to Ireland in 1919. Bryson does not denigrate Lindberg's achievement, but he does reveal his cold character, dislike of publicity and fascist leanings, all of which his many admirers at the time saw as a mixture of modesty and patriotism. Bryson examines the rise and fall of the hero worship of Lindberg, which in many parts of the globe reached cult proportions in the late 1920s. The realities of the 1914-1918 war had made the warrior-hero dubious and there was something latently desperate about the need to find a new model of heroism. Handsome, brave, modest Lindberg filled that need.

Bryson has an adept way of steering between hagiography and muck-racking with those he deals with. He shows that Henry Ford, Warren Harding and others were over-rated in intelligence and their supposed humanity. Lindberg, Herbert

Hoover and Oliver Wendell Holmes are depicted as intelligent men, dangerously intelligent, because beneath their good reputations their compassion and commitment to freedom had a blind side. All three supported eugenic programs for racial improvement in America; Bryson goes into detail about these sinister, racially based ideas on compulsory sterilisation.



Lindberg and the plane that he flew from New York to Paris

Despite such sections *One Summer America 1927* is not an exposé or a lament. With achievement he gives credit, often to the under-rated.

These include Mrs Coolidge the gregarious first the First Lady, habitually covering for her taciturn husband, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who despite supporting her husband's politics, became an accomplished writer. Bryson includes a long section on Philo F. Farnsworth.

Who was that? Philo F. Farnsworth (1906-1971) the man who invented the modern working television, one day before John Logie Baird of Scotland broadcast from his model. Bryson traces the development of Farnsworth's designs and experiments to the laboratory television (where in 1927 massive rotators could only produce an image the size of a drink coaster) to the working model on display at the 1939 World's Fair. Farnsworth's work on cathode rays made that possible.

Another now forgotten figure who did so much to shape modern life was David Sarnoff (1890 or 1891-1971). He was not an inventor, but he shaped modern radio and television development by getting live events broadcast, by getting advertising on radio and playing a key part in forming NBC. Commercial radio broadcasts had started in New York in 1920 and by 1922 they were becoming a staple in wealthier American households, but they were not very commercial, in both the sense of making a profit and in the sense of being saturated with commercials. Initially radio stations just had sponsors named at the beginning and ending of shows. They were also not very lively, being unable to broadcast sporting events live. In 1927 Sarnoff changed that, by relaying sporting events results in writing so that radio announcers re-enacted sporting games and races as if they were happening in front of them. This was how Ronald Reagan got his start in show business in the early 1930s. Snazzy programming making radio lucrative for ads and Sarnoff put much of the structure in place in 1927.

He also encouraged the inventor Vladimir Zworykin (1889-1982) to develop what became the modern television and pushed his invention. There was a considerable overlap with Farnsworth's ideas and subsequently, litigation. Zworykin gained the credit and the power but in old age he claimed to never watch television because it was so mindless.



Calvin Coolidge as an Indian Chief

The lives of four famous American men are examined in depth because 1927 shows them at the peak of their power and popularity, but all three soon found that the after the summit came the abyss. Popular President Coolidge went to South Dakota to dedicate the Mount Rushmore project - and stayed and stayed and stayed. After local politicians used him as bait for a tourist trap by filling a pool with starving trout that he could hardly fail not to catch, a delighted Coolidge became such a keen angler that it was hard to get him away. South Dakota tourism officials and state level politicians then used the president as a poster boy for tourist angling.

South Dakotans, realizing how fine a president was for publicity, sponsored parades and dressing up as a cowboy for photographers – or an Indian. The real seat of government became Rapid City High School, now populated by bureaucrats, although Coolidge stayed and communicated more from a hunting lodge thirty miles off. Eventually he even used the schoolroom to announce he would not run for the presidency in August 1927, fifteen months before the election. In a sense he no longer was the president, having virtually abdicated. Despite his reputation for puritanism, taciturnity and his praise of duty and hard work, no other president was so obviously fond of vacationing.

