



Screenplay writer, author, playwright, and columnist Ben Hecht.

# Ben Hecht: The Old New Journalist

Julien Gorbach

Nicholls State University, United States

**Abstract:** This study traces the last years of Ben Hecht's writing career, arguing his importance in postwar American literature. He produced ten novels, about 250 short stories, some twenty plays, more than seventy screenplays, and many radio and television scripts. Perversely, his legendary success as a Hollywood screenwriter only served to undermine his literary reputation, so that his prose remains overlooked to this day. But while Hecht's first book, *Erik Dorn*, published in 1921, was an alienation novel written some twenty years ahead of its time, his final cycle of nonfiction books anticipated the New Journalism of the 1960s. None better exemplified his blend of fiction and nonfiction than an unpublished biography of the Jewish gangster Mickey Cohen, the so-called king of Hollywood's Sunset Strip. Cohen personified the "tough Jew" for Hecht, and research on the biography became a confrontation with a myth that the author himself had constructed and disseminated to the American public. A Chicago crime reporter in his youth and inventor of the gangster movie, Hecht had become a militant propagandist for the Zionist cause back in the late 1940s. He had originally befriended Cohen when the two joined forces to raise money and smuggle weapons to the Jewish "terrorists and gangsters" of Palestine. The Cohen manuscript thus illuminates Hecht's significance as both a twentieth-century writer and a man who played a role in history.

In the opening pages of his mammoth autobiography, the journalist, novelist, dramatist, and screenwriter Ben Hecht made light of a regret that haunted him for much of his life. "I can understand the literary critic's shyness towards me," he famously quipped. "It is difficult to praise a novelist or a thinker who keeps popping up as the author of innumerable movie melodramas. It is like writing about the virtues of a preacher who keeps carelessly getting himself arrested in bordellos."<sup>1</sup>

Film historians now refer to Hecht as Hollywood's most legendary screen-

writer, but perversely, his achievements in film only served to undermine his literary reputation.<sup>2</sup> An iconic figure in that great migration of writers who came west with the advent of talking pictures, Hecht used his movie work to finance his prose. Over the course of a remarkable career he produced ten novels, about 250 short stories, some twenty plays, more than seventy screenplays, and many radio and television scripts.<sup>3</sup> His output for the studios during the Golden Age of Hollywood transformed modern cinema, but as biographer Douglas (now George) Fetherling noted: “It is difficult today to understand the harmful effect that had on his standing as a literary man. The common notion, that he had sold his creative soul to Hollywood . . . remained unchallenged until the 1960s, when his books were nearly all out of print and forgotten.”<sup>4</sup>

This study considers the legacy that Hecht built during a final, fifteen-year stage of his writing career, when a British boycott of his films, a backlash to his militant Zionist activism during the 1940s, prompted him to return to prose. It argues his enduring importance as one of the great American writers of the twentieth century, one who cross-pollinated various cultural forms with extraordinary wit and exuberance. Hecht could weave romantic tropes and styles into endless tales, spinning them out like the fabled heroine of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Film scholars have acknowledged that his movies brought a new sophistication to popular culture, transforming it into something richer and more significant than it had been before he came along.<sup>5</sup> Less acknowledged, however, is his place in the literature of the postwar era. His debut in fiction, *Erik Dorn*, published in 1921, had been an alienation novel written some twenty years ahead of its time. The naturalistic sketches that he had simultaneously churned out for *One Thousand and One Afternoons* in Chicago, his daily newspaper column, foreshadowed the literary journalism that would begin to emerge after World War II. Hecht’s books after 1950, beginning with his autobiographical masterpiece, *A Child of the Century*, represented a return to what he had started with those columns. The cycle of memoirs that he produced during his final years, and, most especially, his unpublished biography of the gangster Mickey Cohen, were a natural evolution for this journalist and storyteller—a hybrid of memory and fancy, vivid fact, and inventive narration that anticipated the New Journalism of the 1960s.

