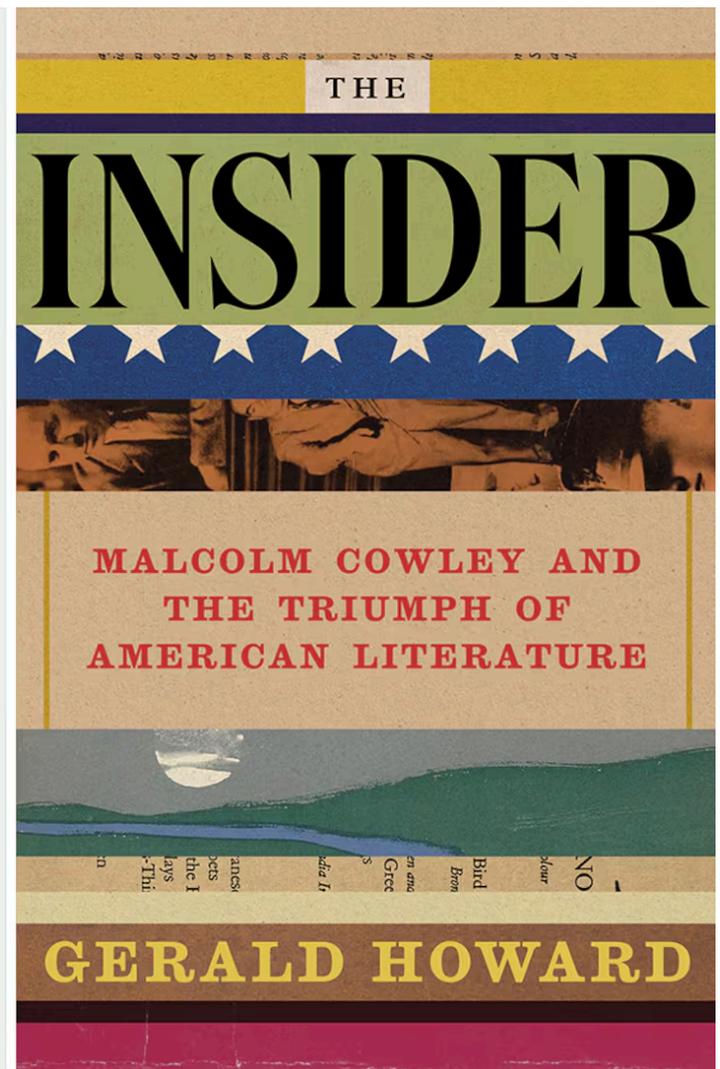
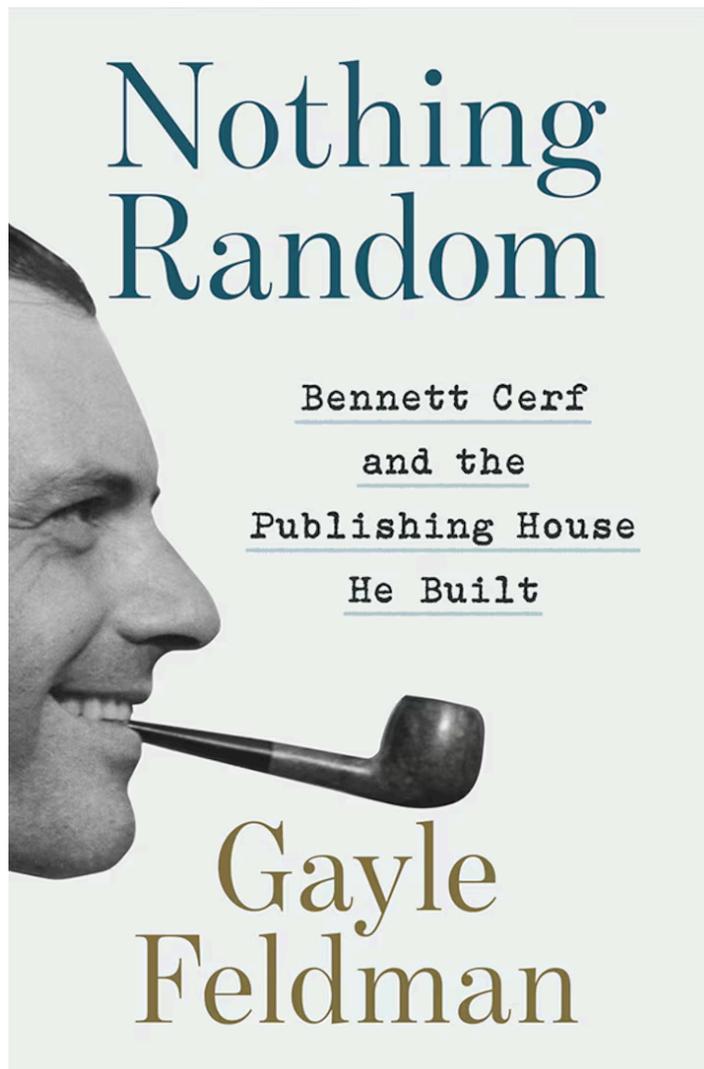