He would live long enough to see the economic havoc of the great depression. His do nothing approach to the economy was one of its main causes. Henry Ford's reputation with cars is so high that some people still believe that he invented automobiles. What he did do was popularise them and mass production through the model T Ford. Before that went into production in 1908, cars were comparable to yachts in their rarity, as a status symbol and a sign of being rich.

By making the durable Model T affordable to ordinary people Ford changed the world forever and became the dominant force in the world of automobiles - until 1927. The faults with the model T, such as idiosyncratic gears and lights, were not in the new vehicles of his imitators and rivals. He discontinued the line and produced other vehicles, but none had the popularity and massive market share accorded to the model T. Bryson also recounts Ford's other costly time devouring and disastrous failures in 1927 libel cases, his attempt at newspaper publishing and setting up a utopia in Brazil, Fordlandia. Ford is widely believed to have been a success, but this needs to be balanced by examining his failures.



Ford's Model T. They were so popular and cheap that factories could not initially meet the demand

For Lindberg stress would come with the kidnapping and murder of his only son in 1932 and an increasing feeling among many that he was being gulled and used by the Nazis and their sympathizers. Many in that same situation woke up, but despite the obvious evidence in the early days of WW2, Lindberg would hold to his views until the Pearl Harbour attack. His later good works did little to raise him back to his hero status.

Al Jolson's movie *The Jazz Singer* was the first film musical as well as the first full talking film and for those reasons was a resounding success, but Jolson followed it up with too many clones and by the early 1930s more such were unwanted. His career languished until the 1940s.

Bryson goes into detail about this first talkie and then about the first of the Broadway musicals as we now understand them. This was Jerome Kern's *Showboat*, which was also first staged in 1927? Kern set out to tell a story in music with delineated characters and songs and settings that moved the story along. That

sounds so obvious to us now, but before Kern's *Showboat* Broadway performances did not do this, they just had people who sang, danced and joked. Similarly before the 1920s hitting home runs was rare in baseball. It was indeed a whole new game when Babe Ruth went to bat and 1927 was one of the great seasons that reshaped the game. The publication of Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* also caused something new in American entertainment, a successful, witty and lucrative attack on religion. Some states made it a crime to sell or own the book: that pushed sales ever higher.



Al Jolson in a typical pose.

The 1920s were a time of emancipation for women; many freedoms that are barely noticed now were new in the 1920s. The right to vote is the best known, but the right to enter professions opened up. Books such as *Elmer Gantry* could be read and Scott Fitzgerald's frequently rebellious culturally challenging stories were in popular magazines. Beaches were no longer segregated on gender. Clothing styles went through a virtual revolution. Corsets, chin to wrist coverings and dresses dragging at the ankles suddenly seemed as passè as periwinkles and ruffs. Instead hemlines went to the calves, straps rested on bare shoulders and instead of being a tight fitting burden to carry garments flowed. Dull colours had been replaced by lamè or silk, often in cream, lime or apricot. instead of monochromatic unadorned clothing, bright plant or flower patterns became prominent. The flapper became the embodiment of the 1920s.

As the illustration below shows, short bobbed hair replaced the high piled up coiffured look that had lasted with variations into World War One. Did women working in factories, farms and hospitals find that they liked the simpler style because such war work made it necessary?

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

For Weekly Franklin
FEB. 4, 1922 5c THE COPY
10c in Canada



Beginning
Merton of the Movies—By Harry Leon Wilson

This could be an illustration for Scott Fitzgerald's 'Bernice Bobs her hair.'