### Background

**B**orn February 28, 1894, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side to newly arrived Russian Jewish immigrants, Hecht spent an idyllic childhood in Racine, Wisconsin, before landing a job at the *Chicago Journal* in 1910.<sup>6</sup> At an age

when other young men join fraternities, Hecht found fellowship among the tribe of city newsmen. While reporting crime and scandal, he also rose as a leading light of an avant-garde literary movement, the Chicago Renaissance. He contributed to Margaret Anderson's groundbreaking modernist journal, the *Little Review*, and, as a disciple of H.L. Mencken, produced a steady stream of short fiction for the magazine the *Smart Set*.

By 1920, Hecht was a seasoned reporter but still a young man, and he returned from a year as a war correspondent in Germany with a new awareness about journalism and his place in it. In *Erik Dorn*, the One Thousand and One Nights in Chicago columns, and, soon thereafter, in the Broadway play *The Front Page*, he investigated the media and reflected many of the major concerns voiced by critics and scholars of the day. But Hecht set himself apart in that he effectively combined insights into media with skills as a practitioner.

While moonlighting in public relations, Hecht began his One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago column for the *Chicago Daily News* in June 1921. Every day, for more than a year, he would produce a different tale about the city. He had envisioned the column as a feat of storytelling, a high-wire act, just as Scheherazade's 1,001 Arabian tales had been—though the sultan's wife had performed for her life, while Hecht was just doing it to prove that he could. In the fall of 1922, bookstore proprietors Pascal Covici and William McGee published a collection of sixty-four of the columns in book form, interleaving them with expressionistic illustrations in black ink by the artist Herman Rosse. In the book's preface, *Daily News* editor Henry Justin Smith explained Hecht's "Big Idea—the idea that just under the edge of the news as commonly understood, the news often flatly and unimaginatively told, lay life . . . He was going to be its interpreter. His was to be the lens throwing city life into new colors."<sup>7</sup>

Each story, each slice of life, was a shard in the kaleidoscope of modern city life. A great financier finds himself distracted on a rainy day by thoughts about his own insignificance; solitary souls wander through the mists of a downtown that "is like the exposed mechanism of some monstrous clock"; a poor widow spends so lavishly on her husband's funeral that she loses her children; a Mr. Prokofieff directs a chaotic, circus-like modernist opera; hundreds of fishermen sit all afternoon along the Municipal Pier, staring across Lake Michigan at oblivion. There are portraits, ironic yarns, and mood pieces painted in brush strokes: "A dark afternoon with summer thunder in the sky. The fan-shaped skyscrapers spread a checkerboard of window lights through the gloom." As Smith noted, "Comedies, dialogues, homilies, one-act tragedies, storiottes, sepia panels, word-etchings, satires, tone-poems, fugues, bourreess—something different every day."<sup>8</sup> In "The Tattooer," for example,

Hecht describes an artisan who has lived past his glory days:

The automatic piano in the penny arcade whangs dolorously into a forgotten tango. The two errand boys stand with their eyes glued on the interiors of the picture slot machines—"An Artist's Model" and "On the Beach at Atlantic City." A gun pops foolishly in the rear and the three-inch bullseye clangs. In a corner behind the Postal Card Photo Taken in a Minute gallery sits Dutch, the world's leading tattooer. Simple tattoo designs cover the two walls. Dragons, scorpions, bulbous nymphs, crossed flags, wreathed anchors, cupids, butterflies, daggers and quaint decorations that seem the grotesque survivals of mid-Victorian schools of fantasy. Photographs of famous men also cover the walls—Capt. Constantinus tattooed from head to foot, every inch of him; Barnum's favorites, ancient and forgotten kooch dancers, fire eaters, sword swallows, magicians and museum freaks. And a two column article from the *Chicago Chronicle* of 1897, yellowed and framed and recounting in sonorous phrases ("pulchritudinous epidermis" is feature frequently) that the society folk of Chicago have taken up tattooing as a fad, following the lead of New York's Four Hundred, who followed the lead of London's most aristocratic circles: and that Prof. Al Herman, known from Madagascar to Sandy Hook as "Dutch," was the leading artist of the tattoo needle in the world.

