



## At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf

*Bennett Cerf, Christopher Cerf (Introduction)*

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“I’ve got the name for our publishing operation. We just said we were going to publish a few books on the side at random. Let’s call it Random House.” So recounts Bennett Cerf in this wonderfully amusing memoir of the making of a great publishing house. An incomparable raconteur, possessed of an irrepressible wit and an abiding love of books and authors, Cerf brilliantly evokes the heady days of Random House’s first decades.

Part of the vanguard of young New York publishers who revolutionized the book business in the 1920s and '30s, Cerf helped usher in publishing's golden age. Cerf was a true personality, whose other pursuits (columnist, anthologist, author, lecturer, radio host, collector of jokes and anecdotes, perennial judge of the Miss America pageant, and panelist on *What's My Line?*) helped shape his reputation as a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm and brought unprecedented attention to his company and to his authors. At once a rare behind-the-scenes account of book publishing and a fascinating portrait of four decades' worth of legendary authors, from James Joyce and William Faulkner to Ralph Ellison and Eudora Welty, *At Random* is a feast for bibliophiles and anyone who's ever wondered what goes on inside a publishing house.

## At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf Details

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### **Arnulfo Novo says**

Qué libro tan entretenido! Las memorias de Bennett Cerf son igual de interesantes que los libros que editó y publicó. Co-fundador de Random House, comparte de una manera muy divertida cómo descubrió y se aventuró a publicar escritores como William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Dr. Seuss, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein -entre muchos más-, y cómo sus relaciones personales lo marcaron. Imagínense lo interesante que ha de haber sido ser el mejor amigo de todo el círculo de escritores estadounidenses más importante y relevante de su época, hacer frente al negocio de los libros durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, pasar de ser una editorial casera a ser la editorial más grande del mundo de habla inglesa. La filosofía de Benett además es ejemplar, un hombre íntegro, de palabra, con visión, con valores, muy humano, con excelente sentido del humor que tuvo éxito porque nunca fue por el dinero sino por el amor a los libros y su pasión por descubrir escritores y ayudarlos a que ellos tuvieran éxito con sus libros. Por donde vean este libro, vale mucho la pena leerlo.

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### **Mientras Leo says**

Me ha encantado. Por divertido, por curioso, por leyenda de la creación de un monstruo editorial. Por todo

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### **ALLEN says**

Jovial reminiscences from the master of Random House publishers in New York City, best known to Fifties Americans as the punster who usually had a dictionary to sell on TV's "What's My Line." In this book, we learn that the Cerf family is of Alsatian Jewish origin, that Bennett grew up an overachiever and made many enduring friends while a student at Columbia, that he took a little experimental publisher called Modern Library and helped build it into a middle-class mainstay of literate Americans in the Twentieth Century, and of course that he helped shepherd the careers of his favorite authors, among them Truman Capote. Engaging, perhaps a little too humble, a quick read but not all that substantial. For Manhattan-publishing-world completionists, mainly.

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### **Lee Anne says**

Bennett Cerf truly led a charmed life. After a brief stint on Wall Street, he fell into publishing and founded Random House, to this day (although it is now owned by Bertlesmann) the world's largest English language book publisher.

This book, more a collection of anecdotes than a memoir (it was compiled posthumously from interviews and notes), tells many amusing stories of life in the book business. Cerf is a great storyteller, and makes his life sound like a grand lark. Anyone who loves books can find something to tickle the fancy; there are stories about Dorothy Parker, Sinclair Lewis, John O'Hara, Moss Hart, James Michener, to name a few. Having just

read Atlas Shrugged, I particularly loved the story of Ayn Rand (whose politics Cerf hated, but he found her personally mesmerizing) and Cerf's attempt to get her to edit John Galt's windy, redundant speech.

This book was a delight from start to finish, and makes me miss the Game Show Network's airing of "What's My Line?" even more.

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### **Kevin A. says**

This is the perfect memoir -- Cerf was well-known as a lecturer and a collector of anecdotes, and his talents shine through every page. He keeps things light, as he seems to have done in his life. This no doubt papers over many issues that might benefit from deeper analysis, but this isn't that sort of book.

Instead we get a romp through his nearly 50 years in publishing, from his apprenticeship under Horace Liveright, to taking The Modern Library independent, to founding Random House in 1927, to becoming a public figure through his 15 years as a panelist on television's What's My Line.

He sold Random House to RCA in 1965, and gave up the presidency in 1967 and the chairmanship in 1970, when he was 72. He speaks of how it was prudent of him and best for the business to arrange his own succession and step away at the top of the game rather than hang on too long. What was best for Random House may not have been best for him. He had made millions selling the company, but he admits to feeling restless, and though the final paragraph boasts of his good health, he died almost immediately after completing this memoir in 1971.

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### **Rosanne says**

#### **Excellent biography**

This book is an excellent biography and look inside Random House publisher. It covers how Bennett Cerf and his friend started and ran the publishing house. It is very interesting to me since I use to work in publishing and watch him on "What's My Line" reruns.