Bryson assesses other still famous events of 1927 in America, the first Ponzi scheme (named after the original Ponzi) the massive flooding of the Mississippi in

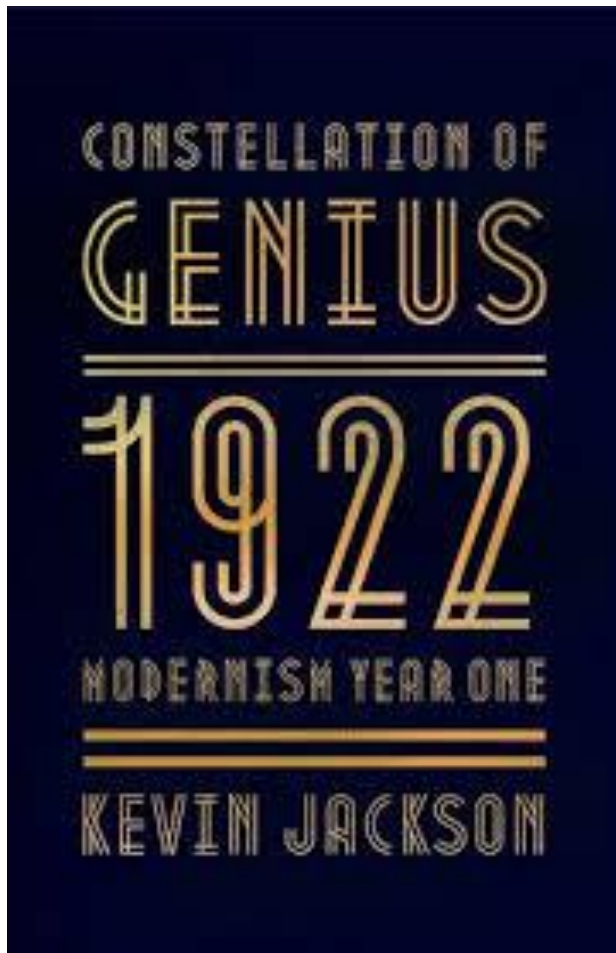
1927 and the Sacco and Vanzetti executions. He also captures the mood of the year with the then famous, now forgotten Snyder murder trial, This was one of those husband /wife/ lover crimes made for media entertainment. This was an old idea even in 1927. Lizzie Borden in 1892, Jack the Ripper in 1888, Lincoln's assassination had all been treated as media circuses.

The great Mississippi flood had continuing consequences. One of America's worst disasters, government responses to it developed by Hoover shaped how America's governments and bureaucracies would react in future.