Here in his corner, surrounded by the molding symbols and slogans of a dead world, Dutch is rounding out his career—a Silenus in exile, his eyes still bright with the memory of hurdy-gurdy midnights.

"Long ago," says Dutch, and his sigh evokes a procession of marvelous ghosts tattooed from head to toe and capering like a company of debonaire totem poles over the cobblestones of another South State Street. But the macabre days are gone. The Barnum bacchanal of the nineties lies in its grave with a fading lithograph for a tombstone. Along with the fall of Russian empire, the collapse of the fourteen points and the general dethronement of reason since the World's Fair, the honorable art of tattooing has come in for its share of vicissitudes.<sup>9</sup>

Hecht reached to determine the limits of what reporting could offer the storyteller. His column harkened back to the daily columns of George Ade and Eugene Field in the Chicago newspapers of the 1890s, which may have been the first signed columns to appear in any American paper, and the Mr. Dooley stories of Finley Peter Dunne. These were varieties of the newspaper "sketch," a broad category of newswriting that encompassed any report based on personal observations. Hecht's style most resembled the relatively unmannered realism of *Stories of the Streets* and of the *Town*, Ade's column, which grew directly out of reporting experience.<sup>10</sup>

But in the end, Hecht did find the limits of shoe leather, at least for himself. The final column of his collection features a character known only as “the newspaper reporter.” The reporter returns from a long day on the streets, and opens his notepad to find that some “secret of the city,” which he had thought that he held in his mind during the day, has now slipped away from him. The next day the reporter tries to ferret out the secret by interviewing people who lie on the grass in Grant Park, staring up at the clouds, but upon returning home again, finds the secret has eluded him once more.<sup>11</sup>

While the American Society of Newspaper Editors, soon to be formed, in 1922, would be insisting upon objectivity as a standard of professionalism, One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago reflected a growing acknowledgment of the subjective nature of journalism. Hecht’s supervisor at the *Daily News*, Charles H. Dennis, and four other ASNE founders drafted a code that called for “truthfulness, impartiality, fair play and decency.” Still, this was a time when newspapers were adopting more nuanced ideas about objectivity, distancing themselves from the “naïve empiricism” once understood as realism in the 1890s. Like the debut of the political column at this time, the more frequent use of bylines and the emergence of “interpretive reporting” in the form of news summaries and analysis, Hecht’s column suggested that facts and events require interpretation and that every report contains a point of view.<sup>12</sup>

A leading voice of this new skepticism about objectivity was Henry Luce, who worked as a legman for Hecht on the column (much to Hecht’s dissatisfaction). Within two years Luce cofounded *Time*, a newsweekly full of summaries and analysis. “Show me a man who thinks he’s objective,” Luce had said, “and I’ll show you a man who’s deceiving himself.”<sup>13</sup>

These doubts about objectivity, the call to police journalism, and the birth of an industry of public relations experts who massaged data and carefully calibrated messages coincided with growing pessimism about the notion of a public that was capable of reason and informed decision-making.<sup>14</sup> Collectively, though, the new attitudes about the press and the public were symptomatic of something deeper at work. They reflected a profound new skepticism about the power of reason and the knowability of truth, a pervasive lack of confidence, and sense of distrust that was a legacy of World War I. Hecht’s search for realism had only affirmed his subjectivity. He had gone off as a reporter seeking facts and found “that the city was nothing more nor less than a vast, broken mirror giving him back garbled images of himself.”<sup>15</sup>

