

# A FEROCITY OF SPIRIT

by Andrea Barnet

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Although the subjects of Andrea Barnet's book, All-Night Party, are the defiant, bohemian women in Greenwich Village and Harlem in the early*



Andrea Barnet,  
author of  
All-Night Party

*1900s, for Barnet, the impulse to learn about these women—and to understand them—struck much closer to home.*

**W**hen I was young, my mother wasn't like other mothers. She never went to PTA meetings or asked about my schoolwork. She couldn't abide cooking and at best did it grudgingly. My mother mowed the lawn in short shorts and a bikini top, knew how to fish and shoot and fly an airplane. She lived for the physical world, the freedom of open space. My mother was subversive by nature, and that scared me. Ours was an irregular household of three females, and as such, it was her will alone that ruled. With my mother, there were things one knew not to do: cry, complain, show weakness, feel hunger at inconvenient times. She took pride in her own self-sufficiency and expected the same of us. At the time, we lived in a suburb of Boston and the fact that she was divorced (happily so) and indifferent to social convention must have seemed scan-

dalous. I can still remember my mother's fury on my twelfth birthday, when the families of the five girls I invited on a mountain camping trip wouldn't let them go. "It's outrageous," she had fumed. "It's because I'm a woman."

Perhaps my mother was hovering somewhere in the wings of my unconscious when I decided to write about the 1920s and the first generation of women to defy openly the rules for their sex. I do know that part of what drew me to the band of women who settled in Greenwich Village—and then Harlem—sometime around 1912 was their sheer nervousness. Having come of age in the early seventies, I identified deeply with the aspirations of this earlier era, which in so many ways prefigured the rebellions of my own time. I had always taken a certain pride in the mix of revolutionary fervor and hedonistic abandon that marked my own

ALL-NIGHT PARTY  
by Andrea Barnet  
ISBN: 1-56512-381-6

Paper  
Publication: March 2004

generation of women, but this earlier generation had been much more brave, much more grandly defiant. Once these women had vaulted the walls set up to contain their behavior, putting their own dreams ahead of husbands and hearth, children and "proper" womanly sacrifice, there had been no turning back. Living unconventionally had become a necessary corollary to doing their own work.

Biographers are often suspected of identifying with their subjects, of seeing themselves in those they choose. In my case, I think the opposite was also true: I was drawn to some of the women I chose because they were so unlike me, because I saw qualities I envied, or feared, or felt I needed to understand. I knew I wanted to write about the publisher Margaret Anderson from the first page of her autobiography. She was impish and impractical, eternally optimistic. Against all odds, she had started an avant-garde literary magazine and made it fly. I thrilled at her impertinence, her indifference to authority. I found her irresistibly funny and original.

I was drawn to the poet Mina Loy for more complex reasons. Born in London, an enigmatic beauty who acted, painted, wrote poetry, and designed her own clothes, she had left her two young children in Florence in 1916 and set out alone for a new life in New York. On a purely visceral level, being a woman with a child myself, it seemed an unimaginable decision. Perhaps this was why I wanted to feel it as she had, to see if I could

know her longings from the inside. In Mina, as in all of these women, it was the intersection of the private dream life and the culture that interested me; it was how, on a purely emotional level, she had managed to sustain a life of pure invention, a life neither predictable nor safe.

Bessie Smith couldn't have been more different from Mina Loy or Margaret Anderson, with all her exquisite whimsy. In part, this is

why I chose her. Hot-tempered and famously promiscuous, a hard-drinking blues diva with more fire than she could contain, Bessie was indomitable. I loved her sass, her resilience, her wild and reckless heart. Sheathed in skintight satins, her blues her only prop, Bessie had given back to black women the experience of themselves, and in so doing, empowered all women. Her magic, like that of each of these women, came from stubbornly insisting

on being herself.

There is something slightly subversive about daring to dream of a life one has never seen and then venturing out into unmapped territory to make it, which is what each of these women, in her own way, did. Was it coincidence that I was drawn to a collection of females so spirited and irrepressible and extreme? I don't think so. Change is never easy and rarely direct. To see it through, it takes strength, will, fearlessness, resilience, grit. A certain ferocity of spirit, that is. As my mother would say: No whining, no crying, no complaining. And above all, no turning back. ■

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