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Chapters And Verse

The Vicious Circle

Dorothy Parker has always been one of my literary and personal heroes. She came into this world in 1893 as Dorothy Rothschild (not of banking fame). Her mother died while Dorothy was still a baby and she never got on with the dreaded stepmother. As a young girl she was sent -- by her Jewish father -- to a Catholic convent school. Eventually, she found her feet as a writer for Vogue and The New Yorker and as a drama critic for Vanity Fair.

It's hard to spend anytime in New York without thoughts of Dorothy Parker, the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th St. and the wit and witticisms of the gang that gathered for long, liquid lunches at the Round Table to slice and dice the world of which they were such entrenched members – the smart and saucy literati.

This is the circa 1920's crowd - a caustic coterie of critics - that invented cynicism. Parker's writings were once brilliantly described as "acid lucidities" and , as a consequence, she was both feared and admired by subjects and readers. To wit: in a 1933 review of the play "The Lake", starring Katherine Hepburn, Parker wrote: " Miss Hepburn runs the gamut of emotions from A to B." Ouch.

In August, in NYC, I missed Parker Fest 2000 –the second annual convention of Dorothy Parker fans (I was busy practicing for my tour of duty at Millionaire). There were Dorothy Parker impersonators, costume events where fans come dressed as members of the Vicious Circle (as the round table crowd was dubbed), and everyone reciting Parker poems and homilies at will...little gems like: "You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think"; or "brevity is the soul of lingerie." Or a book review which read as follows: "This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown aside with great force." Or another in which she savaged the author with these words: "He is beyond question a writer of power; and his power lies in his ability to make sex so thoroughly, graphically and aggressively unattractive that one is fairly shaken to ponder how little one has been missing."

Her poems were often cheeky:
“I like to have a martini
Two at the very most
After three I’m under the table
After four I’m under the host.”

Others were amusing, but the humour was always dark. My favourite poem goes like this:

“By the time you swear you’re his
Shivering and sighing
And he swears his passion is
Infinite, undying
Lady, make a note of this
One of you is lying.”

I have made it a lifelong pursuit to uncover rare and obscure volumes of her work and with the help of friends, second hand bookstore aficionados and hours searching through dust laden shelves, I now have a wonderful collection of her original work. But, if you just want a taste, your best bet is a volume that Parker herself put together. The anthology of prose and verse, called *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, has remained continuously in print (and selling steadily) since 1944. The stories and poems are as compelling today as I’m sure they were then. The material is funny, sad, gut-wrenching and sometimes painful because she tapped into our core - the things we all feel, but seldom admit to.

Her story - although some would call it a soliloquy - called *A Telephone Call* is universal. Who has not sat, fearful and anxious waiting, knowing it would never ring.

Parker’s own life was a little tragic and lonely, and her circle of friends, her lifeline. But she often alienated them as well with her biting commentary and assessments. She died in 1967, at the age of 73, but, as her friend Brendan Gill writes, she had a “protracted life-in-death” -- a writer who makes a reputation in youth and then lives on into age and obscurity. There was more than a touch of irony in that she had taken “ an unconscionably long time to leave a world of which she had always claimed to hold a low opinion.”

She even wrote her own epitaph: “ Excuse my dust.”