

The Library of America interviews Marion Elizabeth Rodgers about H. L. Mencken

In connection with the publication in September 2010 of the two-volume set, *H. L. Mencken: Prejudices: The Complete Series*, edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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These two volumes collect the six series of Prejudices—each published as an individual book between 1919 and 1927. By the time of the First Series H. L. Mencken had published eleven books, had been a reporter, an editor, a columnist, and a literary critic—and he had another eighteen books ahead of him. How do the Prejudices books fit into the rest of the Mencken canon?

The first volume of *Prejudices* followed the publication of the first edition of *The American Language*, a classic hailed on both sides of the Atlantic. “In order to put an end to this new respectability, I shall insert some rat-poison into *Prejudices*,” Mencken confided to a friend. “It is a slaughterhouse.” *Prejudices* represents Mencken when his popularity and influence were at their height. He originally intended just four volumes, but the series ran to six. The topics he tackled, literary and otherwise, were all controversial. *Prejudices* differs from his other books in that many of the essays had previously appeared in newspapers, *The Smart Set*, and later, *The American Mercury*. All were painstakingly revised. Even so, you will notice that the style of writing in his earlier work in *Volume One* deliberately attempts to shock or show off, as in “Among the Avatars.” By the last page of the second volume, Mencken’s approach has matured, as demonstrated by the ease and genuine distinction of style in “Valentino” as he reflects on an evening spent with the troubled movie heartthrob.

Did what Mencken chose to include in the Prejudices series change over the six books? Did “prejudices” have a special meaning for him?

While the focus of all six *Prejudices* consistently remains on the American

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scene, his interests do change over the course of the series. Nineteen of the twenty-one chapters in *Prejudices: First Series* are devoted to literature. *Prejudices: Second Series* attacks Puritanism, censorship, Prohibition, Woodrow Wilson, and reformers, but concludes in a lighter vein, where Mencken writes of love. The lead essay, “On Being an American,” in *Prejudices: Third Series* is characteristic Mencken: he identifies the country as being “a glorious commonwealth of morons,” full of pruderies and religious rituals weighed down by a fear of ideas. “Here, the general average of intelligence, of knowledge, of competence, of integrity, of self-respect, of honor is so low that any man who knows his trade, does not fear ghosts, has read fifty good books and practices the common decencies stands out as brilliantly as a wart on a bald head.”

Prejudices: Fourth Series continues with his running commentary on how most men in the United States are being deprived of their rightful liberty. Here he champions racial minorities, the censored literary genius, and emerging writers trying to break out of Anglophile traditions. Reviewers hailed the essay “The Fringes of Lovely Letters” in *Prejudices: Fifth Series*, calling all young writers to memorize the last two sections on style and criticism. *Prejudices: Sixth Series* contains less on literature, and is lighter in tone, concluding with a discussion of the American film industry, “Appendix from Moronia.” These are all of Mencken’s own prejudices, of course. His format, as he explained to a friend, was “a fundamental structure of serious argument, with enough personal abuse to engage the general, and one or two Rabelaisian touches.”

For Murray Kempton, Mencken was at his best as a literary critic. Alistair Cooke acclaimed him as a humorist (“halfway between Mark Twain and Woody Allen”). Russell Baker thought he would be best remembered for his writing style. How would you classify Mencken—or which aspect of him do you think will prove most enduring?

We read Mencken for all of those things—for his literary criticism, humor, wit, and writing style. Of all American writers he is most comparable to Mark Twain, combining the attributes Mencken once observed in Twain: that “mixture of sentimentality and cynicism” and the “mingling of romanticist and iconoclast.” Both were relentless satirists, both “bitter critics of American platitude and delusion,” using humor to combat cowardice, hypocrisy, and frauds. What makes Mencken so distinctive, of course, and what brought him so much fame during his lifetime, was, as Alistair Cooke noted, “the vigor and noble indignation he brought to unpopular causes.” In Europe, and in the United Kingdom espe-

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cially, Mencken is still viewed as a touchstone of American culture. The fact that his works continue to be translated and published overseas is a testament to his enduring popularity.

The pieces in these two volumes appear in the order in which they were originally published. But having so much Mencken together gives us a chance to browse widely across a decade of his work. Would you be willing to conduct a “highlights” tour through the volumes—one that might give us the flavor of the different Menckens: the humorist, the literary critic, the attack dog, the social anthropologist, the promoter, the thinker, and any Mencken I’m leaving out?