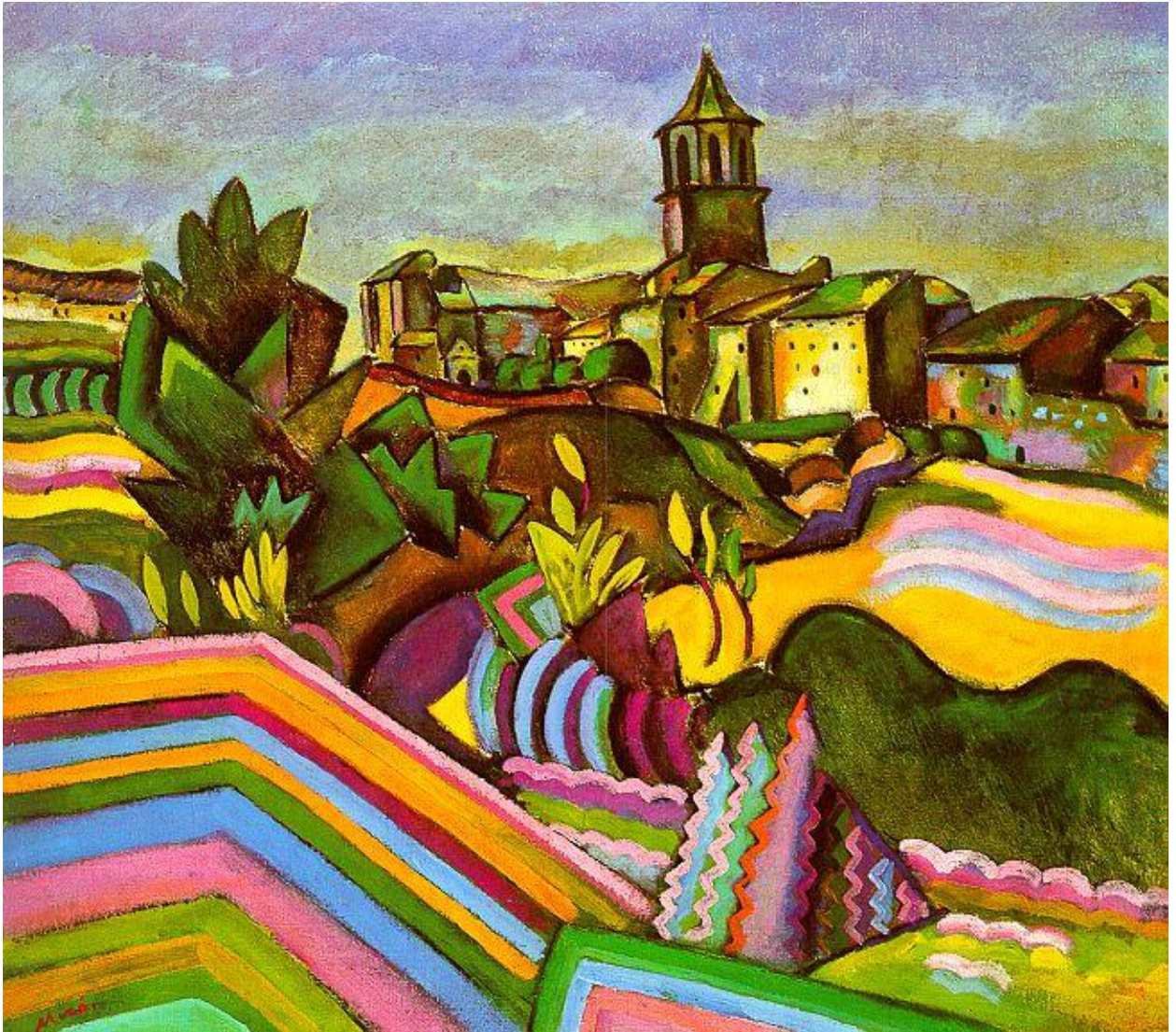
Hovering over this prosperously frenetic year is the Great Depression: Bryson refers to the economic mistakes made in 1927 that were leading up to it without drenching his picture of 1927 with a future few could see coming.

In that one year he has much detail to cover and the dangers are getting bogged down in detail or skimming lightly and therefore simplistically over the surface. His skill as a writer and clarity of expression ensure that neither possibility happens. Bring on *1928: Another hell of a year!*

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Kevin Jackson also uses 1920s chronology to segment his narrative, but he does this in a more detailed and yet more widely applied way. He not only goes through every month in his selected year, but goes through the days where significant world events happened. If their careers began or they started to gain fame in 1922 he introduces how their lives were in that year, some are only mentioned, and others get several pages. These luminaries include James Joyce, T.S. Elliot, Louis Armstrong, George Gershwin, Rudolph Valentino, Alfred Hitchcock, Walt Disney, Aldous Huxley, Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Kandinsky, Edith Wharton, Eugene O' Neill, Berthold Brecht, John Maynard Keynes, M.C. Escher, Picasso, Howard Carter, Buster Keaton, Fritz Lang, Franz Murnau, Le Corbusier, Marcel Duchamp, Dorothy Parker, Wyndham Lewis, Garcia Lorca, Enid Blyton, Man Ray, Igor Stravinsky, Agatha Christie, Juan Miro, Robert Flaherty and Andre Breton. Not only their personal careers but the fields in which they worked are described as they were developed then.



