

READING GROUP GUIDE

Dear Reader,

This is really only the second biographical novel I have attempted in my 20-year career as a historical novelist. As to what it is that drew me to Lillian as a subject—that is so hard to say.

But what I learned—or rather, what was reinforced—through my research and writing was that so many of the pressures and expectations on women in our time are thoroughly baked into our history. In Lillian, I found an unlikely heroine who—despite all the expectations around her—fought to maintain her autonomy and be the author of her own life. She was brash and impulsive, self-centered and blind to her own faults in many ways, but also deeply loyal to her friends. And she had a complex and troubled relationship with her ambitious mother.

The world of Broadway in the early 20th century also piqued my interest. As soon as I started doing the research, I found myself completely hooked. The larger-than-life figure of Florenz Ziegfeld needs no introduction. He basically invented the musical revue, prioritizing spectacle and beauty, entertainment over content, and taking chances on new and unconventional stars—like the velvet-voiced Bert Williams, the first Black performer permitted in a Broadway show that also featured White performers.

Thank you for wanting to go deeper into Lillian's story. I hope this guide helps you discover more, and that you'll end by loving her as I do.

Susanne

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TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS

1903 1904 1905 1906 1907 1908 1909 1910 1911 1912 1913 1914 1915 1916 1917 1918 1919 1920 1921 1922 1923 1924

Tue 2 Jul 1907

- ◆ 15. Schoolboys etc.
Wed 7 - Sat 31 Aug 1907
- ◆ 16. Meeting Spears
Tue 20 Aug 1907
- ◆ 17. Lillian interview with Shubert
Wed 25 Sep 1907 0:00:00
- ◆ 18. Shubert
Sat 28 Sep 1907
- ◆ 19. The Tourists
Fri 1 - Sat 30 Nov 1907

◆ 20. Flo spots Lillian
Wed 20 Nov 1907

TENSION  90%

LOCATION

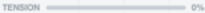
- Majestic Theater
- New York

PARTICIPANT

- Lillian is 15 years, 10 months old
- Flo is 40 years, 7 months old

- ◆ 22. Miss Innocence
0:00:00 Mon 30 Nov 1908 - 24:00:00 Fri 30 Apr 1909
- ◆ 23. Follies of 1909
0:00:00 Mon 14 Jun - 24:00:00 Mon 16 Aug 1909
- ◆ 24. Mary dies
Mon 1 Nov 1909 0:00:00
- ◆ 25. Lillian meets Elsie
Wed 4 May 1910 0:00:00
- ◆ 28. Follies of 1910
0:00:00 Mon 20 Jun - 24:00:00 Thu 15 Sep 1910
- ◆ 31. Follies of 1911
0:00:00 Mon 26 Jun - 24:00:00 Wed 13 Sep 1911
- ◆ 33. Over the River
0:00:00 Mon 8 Jan - 24:00:00 Fri 19 Apr 1912
- ◆ 34. Follies of 1912
0:00:00 Mon 21 Oct 1912 - 24:00:00 Wed 8 Jan 1913
- ◆ 35. Lillian in Vaudeville
Apr - Sep 1913

◆ 36. Lillian & Flo split
Wed 31 Dec 1913 0:00:00

TENSION  0%

LOCATION

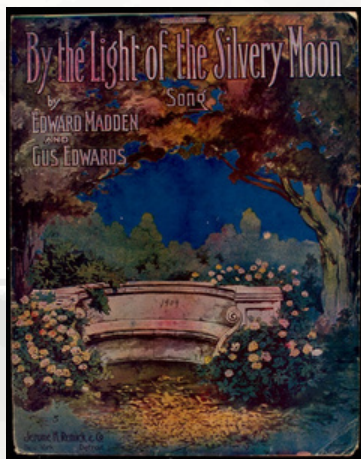
A VISUAL TOUR

One of the delights of working on this book was the amount of visual references that featured Lillian and most of the other characters in the book.

I've gathered some together in the following pages for your interest, and so it might add a concrete dimension to your reading.

Everything is out of copyright here!

VISUAL TOUR

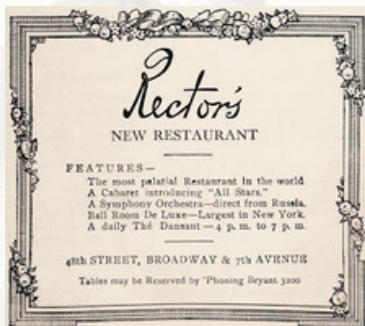


"By the Light of the Silvery Moon," one of Lillian's iconic songs, the one Gus Edwards asks her to sing at Flo's memorial.

