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The Lady With The Borzoi: Blanche Knopf, Literary Tastemaker Extraordinaire



Synopsis

Left off her company's fifth anniversary tribute but described by Thomas Mann as "the soul of the firm," Blanche Knopf began her career when she founded Alfred A. Knopf with her husband in 1915. With her finger on the pulse of a rapidly changing culture, Blanche quickly became a driving force behind the firm. A conduit to the literature of Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, Blanche also legitimized the hard-boiled detective fiction of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler; signed and nurtured literary authors like Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bowen, and Muriel Spark; acquired momentous works of journalism by John Hersey and William Shirer; and introduced American readers to Albert Camus, André Gide, and Simone de Beauvoir, giving these French writers the benefit of her consummate editorial taste. As Knopf celebrates its centennial, Laura Claridge looks back at the firm's beginnings and the dynamic woman who helped to define American letters for the twentieth century. Drawing on a vast cache of papers, Claridge also captures Blanche's "witty, loyal, and amusing" personality, and her charged yet oddly loving relationship with her husband. An intimate and often surprising biography, *The Lady with the Borzoi* is the story of an ambitious, seductive, and impossibly hardworking woman who was determined not to be overlooked or easily categorized.

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Customer Reviews

Blanche Knopf (1894-1966) is the subject of this interesting biography--but it is as much a bio of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., the publisher and the American publishing industry. Co-founder of the house in 1915, it was really Blanche who was the indefatigable spark plug whose ceaseless activity drove Knopf into the first ranks of American publishers. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in the development of American publishing during the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Given the enormous range of important books published by Knopf, the book also provides a very interesting mini-history of much of the important literature during this period and its key writers. For example, BK was a great friend of Henry Mencken as well as publisher of his classic "The American Language;" so the reader learns a good deal about this fascinating character. The same is true of Willa Cather and other authors. One key to Blanche's success was she hunted out potential authors, went out and met them, and continue to serve as their "den mother" during their often challenging lives. I doubt if our huge corporate publishers today (including Knopf absorbed by Random House in 1960) devote such TLC to their authors as she did. Blanche directed Knopf to publish a wide range of foreign authors, including Freud, Gide, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Sartre, Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. Potential controversy did not scare her off, as witnessed by her publication of "The Second Sex" as well as a host of black writers discovered in her forays into Harlem, including James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. But she also had a great eye for fun books like Julia Child's trailblazing work on French cooking. And Knopf published lots of mysteries selected by BK, including books by Dashiell Hammett (who really required a lot of baby sitting), Raymond Chandler and Ross McDonald. She also seems to have known many eminent folks in the smaller and more intimate New York of her day, including Justice Robert Jackson, Scotty Reston, John Hersey and Tom Dewey. She also managed several important foreign goodwill trips for the government to Latin American and Europe along the way. I have always been a fan of Knopf books because of the outstanding level of craftsmanship and typography they manifest. This too is largely ascribable to her impeccable taste. From the outset of the house's founding in 1915, she insisted that Knopf would publish only the highest quality books--a tradition that continues today. Knopf did

not fall into the trap of seeking to publish only best sellers; more moderate but perennial solid titles were its goal. I had long been curious about Knopf and I thank the author for informing me of many key details as she examines Blanche's interesting life. The book is supported by solid research reflected in extensive notes and solid bibliography and index. Quite an interesting read about an important cultural figure.

Not every biographer winds up liking their chosen subject. But rarely does biography devolve into hagiography as in this book. Claridge's volume tells half a great story: that of the publishing world in the first half of the Twentieth Century. This aspect of the book, skimming across Knopf's greatest hits and names - Dashiell Hammett, Langston Hughes, Thomas Mann, Freud - is the best reason to pick up this book. Since each chapter is dotted with anecdotes concerning these writers, this is what keeps one turning the page. However, its ostensible subject is far more problematic. Claridge's mission is made clear at the outset, to correct, posthumously, a great injustice, to credit Blanche Knopf, wife of Alfred and co-founder of their publishing company, with her role in its accomplishments. Unfortunately, in trying to correct the balance, she stacks her arguments to the point where a corrective to the corrective is needed. Her thesis is easily summed up. Everything Blanche does is good, everything Alfred does is bad. The accumulation of arguments in this vein becomes increasingly comical as the book progresses, as well as increasingly irritating. Alfred, one is made to understand, is cold, domineering, dogmatic, a poor manager, unloving, etc. Blanche is warm, perceptive, people love her, etc. But reading between the lines, another picture presents itself. Blanche is anorexic (although that label is never used), episodically alcoholic, depressed and periodically suicidal (two attempts are quickly glossed over and Alfred of course is blamed for one of them). Her son loathed her and she was a serial philanderer, with married men, who liked to show off her lovers' gifts to her husband but then couldn't understand why he bore her any resentment. None of this would matter if Claridge didn't repeatedly explain any fault of Blanche's as due to the failings of others. Even the most minor. A mistake in German spelling in a letter she wrote is blamed on her secretary (p.193). Claridge writes "Unlike Alfred, whose writing was too ponderous for readers to finish, Blanche had a clear, direct style" (p.196). Do we get any comparative examples? A quote critical of Blanche (p.236) was apparently from someone who "sounds if she is jealous of Blanche". When she is out to steal an author from another publishing house, "unlike poaching, following up on news of an unhappy author was entirely ethical" (p.265). The distinction is lost on me. Cliches abound. "Her lenses were so thick they looked like the bottom of Coke bottles" (p.259). Blanche "had never been one to dwell in sorrow; she was wont to feel great pain at her losses and then

determinedly resume her life"(p.270). "She had wanted to challenge convention, to push the boundaries"(p.282). Plus omniscience is presumed in the author. "Her poor diet had created distinctive claws, surely reminding her and Alfred of the bird girl in Green Mansions"(p.333). Surely? How does she know? When admiration becomes sycophantic, 340 pages of text becomes a slog. It isn't that Blanche Knopf doesn't deserve recognition for her many immense accomplishments. She just deserves a better biography.

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