



Supreme City: How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern America

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While F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, Manhattan was transformed by jazz, night clubs, radio, skyscrapers, movies, and the ferocious energy of the 1920s, as this illuminating cultural history brilliantly demonstrates.

In four words--the capital of everything--Duke Ellington captured Manhattan during one of the most exciting and celebrated eras in our history: the Jazz Age. Radio, tabloid newspapers, and movies with sound appeared. The silver screen took over Times Square as Broadway became America's movie mecca. Tremendous new skyscrapers were built in Midtown in one of the greatest building booms in history.

Supreme City is the story of Manhattan's growth and transformation in the 1920s and the brilliant people behind it. Nearly all of the makers of modern Manhattan came from elsewhere: Walter Chrysler from the Kansas prairie; entertainment entrepreneur Florenz Ziegfeld from Chicago. William Paley, founder of the CBS radio network, was from Philadelphia, while his rival David Sarnoff, founder of NBC, was a Russian immigrant. Cosmetics queen Elizabeth Arden was Canadian and her rival, Helena Rubenstein, Polish. All of them had in common vaulting ambition and a desire to fulfill their dreams in New York. As mass communication emerged, the city moved from downtown to midtown through a series of engineering triumphs--Grand Central Terminal and the new and newly chic Park Avenue it created, the Holland Tunnel, and the modern skyscraper. In less than ten years Manhattan became the social, cultural, and commercial hub of the country. The 1920s was the Age of Jazz and the Age of Ambition.

Original in concept, deeply researched, and utterly fascinating, *Supreme City* transports readers to that time and to the city which outsiders embraced, in E.B. White's words, "with the intense excitement of first love."

Supreme City: How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern America Details

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Paul says

This book is a bit focused on "big men" during the first part of the 20th century, mostly telling a somewhat disjointed tale of the development of many of the largest industries in New York through biography. While I understand this desire to do this, I think that, philosophically, the focus on the personal stories of some of the most unusual (i.e. successful, with all the survivor bias that implies) people of an age is probably misleading in many ways. For example, nearly every one of the men in this book was basically openly cheating on his wife - is that supposed to reflect the culture at large, or just the specific mores and privileges of the ultra-rich and powerful? The book's arrangement is reminiscent of Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain* in that it is organized by topic rather than chronologically, but Applebaum does a much better job of depersonalizing the story and on focusing on the actual developments on the ground and how it affected society as a whole. By comparison, *Supreme City* is a series of tabloid stories dressed up to look like history.

As is nearly always the case, the book itself does not live up to its subtitle. There is not even a token effort to connect Jazz Age Manhattan to Modern America, and I highly doubt that it has any special claim there compared to the Industrial Revolution or the post-war era. Obviously each era leaves its legacy on the future, and much of what was first developed in the Jazz Age is still around. Hard to argue against a subtitle that is not actually brought up in the book *at all*, though.

Of course, with all this criticism out of the way, this does seem like a well-researched, sprawling history of business (and some politics) in early 20th-century New York. There were many interesting facts and tidbits contained herein. If you are the sort who likes in-depth histories of Manhattan and/or the life stories of entrepreneurs, you'd probably enjoy this.

3.5 of 5 stars

NancyKay says

A supreme story, excellently told. Especially for a New Yorker who possesses only general information about such topics as why there's so many skyscrapers around Grand Central, that boxing and musical comedy both came into their own in the 1920s along with movies and tabloid newspapers and radio, this book tells amazing stories and succinct biographies of the great movers and shakers who made NYC into its 20th century self. Architecture, sport, publishing, the Lindbergh solo flight, Prohibition, the rise and fall of Mayor Jimmy Walker, the genesis of Tudor City, the design and building of bridges and tunnels, and much more are brought to life, with nary a dull passage.

Martin says

The richest city in the richest country in the world, the Great War had displaced London's financial capital to New York. The city was already self-sufficient through mostly real estate tax, and real estate speculation and the economy of building kept the city financially strong and ever-growing. Probably my favorite part of the

book was about Vanderbilt's history with the city's trains, and the eventual moving of the trains to an electrified underground, which was cleaner, easier to repair, and allowed for a building boom above ground where there had previously been 16 blocks of railyard. From that point onward, there was a midtown building boom (including skyscraper wars!) that probably had no rival until the 21st century in Asia.