BOOKS

# The men who built the American literary canon

New biographies present Malcolm Cowley and Bennett Cerf, two titans in the book world

By **Wendy Smith** Updated January 8, 2026, 7:52 a.m.



"Nothing Random" by Gayle Feldman and "The Insider" by Gerald Howard. PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP/RANDOM HOUSE PUBLISHING GROUP

By 1944, William Faulkner was a has-been. “The Sound and the Fury,” “As I Lay Dying,” “Light in August,” and “Absalom, Absalom!” were all out of print, and his own publisher, Random House, had donated printing plates of his titles to be recycled for the war effort. Outraged at what he deemed a literary injustice, Malcolm Cowley used his influence as a consulting editor at Viking and a well-connected critic to give Faulkner his due. In 1944-45 he published a series of essays in The New York Times Book Review, Saturday Review, and Sewanee Review arguing that “each of his books was part of a much larger project, that of creating the myth and legend of the American South and its guilt-stained history.” These created enough of a buzz to convince Viking to add a “[Portable Faulkner](#)” to its profitable reprint series, published in 1946 to ecstatic reviews that praised Faulkner and Cowley alike.

It was “arguably the most successful rescue mission in American literary history,” writes Gerald Howard in “[The Insider](#),” his lively biography of Cowley. It “would reverse Faulkner’s drift into obscurity and lead to his recognition [as] a writer of world stature worthy of the Nobel Prize in Literature.” Faulkner’s publisher “had little to do with it,” admits Gayle Feldman in “[Nothing Random](#),” her astute portrait of Random House founder Bennett Cerf. But Cerf, who in addition to being a publisher, columnist, humorist, and all-purpose celebrity was a shrewd salesman who knew a business opportunity when he saw one, reprinted “The Sound and the Fury” and “As I Lay Dying” in a single Modern Library edition, using Faulkner’s introduction to Viking’s Portable as their introduction, and promised to reprint the other novels and a collection of short stories next.

Faulkner’s rehabilitation is just one instance of the transformation of American literary culture and commerce in the 20<sup>th</sup> century chronicled with publishing savvy and a knack for juicy anecdotes in “The Insider” and “Nothing Random,” each focused on a single remarkable man.

Cowley presented himself as a slow-talking country boy, courtesy of childhood summers in rural Pennsylvania, but he was a literary insider from the time he made the editorial

board of *The Harvard Advocate* as an undergraduate in 1917. Expatriate years in 1920s France made him a member of the “lost generation” whose place in literary history he claimed in critical essays as early as 1921 and in books ranging from “[Exile’s Return](#)” in 1934 to “*A Second Flowering*” in 1973. He held “a power seat” in ’30s culture as literary editor of *The New Republic*, until his Stalinist leftism (later regretted) got him demoted in 1940. “*The Portable Faulkner*” followed “*The Portable Hemingway*” elevating his stature in the 1940s as the editor of these seminal anthologies, and he went on to edit Jack Kerouac’s “[On the Road](#)” in the ’50s and Ken Kesey’s “[One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest](#)” in the ’60s.