Prejudices is a buffet of delights. If you are in a blue mood and need a laugh, turn to “Victualry as a Fine Art” (“The American hotel meal is as rigidly standardized as the parts of a Ford . . .”) or “The Libido for the Ugly” (“I have seen, I believe, all of the most unlovely towns in the world; they are all to be found in the United States.”). For sheer grace, demonstrating Mencken’s mastery of style (and the sentimental Mencken), read his essays on his mentor, the critic James Huneker (“No man was less a reformer by inclination, and yet he became a reformer beyond compare.”) or “On Living in Baltimore” (“I have lived in one house in Baltimore for forty-five years. . . . It is as much a part of me as my two hands.”).

For a sense of Mencken as social anthropologist, go to “Reflections on Human Monogamy” (“Men always hate most what they envy most.”) or “The Hills of Zion,” Mencken’s report on a backwoods “Holy Roller” meeting during the Scopes Trial. For Mencken as literary critic, see “Criticism of Criticism” (“The really competent critic must be an empiricist . . . He makes the work of art live for the spectator; he makes the spectator live for the work of art.”) or any of the essays on individual writers. For the civil libertarian, see “The Dry Millennium” (“ . . . the first effect of Prohibition will be to raise up impediments to marriage. . . . Absolutely sober men will be harder to snare.”). For the political attack dog, “On Being an American” or “Roosevelt: An Autopsy” (“The issues that won him most votes were issues that, at bottom, he didn’t believe in.”). For psychology, “On Controversy” (“No controversy to my knowledge has ever ended on the ground where it began.”). And do not overlook Mencken the musician, evident throughout in his commentary on opera, music and composers.

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In 1926 Walter Lippmann called H. L. Mencken “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.” What did Lippmann mean and how did Mencken achieve such an influential position?

By 1926, Mencken was no longer a literary personality. He had become an institution. It is difficult for modern readers to realize what an electrifying effect Mencken had. For the generation coming of age during the 1920s, Mencken cleared the air of Victorian stuffiness and cobwebs. Edmund Wilson credits Mencken and *The American Language* for setting a new stage in American literature, liberating writers from an Anglophile, literary colonialism. He was the first American writer to publish books on George Bernard Shaw and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Behind the scenes, Mencken helped new writers by publishing their work and promoting them to other editors. By being the first white editor to publish the work of black writers in a mainstream white magazine, he helped open the gates for the Harlem Literary Renaissance. He did the same for Southern writers. Mencken’s literary and social criticism for the Baltimore *Sun* papers and Chicago *Tribune*, his books (among them *A Book of Prefaces*, *The American Credo*, *In Defense of Women*, *Prejudices*), and his magazines, *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*, made him, according to *The New York Times*, the most influential private citizen in the United States. Sherwood Anderson wrote that everywhere he went he was asked, “What do you think of Mencken?”

His fame was such that Ernest Hemingway, in *The Sun Also Rises*, could write, “So many young men get their likes and dislikes from Mencken.” A bibliography of his writing appeared in 1924 and, by 1926 two biographies had been written about his life. Hundreds of newspapers printed his latest quotes and described the way he parted his hair, his fondness for cigars. In New York, a doctor used extracts of *Prejudices* to test his patients’ vision. Beauties of the Ziegfeld Follies held copies of *Prejudices* while hanging out at the Algonquin Hotel. On Midwest college campuses students waved copies of *The American Mercury* when they thought their professors were being dull. Mencken’s plays were produced in theaters in London and Los Angeles. F. Scott Fitzgerald inserted Mencken’s name in the proofs of *This Side of Paradise*. His dalliances with blondes inspired Anita Loos to write *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Journalists, motivated by his outspoken stands on controversial issues, imitated his vernacular style. Overseas, the growth of his reputation in Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia was one of the literary phenomena of the time. With such praise there came fierce opposition. Mencken collected the diatribes and published *Menckiana: A Schimpflexicon*. It sold very well.

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Do we now read Mencken for his political thinking? Or does Gore Vidal get it right when he says “Mencken’s descriptions of these wondrous clowns [i.e., politicians] are still a delight because, though the originals are long since erased from the collective ‘memory’ of the United States of Amnesia, the types persist?”

