



GRAND HOTEL
VICKI BAUM

INTRODUCTION BY
NOAH ISENBERG

I'll read pretty much anything put out by the New York Review Books imprint -- they rescue little known gems, shine a light on great authors and bring back classics that fell through the cracks. When I saw they were reissuing the novel "Grand Hotel" I was intrigued. I know the Oscar-winning film from 1932 and doubtless the success of that movie has overshadowed the novel (and play) it sprang from. Using one setting like a hotel or cruise ship or train station to capture the varied stories of numerous characters has since become a cliché. (Think "The Love Boat" on TV, with each episode balancing a drama, a light romance and a comedy, as one awful example.) I knew nothing about the Austrian writer Vicki Baum but she had a lengthy career and great success in Hollywood. Not surprisingly, since NYRB put it out, "Grand Hotel" turns out to be a winner. Like the film, it features a broad cast of characters crossing paths, from a jewel thief to an aging ballerina to a businessman desperately trying to keep a deal afloat to a mousy little clerk who is dying and has decided to spend his final days living it up in luxury. It's an entertainment and that's never to be sneered at. But Baum has some wonderful, tour de force scenes that are insightful and strong without ever calling attention to themselves. You'll be turning the pages to see what happens next and only later appreciate the reverie of the jewel thief as he studies the beautiful ballerina and falls in love or the "personal secretary" who cheerfully exchanges her attentions for money or the sickly clerk's awkward but sweet appreciation of flying down the road in a fast car and how something as simple and scary and thrilling as that could be a revelation to him. A treat from start to finish. -- Michael Giltz