

An American In Paris
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I won't keep you in suspense about the subject of my talk. The American in Paris is Janet Flanner. She's the Indianapolis woman who wrote a fortnightly Letter from Paris for "The New Yorker" magazine for 50 years. Her style of writing became so distinct that it set the style for the other writers both on the magazine and in English lit and journalism classes throughout the country.

Janet grew up in Indianapolis a century ago when the population was 175,000. She left the city in 1918 when she was 26 years old. Leaving Indianapolis was more of an escape than a departure. Years later she described Indiana as a "hateful place, with its bourgeois standards, its lack of beauty, and its elongated, flat spaces."

Aside from leaving what she considered a cultural wasteland, there were other factors at work. She and her two sisters, and especially her mother, were embarrassed by the family's source of income – a mortuary. Janet's father, Frank Flanner, had started the business in 1881 with \$500 he borrowed from his mother. Three years later his brother-in-law, Charles Buchanan, bought out Flanner's partner and the mortuary at 172 North Illinois Street became known as Flanner and Buchanan, an enterprise that continues to flourish here.

And then when Janet was 20 years old her father bought an assortment of drugs at different stores. He went into the chapel of the firm's new mortuary at 320 North Illinois

Street, once the home of the Kingan (meat packing) family. He mixed the drugs – prussic acid, strychnine, carbolic acid and morphine -- in a cup and drank them. Buchanan found him on a davenport in the chapel 30 minutes later. Flanner was 58 years old.

Janet said she never got over the shock of her father's suicide. It became something of a local scandal. Flanner had been relatively successful both in real estate and in the funeral business, though there were rumors that he had recently suffered significant losses in his investments. There was even talk that his wife, a social and cultural maven, had pushed him into it. An obituary in The Indianapolis News mentioned that he had been despondent for more than a year.

Born in 1892, Janet Tyler Flanner grew up in a reasonably well-to-do family. The family lived in large houses on Pennsylvania and Meridian streets and Capitol Avenue never more than a few blocks north of Monument Circle. The family was a literary sort. Her mother, Mary Ellen Hockett Flanner, a beautiful woman, had theatrical aspirations. She wrote poetry and plays and gave dramatic readings. Janet's older sister, Maria, was a song writer and pianist. Maria never married. She and Janet were never close. In a letter to a friend, Janet wrote, "I think the loneliness which my sister Maria has endured in her spinster life made her acid of speech and sometimes rancid of soul, poor woman. We look enough alike to alarm me at moments, heaven forgive me..."

Her younger sister, Hildegarde, was a poet. Friends described her as gentle, warm and humorous. And very bright, too. Her husband, an architect and an artist, was equally bright. Both were considered somewhat eccentric. They named their son Jan after Janet. They had moved to California to live with her mother.

Frank Flanner was the grandson of a Quaker clergyman. Like many Quakers here at the time, he was sympathetic to the plight of the “colored” in the city. In 1898 he donated a cottage for the use of black children. It grew into a social service center and was renamed Flanner House in 1912. It still exists here. The Flanners sometimes hosted black leaders. As a young child Janet sat on Booker T. Washington’s knees. The great educator asked her, “You are not afraid of me, are you?” “Why should I be?” she replied.

When the new Tudor Hall school opened Janet was enrolled as a sixth grader. Later after the family took the grand tour of Europe, she enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1912. Whether it was because she violated curfew too often or that her relationship with a female gym teacher became too intense, she was asked to leave after two years because of her “rebellious influence.”

She often mentioned that from the time she was six years old she had wanted to be a writer. She got her chance in 1916 at the age of 24 when The Indianapolis Star hired her. The paper’s drama critic, Frank Tarkington Baker, decided The Star should start reviewing movies even though the films (silent movies in those years) were aimed mostly at children and unlettered adults. Baker gave her the job and she became the nation’s first newspaper movie critic. There may have been some nepotism at work because she reportedly was a niece of Booth Tarkington and Baker was his cousin, though I was unable to confirm this with distant relatives of the novelist living here.