His first novel, *Erik Dorn*, which arrived on bookstands in the fall of 1921, offered a perspective that was diametrically the inverse of what he provided each day in his column. As the story begins, Dorn is Hecht as he imag-

ines himself six years in the future: no longer a reporter or columnist, now a thirty-four-year-old editor for a newspaper. He has become jaded about the human drama that plays out across the city each day, all the writhing turmoil and tragedy captured in newsprint and churned out “sausage fashion” in a half-million newspapers a day. Whatever secrets the city holds have been revealed, and he is weary of them all. Walking the streets and scanning the reams of copy that cross his desk, he sees the tumult of human activity like the patterns on an anthill. His eyes trace these geometries, but they are meaningless. Newspapers, with their editorial bromides and shrill sensationalism, hold up a mirror to this carnival of life, delivering “a caricature of absurdity itself.”<sup>16</sup> Dorn, meanwhile, is captive to the mocking laughter in his own head, his own devastating irony. “The book as a whole is as beautiful and disturbing as a live thing,” wrote a reviewer for *Vanity Fair*. “It remains to consider how far *Erik Dorn* is a brilliantly colored caricature of a generation of disillusionists, a generation which, though still young, can find no reason for its continued existence but that the blood is warm and quick in its veins.”<sup>17</sup> Dorn voiced his generation’s pessimism, echoing Walter Lippmann’s denunciations of the public that same year, lamenting that people “want black and white so they can all mass on the white side and make faces at all the evil-doers who prefer the black. They don’t want facts, diagnosis, theories, interpretations, reports.”<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, in the character of Dorn, Hecht gave form to the anxieties of a new era’s corporate efficiency. In an introduction to the 1963 reprint of *Erik Dorn*, Nelson Algren would credit Hecht with anticipating the themes of alienation and conformity—the latter personified by the “organization man”—that permeated American literature after World War II. “I’m like men will all be years later,” Dorn says, “when their emotions are finally absorbed by the ingenious surfaces they’ve surrounded themselves with, and life lies forever buried behind the inventions of engineers, scientists and business men.”<sup>19</sup> In the early 1920s, this was efficiency in the manufacture of everything from tin cans and Ford automobiles to machine guns and bootleg whiskey. It was an efficiency that Hecht and other Chicago newsmen would soon associate with a fresh breed of gangsters and, in particular, with the cold-blooded Al Capone.

This editor’s detachment is not objectivity—far from it. Algren suggests that Dorn’s cynicism is merely “a hideout from the winds of passion” that blow within him. Biographer Fetherling argues, on the other hand, that Dorn is a man with more talent, intellect, and promise than he knows what to do with, and thus ultimately finds himself dissatisfied and disillusioned.<sup>20</sup> He feels things, even falls in love, but ultimately can’t help mocking his own folly. In short, while Hecht’s daily experiment in realism with his column had led

to a deeper sense of subjectivity, his newspaperman Erik Dorn is his original romantic egoist, the first of many to follow: a malcontent who is brilliant, coldly efficient, but driven by a mad hidden passion.

*Erik Dorn* and the collection *One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* brought Hecht national attention, but it wasn't until he was in his mid-thirties that he scored his first bona fide hit, with the 1928 Broadway debut of *The Front Page*. A collaboration with fellow newsroom veteran Charles MacArthur about Chicago newspaper life, *The Front Page* was credited by Tennessee Williams as having "uncorseted American theater,"<sup>21</sup> and it has been hailed as the greatest comedy ever written for the American stage.<sup>22</sup>

By 1928 Hecht had already written *Underworld*, the silent film that would launch a gangster movie craze and earn Hecht an Academy Award. Over the next forty years he spun out blockbusters with a resourcefulness, versatility, and speed that at times resembled sorcery. He justifiably claimed to have "invented the gangster movie," following up *Underworld* with *Scarface*, a 1932 epic produced by millionaire Howard Hughes to be the gangster movie to end all gangster movies.<sup>23</sup> He likewise helped invent the screwball comedy, following *The Front Page* with *Twentieth Century* (1934) and *Nothing Sacred* (1937).<sup>24</sup> He also produced such classics as Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946), and penned the final draft of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in one marathon session with producer David Selznick. Hecht was the man the studios turned to whenever they were in a jam: He could write well in any genre, and at lightning speed.<sup>25</sup> *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael later credited him with half the entertaining movies that Hollywood ever produced.<sup>26</sup>

But Hecht is unique among great American writers in also playing an important role in history, a role that would alter the trajectory of his literary career and add a new dimension to his enduring relevance. His Judaism had never been an important aspect of his life until 1939, when, as he later explained in his autobiography *Child of the Century*: "I became a Jew and looked on the world with Jewish eyes. The German mass murder of the Jews, recently begun, had brought my Jewishness to the surface."<sup>27</sup> Though remembered as a Hollywood legend, he is more significant as the man who broke the silence about the Nazi murder of European Jews.