Why can't we have it both ways? Mencken's interests were varied. He was a magazine editor and literary critic, and a newspaperman absorbed in the political, social, and cultural issues of the day. As a political theorist, he lambasted the Department of Justice, the American Legion, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Ku Klux Klan. But no entertainment gave Mencken greater pleasure than reporting from the national conventions, which he covered, with few breaks, from 1904 to 1948. He simply relished politics and the men engaged in it. “If experience teaches us anything at all,” he wrote in *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, “it teaches us this: that a good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.” His views on politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, Calvin Coolidge, and others are scattered throughout these volumes. His most famous denunciation of American politics and the American way of life is “On Being an American” in *Prejudices: Third Series*.

The Fifth Series includes “The Hills of Zion,” one of Mencken’s many famous dispatches from the 1925 Scopes Trial—often called “the Monkey Trial,” after his coinage. Is it true that it was his idea for the defense to focus on attacking William Jennings Bryan, the most famous member of the prosecuting team, rather than on defending Scopes? How much of the notoriety and outcome of the Scopes trial was due to Mencken’s engineering?

The Scopes Trial remains one of the most colorful episodes of Mencken's career. Clarence Darrow and Mencken knew each other well. The best way to handle the case, Mencken advised Darrow's legal team, was to “convert it into a headlong assault on Bryan.” Mencken proposed that Darrow put Bryan on the stand, “to make him state his barbaric credo in plain English, and to make a monkey of him before the world.”

During the trial, Mencken spent much of his free time in the company of the scientists who had been called in as witnesses for the defense. Many felt their expert testimony would demolish the fundamentalist case that threatened freedom of education and scientific inquiry. When the Judge denied hearing their testimony, many of the reporters left town, convinced that all that

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remained in the trial was, as Mencken put it, “the final bumping off of the defendant.” By leaving early, Mencken missed the climax of the trial, when Darrow put Bryan on the stand to test the historical authenticity of the Bible. It was “a deprivation,” Mencken later confessed, “that I have always regretted heartily.”

The event proved to be an ordeal for Bryan; his testimony was expunged from the record. In the end, John Scopes was fined. Five days after the trial was over, Bryan died. There were those who believed Darrow had killed Bryan with his inquisition. If so, Mencken said, that was “a job of public sanitation” that Darrow “never regretted.”

The Fifth Series includes “In Memoriam: W. J. B.,” Mencken’s obituary of William Jennings Bryan about which Alfred Kazin wrote “It was significant that one of the cruelest things he ever wrote . . . was probably the most brilliant.” In your biography of Mencken you recount how the Baltimore Evening Sun literally did “stop the presses” so that the second edition could include a toned down version of this piece and all the irate phone calls could stop. Volume Two publishes the original version and the vitriol drips off the page. What was it about Bryan that so riled Mencken?

Years later, long after “the trial of the century” was over and Mencken was in a mellower mood, he admitted that dismissing Bryan as “a quack pure and unadulterated” was perhaps not “really just.” But he never abated rejecting the principles that Bryan represented. Like his hero, Thomas Jefferson, Mencken believed in the separation of church and state. He saw the Scopes Trial as the culmination of the anti-evolution crusade that the fundamentalists had begun as a counteroffensive against modern theology, indeed, as a struggle of civilization and science against bigotry and superstition. The clash between fundamentalists and evolutionists continues in our own time. It wasn’t so long ago that we had trials called “Scopes Two.” “Heave an egg out of a Pullman window,” Mencken once observed, “and you will hit a Fundamentalist almost anywhere in the United States today.”

In the foreword to Fred C. Hobson’s critical study, Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South, Gerald W. Johnson credits “The Sahara of the Bozart,” Mencken’s savage attack on Southern culture, with acting like a stick of dynamite in exploding “the crust of ignorance, prejudice, and superstition” that then smothered the South and revealing the “seething intellectual ferment” beneath. Johnson calls the ensuing renaissance in

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“the intellectual life of the South” “Mencken’s greatest single achievement.” That’s quite a lot to attribute to one essay. How much of an impact do you think it had and why?