Her first assignment was to review Charlie Chaplin’s “The Kid.” She remembered years later how thrilled she was when the movie theater republished excerpts of her review. She was paid \$25 a week and when she asked for a raise, her boss referred to her as “a greedy little pig,” but she got a five-dollar raise. Still, life wasn’t too difficult for

her. Her father had left an estate of \$150,000, enough to provide small incomes for his wife and daughters.

After two years as a movie critic, she left to spend a year working at a reform school for black girls in Philadelphia. Returning home, she married William Rehm, a young artist whom she had first met at the University of Chicago. They traveled extensively, and settled in Greenwich Village in New York shortly after the end of World War I.

She went to work for the "New York Sun" but was fired within a week. She tried free-lancing articles for magazines but without much success. As an aspiring writer, she moved in the circle of the Algonquin Round Table crowd, a group of writers and playwrights who met regularly in the Algonquin Hotel dining room. The group included Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott and Robert Benchley. She was never a member. She said she felt "they were full of themselves."

Janet was a feminist. She made speeches in favor of women's suffrage and became one of the first women to join the Lucy Stone League. The league fought for women to preserve their maiden names after marriage.

Perhaps the real reason she wanted to leave the Midwest was her lesbianism, a condition that wasn't generally tolerated in mid-America. In Greenwich Village she met Solita Solano, a dark, striking woman who was working as the drama editor at the New York Tribune. Solano was born Sarah Wilkinson. She adopted her exotic moniker after she had left her home in Troy, New York at the age of 16. She married an engineer and they spent four years in the Orient. She divorced him and became a successful journalist, first in Boston and then with the Tribune. Janet and Solano fell in love and they began a

relationship that lasted for 50 years. When Solano was sent to Greece on assignment, Janet went with her. They then settled in Paris in 1922. In time, Solano gave up writing to become a researcher and secretary of sorts for Janet. Both had a large circle of lesbian friends throughout their lives together but they never abandoned each other.

Janet divorced Rehm in 1926. It was amicable. In fact, he remained one of her supporters throughout her years as a writer. After the divorce she admitted with some remorse that she had married him as a way to get out of Indianapolis.

In the Twenties she was among the young American expatriates who had flocked to Paris after World War I and were known as the Lost Generation. They may have been lost but they had a good time.

She wrote: "We had settled in the small hotels on the Paris Left Bank near the Place Saint-Germain-des-Pres, itself perfectly equipped with a large corner café called Les Deux Magots and an impressive twelfth century Romanesque church, with its small garden of old trees, from whose branches the metropolitan blackbirds sang at dawn, audible to me in my bed close to the rue Bonaparte... We were a literary lot."

She and Solita had rented a room for less than a dollar a day on the fourth floor of a hotel where they stayed for 16 years.

Some of the major writers and painters and other cultural figures of the 20th century got their start in that colony. Hemingway and Fitzgerald made the biggest splash, but there were poets Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings, and novelists John Dos Passos, Kay Boyle and Katherine Anne Porter. Their gathering place was a small bookstore nearby. Founded by another American, Sylvia Beach, it was

named Shakespeare and Company. Beach achieved notoriety in literary circles by publishing James Joyce's "Ulysses" after it had been banned as offensive elsewhere.

When "Ulysses" appeared, Janet recalled, "It was the single most exciting and defining event for the Paris expatriates. It burst over us... like a gift of tongues... it was the library of our minds."

It has never captured my mind, I'm ashamed to admit. I've tackled it a half dozen times but have yet to get beyond the first 100 pages. But "Ulysses" is not the only classic gathering dust in my bookcase.

Janet thought of herself as a Midwesterner whose life began at the age of thirty when she went to Paris. She said that she found in France the tradition of beauty, art and culture that she had not found in Indianapolis.

Paris then was attracting hundreds of young Americans with romantic notions of writing novels. They spent their nights sitting at sidewalk cafes discussing literature and their works in progress. Few of them lasted.

