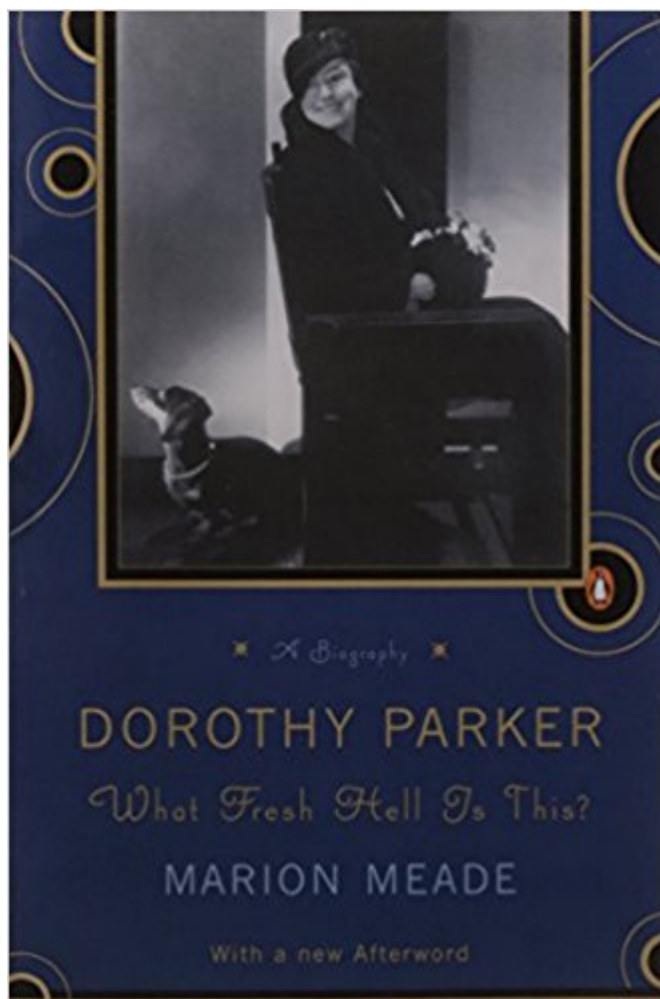


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# Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?



## Synopsis

Marion Meade's engrossing and comprehensive biography of one of the twentieth century's most captivating women. In this lively, absorbing biography, Marion Meade illuminates both the charm and the dark side of Dorothy Parker, exploring her days of wicked wittiness at the Algonquin Round Table with the likes of Robert Benchley, George Kaufman, and Harold Ross, and in Hollywood with S. J. Perelman, William Faulkner, and Lillian Hellman. At the dazzling center of it all, Meade gives us the flamboyant, self-destructive, and brilliant Dorothy Parker. This edition features a new afterword by Marion Meade.

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## Customer Reviews

"Meade's lively biography recounts the unhappy life of the wise-cracking versifier, short story writer and critic," reported PW. "So detailed is Meade's book that this, one imagines, is the last time a biographer will need to explain why so talented a writer could at the same time be so nasty a human being." Photos. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"A compelling and somewhat frightening tale . . . Meade is also to be applauded for a great feat of detective work." --Cosmopolitan  
"An intensely readable biography . . . Wonderfully full, richly researched." --Mademoiselle  
"This well-read, well-written biography caresses your ears like a tautly written novel. (Narrator) Conlin, whose voice is both rich and melodious, reads with great style." --AudioFile  
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I was obsessed with Dorothy Parker in high school. I read her caustic quotes over and over. I devoured her poetry. I begged to do a presentation on her in English class (I was assigned William Carlos Williams, and I thought to myself that the girl who got Parker did NOT do her justice). When I finally got my hands on a copy of *What Fresh Hell Is This?* I was ecstatic. I finally got to learn more about this awesome person! What I found out, though, was that Dorothy Parker was not as awesome as some of her quotes. In fact, she was kind of terrible. Don't believe me? Read *What Fresh Hell Is This?* Marion Meade's detailed biography tells the story of a woman who ridiculed her husband when he showed up to her Algonquin Round Table luncheons, claimed men were useless while still drawing all her self-worth from her relationships, always had to be the center of attention, and derided homosexuals even though she was friends with many. But there's more to Dorothy Parker than that. She also lost her mother at a very young age and believed for years that she ill-wished her stepmother to death. She was one of the first women to write for *Vanity Fair* and was instrumental in establishing the tone of *The New Yorker*. She was a passionate champion of racial equality and left most of her estate to Martin Luther King, Jr. upon her death. Meade's biography is a meaty book, but it does a good job of establishing who Parker was both as a writer and a person. I don't always enjoy reading biographies, since they tend to be very heavy on detail and academic in tone, but Meade's writing was always as peppery as her topic. I did find that the book dragged in sections, but when you're writing about someone's whole life, I suppose that can happen. I recommend this book to anyone who thinks they know anything about Dorothy Parker. Whether they're surprised or not, I think they'll enjoy it.