Juan Miró came to prominence in the 1920s and began a sixty year long career

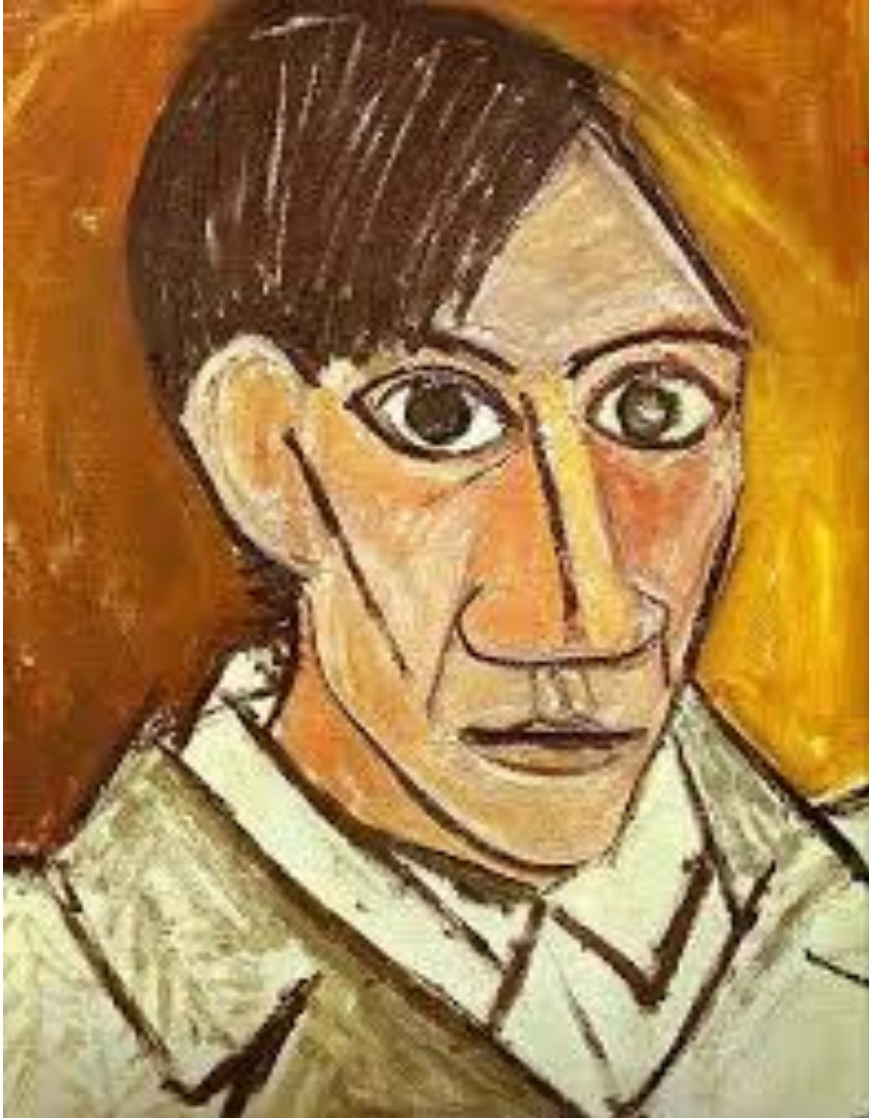
It is interesting to note that not one of their fields was totally new: jazz, expressionist film and art, surrealism, cubism, Egyptology, suspense films, cartoons, ethnographic documentaries, detective stories, “women’s novels,” experimental photography, modernist classical music and functionalist architecture were all years, sometimes decades old, but all of these previously named individuals developed their field to the extent that their names became synonymous with the genre. In some cases the individual became more recognisable than the

genre: they certainly left such an impression that their successors followed their development.

Despite this massive chronological structure, Jackson does not lose his focus on cultural modernism. The aftermath of the Russian and German Revolutions, the gaining of women's rights, the beginnings of the crumbling of colonialism and the rapid spread of commercial radio and flight, placed cultural developments in a world that was rapidly, sometimes frenetically changing. Accelerated change was breaking down the rigid old ways and culture became experimental in its forms and either questioned the old values or derided them. That old world based in rarely questioned hierarchies serving nationalism, royalty, religion and imperialism had almost self-destructed in the war and was left greatly weakened.

