

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 9: Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964)

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"I've photographed everybody from Matisse to Isamu Noguchi." - CVV

"... Van Vechten had 'taken the material (Harlem) had offered him and achieved the most revealing, significant and powerful novel based exclusively on Negro life yet written. ... The author pays colored people the rare tribute of writing about them as people rather than as puppets.'" - James Weldon Johnson's Review of *Nigger Heaven* published in *Opportunity*, quoted in Lueders' *Van Vechten*, 104.

### Primary Works

1915 *Music After the Great War*; 1916 *Music and Bad Manners*; 1917 *Interpreters and Interpretations*; 1918 *The Merry-Go-Round, The Music of Spain*; 1919 *In the Garret*; 1920 *The Tiger in the House*; 1921 *Lords of the Housetops*; 1922 *Peter Whiffle*; 1923 *The Blind Bow-Boy*; 1924 *The Tattooed Countess*; 1925 *Red ; Firecrackers*; 1926 *Excavations, Nigger Heaven*; 1928 *Spider Boy*; 1930 *Parties, Feathers*; 1932 *Sacred and Profane Memories*

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Fire Burns  
*A Department of Comment*

*Some time ago*, while reviewing Carl Van Vechten's lava laned *Nigger Heaven* I made the prophecy that Harlem Negroes, once their aversion to the "nigger" in the title was forgotten, would erect a statue on the corner of 135th Street and Seventh Avenue, and dedicate it to this ultra-sophisticated Iowa New Yorker. (Thurman's review appeared as "A Stranger at the Gates," in *The Messenger*, September 1926, 279. - information provided via e-mail by author Bruce Kellner, 6/27/98.)

So far my prophecy has failed to pan out, and superficially it seems as if it never will, for instead of being enshrined for his pseudo-sophisticated, semiserious, semi-ludicrous effusion about Harlem, Mr. Van Vechten is about to be lynched, at least in effigy.

Yet I am loathe to retract or to temper my first prophecy. Human nature is too perverse and prophecies do not necessarily have to be fulfilled within a generation. Rather, they can either be fulfilled or else belied with startling two-facedness throughout a series of generations, which, of course, creates the possibility that the fulfillments may outnumber the beliments and thus gain credence for the prophecy with posterity. Witness the Bible.

However, in defending my prophecy I do not wish to endow Mr. Van Vechten's novel (?) with immortality, but there is no real reason why *Nigger Heaven* should not eventually be as stupidly acclaimed as it is now being stupidly damned by the majority of Harlem's dark inhabitants. Thus I defiantly reiterate that a few years hence Mr. Van Vechten will be spoken of as a kindly gent rather than as a moral leper exploiting people who had believed him to be a sincere friend.

I for one, and strange as it may sound, there are others, who believe that Carl Van Vechten was rendered sincere during his explorations and observations of Negro life in Harlem, even if he remained characteristically superficial. Superficiality does not necessarily denote a lack of sincerity, and even superficiality may occasionally delve into deep pots of raw life. What matter if they be flesh pots?

In writing *Nigger Heaven* the author wavered between sentimentality and sophistication. That the sentimentality won out is his funeral. That the sophistication stung certain Negroes to the quick is their funeral.

The odds are about even. Harlem cabarets have received another public boost and are wearing out cash register keys, and entertainers' throats and Negroes are alleging that Carl Van Vechten has not told the truth. It really makes no

difference to the race's welfare what such ignoramuses think, and it would seem that any author preparing to write about Negroes in Harlem or anywhere else (for I hear that DuBose Heyward has been roundly denounced by Charlestonian Negroes for his beautiful Porgy) should take whatever phases of their life that seem the most interesting to him, and develop them as he pleases. Why Negroes imagine that any writer is going to write what Negroes think he ought to write about them is too ridiculous to merit consideration. It would seem that they would shy away from being pigeon-holed so long have they been the rather lamentable victims of such a typically American practice, yet Negroes would have all Negroes appearing in contemporary literature made as ridiculous and as false to type as the older school of pseudo-humorous, sentimental white writers made their Uncle Toms, they Topsy's, and their Mammies, or as the Octavius Roy Cohen school now make their more modern "cullud" folk.

| [Top](#) | One young lady, prominent in Harlem collegiate circles, spoke forth in a public forum (oh yes, they even have public forums where they spend orchestra instruments. The so-called intelligentsia of Harlem has exposed its inherent stupidity. And Nigger Heaven is a best seller.

Group criticism of current writings, morals, life, politics, or religion is always ridiculous, but what could be more ridiculous than the wholesale condemnation of a book which only one-tenth of the condemnators have or will read. And even if the book was as vile, as degrading, and as defamatory to the character of the Harlem Negro as the Harlem Negro now declares, his criticisms would not be considered valid by an intelligent person as long as the critic had had no reading contact with the book.

