To the Reader

In 1962, a young unknown named Cormac McCarthy, with no publishing connections at all, sent the precious manuscript of his first novel to Random House, "because [out] of everybody, they published . . . the good authors," he'd recall forty-six years later to an interviewer (me). "They were the foremost literary house in America," he added, almost as though it had been ordained.

The next year, 1963, Random took a chance on him, and gave McCarthy a contract. That same summer, *Esquire,* then the nation's hippest magazine, serendipitously echoed his words in an issue devoted to contemporary American writing. By that point, it proclaimed, "Bennett Cerf [had] secured Random's position as the most important literary publisher" in the country.

Many people today may be familiar with the name Random House, but Bennett *who*? Most would have no idea. They'd be clueless that in the mid-1920s, Cerf had co-founded, and until the mid-1960s was first among equals in running, what has now become the world's largest English-language publisher. They wouldn't know that from a young age he'd been a tremendous reader, with keen instincts for books and people; that he'd made the Modern Library into a cultural touchstone; that he'd succeeded in connecting books to Broadway, Hollywood, and TV, and in so many ways saw the publishing future long before most others in the business did.

However, in that midcentury moment when McCarthy and *Esquire* had come to the same conclusion, I was a kid growing up in Philadelphia and, like tens of millions of Americans at that time, *was* familiar with Bennett Cerf. He was the funny, middle-aged, horn-rimmed panelist I watched on *What's My Line?,* a television game show broadcast live from

New York City every Sunday night. I didn't know about Cerf and books; that would come much later.

After college in Philadelphia, I studied at Cambridge University, then worked for several London book publishers. Once back in America, I had trouble finding a New York job. When I was given a chance to write a few articles for *Publishers Weekly,* no one was more surprised than I when it spawned a career, one that enabled me to meander through publishing present and past.

Cerf's name would crop up from time to time, but it wasn't until I stumbled upon his personal archive at Columbia University, as well as the vast collection of Random House papers preserved there, that I began to grasp the immense surface of his life: the endless chain of writers, composers, producers, directors, actors, politicos, journalists, and publishers he'd known, as well as the multiplicity of the contribution to American letters that he'd made. I came to appreciate his uncanny ability to grasp what authors as disparate as Truman Capote, Gertrude Stein, and Dr. Seuss each sought through his or her work—be it connection, fame, money, attention, love, to change the world, to exorcise demons—and how he helped each achieve it.

I also began to understand the paradox that had largely denied him lasting recognition: what had made him well known and beloved in his day, and had helped put Random House on the map, had also worked against him. That became all too clear in another *Esquire* article that ran only eight months after the first. This second piece, a five-page profile of Cerf from 1964, characterized him not as that serious, driven publisher who had "secured" Random's paramount position in the publishing pecking order, but as a lightweight fixated on "fun." Most egregious was the TV fun of being on a game show, but there were other kinds, too: the lucrative fun of the pun-filled newspaper and magazine columns and joke books Cerf churned out under his own byline, and the fun derived from sunny speeches he'd deliver on (paid) lecture tours traversing the country. A "TV personality," he was a celebrity before celebrity culture seeped so indelibly into America. In intellectual circles, then, it made him highly suspect.

How could that man be the same one who'd fought the court case that allowed James Joyce's previously banned *Ulysses* to be legally available in the America of 1934? How could he have published Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the America of 1952? Or Philip Roth's *Portnoy's*

Complaint in 1969? How could that grinning guy on millions of screens be the publisher of William Faulkner, Ayn Rand, or Eugene O'Neill? Did he actually read the books he published? (He did, a large number of them.) To many in his day, that simply did not compute.

And yet, it's precisely because Cerf was open to so many worlds, high and low, mass and class; and to so many people—he loved being a New York switchboard to the famous, but also took pleasure in chatting with all the regular Joes and Janes—that he accomplished so much. He had warmth, charm, a fine brain, and handsome looks when young; humor bubbling up; and an eagerness and optimism that seemed to ensure life would sail along on a fair wind. His ego was far from small, but when he focused his attention, it felt like you and he were the only ones in the room. "Stepping into sunlight" was how actress Mia Farrow once described being with him. Influencing and reflecting the direction American culture would take from the 1920s through the 1960s, he intuited the role celebrity would play, and the business consolidation that would take place, but could not foresee how the changes he helped set in motion might affect *him*.

