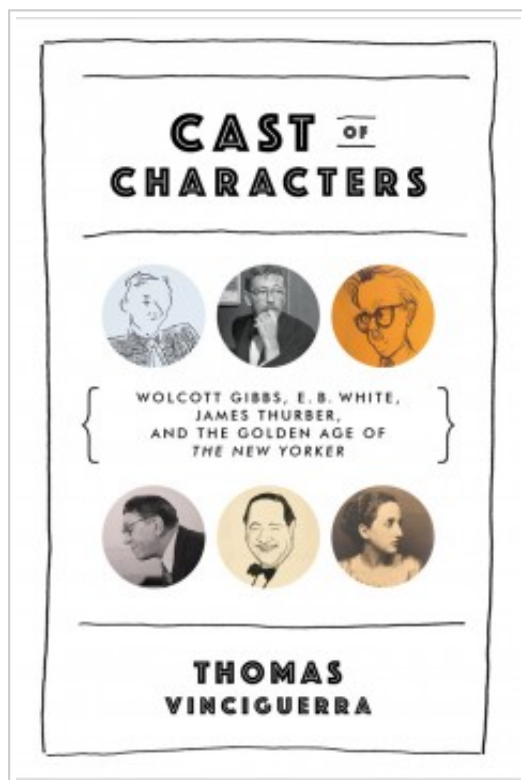


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Cast of Characters

Wolcott Gibbs, E. B. White, James Thurber, and the Golden Age of The New Yorker

by Thomas Vinciguerra

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From the Publisher: From its birth in 1925 to the early days of the Cold War, The New Yorker slowly but surely took hold as the country's most prestigious, entertaining, and informative general-interest periodical. In *Cast of Characters*, Thomas Vinciguerra paints a portrait of the magazine's cadre of charming, wisecracking, driven, troubled, brilliant writers and editors. He introduces us to Wolcott Gibbs, theater critic, all-around wit, and author of an infamous 1936 parody of Time magazine. We meet the demanding and eccentric founding editor Harold Ross, who would routinely tell his underlings, "I'm firing you because you are not a genius," and who once mailed a pair of his underwear to Walter Winchell, who had accused him of preferring to go bare-bottomed under his slacks. Joining the cast are the mercurial, blind James Thurber, a brilliant cartoonist and wildly inventive fabulist,...

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What We Say

It's hard to resist The New Yorker in its heyday: the magazine personified (personifies?) both a certain sophisticated Manhattan perspective and the desire to obtain a certain, sophisticated Manhattan perspective. It was genuinely revolutionary and in that remarkable era from its founding in 1925 to the Cold War boasted a Murderer's Row of talent in its pages: James Thurber, Charles Addams, Wolcott Gibbs, John O'Hara, illustrators like Arno, founder Harold Ross and of course E.B. White. Author Thomas Vinciguerra does not resist and those who revel in the details of that group and that era will find much to savor here. It's roughly chronological but often many chapters feel like stand-alone features that might have appeared in The New Yorker itself: here's a chapter on excessive drinking, there's a chapter on romantic and marital woes, yet another on the war and the inevitable final chapter as they file their final stories once and for all. Indeed, it would play better as a serialized offering over a year, say one a month. Read all at once, it is exhaustive and exhausting. Gibbs played a central role in the magazine as both editor and reviewer and writer, but much is explained when Vinciguerra mentions in an author's note that this began as a biography of him alone. Too often, every little byway is explored at tedious length. If the formidable and marvelous Katharine Angell (wife of E.B.) becomes ill late in the day, we can't be told she was plagued by maladies. We are told, "By the early 1970s, Katharine was suffering from shingles, dermatosis, a fractured vertebra, osteoporosis, a kidney infection, and congestive heart failure." The accretion of detail is admirable at first but eventually frustrating. Still, Vinciguerra usually keeps all their foibles and brilliance in perspective. He's a little too kind at times. (For example, Arno is a physically abusive man who welched on child support; Vinciguerra doesn't forgive but sees it as evincing his anger at the world and describes Arno giving one date a "shiner," far too colorful and friendly a word for beating her up.) More problematic is that this truly is about a cast of characters. Each vivid, eccentric character gets our full attention, one after the other. The New Yorker itself is a little lost in all this, with little sense of forward momentum allowed to develop. Sure, highlights like the takedown of Time magazine and John Hersey's Hiroshima piece are captured. But this is a series of portraits more than the journey of the magazine itself. Still, it's intelligent, well-grounded, and moment-to-moment entertaining. With a cast of characters like this, how could it fail? Now if only I had Gibbs or Ross or Shawn to edit this rambling little review.... -- Michael Giltz

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What Others Say

A fresh view.... Aply captures the antic spirit of the New Yorker's first heyday. - **Kirkus Reviews**

Captures the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of its editors and writers...will be embraced by faithful New Yorker readers. - **Publishers Weekly**

Vinciguerra's writing has a way of bringing these characters to sparkling life.... New Yorker readers are a dedicated lot and will snap this 'golden age' volume up. - **Booklist**

It's a beautiful book and a sad book, as the flood of time and modernity rises before the Cast of Characters can walk in pairs to the ark. - **P.J. O'Rourke**

Irresistible...a banquet of information about the good writing and bad manners of the eccentric crew who made a myth both of themselves and of the journal they made famous. Vinciguerra writes a sharp, crisp sentence, and tells his story with brio. - **John Lahr, author of Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh**