

# '20s FICTION & NONFICTION

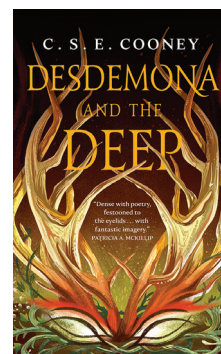
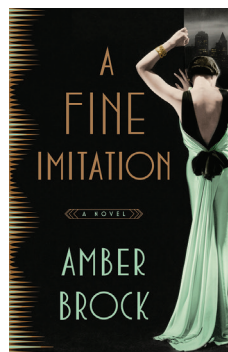
By Emma Carbone & Margaret Heller

When we first entered 2020, no one realized just how much the start of this new decade would hearken back to the Roaring Twenties of the previous century. The 1920s are a popular setting for fictional works and a rich subject for nonfiction, allowing authors to explore financial inequality contrasted with lavish parties, the motivations behind Prohibition and the seedier reality, and the exuberance felt by a society happy to see the end of World War I while enjoying the ability to buy on credit for the first time.

The myths and stereotypes of the 1920s can obscure the realities that laid the foundation for the social and political future of the United States, including events that mirror our own times and perhaps provide some warnings. Expanding voting rights, emerging political movements, racial violence, and income inequality are just a few of the themes that speak to our own Twenties—not to mention rebuilding after war and pandemic.

The 1920s—especially the early years before the financial tremors that would lead to the Great Depression in 1929—were noted for their optimism and freedom experienced by many, especially white women, who were experimenting with both shorter hair and hemlines and voting for the first

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time. The 1920s also saw the aftermath of the influenza outbreak in 1918, which, along with the loss of life in World War I, led to increased interest in Spiritualism.

Society was embracing new technology, new fashion, and new culture, yet racism and casual bigotry were endemic, even among those who welcomed new ideas. Urban life in cities such as New York and Chicago looms large in the mythology of the 1920s partly because there was action there, but also because the country increasingly looked to large cities for what was new.

Library collections should include books that go beyond the stories and names that come immediately to mind. Some of the best new titles coming out in celebration of the centenary provide context for all those flapper and mobster tales. The texts covered here represent a mix of approaches that will give a full picture of the decade, from perspectives not always recognized.

While we are sheltering in place and trying to flatten the curve of the current global pandemic, the 1920s as a setting feels especially relevant. Like the decade itself, these titles are varied and represent a range of experiences, with books written for adult audiences as well as YA titles with crossover appeal for adult readers. Starred titles (★) are essential for most collections.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Magee, Jeffrey. *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz*. Oxford Univ. 2005. 252p. ISBN 9780195090222. \$45.**

The academic musicology aspects of this book do not overshadow the fascinating life of pianist/band leader Henderson, whose influence on later music has not always been known or appreciated. His story reveals the class and race tensions that were the backdrop of the 1920s experience.

**Sutton, Matthew Avery. *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*. Harvard Univ. 416p. 2009. ISBN 9780674032538. \$37.**

Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson used modern technology such as airplanes, radio, and cars to build a megachurch in Los Angeles in the 1920s. Her colorful life story includes trends such as flappers and their bobbed hair, changing roles for women, and the emergence of modern evangelism.

## FICTION

★ **Akers, W.M. *Westside*. Harper Voyager. 2019. 291p. ISBN 9780062853998. \$22.95.**

Gilda Carr, solver of “tiny mysteries,” is drawn into a case much larger than one missing leather glove in this alternate 1921 where a 13-mile fence along Broadway separates New York’s flourishing Eastside from the hostile, wild Westside.

★ **Brock, Amber. *A Fine Imitation*. Crown. 2016. 304p. ISBN 9781101905111. \$25.**

Vera Bellington’s claustrophobic life in the penthouse of the Angelus is changed forever when artist Emil Hallan arrives at the building to paint a mural. As the two are drawn to each other, dangerous secrets from both Vera’s and Emil’s pasts will force Vera to decide how much she’s willing to risk for an unknown future.

**Cooney, C.S.E. *Desdemona and the Deep*. Tor.com. 2019. 224p. pap. ISBN 9781250229830. \$16.95.**

Desdemona Mannering learns that her family’s wealth comes from a tithe paid to the King of the Goblin Court, and sets out to find the tithed men and bring them home.

★ **George, McKelle. *Speak Easy, Speak Love*. Greenwillow: HarperCollins. 2017. 472p. ISBN 9780062560926 \$17.99.**

Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* receives a YA Jazz Age update in this retelling, in which Beatrice and Benedick fall into dislike at first sight while summering at Hero’s family speakeasy, Hey Nonny Nonny.

**Grey, Iona. *The Glittering Hour*. Thomas Dunne. 2019. 471p. ISBN 9781250066794. \$26.99.**

In 1936, nine-year-old Alice Carew follows clues to put together the puzzle of her mother’s past and the decisions, in 1925, that led Selina to her safe and stable husband Rupert Carew instead of her great love, artist Lawrence Weston.