While the American press remained oblivious to the reports that surfaced early in World War II of a German extermination plan, Hecht launched a massive, one-man publicity campaign. He delivered speeches, published jolting, full-page newspaper advertisements, and orchestrated star-studded theatrical spectacles at Madison Square Garden and the Hollywood Bowl that raised awareness and mobilized public pressure on the Roosevelt administration for an Allied rescue program.<sup>28</sup> But unable to change British and Ameri-



can policies over crucial months of the war, Hecht bitterly came to realize that he would fail to save any significant number of Jews, and he held the Allied leadership culpable for the genocide.

After the war, he became notorious as a militant supporter of Jewish nationalism—a second brief, spectacular career as activist that would have a long-term impact on his future as a writer. In his advocacy of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the Zionist guerillas warring to drive the British Empire out of Palestine, Hecht embraced the labels of “terrorist” and “gangster” with propaganda that climaxed in an infamous May 15, 1947, newspaper advertisement. Headlined “Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine,” it declared that American Jews had “a holiday in their hearts” every time the Irgun bombed or killed British troops in Palestine.<sup>29</sup> Amid the storm of outrage that followed, Hecht approached the flamboyant Hollywood gangster Mickey Cohen for help raising money and procuring arms and matériel, which the mob then smuggled to the Jews of the Holy Land.

When the British Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association announced a boycott of Hecht’s films in mid-October 1948, it cited his “holiday in their hearts” advertisement. Though Britain finally lifted the boycott in 1952, as late as 1956 Hecht was denied credit for *The Iron Petticoat* out of fear of losing the British market.<sup>30</sup>

Back during the years of Hecht’s desperate plea for rescue, he had appealed to the conscience of his fellow Americans, but had also forged an image of the new “tough Jew” of Palestine.<sup>31</sup> Thus this former Chicago crime reporter and inventor of the gangster movie created the myth of the “tough Jew” of Israel, and in the last stage of his writing career, confronted the realities behind the myth that he himself had created. His friend Mickey Cohen, a former pro boxer, freelance “heister,” and chief enforcer for Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, was the living, breathing personification of that myth. He was also a charming psychopath.

Hecht collaborated with Cohen on the gangster’s biography, writing it in a style that would by the 1960s be recognizable as “New Journalism.” The project became a final wrestling match with issues of literary style that he had originally framed with his first two published books, *One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* and *Erik Dorn*. Yet the enigma of the cunning, manipulative Mickey Cohen also raised a fresh challenge for the aging reporter, and Hecht’s efforts to untangle this mystery offer a final word on his life and legacy.

### **The Old New Journalist**

“Memory is the worst of playwrights,” Hecht wrote. “Its ghosts have no time sense. They intermingle, overlap, pop up in the wrong places at the

wrong time. And they even tell lies. But I welcome their mendacity and disorder without criticism. It is not easy to remember oneself.”<sup>32</sup> He could empathize with his many old friends and colleagues in Hollywood who found themselves out of work when blacklisting became policy, though he himself did not suffer so cruel a fate. “The cold war blew like an icy wind across the country to the Pacific Coast,” remarked screenwriter John Howard Lawson, one of the so-called Hollywood Ten who were fired for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Hecht was no Communist, but after the British announced their boycott of his films, he returned west for “a chill Christmas week—there were no jobs or parties for me. The movie moguls, most of them Jews for whose pockets I had netted over a hundred million dollars in profits with my scenarios, were even nervous of answering my hellos, let alone hiring me.” His circumstances were, nevertheless, not nearly as dire as for those listed as subversives in the infamous *Red Channels* pamphlet. The fact that at one point he used the name of his chauffeur, Lester Barstow, as a pseudonym after the studios agreed to hire him for half his usual fee, suggests that he was struggling to maintain a comfortable lifestyle with his wife, Rose, and their daughter, Jenny—a large household staff, homes in Nyack, New York, and Oceanside, California, and an apartment in Manhattan.<sup>33</sup>