Both “The Sahara of the Bozart,” first written for the *New York Evening Mail* in 1917, and “The National Letters,” an expanded version of the same essay, appear in *Prejudices: Second Series*. Their importance cannot be underestimated. The essays were a revolt against the “predominant English taste” of New England and the Genteel Tradition. The only writers of the past who were of value, Mencken argued, were Poe and Whitman. Mencken’s attack against American letters, “chiefly remarkable . . . for its respectable mediocrity” and “amiable hollowness” extended to the South, a region that had once flourished and which he now derided for its “mediocrity, stupidity” and “lethargy.” The only hope for Southern literature, he wrote in “The Sahara of the Bozart,” lay in the hands of African American writers.

The essays attracted a following among the Southern white liberal minority. Among them were Thomas Wolfe, studying at Harvard; Paul Green, an aspiring playwright from North Carolina who would win a Pulitzer Prize; Allen Tate, a poet from Vanderbilt; Julia Peterkin, a South Carolinian whom Mencken advised to write novels about Gullah Negro life; and novelist Frances Newman, from Atlanta. Emily Clark, the moving spirit behind a literary magazine called *The Reviewer*, began publishing many of the Southern writers who Mencken sent her way. Southern journalists, prodded by Mencken’s indictment of the South’s “dead silence” also saw in Mencken’s method the most effective way to correct Southern ills.

As Fred Hobson has shown so well, “The National Letters” and “The Sahara of the Bozart” helped incite the Southern Literary Renaissance of the 1920s. Moreover, as Charles Scruggs has demonstrated in *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*, the essays were an important clarion call to black intellectuals, such as James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois, who were quoting Mencken in the pages of the *Crisis*, the *Messenger*, *New York Age*, and elsewhere. “The Sahara of the Bozart” inspired Walter White to write *Fire in the Flint*.

Volume One includes an excerpt from Mencken’s unfinished autobiography, “My Life as Author and Editor,” written in the 1940s, in which he reminisces about the publication of the Prejudices series. By his account the pieces in which he negatively criticized writers—Thorstein Veblen, Hamlin

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Garland, among others—had the effect of diminishing their popularity and esteem. Was he delusional or really that effective? And did he have the same impact on those he praised (George Ade, Arnold Bennett, Robert Frost, Jack London, etc.)?

During his tenure as book editor for *The Smart Set* from 1908–1923, Mencken became the most widely known critic in the United States. I agree with Mencken scholar Charles Fecher, when he states that “no other one, then, before or since, has ever yielded anything like his enormous power and influence. He quite literally changed the course of American literature, bringing one period of it to an end and inaugurating another, and in the process of doing so he helped some of the most important and salient figures in the new generation of writers to achieve prominence.” Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, James Branch Cabell, Eugene O’Neill, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Aldous Huxley were just a few of the many authors who saluted Mencken as their champion. He was one of the earliest critics seriously to hail the work of Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, and Henrik Ibsen; to recognize the talent of James Joyce, Stephen Crane, George Ade, Jack London, and Joseph Conrad, to highlight the literary criticism of Hugh Walpole and Edgar Allan Poe. Contemporary approval was best summed up by James Huneker, when he congratulated his young protégé upon the publication of *Prejudices: First Series*. “You have us *all* lashed to the mast. You are *It* in the American critical circus. All the rest are fading ghosts.”

Some critics feel that Mencken’s politics took a sharp turn to the right in the thirties and he began to fall out of favor. So with these books are we seeing Mencken at the top of his game?

Mencken’s initial refusal to recognize the Depression, and his constant criticism of Roosevelt’s New Deal, cost him many fans. As his influence lessened, he began to be referred to as “The Late Mr. Mencken.” His magazine, *The American Mercury*, plummeted in circulation, so much so that he gave it up. All of that changed during the postwar period. By 1948 there was a complete resurgence in Mencken’s popularity, as bookshops reported a demand for *Prejudices*. By then, Mencken had written the works for which he is best remembered: his three volumes of memoirs (*Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*), *Christmas Story*, and the revisions and supplements to *The American Language*.

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During the First World War Mencken's outspoken resistance to the anti-German hysteria got him banned from the Baltimore Sun for three years. Do you think this experience sensitized him in a way that allowed him to identify with victims of discrimination thereafter?