The two biggest emerging world powers after the First World War, America and Soviet Russia, were in diametric opposition, but both, while victorious, were uncertain of their direction and their foundations. By 1922 it was obvious that the world would not fall to Lenin's vision of Communism, but while Communism in Russia, was militarily successful, it had failed economically and socially. At the same time America was also going through a time of self-doubt and uncertainty as it became a world power. The Protestant work ethic, puritanism and the ideal of sacrifice of the self for national duty had all taken a hit due to the Great War. In the 1920s it was clear that population pressures, urbanisation, prosperity, and the increasing spread of corporate power were working against the ideals that had inspired a predominantly rural, self-sustaining America isolated from pressures by other nations. American puritanism had its greatest victory with the start of Federal Prohibition laws in January 1920, but this rapidly transformed into its greatest defeat as soon millions of once law abiding citizens successfully flouted a law they quite rightly thought of as foolish, inoperable and unenforceable. Prohibition's failure led to a wider questioning of the rights of government and moralistic group's rights to enforce their values on individuals.

The popularity of *Elmer Gantry* and Lewis's other attacks on American society and Scott Fitzgerald's depictions of rebellious youth would have been impossible before the 1920s. To some extent their popularity was connected to the rising economic power of women – and their new view of the world.

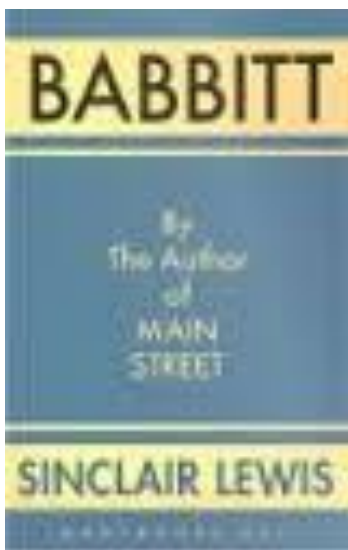


Picasso self portrait

By the beginning of the 1920s the flapper had appeared. Dress lines were up to the calves and down to the chest. There was a mood of freedom for women that went beyond appearances and legal rights. This also applied to men. In early 1920s culture this disaffection would often be expressed in inchoate forms, often as in some way rebelling against the expectations of marriage, domestic life and concepts of duty. Rebellion could be by travel as escape, taking up unconventional views, scandalous romance or living lives for pleasure.

This disaffected, restless public mood and the available options were evident in several early 1920s works. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, (1918), Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, (1920) and *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922),

Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922), George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1920), Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), and his early short stories, Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow* (1921) and his early short stories, John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921), Scott Fitzgerald's Eugene O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) H.G. Well's *Secret Places of the Heart* (1922) and John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1922)



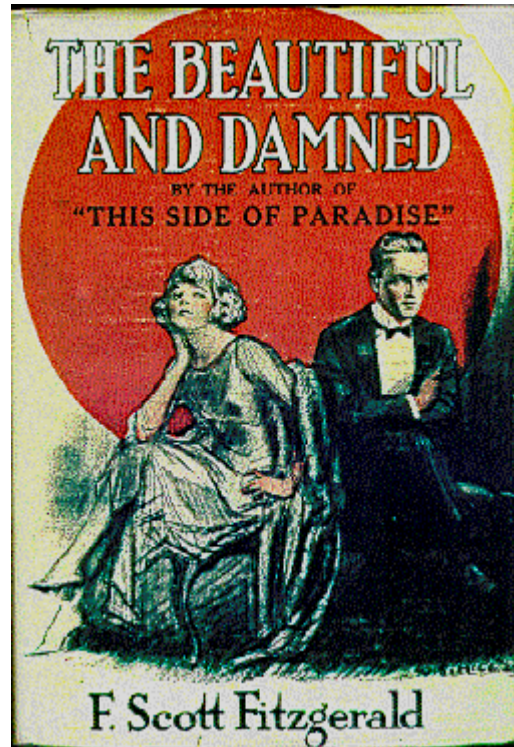
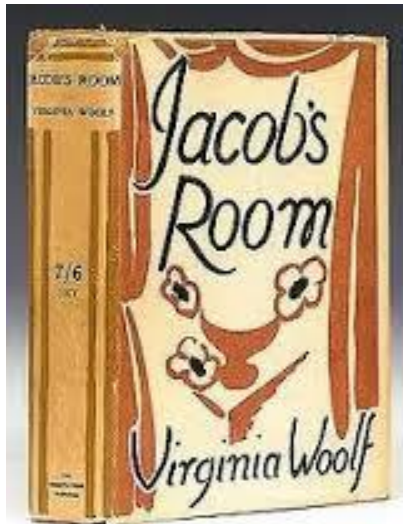
Sinclair Lewis