The objectors to Nigger Heaven claim that the author came to Harlem, ingratiated himself with Harlem folk, and then with a supercilious grin and a salacious smirk, lolled at his desk downtown and dashed off a pornographic document about uptown in which all of the Negro characters are pictured as being debased, lecherous creatures not at all characteristic or true to type, and that, moreover, the author provokes the impression that all of Harlem's inhabitants are cabaret hounds and thirsty neurotics. He did not tell, say his critics, of our well bred, well behave~d church-going majorities, nor of our night schools filled with eager elders, nor of our brilliant college youth being trained in the approved contemporary manner, nor of our quiet, home loving thousands who hardly know what the word cabaret connotes. He told only of lurid night life and of uninhibited sybarites. Therefore, since he has done these things and neglected to do these others the white people who read the book will believe that all Harlem Negroes are like the Byrons, the Lascas, the Pettijohns, the Rubys, the Creepers, the Bonifaces, and the other lewd hussies and whoremongers in the book.

It is obvious that these excited folk do not realize that any white person who would believe such poppy-cock probably believes it anyway, without any additional aid from Mr. Van Vechten, and should such a person read a tale anent our non- cabareting, church-going Negroes, presented in all their virtue and glory and with their human traits, their human hypocrisy and their human perversities glossed over, written, say, by Jessie Fauset, said person would laugh derisively and allege that Miss Fauset had not told the truth. the same as Harlem their time announcing that they have not read the book, and that the author is a moral leper who also commits literary sins), that there was only one character in Nigger Heaven who was true to type. This character, the unwitting damsel went on, was Mary Love. It seems as if all the younger Negro women in Harlem are prototypes of this Mary Love, and it is pure, poor, virtuous, vapid Mary, to whom they point as a typical life model.

Again there has been no realization that Mary Love is the least life-life character in the book, or that it is she who suffers most from her creator's newly acquired seriousness and sentimentality, she who suffers most of the whole ensemble because her creator discovered, in his talented trippings around Manhattan, drama at which he could not chuckle the while his cavalier pen sped cleverly on in the same old way yet did not - could not spank.

But - had all the other characters in Nigger Heaven approximated Mary's standard, the statue to Carl Van Vechten would be an actualized instead of a deferred possibility, and my prophecy would be gloriously fulfilled instead of being ignominiously belied.

- WALLACE THURMAN

| [Top](#) | Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Matthew Braley

Carl Van Vechten was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on June 17, 1880. He was the youngest of three children. His father, well into his forties at the time of Carl's birth, was a native of New York State and attended Columbia Law School. His mother attended Kalamazoo College, in Michigan, where she was an early advocate of women's suffrage.

The Van Vechtens lived in Michigan before Carl's birth, but moved to Iowa for a business venture with Carl's uncle. Carl's father lost his savings when he was forty-eight, and he decided to try his hand at life insurance. There he made a small fortune.

Van Vechten was an avid reader as a young boy, and even something of a showman. During summers in Crystal Lake, Michigan, he wrote and performed skits with friends. In high school, along with two collaborators, he adapted and produced a dramatic version of *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

He attended the University of Chicago in 1899 where he specialized in English, but more important to his career at this time was his exposure to music. He attended several Chicago symphonies, and was a competent pianist. The exposure to new composers and compositions put him years ahead of others in the field when he became a musical critic in 1906, in New York.

While still in Chicago, Van Vechten continued a writing apprenticeship. He wrote a number of reports on University life and a series of short stories, which were distinguishable for their "introduction of actual characters and for their carry-over of some characters from one story to another" (Lueders 23). Both of these techniques would become standard traits of Van Vechten's writing.

During his last year of studies, Van Vechten became disenchanted with school, finishing only because his father urged him to do so. He considered his collegiate experience a waste of time. In the meantime, he fulfilled another desire by becoming a newspaperman. Upon getting a job with the Chicago *American*, he said, "I think it's the worst thing in the world for anybody to do who wants to be in writing, but I wanted to go on a paper" (Lueders 24). His career at the Chicago *American* was atypical if only for the eclectic nature of his responsibilities. He covered news of all types, including the Parker-Roosevelt presidential election and the Iroquois Theater fire. He also was sent to locate photographs of figures in the news, an activity of which he was especially skilled and fond. At the age of twenty-six he was fired from the newspaper for writing an archly report about a horse show. He moved to New York soon after his dismissal.

In New York, on January, 1907, Van Vechten became the assistant music critic of the *New York Times*. It was not long, only a few months, until Van Vechten became restless and solicited money from his father to travel to Europe for the sole purpose of hearing European opera. However, on his trip, in London, on June 29, 1907, Carl Van Vechten married Anna Elizabeth Snyder, also from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The two were acquaintances from childhood, and they had shared a common desire to flee Cedar Rapids. The marriage got off to a rough beginning. The couple ran out of money in Amsterdam and was stranded until money sent from home could finance their return. The marriage ended in divorce in 1912.

Van Vechten's first trip to Europe did not deter him in the least as he returned, this time to Paris, just a year later. His experience in pre-war Paris affected him deeply: "An American youth's first view of Paris is an unforgettable experience, a favorite theme of Henry James, but nowhere touched on so happily as by Carl Van Vechten in *Peter Whiffle*" (Lueders 25). Van Vechten was able to maintain his job with the *New York Times* as a correspondent while in Europe. The Wright brothers were there at the time, and Van Vechten effusively recalled the early flights of experimental airplanes in France. In April 1909, he was relieved of his post as correspondent, in part, due to a pension for covering stories of his own interest. He returned to New York and to his old job as music critic for the *Times*.

