



Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s

Ann Douglas , Fritz Metsch (Designed by)

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"Terrible Honesty" is the biography of a decade, a portrait of the soul of a generation - based on the lives and work of more than a hundred men and women. In a strikingly original interpretation that brings the Jazz Age to life in a wholly new way, Ann Douglas argues that when, after World War I, the United States began to assume the economic and political leadership of the West, New York became the heart of a daring and accomplished historical transformation.

Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s Details

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From Reader Review Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s for online ebook

Dan X. Barton says

This book explains a great many things about a great many things. I am a bit smarter after having read it.

Jack Terry says

I didn't really finish it. I put it down after 100 pages. It is a very detailed, very broad look not only at 1920's New York but also what and who the author believes influenced it. I wasn't looking to read about Freud, which is why I finally stopped.

Linda says

I am trying to catch up on all of the books I have said I have read and never reviewed. And I read this book -- in 1995. It is about literature, music and theater in the 1920's in New York. It is also about how Jazz influenced and brought together blacks and whites in an appreciation of something wonderful. For 483 pages, Douglas creates a picture of the way social and cultural events shaped our continuing artistic lifestyle in the United States. This is a comprehensive and scholarly study that is very readable and I hope I will read it again some day because it was a superb. There is an extensive bibliography and a comprehensive index. Yes, I own a copy.

David Bates says

In *Terrible Honesty* Ann Douglas examines the cultural scene of New York City in the 1920's. Standing at the center of the theater, advertising and publishing industries in the United States at the moment when America gained international prominence following WWI, Douglas argues that New York was in a unique position to dictate the terms of emerging modern culture. Meeting her subject on its own terms, the narrative of cultural development is couched in the psychoanalytical language that New Yorkers were newly applying to understand themselves. The analysis is part chronicle, part performance, of the creation of 1920's mass culture.

A professor of literature, Douglas has a stronger eye for culture than social sciences, and her work only lightly touches on the demographics, technological change and economics that made New York cultural life so central. Rather, her conception of New York is a broad one; a train platform on which artists and intellectuals arrive, depart, or use as a marker in their passage down the line. This allows her to use New York as an organizing principle for her discussion of the currents in thought and letters during the 1920's that includes the American expat community in Paris and Sigmund Freud's work in Vienna. A flexible organizing principle is an important characteristic for Douglas. Her real focus is the capturing of the spirit of the age. While the island of Manhattan anchors *Terrible Honesty* at one end in the physical world, the belief in a unified cultural zeitgeist anchors it the opposite end in the world of ideas. The hundred or so

personalities of writers and artists that fill the work are so many drops of spray from the cultural wave that is Douglas's real subject.

Gender is at the heart of that analysis. Written as a follow on compliment to her 1977 book about Victorian America, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Douglass frames the Lost Generation as a culturally masculine revolt against the archetype of the domineering matriarch. The young moderns reject the nannying of political progressivism, liberal Christianity and prohibition and instead embrace a gritty aesthetic of hard truths along with a lifestyle of drinking, open relationships and rootlessness. Leaning heavily on Freudian motifs this "matricidal" interpretation of 1920s culture is Douglas's contribution to the scholarly literature. To its credit this frame illuminates unconscious cultural connections that permeate American culture.

While the location of Manhattan, the idea of zeitgeist and the lens of gender combine to create a workable and illuminating account of culture in the 1920's, they also obscure important points and some objections are in order. The focus on Manhattan, and perhaps a preference for literature over other media, relegates the culturally significant development of American cinema occurring in California's movie studios to a smaller role than it deserves. More consequentially, the gender narrative of masculine revolt from matriarchal authority creates a chain of causation slightly divorced from the reality of the material world. WWI and the sick peace that followed it do not assume the devastating significance for the progressive world view that it arguably had. Rather, the war in her telling becomes secondary to a seemingly organic unfolding of generational conflict in which brilliant young bohemians declare independence from bourgeois mothers. Douglas's description of her young moderns as orphans rings true, but the motif of rebellious archetypal matricide which permeates her work minimizes the shattered expectations for human progress within which that rejection took root.

Elizabeth says

One of the nice surprises in reading this book is the author's clear style. Not all nonfiction books are so compelling to read...so enjoy.