**Ibrahim, Laila. *Paper Wife*. Lake Union: Amazon. 2018. 298p. pap. ISBN 9781503904576. \$14.95.**

Mei Ling emigrates from China in 1923 as a “paper wife” promised to a successful merchant in California, and takes orphan Siew under her wing. When her husband proves to be penniless, Mei Ling must make her “paper family” a real one.

**Kelly, Lee. *A Criminal Magic*. Gallery: S. & S. 2016. 432p. ISBN 9781481410335. \$25.99.**

In 1926 Washington, DC, sorcerer Joan and undercover Prohibition agent Alex are drawn into opposite sides of a gangster’s bid to consolidate power and wealth by changing the face of magical speakeasies forever.

**Lambert, Kristin. *The Boy in the Red Dress*. Viking. May 2020. 368p. ISBN 9780593113684. \$18.99.**

A socialite turns up dead at a French Quarter nightclub. The police suspect the club’s star performer Marion, the boy in the red dress. Marion’s best friend Millie seeks to prove her friend’s innocence.

**Latham, Jennifer. *Dreamland Burning*. Little, Brown. 2017. 384p. ISBN 9780316384933. \$18.99.**

In this YA, Rowan’s efforts to uncover the story behind skeletal remains found in her backyard in contemporary times intertwine with the story of Will’s life during the Tulsa race massacre of 1921.

**LaValle, Victor. *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Tor.com. 160p. pap. ISBN 9780765387868. \$13.99.**

In this reimagining of H.P. Lovecraft’s novella *The Horror at Red Hook*, Harlem hustler Charles Thomas Tester delivers a dangerous book to a sorceress in Queens and draws the attention of things better avoided.

**Liviero, Gemma. *In a Field of Blue*. Lake Union: Amazon. Feb. 2020. 414p. pap. ISBN 9781542009447. \$14.95.**

Four years after Rudy’s brother Edgar was declared missing in action in France in 1918, a woman arrives at the family manor claiming to be Edgar’s widow and the mother of his child.

**MacColl, Mary-Rose. *Swimming Home*. Penguin Pr. 2017. 432p. pap. ISBN 9780143129967. \$16.**

In 1925 England, 15-year-old orphan Catherine Quick dreams of being the first woman to swim the English Channel.

★ **Massey, Sujata. *The Widows of Malabar Hill*. Soho Crime. 2018. 400p. ISBN 9781616957780. \$27.95.**

One of the only female lawyers in 1920s India investigates a suspicious will on behalf of three Muslim widows living in full purdah.

**Montgomery, Jess. *The Widows*. Minotaur: St. Martin’s. 2019. 336p. ISBN 9781250184528. \$26.99.**

Lily Ross’s promise to avenge her sheriff husband’s death in Kinship, OH, in 1924 is put on hold when widow Marvena Whitcomb asks for help finding her missing daughter.

★ **Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. *Gods of Jade and Shadow*. Del Rey: Ballantine. 2019. 352p. ISBN 9780525620754. \$26.**

Casiopea Tun’s quiet life in a small Mexican town far from the Jazz Age’s action changes when she accidentally frees the ancient Mayan god of death.

★ **Okonkwo, Joe. *Jazz Moon*. Kensington. 2016. 352p. pap. ISBN 9781496701169. \$15.**

Aspiring poet Ben leaves Harlem for Paris, where he finds drugs, music, and a society where he’s treated as an exotic celebrity, all while coming to terms with his homosexuality.

**Rose, M.J. *Tiffany Blues*. Atria. 2018. 336p. ISBN 9781501173592. \$26.**

Jenny Bell and her best friend Minx travel to Long Island to spend eight weeks as fellows of the Tiffany Foundation.

**Solomon, Anne. *Leaving Lucy Pear*. Viking. 2016. 336p. ISBN 9781594632655. \$26.**

In 1917 Beatrice Haven leaves her newborn daughter under a pear tree in Cape Ann, MA. Ten years later her life collides with that of Emma Murphy, the woman who has been raising Bea’s daughter Lucy Pear as her own.

★ **St. James, Simone. *Lost Among the Living*. Berkley. 2016. 352p. pap. ISBN 9780451476197. \$15.**

Jo works in 1921 England as a paid companion to her dead husband’s wealthy aunt. The two travel to the family estate, where Jo hears rumors of a family curse and a ghost in the woods, and uncovers her husband’s secrets.



Stratford, Sarah-Jane. **Radio Girls**. Berkley. 2016. 384p. pap. ISBN 9780451475565.

In 1926 London, Maisie works at the new British Broadcasting Company, under Hilda Matheson, director of Talks radio programming, until a dangerous conspiracy threatens everything both women have worked to create.

Trueblood, Amy. **Nothing but Sky**. Flux: North Star. 2018. 288p. pap. ISBN 9781635830163. \$11.99.

In this YA novel, wing walker Grace and her barnstorming team aim high to compete in the 1922 World Aviation Expo for a lucrative Hollywood contract.