In 1914, Van Vechten went back to an altogether unfamiliar Paris. The tensions that were a prelude to the war greeted him upon his arrival. More significantly, he began a long and beneficial friendship with Mabel Dodge. Through this friendship he met an array of extraordinary and famous people, many of whom became inspirations for characters in his novel *Peter Whipple*. Upon Mabel Dodge Luhan's death Carl Van Vechten said of her, "She adored to change people. I loved what she did for me and accepted her guidance with pleasure" (Lueders 29).

In 1912, just weeks after his first divorce, Van Vechten met his second wife Fania Marinoff. She was a Russian born actress of considerable talent and repute, and their union lasted for near five decades.

It was shortly after his marriage to Marinoff that Van Vechten began his literary career. In 1915, he put together his first collection of critical essays entitled, *Music After the Great War*. Spurred by the collection's quick publication, he wrote another collection of essays. These were rejected by fourteen publishers before he stopped submitting them.

It was not until the 1920's that Van Vechten began his brief but prolific period as a novelist. The majority of his novels are influenced by his experiences in either Europe or New York. His books, known for rapid and frenetic narration and high brow but poignant diction, sold relatively well and were popular with critics. In 1922, *Peter Whiffle* was published, a novel popular for its blending of the fantastic and the authentic. The author himself is present at all

times in the form of a first person narrator. Furthering this technique, Van Vechten incorporates many actual persons into his story about a fictional boy named Peter.

A year later *The Blind Bow-Boy* was published followed a year later by *The Tattooed Countess*. *The Blind Bow-Boy* is the story of a boy who is summoned to New York by his wealthy father. It is known as a contemporary version of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, but as with all of Van Vechten's novels, nothing is quite as it seems. In *The Tattooed Countess*, Van Vechten returns to his roots with a story set in Maple Valley, Iowa. His motivation for the story lied within his belief that Iowa was one of the only places he had been that was truly American. Ironically, the book is a satire, based on the "provinciality of small-town life in America" (Lueders 79). In Van Vechten's novel, the characters who do not fit into society have no choice but to flee from it.

It was not until 1926 that Van Vechten's most famous and controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*, was published. His interest in African-American culture started well before writing the book. As early as 1914, Van Vechten pursued creating a "real Negro theater in which Negroes should act in real Negro plays *about Negroes*" (Lueders 95). Nevertheless, even before its publication, reaction to *Nigger Heaven* was largely indignant, much to the chagrin of Van Vechten. He was encouraged by the support of James Weldon Johnson who asserted that Van Vechten had "taken the material [Harlem] had offered him and achieved the most revealing, significant and powerful novel based on Negro life yet written" (Lueders 104). Langston Hughes whimsically described the book as "the whole rainbow of life above 110<sup>th</sup> street" (Lueders 104).

Perhaps most of the controversy surrounding the book stems from the title itself. Van Vechten claimed that the title is an ironic commentary about the injustice of blacks relegated to sit in the poorest seats of the Harlem playhouse. Nevertheless, Van Vechten's defense did little to quiet critics such as D.H. Lawrence who blithely wrote, " Mr. Van Vechten's book is a nigger book, and not much of one" (Lueders 103). *Nigger Heaven* may seem unremarkable now, but a novel, in 1926 that treated blacks as individual human beings was a momentous occurrence. As black editor and writer George S. Schuyler proclaimed, "Carl Van Vechten & has done more than any single person in this country to create the atmosphere of acceptance of the Negro" (Lueders 95). His career as a novelist ended in 1930 with a novel about the death of the twenties entitled *Parties*.

In 1928, the death of Van Vechten's brother left the writer with a veritable fortune of around six million dollars. It was in 1932 that the once newspaperman, once novelist, pursued his third career as a photographer. Most of his photos reflect his love for the theater, in particular the ballet and opera, and writing. Among his early subjects were Chinese actress Anna May Wong, playwright Eugene O'Neill, Tallulah Bankhead, H. L. Mencken, and legend of the American musical theatre, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

His photographic subjects were almost always the big names in the arts of the era. Van Vechten preferred shooting in one of two styles. Either the subject would sit for the photo or re-create, in costume, a specific role. What started out as a diversion from his literary career became a serious enterprise for Van Vechten. He astutely realized that his work was an important documentation of literary and theatrical history. By the fall of 1942, Van Vechten's notoriety as a photographer was profound. Many of his portraits appeared in books and magazines, and it was not long before he became famous for his work.

On Van Vechten's seventy-fifth birthday, in 1955, he was honored with exhibitions at Yale University and the New York Public Library. The same year he received a doctorate degree from Fisk University. Five years later Coe College, in his hometown of Cedar Hills, and Pittsburgh University held exhibitions of his work. He was honored as a chief benefactor of the New York Public Library. In 1961, he was named to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in 1964 but not before producing thousands of photographs, seven novels, and countless essays and short stories.

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