Janet said she left for Paris intending to become another Edith Wharton. She did write a novel titled, "The Cubical City". Published in 1926, it got decent reviews but she realized that she would not succeed writing fiction.

Flanner was always a prolific letter writer. When she was new in Paris she wrote enthusiastic letters about the city to her friends. One of them was Jane Grant, a friend from the Lucy Stone League. Her letters to Grant and others were full of gossip and commentary on Parisian life. By then Grant had married Harold Ross, a young war veteran who was starting a magazine called "The New Yorker". Grant showed Janet's letters to Ross, who liked them and suggested that she write similar letters for his

magazine that debuted that year in 1925. He paid her forty dollars for each letter. Not much, but she was thrilled, even though she had doubts that the magazine would last.

But, of course, it did succeed and she continued to write the fortnightly “Letter From Paris” for the next 50 years. Her instructions from Ross were brief: “Don’t write about France. Write about the French.” She said he never told her what to cover or what to write. She wrote about gallery openings, new plays, painters, writers, musicians, actors, politicians, sensational court trials, and even crooks. If she wrote about politics, it was the effects that political decisions made on the French.

For a reason that Flanner never understood, Ross had her letters signed Genet. G e n e t

“Maybe he thought it was the French pronunciation of Janet,” she surmised. Ross had his eccentricities, she said. One was his passion for words and grammar. Staffers would catch him in his office reading the dictionary “as if it were a novel,” she said. “He loved to have his secretary read aloud to him from a book of synonyms.”

In the early years the magazine adopted a casual, witty, satiric and light-hearted tone appropriate for the Jazz Age. Cartoons that reflected the lifestyles of sophisticated New Yorkers were scattered throughout the magazine, even as they are today. The magazine reflected the hedonism of the Twenties, but the Depression and World War II changed the tone of the magazine. During those sobering years, it became more serious, as did her “Letters From Paris”.

After Ross died at the age of 59 in 1951, William Shawn became the magazine’s editor. He had high regard for Flanner. In the introduction to “Janet Flanner’s World,” one of Flanner’s nine books, he wrote: “Beneath the elegance of her style was the plain

speech that went back to her Quaker upbringing in Indiana. Embedded in her enormously sophisticated manner was a Hoosier common sense.”

Writing didn't come easy for her. She often worked on her New Yorker letters and profiles for 12 to 16 hours at a time, sometimes typing all night. There were days it took her hours to write an opening paragraph. Like a lot of writers in those years, she was a heavy smoker. And she liked her martinis, too, when she gathered with friends at the nearby cafes.

She realized that she could not compete with daily newspapers so she invented the “Letters” formula which dealt not with news itself, but with the effect news had on the French. She read eight newspapers every day – from Communist to conservative journals.

“I act as a sponge,” she wrote. “I soak it up and squeeze it out in ink every two weeks. ... I keep going over a sentence. I nag it, gnaw it, pat and flatter it.”

Her letters became a new type of foreign correspondence which she had to develop because, she said, “there was no antecedent for it.” She wrote compactly in an informal, almost conversational style – a style that was widely copied, especially by other writers on the magazine.

In addition to the fortnightly letters, she wrote lengthy profiles on major political and cultural figures; among them Hitler, Picasso, Matisse, Isadora Duncan, Edith Wharton, Queen Mary, Lily Pons, Elsa Maxwell, Andre Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Marshal Petain, the Vichy leader during the war.

Over the years she wrote for other magazines and newspapers and did some translating, including two books by her friend Colette. She also traveled extensively throughout Europe to report on major events.

Her “Letters From Paris” were not always about politicians and cultural figures. She wrote about swindlers, murderers and other criminals if their crimes had caught the attention of the French.

“I write about what catches my eye, what catches my sense of what is true, important and dramatic,” she said.

She said she never had much success in face-to-face interviews with her subjects, so she often didn’t bother talking to them. Instead, she did exhaustive studies of their lives. She interviewed their friends and their enemies and ordinary citizens. She tended to avoid politicians, considering them to be congenital liars.