Whether the British boycott encouraged Hecht to return to prose late in life, this final phase was like the third act to one of his better scripts: In hindsight it would seem inevitable. He spent five years writing his massive autobiography, *A Child of the Century*, completing the 950-page manuscript in July 1953. In the meantime, he continued to earn a paycheck, churning out screen work at his usual breakneck pace, and expanded into the new medium of television. In the fall of 1958, Hecht hosted a weeknight television talk show on Manhattan’s WABC-TV, inheriting Mike Wallace’s production staff after the future *60 Minutes* star interviewed Mickey Cohen, and the LAPD sued the network for libel. Though *The Mike Wallace Interview* departed from prime time, Hecht kept the pot boiling on local television. In addition to his caustic and colorful “Bedtime Stories” delivered each night, he jostled over the merits of Hollywood with native son Budd Schulberg; swapped murder and gangster stories with crime photographer Weegee; sifted through the political dirt with columnist Drew Pearson; compared notes on writing, rebellion, and bohemianism with Jack Kerouac; and, in what proved to be a final straw for the station management, questioned Salvador Dali about a newly invented form of sex.<sup>34</sup>

Yet in the conclusion to *Child*, Hecht wrote that he inhabited a world full of ghosts. His parents were long dead, as was his indomitable aunt, Tante

Chasha, and his old newspaper buddies from the days before World War I, Sherman Duffy and Wallace Smith. Herman Mankiewicz, fellow screenwriting pioneer during the 1920s and 1930s, had just passed away, and Max Bodenheim, the tragic poet who had once been Hecht's close confederate in that great modernist literary movement, the Chicago Renaissance, would soon be murdered in the Bowery. Even some who were still alive seemed more like wispy spirits than fellow living souls. Charles MacArthur, Hecht's once illustrious partner in such comedic classics as *The Front Page* and *Twentieth Century*, was living out his last days as a dissipated alcoholic. Keenly aware of his own mortality, Hecht's thoughts were now more than ever focused on his literary legacy.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly *Child of the Century* was a determined effort to leave something substantial behind. Taking his title from Alfred de Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, he drew on his experiences to write "inside history," offering an extraordinary window into his era. Fetherling noted:

Hecht was truly, as he said, a child of the century: a member of that generation born close to 1900 and the first to come of age with the big-time gangster, the automobile, the world war, the skyscraper and the interior monologue. . . . In its depiction of one person's progress across the landscape of his time, it falls within the tradition of the best American autobiography that stretches from Benjamin Franklin through Henry Adams to Emma Goldman.<sup>36</sup>

Like the epics he had written for film and stage, it featured a giant cast of characters, rendered in short, deft anecdotes, from Louis Brandeis to Groucho Marx, both Roosevelts, and dozens of the great writers, artists, and celebrities of his day. A final 115-page section describes Hecht's activism during the Holocaust and ensuing fight for a Jewish state: his attempts with the brilliant young activist Peter Bergson to rescue Europe's Jews from extermination, and fundraising for the Irgun guerillas in Palestine. Historians ever since have found it difficult to write against the grain of Hecht's compelling narrative, to the great consternation of his political foes.

As for the book's critical reception, Hecht could hardly count on support from the great arbiters of literary taste of the day, the "New York Intellectuals," particularly since he had launched a preemptive strike against them. In recalling New York City's wild, *fin de siècle* party during the 1920s, he had contrasted the old smart set with the current clique. Today's elite New Yorker "is as tame as a white mouse, and as given to running in circles. He is not a New Yorker unless you wish to insult him. He is a Citizen of the World with a grown-up soul. . . . With his second helping of ghoulish, my New Yorker takes up the problem of India. His small talk seldom embraces less than a