Underpinning all he did were two qualities of a rare magnitude. Extraordinary energy was the first. In the 1950s, a *New York Times* critic characterized Cerf's energy as akin to the greatness-defining quality of men like Hamilton and Washington. The second attribute of this man who made life look easy was a determination that was anything but. He never wasted time; competed fiercely to win; always wanted more; was never satisfied with himself. "Was I okay?" That question hounded him, haunted him. For a man who seemed to embody self-confidence, insecurity lay just beneath.

He was twenty-five when he began in publishing in 1923, working for a man named Horace Liveright. Two years later he started on his own, persuading his best friend to join him as business partner in buying Liveright's crown jewel, the Modern Library reprint series. Two more years, and the young partners announced that in addition to expanding the series, they would publish a few fine-press books on the side, "at random," to get in on the profitable market for beautifully made collectibles that was a Roaring Twenties craze. His decision to name the new company "Random House" signified to others that distinctive insouciance, as though what came of it would be nothing too serious, a mere "play toy" for two well-heeled young men.

And yet it was at the very start, a few weeks after he'd begun his apprenticeship with Liveright, that Cerf had vowed to his college friend Richard Simon (who was about to go into business with Max Schuster) that "within ten years" he hoped to become "one of the greatest publishers of the country." Ten years into his career, the ostensible "play toy" Random House fought and won the *Ulysses* case, going a long way to fulfilling that vow. There was nothing random at all about the ambition and scope of what he envisaged for himself and his company.

Cerf loved reading all kinds of stories, and loved telling them, too. His almost shameless need for attention, approval, and affection gave rise to a self-acknowledged habit of exaggerating and mythologizing—if nothing was ever enough, why not inflate things, make them funnier, edit out the painful parts, shape the story to gain the greatest effect? The stories created problems for him that outwardly, at least, he shrugged off with that grin.

They also created problems for me. Many of his stories were fashioned into *At Random,* a memoir published posthumously in 1977 and read as gospel. Some of the years I devoted to this book were taken up trying to untangle fact from fiction. In the early sections (and later, if a major discrepancy is involved), I point out the disparities; others are unpicked in the endnotes. When there is no paper trail to determine veracity, I indicate that the tale is likely apocryphal.

Bennett Cerf binds this book together, but his is not the only story between these covers. How Random House—now joined with Penguin, as Cerf himself had envisaged in the 1950s—became the preeminent English-language trade book publisher is one strand; how Random and the other New York houses established by Jews in the early decades of the twentieth century—particularly Liveright, Knopf, and Simon & Schuster—transformed American book culture is another. The publishing stories of authors both canonical and less well known (but ripe for rediscovery) thread through these pages. New York City history; Jewish American history; and Hollywood, Broadway, and TV history have strong supporting roles.

The contract for this book was signed in the autumn of 2002; years of research and interviews went into it, and countless drafts. I was fortunate so many who knew Cerf gave generously of their time to help, and am saddened some didn't live to see it in print. Whether from the daughter of a go-between in the *Ulysses* case; the children of Faulkner's longest-

serving editor; friends like Kitty Carlisle Hart; acquaintances such as Henry Kissinger and Barbara Walters; authors like Toni Morrison, Ira Levin, and William Styron; or what the paper trail turned up, there is new information in these pages, as well as an evocation of a vanished world. Some attitudes, customs, language, and actions common to that world may no longer be acceptable in ours. This book is a portrait embedded in an era, not a judgment on that era or our own.

The act of biography is reclamation, a choice to recall one person and the world he or she inhabited to public memory. Why should any individual be worthy of the slog, sweat, and occasional hard-won moments of inspiration that go into the years it takes to birth a biography?

Walk into the tower at 1745 Broadway in New York City that is Penguin Random House's global headquarters. The massive lobby is lined with illuminated glass shelves. On them sit hundreds and hundreds of books. Some—titles like *In Cold Blood, The Cat in the Hat, Absalom, Absalom!, Atlas Shrugged, The Iceman Cometh, What Makes Sammy Run?, Act One, Rosemary's Baby, A Raisin in the Sun*—were books that Cerf first published.

From a very young age, I found books to be, as they are for so many of us, a window onto the world, a refuge, a promise, and a ticket to a life beyond the confines of my childhood. As an editor, journalist, and writer, they gave me a career. Although at times he frustrated, maddened, and perplexed me, tracking down Bennett Cerf also taught me so much. He amused, amazed, moved, and never bored me. It is humbling to peek inside and try to understand and portray another's life. Whether I have succeeded is for readers to decide. But that I should have made the attempt to recall this particular man back to life, I have no doubt.

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