The author delves into the personalities who reconfigured the area, including William J. Wilgus (engineer of the New York Central train lines), the two men behind the gem of all skyscrapers Walter P. Chrysler and architect William Van Alen, developer Benjamin Winter (who bought and demolished the great mansions of 5th Ave),

Anne Vanderbilt and Anne Morgan fled 5th Ave mansion to revitalize Sutton Place as a well-heeled Sapphic enclave, Fred F. French (developer of utopian skyscraper development Tudor City, and proponent of small share investment in his vertically integrated construction firm, which ensured high quality production and a guaranteed profit for investors), and Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel (the visionary exhibitor who pioneered lavish presentations of silent films, including movie palaces and full orchestras, and who also became a radio personality in the 1930s), and Clifford Holland, who built the tunnel that allowed trucks in and out of the city, which began the de-industrialization of Manhattan.

Change was afoot in all places in society. Women became comfortable going out without male escorts. The rich gave up their mansions on 5th Ave to live in Park Ave apartment houses. Much of the social life in the 1920s was spent in active opposition to Prohibition, which New Yorkers often felt was an edict from small-town hicks trying to tell them what to do. The politicians were not particularly supportive of it, and enforcement was less than half-hearted. One of the stellar personalities the author introduced to me was Texas Guinan, a former vaudevillian who became perhaps the greatest speakeasy/nightclub proprietor on her day. Boundaries collapsed in the 1920s, and in New York there was a new breed of second generation Americans on the rise, whose parents were among the great huddled masses of the late 19th century. The author points out that in the same year that a Russian Jewish immigrant from the Lower East Side, Irving Berlin, married a Long Island society girl, the name Cohen surpassed Smith as the most common name in the New York City phone book.

The first half of this book greatly expanded my knowledge of Manhattan, as it explained in great detail how it developed in the early 20th century, particularly with the building boom in the midtown area, with its development of the transportation system we recognize today, in addition to the cultural mecca it became for theatre, broadcasting, and writing of all kinds. I appreciated the biographical sketches of Duke Ellington and Jack Dempsey the most. However, as the book went on, it outstayed its welcome. The level of detail that I appreciated in the beginning became overkill by the end. I probably could have done with much less on Florenz Ziegfeld, William Paley, and the world of publishing. In the beginning, once the book got past mayor Jimmy Walker, I could see how the larger than life characters with grand ambitions did set the tone for the modern American city, as the book's title suggests. In the second half of the book, I felt that the author was being too thorough in trying to represent all areas of American culture. It became encyclopedic, and not in the good way.

Neil says

Fascinating history of a very specific time and place - 1920's Manhattan. The Jazz Age; the period between WWI and the Depression when the midtown section became the cultural and financial capital of the world.

Eline Maxwell says

I listened to this book rather than read it, and it made the difference between finishing it and putting it aside for chapters I probably would have quit over. Listening to it also allows each chapter to be an individual story. It was the era in which my grandparents were young, the years in which my mother and uncle were born, and it was fun imagining them as part of the hustle and bustle of so much change.

Frank McAdam says

The book's theme is the development of midtown Manhattan as the cultural and commercial center of New York City during the 1920's. In telling the story, however, it necessarily deals with other parts of Manhattan and so ends up being more a selective history of the city itself during the Roaring '20's, probably the most turbulent period in New York's history. The most interesting parts are those at the beginning that deal with Prohibition gangsters and politicians and those at the end that discuss the era's cultural icons, such as Duke Ellington and publisher Horace Liveright. The intervening sections dealing with midtown real estate development and the building of the area's infrastructure are the weakest, at least for those without a compelling interest in financial matters. (Who else needs an entire chapter devoted to so bland a businessman as Fred French?) In the end, the book does manage to capture some of the color and boundless optimism that characterized the decade. I'd recommend it most to those New Yorkers who have a love for their city's history and enjoy a good dose of nostalgia.

Anne says

This is a well documented and highly readable social-political history of a key period in New York City's history - the 1920s. The reader meets the fascinating characters who helped make New York the powerful force it has become in our nation and our cultural history. This book effectively straddles academic and popular history and provides an interesting portrait of Jazz era NYC.

Ricky Stahl says

This book was so well written you feel as though you are back in the 1920's in New York City. You learn about famous jazz singers and the people who started and ran the TV networks. Not a single detail is left out as Millers descriptions of the buildings to the transportation and tunnels. A fantastic lesson in the history of New York City.