The phrase "exhaustively researched" has never applied more to a book I've read than it does to Marion Meade's splendid biography "*Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?*" Mrs. Parker had a career spanning five decades. She wrote short stories, plays, movies, essays, war correspondence, book and drama criticism, and more. She was especially famous for her light verse, which she sold like mad when this commodity was hot. Mrs. Parker was also depressed and alcoholic for most of her adult life. She was a founding member of the famous Algonquin Round Table, a group of writers, critics, wits, and actors that was to writing genius what Los Alamos was to scientific genius. On the surface, it was a bunch of friends and colleagues who met daily for lunch in New York's Algonquin Hotel, but in reality, it was a collection of some of the 20th Century's sharpest minds, all

of them imbibing liberally, and zinging one another with insults. It was a means for them to hone their minds, preparing them for their future jobs and successes. Often, when people think of Dorothy Parker, that's what comes to mind: "Oh, she was that vicious little woman in the Algonquin Round Table." She was, indeed, sharp-tongued and often vicious. That was just one part of her story, though, and that's where this book shines, in broadening our view of Dorothy Parker to include the rest of her sad, fascinating life. "Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?", of course, deals with Dorothy's childhood, how she lost her mother as a child, then had a contentious relationship with her stepmother. We follow her as she moves into a hasty, pre-war marriage to Mr. Parker, and how she inches her way toward a career as a writer. In many ways, the early to mid 20th Century was a high-water mark for writers. Few people had radios in their homes, and TV broadcasting was years away. The movies were popular, but to entertain and inform themselves, people read. New York City had multiple newspapers competing with one another; there were magazines publishing fiction, poetry, and art--basically, a bunch of "New Yorker" type magazines, though written to entertain even "housewives in Dubuque" (as a Vanity Fair editor described their scope). From its first issue, "The New Yorker" was designed to be a sophisticated magazine that didn't even try to reach the housewives in Dubuque--it was designed for a slick, intellectual New York set. Mrs. Parker and her friends epitomized that set. They met for long lunches at the Algonquin, did whatever their jobs required of them, then it was off to the theater, and afterwards touring the bars (and speakeasies, once Prohibition kicked-in). This was prime time for Mrs. Parker. As all good things end, so did The Round Table group go their separate ways. Despite her stellar reputation as a writer, Mrs. Parker hated to write. She was filled with anxiety, agonizing over every sentence and paragraph. When she did write, she was brilliant. Her short stories and verse ended up in the biggest magazines; her criticism for various magazines was sharp and pulled no punches. But Mrs. Parker was never truly happy. She was married three times, twice to the same man. Neither of those relationships brought her happiness, nor did the countless other men she bedded in her life. She traveled, spending long stretches in Europe, rubbing elbows with Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Books of her verse and stories were huge successes, but there were always money woes. There never seemed to be enough money. She spent it as fast as she earned it. Ms. Meade has surely examined every molecule of Dorothy Parker information on this planet. She has dug deeper than most biographers do, and I think she gets more inside her subject's head. Though I laughed numerous times at Mrs. Parker's wit, this book, in toto, is not a happy book. To present a happy biography would be disingenuous, an egregious disservice to the life Dorothy Parker lived. She lived fully, too. She made it to lavish parties, but she also walked with protesters in the Sacco and Vanzetti uprisings. She visited Spain

during the revolution, and worked stateside to raise money and supplies for Spain's impoverished, who were caught in the middle with nothing. She was investigated by the FBI and the HUAC for her political views and pro-union activities in Hollywood. None of this made her happy. She was depressed, and she drank too much. She got to a point where nearly all of her friends had died. Fitzgerald died at 41; Mrs Parker made it to 73. Her story is fascinating, and Marion Meade does an amazing job presenting this story seamlessly. So many biographies skip over huge gaps in their subjects' lives. With Dorothy Parker, one of the most compelling lifelong struggles is how she'll pay her bills from success to success. Her successes were many; the story of how (and why) they came to be is often surprising--because she needed the money. Dorothy Parker's body of work speaks for itself. Nearly 50 years after her death, her works are still in print, her wit and skill still celebrated. What I took away from this biography was a new appreciation for Mrs. Parker as a wordsmith. Even more, though, I felt a pall of sadness. Her life--for all its highs--never broke through her ennui. Ms Meade's biography so perfectly captures Dorothy Parker's pervasive sadness, that I couldn't help picking up a little myself--sadness along with deep admiration, both for Mrs. Parker's achievements, and for Marion Meade's. Highly Recommended

I have enjoyed this book thoroughly. I knew OF Dorothy Parker but I didn't know much about her life. This book has provided a thorough account of her story. If anything, it may in fact be a little too detailed for my interest in the subject, in the sense that it also relates stories pertaining to some members of Dorothy's social circle, regardless of the fact that some of those details had nothing to do with her. Contrastingly, there's also a great deal of information with which the author assumes we are familiar (movies, plays, publications, etc.). Thankfully, we now have the Internet at our fingertips because I have had to look up a few things along the way to follow the narrative or understand some of the remarks or inferences. Other than that, it is a bit slow to begin but hang in there; it's a very good, well-written book.

This book is the result of a marvelous piece of research by Ms. Meade. Because Dorothy Parker did not take care to retain and bequeath her papers, Ms. Meade's efforts are all the more impressive. Astounding, really. On the other hand, Ms. Meade chose to labor over a subject that just doesn't seem worthy of her exertions. It appears that Dorothy Parker and her circle were, for the most part, marginal talents who, in the long run, didn't contribute all that much to American arts and letters. Sure, there are exceptions, but if we believe the picture that Ms. Meade has drawn, they were constantly trying to publish merely in order to support their two favorite pastimes: getting drunk and

sleeping with somebody else's spouse. I ended up appreciating Ms. Meade much more than I did her subject.

I ordered this book because it was referenced in something else I was reading. I had never heard of her previously. I enjoyed this book and learned so much about her life.

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