

tion to me in 1951, when I began a 27-year association with her, was “What do you think of Ruth Benedict’s book on Japan?”

I knew a bit about their close relationship, and learned more when Mead brought me into what remained of their circle. Intellectually, the two women complemented each other. Benedict had done work in philosophy and Mead in psychology; they shared an interest in literature. Benedict, the older of the two, began as Mead’s mentor. In time, they mentored each other.

What I did not know was who slept with whom during what stages of professional development and across what gender boundaries. Banner’s masterpiece of historical reconstruction challenges those who believe in fixed categories of sexual orientation—Benedict had one husband and Mead three—as well as those who adhere to old-fashioned notions of privacy. Except as case studies for a latter-day Havelock Ellis, does any of this matter? I think so. The libido should never be excluded from intellectual history. Life is a seamless web.

A professor of history and gender studies at the University of Southern California, Banner weaves a narrative of backstage and bedroom interactions from newly available letters and unpublished drafts of the two women’s autobiographical writings, including poems. Mead always advised anthropologists and psychiatrists to use themselves as data sources for understanding human behavior. Now, the Benedict papers at Vassar College and the Mead collection at the Library of Congress

offer up the women’s private lives with no misgivings about feeding the voyeur.

Banner provides insights into the intellectual history of the United States and anthropology’s place in that story. By focusing on the interplay of Benedict, Mead, their husbands, friends, lovers, and protégés, she takes readers well beyond the two women’s published work and shows the genesis of their thoughts on human plasticity, diversity, potential, configurations, and patterns, all pearls on a string of shared ideas. While going in and out of the closets of these great minds, the biographer also deftly links their ideas to the shifting Zeitgeist: the “free love” movement, the Depression, and especially the introduction of anthropology into public-policy discourse during and after World War II. As major thinkers who were also close to each other, the Mead-Benedict dyad and the circle around it can now be added to the Pre-Raphaelites, the Bloomsbury Group, and the American pragmatists chronicled in Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club* (2001).

Current events give particular relevance to Banner’s last chapter, which recounts how Benedict and Mead—with funding from the U.S. Navy—organized an interdisciplinary study of contemporary cultures at Columbia University in 1947. The two women raised important questions about national character, the sort of questions that ought to be asked today about those parts of the globe resisting American hegemony.

—WILTON S. DILLON

ARTS & LETTERS

BROADWAY BOOGIE WOOGIE: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture.

By Daniel R. Schwarz. Palgrave
Macmillan. 346 pp. \$35

An apocryphal conversation from 1930s Hollywood: A mogul dissatisfied with a script says to the writer, “Put some Damon Runyon stuff in to give it some life.” The writer instantly understands. The script needs the sort of characters Damon Runyon (1884–1946) created for his popular short stories.

These days, Runyon’s name appears in

the news only when *Guys and Dolls*, the musical based on his stories, gets revived. In his time, the 1930s, he was the highest-paid newspaper journalist, good on all subjects—sports, headline trials, famous people, and everything about Broadway. His short-story collections sold in the millions, and 16 of the stories became popular movies. Every few years, someone discovers Runyon’s stories and finds in them the work of a gifted and unique writer. This triggers an analysis of the clever plots, the use of the present tense, and the fictitious gentility of conversation among bookmakers, heart-of-



Damon Runyon at the Kentucky Derby in 1938.

gold hookers, horse players, and cops and robbers. Daniel R. Schwarz, an English professor at Cornell University, is the latest to make the discovery. His *Broadway Boogie Woogie* puts Runyon right up there with the great Seabiscuit, a horse Runyon admired, bet on, and wrote about.

Schwarz says that Runyon, in his fiction, could transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. “But most important, his stories give us a complex reading of the diverse contexts that defined the image of New York City culture for Americans and Europeans—and indeed for New Yorkers themselves. Moreover, he was not merely a mirror of the world he observed but a creative force in shaping that world. When we look back at the major cultural forces shaping the history of the first half of the 20th century, and in particular our image of New York City, Damon Runyon looms large.”

Schwarz does not mention Thorstein Veblen, who used a puffed-up vocabulary to make straight-faced fun of the upper leisure class. Runyon, who did not finish grammar school and doubtless never read any Veblen, made fun of the lower leisure

class that lived within the loopholes of Title 18 of the U.S. Criminal Code. His straight-faced act consisted of never referring to a mobster as anything but a gentleman.

I would like to set forth a Runyonesque incident that happened to Damon Runyon himself. The facts have been verified by two sources.

About noon one spring day, Runyon kisses his showgirl sweetheart goodbye and leaves his West 57th Street apartment. He strolls toward Lindy’s Broadway Deli for his breakfast-luncheon and six cups of coffee. On the way, he meets a guy who tells him he has never seen Damon Runyon without a hat. Runyon decides to return to the apartment and get one of his 50 hats. (He bought more clothes than he could ever wear.) There he finds his girlfriend playing house with a gentleman named Primo Carnera, the heavyweight champ.

When Runyon, years later, tells the story to a friend, the friend asks what a gentleman does when he finds his beloved in the arms of the champ. Runyon says: “It’s all in the hat—you put it on and leave in a hurry.”

—JACOB A. STEIN