★Valentine, Genevieve. **The Girls at the Kingfisher Club**. Atria. 2014. 288p. ISBN 9781476739083. \$24.

In this retelling of the fairy tale “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” Jo and her 11 younger sisters find second chances and new beginnings in 1920s New York City.

★Williams, Beatriz. **A Certain Age**. Morrow. 2016. 336p. ISBN 9780062404954. \$26.99.

Socialite wife Theresa’s comfortable life is upended when her lover’s affections shift, leading to a love triangle and the trial of the century.

## FICTION SERIES

★Bray, Libba. **The Diviners**. 2013–20. Little, Brown.

This recently completed YA mystery/fantasy quartet offers an epic and well-researched view of 1920s New York City as young people are drawn into the orbit of a series of occult murders and the supernatural force behind them.

Brody, Frances. **Kate Shackleton**. 2013–19. St. Martin’s.

Amateur sleuth Kate leaves no stone unturned solving murders in her quiet Yorkshire village in 1920s England.

★Greenwood, Kerry. **Phryne Fisher**. 1989–2013. Poisoned Pen: Sourcebooks & others.

The prose inspiration for the TV series *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*, these books follow unconventional socialite (and lady detective) Phryne in 1929 Australia as she investigates cases and flirts with detective Jack Robinson.

★Winspear, Jacqueline. **Maisie Dobbs**. 2003–19. Various publishers.

After serving as a nurse in England in the Great War, Maisie turns her attention to crime as a private investigator in this series that follows Maisie from post–World War I into the 1930s.

## HISTORY

Bryson, Bill. **One Summer: America, 1927**. Doubleday. 2013. 528p. ISBN 9780767919401. \$32.50.

This book focuses on major events in aviation, baseball, politics, crime, and culture during the summer of 1927 that shaped the future. Bryson’s humorous asides and contextualization expand the narrative well beyond that one summer.

Douglas, Ann. **Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s**. Farrar. 1995. 605p. ISBN 9780374116202. \$25.99.

This intellectual history of the writers, artists, and thinkers who made up 1920s New York and American life is epic in scope, and remains worthy for collections.

★DuBois, Ellen Carol. **Suffrage: Women’s Long Battle for the Vote**. S. & S. 2020. ISBN 9781501165160. \$28.

DuBois provides an engrossing and thorough review of women’s political action in the 75 years leading up to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. She looks beyond the efforts by and for white women, and focuses on the considerable work by African American women and their challenges and successes in voting in the early 1920s.

★Emmerson, Charles. **Crucible: The Long End of the Great War and the Birth of a New World, 1917–1924**. PublicAffairs. 2019. 752p. ISBN 9781610397827. \$35.

Emmerson traces the physical and temporal connections between people and events in the post–World War I era. The narrative jumps around the world in each season between 1917 and 1924, charting the rise of communism and fascism, science, literature, politics, and music.

Harcourt, Felix. **Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s**. Univ. of Chicago. 2017. 272p. ISBN 9780226376158. \$45.

Harcourt makes the case that the re-

surgence of the Klan in the 1920s was supported by the biases and mores of the times, when racism and bigotry were embedded in mass culture and politics.

**He Had It Coming: Four Murderous Women and the Reporter Who Immortalized Their Stories**. Agate: Midway. 2019. ed. by Chicago Tribune & others. 256p. ISBN 9781572842779. \$35.

Chicago Tribune reporter Maurine Watkins covered a number of trials of women accused of murder in the 1920s; she later turned those accounts into the play *Chicago*. Photographs and newspaper clippings convey the reality of the decade beyond the flashy and sordid, and resurrect the lives of these women and their families.



Okrent, Daniel. **Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition**. Scribner. 2011. 480p. pap. ISBN 9780743277044. \$19.

The basis for Ken Burns’s documentary on Prohibition, this text tells the story of alcohol in America in the 1920s. Warring political forces, motivated by a combination of religious fervor, progressivism, and racism, sought to limit alcohol consumption, particularly for the working class and immigrants.

Wilson, James F. **Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance**. Univ. of Michigan. 2010. 262p. ISBN 9780472034895. \$29.95.

Many queer performers of the Harlem Renaissance have been largely forgotten. Wilson tells their stories in this scholarly but compelling book.

## GRAPHIC NOVELS

★Chantler, Scott. **Bix**. Gallery 13: S. & S. Apr. 2020. 256p. ISBN 9781501190780. \$29.99.

With the look and feel of a silent movie, this nearly wordless graphic version of the life of cornetist Bix Beiderbecke is the right medium to consider a much-mythologized figure.

Newlevant, Hazel. **If This Be Sin**. Hazel Newlevant Comix. 2014. 44p. ISBN 9781630687069. \$10.

Twenty pages tell the story of Gladys Bentley, Harlem Renaissance blues singer and drag king. The thread of gender and sexuality in popular music continues in two additional stories set in the 1980s and today, giving a sense of what has and has not changed since the 1920s. ■

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To submit titles (new and/or backlist), contact Stephanie Klose four to six months before issue dates listed above (email: sklose@mediasourceinc.com)