Isabelle Springer, wild socialite who takes Lillian under her wing in New York.



Ad for Rector's, one of the restaurants popular with the Follies crowd.



BEFORE THE FOLLIES



Florenz Ziegfeld in 1902



Anna Held, Ziegfeld's
common-law wife



The Anna Held Girls,
pre Follies days

Lillian Russell, Anna
Held's friend

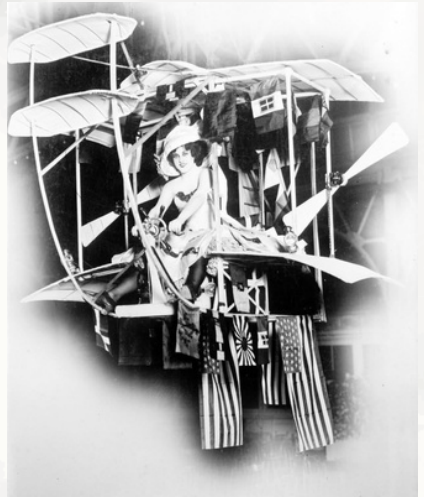


LILLIAN'S CAREER



Jardin de Paris—
New York Theater
Roof Garden

Lillian in "Up, Up in My
Aeroplane" in the
1909 Follies



Lillian beauty shot

SHEET MUSIC

A huge amount of the money made on a musical revue was from the sales of sheet music, which also kept the performers in the public eye when they weren't on stage.



FRIENDS



Bert Williams



Fanny Brice



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lillian was buffeted about by men (and women) who wanted to control her career. How did she hold her own? What allowed her to be her own person in the end?
2. Do you like Lillian? Why? Why not?
3. What was most surprising to you about the depiction of the Ziegfeld Follies in this book?
4. What one moment stood out to you that shaped Lillian's life?
5. In what ways did Lillian's experience as an aspiring star differ from what a woman like her might experience today? In what ways was it the same?
6. The mother-daughter relationship: Who comes out as most sympathetic? Why?
7. What's your impression of what Lillian really wanted out of life?

HISTORICAL NOTE

As fantastic as it seems, everything in this book really happened to Lillian Lorraine. I was fortunate to have a lot of research material not only in the form of pictures, newspapers, and sheet music, but also in a biography—Lillian Lorraine; the Life and Times of a Ziegfeld Diva, by Nils Hanson. Hanson lays the facts of her life out skillfully, and the biography contains much more detail and even more scandalous events than I have been able to include here.

But writing fiction is about choices. It requires the author to tell a story that fits into a certain container, and I chose that container to start in 1906 and end in 1913, not venturing into Lillian's life from that time until her death in 1955. My goal was to get inside her, to try to understand why she seemed to self-destruct at regular intervals as well as what might have motivated her through her rollercoaster ride of a career.

While there was plenty of information about Lillian's public life to mine, her true personal life was a little more difficult to fathom—particularly her relationship with her mother, whose maiden name was Mary Anne Brennan. Mary Anne died at some

HISTORICAL NOTE, CONT.

point in Lillian's life, but the details of how or when are fuzzy, and so I created a scenario that fit within the story as I saw it.

Although Lillian had been preyed upon by men since her teen years, she never acted like a victim. That doesn't excuse the fact that Ziegfeld, a man in a position of power and nearly three times her age, took advantage of her. It only serves to illustrate, sadly, how beautiful young women in show business have perennially had to negotiate and put up with the expectations that somehow they were the property of the men who had pulled all the strings, and the only way to get ahead was to go along with whatever they wanted.

Which is where I think Lillian truly shows her backbone. She could have taken the easy way out, married Flo and been guaranteed a career in musical reviews ever after. But she didn't, despite the fact that Flo proposed to her four times. This detail alone was enough to intrigue me and to encourage me to try to redeem Lillian a little. My Lillian—reckless, volatile, uneducated, prone to substance abuse—is

HISTORICAL NOTE, CONT.

nonetheless smart and independent. She made the best of the circumstances of the time, or at least tried to, even though she also made many bad choices.

The one thing that stood out to me above all was Lillian's loyalty to her friends—male and female—including Ziegfeld. She kept her relationships with Rosie, Elsie, Isabelle, Fanny Brice, Bert, Gus, and the others through her many ups and downs. And someone who is able to inspire that kind of loyalty herself, I thought, probably had more depth and soul than the media ever gave her credit for.

This novel is my attempt to honor that possibility.

THANK YOU!

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