Of these fourteen works only half were published in the key year of 1922. The modernist themes and their creators were prominent before 1922, and they would go on to produce other works later in the decade and be joined by others writing in the same vein, notably Michael Arlen in *The Green Hat* (1925) Dorothy Parker's *Enough Rope* (1926) and her early stories, Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Isadora Duncan's *My Life* (1927) William Faulkner in *Soldier's Pay* (1926), *Mosquitoes* (1927) and the *Sound and the Fury* (1929). Even the cynical, conservative Somerset Maugham wrote one novel very much in this style, questioning not only the concept of domestic bliss, but duty to the empire and the family in *The Painted Veil* (1925).



Virginia Woolf

These were the themes of modernism; escape from conformity, questioning the family and social structures and roles, a delight in pleasure and putting self before duty. Despite their rebelliousness, satires, questioning and a frequently expressed joy in the sensual world, a tendency in almost all of these works to ultimately imply that rebellion and bohemianism were not solutions to underlying problems becomes evident. Duncan's *My Life* was an exception, but even there the reality of her life belied the book. Isadora Duncan died in tragic circumstances after a life where options and optimism were played out.



The Shakespeare Bookshop was a gathering point for Parian expatriates of the 1920s and an outlet for their work

This would also be the fate of many of her fictional counterparts in previously mentioned works. Even those that survive are often impoverished, exiled, degraded or return to conformity after some narrow escape. The style of modernist writing often did not change much from what had gone before. Some of these writers had the elegance, the restraint and the Lubitsch touches of the Edwardians: some such as Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf were still essentially

Edwardians. That could not be said of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, for they not only presented modernist themes, but they did something different with language and the rules of narrative, fragmenting it and then playing with the fragments through parody, satire and psychological insight. There was no return to the old ways in Joyce's work or in Eliot's "The Waste Land."



James Joyce

Kevin Jackson has a point when he makes 1922 the key year for modernism with *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* both being published and causing a furore, not just over censorship, but over their taking literature on an escape from morality and meaning into a world of fragmentary but intense feeling. Meaning was no longer a morality lesson. It was not even the elegant questioning of social values that Wells, West, Galsworthy and Wharton revealed. *Ulysses* went beyond the sharp social observations of Sinclair Lewis, Scott Fitzgerald, Galsworthy, Edith Wharton, Wyndham Lewis and Huxley into the minds of what people felt. Eliot produced a mosaic made up of disjointed literary fragments and expressed his own angst in a potpourri of language.



T.S. Elliot In his politics employment, religion and personality he was conservative, but with publication of 'The Wasteland' he became a cultural hero to bohemians and radicals, who did not personally know him.

Literature would never be the same – fortunately. Through his descriptions of life in the cafés, attics, great houses and meetings Jackson captures the exuberant questioning and colourful mood of 1922 as if we were there. Like Bryson in *One Summer America 1927*, Jackson has a way of finding the unusual, the little known, the reality behind the fallacy. Both writers weave their diverse characters, their stories and the events of their years into fascinating literary mosaics: this is how history should be written.

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