continent.”<sup>37</sup> When the writers he was referring to, such as Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler, thereafter acknowledged Hecht at all, it was with scorn, mostly as an example of the self-hating Jew that he had represented as author of a notorious 1931 novel satirizing a Jewish theater producer, *A Jew in Love*.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, *Partisan Review* darling Saul Bellow proclaimed the book’s importance in the *New York Times*. “Among the pussycats who write of social issues today,” Bellow wrote, “he roars like an old-fashioned lion.” Though Bellow hadn’t picked up a copy of Hecht’s early novels or the *Broken Necks* collection<sup>39</sup> in twenty years, he still remembered the stories, the characters, and even some of the odd phrases: “the scribble of rooftops across the sky,” “the greedy little half-dead.” As a fellow Chicagoan and recent recipient of the National Book Award for *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow graciously acknowledged the debt he owed Hecht and the other writers of the Renaissance: “What was marvelous was that people should have conceived of dignifying what we saw about us by writing of it, and that the gloom of Halstead Street, the dismal sights of the Back of the Yards and the speech of immigrants should be the materials of art.”<sup>40</sup> Four years later, Jack Kerouac would similarly tip his hat to Hecht as a guest on *The Ben Hecht Show*. Unlike the friendly reception that Kerouac received from his host on the program, most others who interviewed the author about *On the Road* had been hostile.

*A Child of the Century* opened the floodgates in Hecht, unleashing a current that would flow into his later books. His ensuing career as a nonfiction memoirist, and the influence *Child* would have on his biography of Mickey Cohen, is particularly significant given the literary context of the day. There were two major trends emerging in postwar literature that would move in opposite directions. One, sparked in backlash to the 1930s social realism of writers such as John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell, eschewed a broader social and political landscape to focus on inner lives. In the brooding and paranoid atmosphere of the McCarthy era, the fiction of J.D. Salinger and Jewish writers such as Bellow and Bernard Malamud “set out on a course of self-examination,” noted Mark Shechner. “[T]hrown back on its own resources, it became more introspective and more literary.” Starting in the 1940s, this became identifiable as the literature of “alienation,” a catchall explanatory term for something that drew literary intellectuals like a magnetic force.<sup>41</sup>

The second trend was literary journalism, a resurgence of an old tradition kept alive after World War II by Norman Mailer and John Hersey, and by *New Yorker* writers A.J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, and Joseph Mitchell in the 1950s. After the phenomenal success of Truman Capote’s “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood* in 1965, the “New Journalism” exploded with a wave of new talent—Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, Jimmy Breslin, Gay

Talese, Michael Herr, and others.<sup>42</sup>

A year before Hecht's death in 1964, the University of Chicago Press acknowledged his place in alienation literature with what amounted to a backhanded compliment that made the occasion far more bitter than sweet. The press had issued a new edition of *Erik Dorn* as part of its Chicago Renaissance series without giving Hecht the opportunity to preview Algren's rather unusual introduction, which contained disparaging remarks about the author and the novel. Furious, Hecht refused the invitation to the publication party. "I have no hankering to pose in your local festivities as a literary patsy," he wired.<sup>43</sup>

Algren's introduction was itself a backhanded compliment. Though he had accredited *Dorn* as an alienation novel produced decades ahead of its time, he suggested that this was a dubious achievement. Since the book was the portrait of an empty, nihilistic "organization man," the whole enterprise was essentially a farce. "For no American yet has written a novel this good yet this bad," Algren asserted. "This is the one serious work of literature we have that by the same token stands as a literary hoax." Ultimately, Algren didn't commend the book or the author: "For the value that is derived from the novel today is not within the novel itself, but from the curiously prophetic shadow that a book, written a half century ago, now casts across our own strange times."<sup>44</sup> When Hecht retorted that this criticism displayed "a Beverly Hillbilly kind of intellectuality," Algren's comments were more unequivocally damning.<sup>45</sup> "He hasn't done anything since *Erik Dorn*," Algren said. "He's made one or two good movies and some awful bad ones. . . . He won't take responsibility for his own talent."<sup>46</sup>

Since this assessment echoed the criticisms that had been leveled against Hecht for many years, it became the conventional wisdom at the end of his life. Even his book editor at Doubleday, Margaret Cousins, who said she adored him, wrote ten years later: "Actually, I don't think he ever lived up to the brilliant promise forecast by his first book—the novel *Erik Dorn*—when he was hailed by critics as a Daniel-Come-to-Judgment, because he was more interested in living than in writing. Writing was his sometime mistress, but he was married to life."<sup>47</sup> Hecht certainly had a reputation as a *bon vivant*, but this seems a curious conclusion to draw about so remarkably prolific an author.

