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The Lost Algonquin Round Table

Humor, Fiction, Journalism, Criticism and Poetry

From America's Most Famous Literary Circle

Edited By Nat Benchley and Kevin C. Fitzpatrick

5 Questions: The Round Table Yesterday and Today

Why did you want to edit this book and bring it out now?

Nat: Aside from the obvious 90th anniversary tie-in, it seemed to me that the myth of the Round Table was being turned in too many irrelevant directions. People were attaching the group's name to projects which had no relation to their real works. There was a growing body of work which seemed to casually throw the name out there and not understand what they were. There were also some projects which misidentified the members of the group (even loosely configured). So Kevin and I agreed that it was time to bring out a book which reminded people why the Round Table mattered in the first place, before their witticisms overpowered their writings.

Kevin: I have gotten the sense over the last several years that the group was going to be remembered more for their witticisms and *bon mots*, and not for being writers. Putting a collection together of the Algonquin Round Table writers seemed like an easy way to put a book in the hands of people who know the group's one-liners and bad puns, but have maybe never read anything they actually wrote.

What is the audience for "The Lost Algonquin Round Table"?

Nat: I would hope that anyone concerned with good, clean, literate writing would be interested in these pieces. Particularly in a time when (and I have to say this, because it is quantifiable) the standards for writing and using English are being lowered across the board, I would like people to have as a reference work some gems from a time when words and their impact mattered.

Kevin: This book will appeal to readers who let their subscriptions to *The New Yorker* and the *Times* expire—and just read them online for free. Or anybody with a lot of time on his hands. Bernie and Ruth Madoff would love this book.

What pieces in the book stand out as your favorites? Why?

Nat: My instant favorite is a treasure I discovered several years ago while researching my show about my grandfather and have never been able to use anywhere else: It is his piece from 1917 comparing Charlie Chaplin and Shakespeare. Several of Sherwood's criticisms (of silent films) are very clever. And I think Margaret Leech's fiction is charming. As an ex-military man, I have a certain fondness for Laurence Stallings' "Turn Out the Guard." And I have also shared a couple of my favorites from family archives, which I thought deserved a wider audience.

Kevin: I had never come across "The New York Type" by Dorothy Parker before. It's eight decades old and it could have been written this month. I love the short fiction section with Edna Ferber and Margaret Leech. Hopefully, a new audience will discover John V. A. Weaver, a poet completely forgotten today, who spoke in a distinctly unique voice from that era.

To what do you attribute the popularity and mythmaking to the Round Table, 80 years after the group split up?

Nat: The group offers an interesting lesson in how to be virally famous—long before the Internet and instant communications. They sustained their fame and acclaim over several decades because they were consistently clever—at their jobs and their avocations. The sheer volume of their output, both professionally and recreationally, means that they were the antithesis of "15 minutes of fame." So today people are still able to write volumes about them by just cherrypicking some of their gems. What we hoped to do was supplement the instantly recognizable signature pieces with more substantive works, perhaps to put a little meat behind the myth.

Kevin: The group has continued to remain popular because they represent a lost era of New York, an exciting city that doesn't exist any longer. In the age of the Round Table, you broke the law by going to speakeasies and the subway cost a nickel. I think people miss a New York they never knew, where Penn Station was grand and elevated trains cast shadows on the sidewalks. These writers evoke a time period of jazz and flappers, an era that seems much happier than today.

Are there any writers or personalities today that seem like members of the Vicious Circle of the past?

Nat: There are indisputably clever writers and quipsters and humorists and critics today. I would be loath to cite names, because I would undoubtedly forget someone crucial. In my Foreword I mention many writers who have shone over the last 30-40 years, some of them for the force of their personalities as well as their writing. Nobody seems to have the time to congregate the way—and for the length of time—that The Round Table did in gentler times, so I doubt that legends will arise about today's Clever Bunch. But the Internet does create some interesting coagulations of clever verbalists. Perhaps someone will publish "The Collected Tweets" to give us the best of the twitters.

Kevin: I agree with Nat. I can't think of anyone in popular culture today that's in their league. But if I was Dr. Frankenstein, perhaps I'd take a little of "The Daily Show" writing staff and mix it up with *The Onion* editors. Replace their bottled Vitamin Water with gin, and maybe we'd have something to start with.

Ordering Information:

"The Lost Algonquin Round Table"

300 pages

ISBN: 97181440151514

Retailers: order through iUniverse.com and all major distributors

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