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### **Matt says**

I picked up this book because I had the good fortune to meet Bennett Cerf's son Chris through the Columbia Publishing Course. Anyone going into book publishing should definitely give this book a read, as it provides an entertaining look at the early 20th century publishing world, among other things.

The book is made up of chapters of Bennett Cerf's (the co-founder of Random House) life, stories, and thought processes. A lot of it is gleaned from oral interviews with Cerf, so some of the stories translate better into writing than others. All in all a great book and it was great to hear the behind-the-scenes stories about certain authors (Faulkner, Lewis, Rand.) Cerf's gregarious and good-natured personality are woven into the text and you really feel like you are sitting in his living room and he is regaling you with these great stories of his life.

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**Karen Cowgill says**

Wonderful man...Wonderful book!! Fortunately, you can still see him on What's My Line, on YouTube.

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**Déborah Muñoz says**

Es un libro muy interesante y cuenta de forma muy amena cómo se creó el gigante que es Random House. Me cayó genial Bennett Cerf, me han gustado sus anécdotas y su forma de ver las cosas.

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**Steph says**

I loved reading about the beginnings of the publishing industry. I was totally born in the wrong decade...

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**Jade Kranz says**

This book should be required reading for those who work in book publishing, but any bibliophile will definitely appreciate it. Bennett Cerf was an outrageous character with a passion for creating good books, finesse for dealing with authors (Ayn Rand, Gertrude Stein, Eugene O'Neill, among many others), and an unbeatable sense of humor that will make you laugh out loud. His reminiscences delighted me so that I missed my stop on the subway while reading them and laughing out loud.

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**Courtney McCarroll says**

I don't doubt that Bennett Cerf was an interesting and charming enough man to establish the world's biggest publishing house, but the entire book ("Reminiscences") is filled with things like: "Phyllis and I love Harold's son Tom. We've watched him grow up. He's one of my favorite people, Tom." That's the only mention of Tom (could be anyone) and since the vast majority of the book is just Cerf recalling memories without any meat or substance or introspection, this one didn't work for me.

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**Jason Pettus says**

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Recently at a party, someone favorably compared me to Random House co-founder Bennett Cerf; and that inspired me to read his autobiography, because not only did I know barely anything about him, but indeed about the entire formation of the modern American publishing industry, other than the vague realization like

many others that there used to be no publishing companies, then at some point a lot, then at some point a few again, which then all got bought up by multinational corporate conglomerates in the 1970s and '80s. And the big surprise is that this turned out to be one of the most riveting and entertaining books I've read in years, precisely because there turned out to be so much drama and so many anecdotes leading to the rise of American literature in the early 20th century into the mainstream powerhouse it now is, and to the establishment and then consolidation of what's now known as the "Big Six" in the publishing world, around for so long and so powerful for so long that we tend to now think of them as unmoving monoliths. But when Random House first started almost a hundred years ago, it was just Cerf and his buddy around, two stockbrokers with naughty sides who enjoyed hanging out with bohemians, and thought it'd be a lot more fun to publish them for a living than work at a bank; and that's essentially how this raconteur's memoirs read, as half business and half drunken party all the time back then, with not only all the eventual giants of the publishing industry turning out to have all been friends, but with all of them essentially flying by the seat of their pants just as the Early Modernist era was starting to take shape, what seems now like a deliberate and crafty plan to change the entire arts community as they knew it, but in reality more like all these people just throwing crap at a wall every day and seeing what stuck.

And man, Cerf has just a ton of anecdotes to share here, both praising and pissy in nature, with dozens of pages in this fast-turning and endlessly titillating book devoted to embarrassingly personal tales regarding Theodore Dreiser, Dorothy Parker, James Michener, William Faulkner, Ayn Rand, and the scores of other writers and drinking pals who he almost single-handedly turned into the literary icons we know today. Along the way, then, he also offers up lots of advice for others who want to become editors and publishers, stuff that surprisingly mirrors a lot of the best lessons of the high-tech startup industry: avoid outside money (either loans or investments) as long as you possibly can, treat your talent like the rock stars they are, be funny when your competitors are serious and serious when they're funny, and pounce on those competitors' employees in the cases where they become disgruntled with their working conditions and quit. Bawdy, confessional, laugh-out-loud funny, sometimes jaw-droppingly unbelievable in the sheer audacity of these arts-industry mavericks, this is easily one of the best "insider" books you'll ever read about the publishing industry, and it comes strongly recommended to those like me who are interested in learning more.

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### **Sandi says**

Published after his death, this memoir collects various interviews **Cerf** did with the Columbia school of journalism about publishing and his role in founding Random House.

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### **John says**

This was another one of those books which I have had for well over 30 years but never picked up to read. But now that I am low on books to pick from, I did . I had expected to read about the Bennett cerf form WHAT IS MY LINE tv show. I had forgot that he was the owner of Random house publishers.. The book was wonderful ,Cerf came into contact with all the authors of his day and his day was the time period of my favorite authors.

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