



Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s

By Ann Douglas

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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald et al. were finding Paris a movable feast, for hundreds of other American artists, writers and musicians who remained at home, Manhattan in the 1920s was a kind of Roman candle hurtling into hyperborean space, its glitter and energy sparking a decade of creativity. And though the expatriates were mining established European cultures, for them, too, Manhattan was their defining center, whether escaping or embracing it. This book is a cornucopia of anecdote and commentary on some 120 stars of the Jazz Age. Douglas (The Feminization of American Culture) devotes considerable attention to the city's impact on the legendary black musicians and theirs on it; to its architectural ebullience; and above all to the literary and publishing mavens who worshipped the integrity of the word-the "terrible honesty" of her title. This is a sprawling, erudite, provocative study of an expanding artistic universe that crashed with the Depression and, like it, left a powerful imprint on the American consciousness. Photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Douglas (The Feminization of American Culture, 1978) here concentrates on Manhattan in the 1920s, with an emphasis on the Harlem Renaissance. More than just a portrait of New York in the Jazz Age, this work is a social and intellectual history of the United States. It covers American literature, music, and architecture and discusses the influences of Freud, William James, and matriarchy on early 20th-century thought.

Exhaustively researched, the narrative introduces a large cast of protagonists and features lots of anecdotes, plot summaries, and discussion of popular music. Douglas shows how the intellectual life of one city in one decade was such an important part of American cultural history. For informed lay readers and scholars generally.

Gary Williams, Southeastern Ohio Regional Lib., Caldwell

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From [Booklist](#)

Douglas, author of the highly regarded *Feminization of American Culture* (1977), is as vibrant a writer as she is accomplished a scholar. This imposing yet stimulating volume picks up where Douglas' earlier work left off and examines the eager decade following the psyche-bending Great War. Douglas uses Raymond Chandler's term "terrible honesty" to describe the era's "primary ethos," which emphasized "accuracy, precision, and perfect pitch and timing," and introduces 120 Jazz Age New Yorkers, the "shock troops of modernity," as vivid embodiments of these values. The lives and achievements of such diverse talents as Bessie Smith, Dorothy Parker, Duke Ellington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Eubie Blake, Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, and Irving Berlin are all covered in this dynamic cultural analysis, which also offers a candid and revelatory comparison of white and black Manhattan, from the intellectual and artistic enclave in Greenwich Village to the musical and literary flowering of Harlem. Douglas, a self-declared "Americanist," stresses the importance of African American culture to New York's status as a world-class city. And not only does she write with great eloquence about the arts, race relations, sex, and alcoholism, but she also ponders the impact of such technological marvels as skyscrapers and airplanes. *Donna Seaman*

Users Review

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Ella Hodge:

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