She wrote a revealing profile of Adolf Hitler before he became the scourge of Europe. He had just come to power in 1935 as the new leader of the German Reich, but some readers – and editors, too --questioned whether he was worth 10,000 words. They believed that the establishment in Germany would dispose of him as an upstart. How little they knew.

Here is how she began the profile:

“Dictator of a nation devoted to splendid sausage, cigars, beer and babies, Adolf Hitler is a vegetarian, teetotaler, nonsmoker and celibate. He was a small-boned baby and was tubercular in his teens. He says that as a youth he was already considered an eccentric. In the war he was wounded twice and almost blinded by mustard gas. Like many partial invalids, he has compensated for his debilities by developing a violent will and exercising strong opinions. Limited by physical temperament, trained in poverty, organically costive, he has become the dietetic survivor of his poor health. He swallows gruel for breakfast, is fond of oatmeal, digests milk and onion soup, declines meat, which

even as an undernourished youth he avoided, never touches fish, has given up macaroni as fattening, eats one piece of bread at a meal, favors vegetables, greens and salads, and loves a raw apple. Alcohol and nicotine are beyond him, since they heighten the exciting intoxication his faulty assimilation already assures.....

“He becomes sick if he sees blood, yet he is unafraid of being killed or killing. He has mystical tendencies, no common sense, and Wagnerian tastes for heroics and death. He was born loaded with vanities and developed megalomania as his final decoration.”

William Murray, a novelist and staff writer for “The New Yorker” and the son of one of Janet’s lovers, wrote a book about living with the two women. He titled it “Janet, My Mother, and Me.” His mother was Natalia Danesi Murray, an Italian who married an American and moved to New York. She and Janet had met in the Thirties when she was 38 and Janet 48. By then Murray was divorced with a young William. With Janet in Paris and Natalia in New York, their relationship was pretty much confined to passionate letters, but when the Nazis threatened Paris in 1939 Janet moved to New York to live with Natalia and William. When Paris was liberated five years later, she returned to Paris.

In his book Murray wrote that Janet “prided herself on never saying anything obvious or boring. She was outraged at the misuse of language, even in casual conversation.”

In her reaction to the astronauts walking on the moon, she wrote to her friend in 1969, “The astronauts are highly educated in their techniques and self control but are uncultivated in every way, those voices, those slang, meager, cheap phrases, not a word of historic simplicity or worth of poetry, nothing except variants of ‘Oh boy, did we hit it.’”

Americans' preoccupation with money also riled her.

"Prosperity simply makes us dangerous to each other and lazy and, of course, so rich that all critical sense has long been discarded."

She could be condescending about Americans, but she was that way about a lot of people. In fact, she said that she didn't really know many people or have many friends, despite being around vibrant and exciting people. "I have a few, half hundred friends, maybe," she said.

Even after 50 years in Europe, Janet always felt herself an American. She said, "A foreigner does become an American... but an American remains an American."

Though perhaps not friends, she did associate with many notable people. Among them were Pablo Picasso, T. S. Eliot, Colette, James Joyce, Georges Braque, Edith Piaf and William Butler Yeats. She admired Gertrude Stein, whom she described as looking like a Roman emperor. "She rumbled when she laughed and sounded like an old-fashioned potbellied stove." She became close to both Stein and her lesbian lover Alice B. Toklas. In fact, after Stein died, Janet looked after the aging Toklas.

I had always admired "The New Yorker" for its sophistication and its outstanding writers – and, of course, the great cartoonists: Peter Arno, Helen Hokinson, James Thurber and Charles Addams. And I especially admired the "Letters from Paris" written by Genet. I had no idea who Genet was but I liked the way her prose seemed to flow effortlessly.

Somewhere along the line I learned that Genet was Janet Flanner; that she had grown up in Indianapolis, and was a member of the Flanner & Buchanan family. So when a friend, Tom Jordan, and I borrowed and scratched together enough money to buy a new

MG in England and tour Europe for three months in the spring of 1952, I had in mind that one of the stories I hoped to write for “The Star” was an interview with her. I was a young reporter with less than two years on the paper, but I wrote her a letter, boldly asking for an interview. I said that I would call when we got to Paris.