The title is misleading. It could be "How the US became 20th Century America." While a great deal of the book focuses on New York, much of it does not, which is only a problem if that is what you're solely looking for. It is a good brief look about how the US was perched to become the power it did--pushed into the international arena by World War I.

The author gives a great deal of space to Black/White relations, which came to the forefront as Blacks suddenly had more visibility in media--music, nightclubs, movies--and as they returned from the War only to be continued to be discounted--and lynched!

My one problem with the book what the amount of time given to the Freudian analysis of Ernest Hemingway and Eugene O'Neill. Although Freud was popular in the United States, this analysis on certain author's works from a Freudian perspective is certainly besides the point.

Nevertheless, the book is an engrossing look at the period, race relations, and the transformation of the United States and New York

Lawrence says

Largely irrelevant to my project, which is no sin, but also oddly Freudian. A useful reading of the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance, though.

Jennifer Iudice says

should have known from the title....

Tim says

Cultural history at its finest.

Joe Mossa says

i should read more books like this cause it is so challenging. reading this is work and work is good for the mind. i can t give it more than 3 stars cause she tries to cover too much ground. i love the 20s and have read much about it-fitzgerald bios including ZELDA. bio of g stein,bio of hemingway,bio of dorothy parker. short stories by ernest,f scott, dottie,stein. i know the 20s but i forget much of what i read but i won t read TERRIBLE HONESTY a 2nd time.

sslyb says

This book is chock full of information. If you are interested in the 1920s in America, especially NYC, read the book. You will learn something. Ann Douglas makes a strong argument with countless examples to prove her point. Only thing is why? Is there anyone who doubts the influence blacks have had on whites and whites have had on blacks in music and literature. If I never read the words "horrible honestly ethos" again I will be glad.

Carol says

I felt a bit mislead by the subtitle, the subjects covered led all over with a "variation on a theme" lack of direction. Sections, and/or subsections were interesting, but I entered the book with a belief that Manhattan during the 20s with all the cultural, sociological, and economics of this era would be the focus. It was covered, but one should enter with a stronger background then I on the individual's discussed. Definitely a college comparative contemporary lit book.

Lauren Albert says

When Douglas actually discusses 1920s Manhattan, the book is quite interesting. Unfortunately, she seems enamored of psychoanalyzing the country instead and declaiming on "matriarchy" and "patriarchy" and "matricidal" and "patricidal" tendencies. Her discussion of the rejection of Victorian "womanhood" and its "hold" on the culture has some interest but she takes it too far and loses track of her primary subject.

Brian says

"Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's" is a perceptive and interesting cultural analysis of American Modernism in what Gertrude Stein described as the "the world's first twentieth century city."

The book is full of both intriguing anecdotes and perceptive, if sometimes overly broad, analysis. Among the cast of characters that she draws on to make her arguments are W. E. B. Du Bois, Harry Houdini, Dorothy Parker, Edward Steichen, William James, Billy Wilder, Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Hart Crane, Bessie Smith, Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, Ethel Waters and Groucho Marx.

Central to her argument are two processes that she sees as essential to the rise of Modernism.

The first is the "mongrelization" of American Culture. Douglas persuasively argues that New York in the twenties saw the first significant cultural interaction between African-Americans, new immigrant arrivals from Europe (particularly Jewish immigrants) and white intellectuals and artists. The rise of mass media and popular culture only fueled the fire. Douglas most skillfully traces this phenomenon in the literary and musical arenas and is somewhat less successful when dealing with the plastic arts.

Douglas also argues that, during the period from the end of World War I up until the beginning of the Great Depression, there was a profound rejection of Victorian society, dominated by a feminizing power, represented most typically by the temperance and suffrage movements, both of them led by women, as well as by the idealistic foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson and the "crusading matriarchal ethos" of figures like Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. Douglas sees the twenties as a period of countervailing "masculinization" of society, a process that was facilitated by both men and women.

I really found this book enjoyable, informative and stimulating. I think she makes her case well; although, as is often the case with cultural histories that contain an overarching explanatory framework, she sometimes seems to over-extend her arguments.

Douglas says

It reads a bit like a PhD thesis (a well written thesis)... but the subject matter is tremendous: the cultural scene of New York in the 1920s, which is when American popular culture and mass media were just coming to critical mass, and beginning to spread throughout the world.

Noah says

A stunning literary achievement. It explains the 'roaring twenties' in detail with an eye toward artistic and cultural movements as well as the politics of the time