The impact on free speech during and after the First World War intensified Mencken's passion for the Constitution and Bill of Rights. As a German-American, Mencken had come under surveillance by the Department of Justice. Until this point, Mencken had commented only in passing on the civil rights of black Americans. Now, he began to see that nothing could be more ironic than the drafting of African Americans to save the world for democracy when, back at home, they were being denied the rights of democracy. The Wilson administration instituted segregation in government offices when none before had existed; it silenced black dissidents, suppressed African American publications and placed individuals under surveillance. Moreover, lynching had steadily increased in the South, and little had been said about these crimes and murders. The importance of individual liberty is a running theme throughout *Prejudices*.

When Mencken's diary was published posthumously in 1990 much was made about his many offensive comments about blacks and Jews. I wonder how you, as the author of a major biography of Mencken and several anthologies of his work, have come to terms with this side of Mencken. Was he racist?

I think one should remember that racial and ethnic slurs were common in Mencken's day, when the *Diary* was written. So was identifying people by their ethnic origins. Mencken's actions on behalf of African and Jewish Americans, when juxtaposed against the entries of the *Diary* and other material, serve as examples of the contradictions in Mencken's personality that make writing about him such a conundrum. His stand against lynching is just one instance; publishing and promoting the work of black authors when no other white editor was doing so is another. Modern critics who label Mencken as a "Nazi" seem to dismiss the fact that in 1938, when the prevailing opinion of the United States (as identified in a Roper Poll) was anti-Semitic, Mencken proposed that Franklin Roosevelt open the gates for fleeing Jewish refugees. Behind the scenes, Mencken did what many others declined to do: help Jewish refugees emigrate to the United States, and agree to sponsor others. When it came to criticism during his own lifetime, Mencken told William Manchester, "It doesn't matter what they think of me." His reputation, he averred, would rest

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on “what I’ve done.” Mencken cannot, and should not, be pigeonholed. I believe actions speak louder than words.

Considering that many of the pieces were published almost one hundred years ago, the notes section is invaluable and amounts to more than 100 pages for the two volumes. It clearly benefits from your having written an acclaimed biography and edited three collections of Mencken’s writings. How did you first become involved with Mencken’s work?

By happy accident. Certainly Mencken’s name came up during the course of my studies. But my real introduction to Mencken was shortly before my graduation from Goucher College, in 1981, while I was researching the papers of Southern writer and alumna Sara Haardt, whom Mencken had married, thereby shattering his reputation as “America’s Foremost Bachelor.” I was putting away one of her scrapbooks in the vault of the library when I literally tripped over a box of love letters between her and Mencken. Taped to the top of the collection was a stern command, written by Mencken, that it was not to be opened until that very year. To say that my life changed at that moment would be an understatement. Suddenly, a door was swung open into Mencken’s life through the tender route of romantic correspondence. In those days my dream was to go to graduate school and write (yet another!) dull thesis on T. S. Eliot. Instead, I focused my degree on the Mencken/Haardt collection, promptly received a book contract, and became hooked. During the two decades since 1981, Mencken has pulled me through many adventures, both professional and personal, that included my editing several volumes of his work and culminated in my biography, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, published in 2005 in hard-cover and in 2007 in paperback. The fresh immediacy of Mencken’s prose is intoxicating; so is his humor and prescience. The era he lived in fascinates me; it is not so dissimilar to our own. I simply never tire of reading him.

As your answers indicate, there is a good deal of Mencken’s writings not included in the Prejudices series. Can we expect more Library of America volumes of H. L. Mencken?

I certainly hope so. The range of subjects in Mencken’s work is amazing and certainly worth revisiting. Half a century after his death, he continues to stir readers. *Notes on Democracy*, for instance, was published by Dissident Press during the presidential campaign of 2008, and did so well it went into at least four printings. *In Defense of Women* has been reissued various times, and

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still finds an audience. Christopher Hitchens carefully studied *Treatise on the Gods* in preparation for his bestseller, *God Is Not Great*. Mencken's scholarly works—*The American Language* and *A New Dictionary of Quotations*—remain useful reference works. In fact, *Quotations* is the basis for several iPhone apps. As for me, I would like to see Mencken's trilogy, *Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days* and *Heathen Days*, reissued. Modern college students who read excerpts from it enjoy Mencken's style, humor, and perspective on the past. Another wonderful work is *Minority Report*—a notebook of selected thoughts, many of them short—released shortly after Mencken's death, now long out of print.