When we arrived in Paris, Tom and I rented a room in the Hotel Diamond, a flophouse on the Rue Dunkerque. It was dark and dreary and lit by a single 40-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling with a string pull chain. As I remember, it went for a dollar a night. It didn’t matter. We were in Paris zipping along the Champs Elysses in a shiny, new dark green sports car that we bought for \$1,600. Europe was still showing the effects of the war and traffic was minimal in Paris and throughout Europe. And the dollar was going a long way in Europe in 1952.

After figuring out how to use one of those French phones in a telephone booth, I called her. At first she was hazy about who I was, but when I mentioned my connection with “The Star” she remembered my letter and agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to give me a few minutes at 10 o’clock the next morning.

At that time she was living in the upscale Hotel Continental that overlooked the Tuileries Gardens. She always lived in hotels in Paris. She told friends that she never wanted the responsibility of maintaining an apartment. Her possessions were minimal. She felt that they restricted her movement, and tended to trap her. Her idea would have been to put all that she owned in a suitcase.

The next morning promptly at 10 o’clock, I boldly knocked on the door of her hotel room. After a long 30 seconds I heard a deep voice bellow, “Who is it?” And when

I replied, she opened the door and obviously irritated, snapped, "Why didn't you call up from the desk? You can't just barge in here."

She was still dressed in her robe, but she invited me in and told me to have a seat while she got dressed. My first impression was that she was a tough cookie. She was small, somewhat mannish with a severe short hairdo. She was 60 years old. It was obvious that she was a heavy smoker. Her manner was guarded, and she appeared to be nervous, and spoke rapidly. But after a few pleasantries, we got along fine. In fact she was gracious until I mentioned her connection to Flanner and Buchanan. "For Christ sake, don't mention that," she said. "We women in the family have tried to forget that connection."

I let her do most of the talking about the two years she spent writing movie reviews for "The Star" 35 years earlier. I steered clear of her private life, though I knew she had run with the expatriate writers and painters and poets beginning in the Twenties. But I came away with enough information for a decent story for "The Star Magazine." She had asked me to let her see the copy before it ran. She said she had a bad experience with a reporter on the "Herald Tribune" and just wanted to make sure that what I wrote was accurate. I agreed and somewhere in Europe I sat down long enough to type out a story and mailed it to her.

She returned it with a nice note, added a few details about her years at "The Star" and made a few minor corrections and commented, "And a very nice, well constructed over-all piece it is on me & would be on any local lady from The Star."

I still have the three letters that I received from her.

I knew very little about her private life and certainly not about her sexual preferences. Those were the years when gays at home were still locked in the closets. .

I later learned that lesbianism was a major factor in her life. She – and other lovers, including Solano – fell in and out of love, but they continued to be friends. In a letter that she wrote to Natalia Murray, in 1945, she explained her lesbianism.

“How strange that I was turned in that direction, the way the branch of a young tree is turned and twisted without pressure from anything outside of its own inclination, element except the shaping of my erotic emotions within me which were like an emotional nearness, constantly pressing me into the company of some woman who excited and charmed me and when her influence waned, another took her place. But it was always a woman, never a male.”

She sometimes lamented that her work never had much substance; that she had wasted her talent through her devotion to turning out those letters from Paris year after year. But receiving the National Book Award in 1966 for “Paris Journal,” a collection of her work from 1944 to 1965, helped to convince her that her work had lasting value. France, too, recognized her by awarding her the Legion of Honor. To editor Shawn, she had become the new Tocqueville.

“As a social historian there isn’t anybody like Janet Flanner,” he wrote. “No one else over the decades has consistently combined that kind of literary fire and dazzling style with good, solid, dependable reporting.”

She continued to write her letters from Paris until 1975 when she returned to the United States in failing health. She spent the last three years of her life living with Natalia Murray in New York. She died on January 7, 1978. She was 86 years old.

Her lover Solita Solano lived on until 1985 when she died at the age of 97.