Alice Lemon says

I really did enjoy this book, but I have to admit that I was a little disappointed that I didn't feel like it quite justified the claim in its subtitle. The book seemed more like a collection of different short histories than one

work with a single thesis, and it didn't really seem to even state, little say try to prove the thesis that Jazz Age Manhattan was responsible for "modern America."

That disclaimer out of the way, I really did like this book. Many of the stories Miller told about New York in the 1920's were things I had never heard about before, such as the story of how Simon and Schuster and Horace Liveright revolutionized American publishing, or the history of the early days of radio. Others, such as Texas Guinan's nightclubs, were something I would never have thought of as something to read about on its own. But Miller makes all the topics he brings up, well-known and not, quite interesting, even if the selection of topics sometimes seems a little arbitrary.

Lawrence Prabhakar says

A real tour de force. So much of what modern America and modern Manhattan are today started in the 20's. From skyscrapers to fashion to radio and TV networks to modern newspaper and literary publishing, they sprouted from this era, on this island. I learned so much from this book and for a history novel it was an easy read. Well written and well researched. Be warned, 582 pages. But it is well worth it.

Tom says

If Miller is correct (...and I think he is!) New York is the modern Rome, and all roads have led FROM her, starting in the 1920s! Thus wonderful, complex books illustrates the complex jigsaw puzzle that is and was NYC and how that hothouse environment fostered change is everything from business to jazz to politics to literature to...I HIGHLY recommend this work to anyone curious about 20th Century America in all its diversity!

Lauren Albert says

Of the 33 people on Miller's "Cast of Characters" at the beginning of the book, only 7 were actually born in NYC. Two more were born in New York State. 14 were from other states. 10 were from other countries. In one of the epigraphs to the book, Miller quotes E.B. White saying that there are three New Yorks--the one of the person born here, the one of the person commuting here and the one who was born somewhere else and comes to New York "in quest of something." "Of these three trembling cities the greatest is the last--the city of final destination, the city that is the goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's high-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements."

This the tale of those cities--from cosmetic queens to nightclubs, from skyscrapers to newspapers, Miller's New York is wonderfully evocative and complete. It is amazing how he keeps the book together even as he moves from subject to subject, from person to person.

Worth reading for anyone who loves NY or who just loves cities.

Noemi Proietti says

A must-read for anyone who loves New York, or just the 20s, Supreme City recounts how New York came to be the city it is today. Well-written and very informative, the book gives you an account of the events and characters that shaped New York. It gives detailed information about the people that in the 20s went to New York searching for fortune and power because, as Duke Ellington said, "The world revolves around New York".

Tawney says

I received this book compliments of Simon & Schuster through the Goodreads First Reads program.

Miller began research on a history of New York City between the World Wars, but found himself drawn to the story of Midtown Manhattan in the Twenties. Quite a story it is. There were big changes in so many areas of business and culture that affected the entire country with New York leading the way.

Some readers may find the very beginning of the book slow going as Miller explains the workings of New York politics, both Tammany Hall and the Republicans, but it is good background to understanding other sections of the book. Politics played a large role in Prohibition which, in turn, had a major part in the changing attitudes of the public. Radio needed both technology and content and business set about providing both. Sports and entertainment needed promoters, and the reporters and news outlets to spread the word. The book delves into these and many other subjects, explaining how they touched and intermingled with each other, just as the personalities interacted. Many of these people were stories unto themselves, most very driven, but not all of them exactly disciplined. It all makes for a really good read. I have not done justice to this book. It is very well done.

There is a map of the Midtown region with the the locations of places covered in the book. It has an extensive bibliography and notes as well as a good index. I appreciate that a lot.

Jill Hutchinson says

This is a huge book that has put me behind in my reading schedule but it was worth every page of it. What a fascinating history of one of the world's most exciting times in one of the world's most exciting cities.....the Jazz Age (1920's and early 30s) in New York City.

The author begins that history with the day the Gentleman Jimmy Walker became the popular playboy mayor of the city...people loved him because he ignored Prohibition and his romantic dalliances were grist for the gossip mill. But regardless of his faults, it was during this time that the city began changing into what we know today. The movement of business to mid-town, the relocation of factories and slaughterhouses across the river to New Jersey and the beginning of the age of the skyscraper.

This history is divided into five parts....Power and Politics; Crime and Prohibition; The Making of Modern Manhattan; Bringing In The Future; and Jazz Age Icons. In these sections he covers everything from the Garment District to the Ziegfeld Follies. This is a wonderful book, informative, and beautifully written even

if it does end rather abruptly. Highly recommended.