“He met the [postwar] cultural moment head-on,” Howard comments. Cowley’s writings placed individual writers in a historical context and literary tradition; he made them “teachable,” as Howard remarks of his introduction to “*The Portable Hemingway*,” and they served as guides for the American literature courses burgeoning as higher education boomed after World War II. Cowley would be an influential mover and shaker in “a new, academically based paradigm in the creation of literary prestige,” teaching classes at universities and graduate creative writing programs, recommending students who caught his eye (like Kesey) for fellowships and publishing contracts. Howard traces Cowley’s tumultuous career with appreciation, but he also enjoys describing a good literary brawl or quoting from a nasty book review, even if it’s at his subject’s expense. Though based on substantive research, “*The Insider*” has a personal tone that befits an author who met Cowley while both were working at Viking Penguin and edited his final two books.

Feldman takes a reportorial approach in a massive book more than two decades in the making, based on multiple institutional archives and interviews with what appears to be everyone living who knew Random House cofounder Bennett Cerf. Despite its formidable length, this is at once a readable blend of business history — Feldman has covered the American publishing industry for decades — and an intriguing portrait of a deeply conflicted man. The unquestioned “first among equals” at Random from the 1920s into the mid-’60s, Cerf published many of the world’s best-known writers, including Eugene O’Neill, Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Truman Capote, John O’Hara, James Michener, Ayn

Rand, William Styron, and Philip Roth. He took his responsibility to literature seriously: Random was instrumental in the 1933 court case that enabled James Joyce's long-banned "Ulysses" to be published in the US, opening the door for franker, freer fiction in subsequent decades.

Cerf capitalized on this victory by selling the hell out of the novel to a mass audience; among his ploys were leaflets on "How to Enjoy Ulysses" distributed for bookstores' use to encourage their customers. His unabashed zest for promotion and sales, coupled with side hustles as a best-selling humor anthologist and wisecracking panelist on the television show "What's My Line," led some to dismiss him as a lightweight. This opinion was not shared by his staff, who knew the serious reader and committed publisher inside the bon vivant. For all the joy in living and relish for his very public profile that Feldman depicts (describing some fabulous parties along the way), she also captures the hurt Cerf felt about being condescended to by the literati, and his uncomfortable understanding that he partly brought this on himself.

The postwar boom that took Cowley into higher education prompted Cerf to take Random House into the immensely profitable fields of children's books and educational publishing. Publishing was becoming big business, ruled by the imperative "grow or die." Cerf raised capital for growth by taking the company public in a 1959 stock offering, persuaded Alfred A. Knopf to bring his house under the Random umbrella the following year, then sold the whole shebang to RCA in 1966. The evolution of publishing houses, from personal enterprises guided by the tastes and instincts of their editors to corporate entities governed by the demands of Wall Street and P&L statements, was underway; Cerf would come to bitterly rue his part in it.

Both books paint instructive pictures of the two principal trends that made American literature and publishing what they are today: the marriage of creative writing and academia, and the corporatization of book publishing to the point that five giant combines now dominate the field. It's overly easy to be nostalgic about the past: Writers not fortunate enough to produce bestsellers have always had to scramble for a living, and

publishers have always had an eye on the bottom line as well as the literary canon. Nonetheless, it's a pleasure to visit a bygone time when publishing houses had distinct personalities and literary critics like Cowley could make a real difference in writers' stature, maybe even their sales, with a book review — a time colorfully rendered in these two intelligent, exhilarating books.

### **THE INSIDER: Malcolm Cowley and the Triumph of American Literature**

By Gerald Howard

Penguin Press, 534 pages, \$35

### **NOTHING RANDOM: Bennett Cerf and the Publishing House He Built**

By Gayle Feldman

Random House, 1,032 pages, \$40

*Wendy Smith is the author of "Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940."*

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