If Hecht can be credited as a pioneer of the alienation novel, then with greater hindsight, it is likewise appropriate to acknowledge him as a forefather of New Journalism, a contribution that he made, simultaneously, with the One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago columns. Literary journalism had existed long before Hecht's time. But the 400 sketches of Hecht's

Chicago column revived this tradition and introduced it into the modern newspaper of the Jazz Age, reflecting the new crosscurrents shaping journalism: the rising skepticism about journalistic objectivity even as the American Society of Newspaper Editors codified objectivity as a professional standard. Fusing the factual data gathered by legmen with his own subjective impressions, psychological insights, and storytelling, Hecht forged a hybrid that Tom Wolfe would one day proclaim as a new literary form in his seminal 1973 anthology.<sup>48</sup>

The worst that can be said of *Dorn* and Hecht's collected columns is that the prose was fitful and the stories lacked emotional depth; perhaps neither book added up to anything substantial enough to endure as a classic. This, however, had more to do with relative youth and immaturity of the author than with discipline, craftsmanship, or storytelling talent. A lifetime of experience separated this writer from the author of the cycle of books that started with *A Child of the Century*, the latter being a man who was mellower and significantly wiser. As the stories of *Gaily, Gaily*<sup>49</sup> demonstrate, the older Hecht possessed a command over narrative and a steady, natural rhythm that made his work more accessible. Fetherling noted one striking aspect of *Child* "is the verve with which Hecht invokes the environments of his past, as though he had never left them, while at the same time analyzing and appraising them. The two actions are not distinct but take place simultaneously, giving the whole book an unusual quality of detached exuberance."<sup>50</sup>

Hecht had returned to prose, but with the minor exception of *The Sensualists*, he no longer tried to write novels. Instead, his books proceeded from where he had started as a journalist and columnist. Writing in the 1970s, Fetherling had argued: "Hecht the Memoirist was the kind of writer their detractors accuse the present New Journalists of being. He shifted focus away from a careful analysis of the facts toward an impressionistic truth supported by a mesh of tiny detail. Much of the detail was certainly as he remembered it, but some was included because it sounded plausible. None of it was researched."<sup>51</sup>

The Mickey Cohen project was the closest Hecht would come to a return to journalism, the one book—with the exception of his ghost-written 1954 "autobiography" of Marilyn Monroe—that wasn't populated by ghosts. A large excerpt finally appeared posthumously in the March 1970 premiere issue of *Scanlan's*, a groundbreaking monthly that showcased aggressive investigative reporting and slashing cultural criticism, launched by the maverick former *Ramparts* editor Warren Hinckle and Sidney Zion, a *New York Times* alum.<sup>52</sup>

A latter-day Hecht champion, Zion provided an introduction to Hecht's piece that hailed his work for the Irgun and explained Cohen's role in the

fight for a Jewish state. "Writing this tale, I am aware that it may sound a little crazy to a lot of people," Zion added. "What was a gangster doing helping Israel? . . . And the Irgun. Weren't they a bunch of right-wing Jewish terrorists?"

The untold truth is that scores of Jewish outlaws were busy running guns around Mr. Truman's blockade while their liveried cousins shook their heads in shame or sat in those Frank Lloyd Wright temples rooting for the English.

Those who had supped with Jewish mobsters will hardly be surprised by this. . . . Thus, the old Meyer Lansky mob on the Lower East Side of Manhattan was actively hustling guns for Palestine. And in Jersey City Harold (Kayo) Konigsberg, then breaking into the head breaking business, performed extraordinary tasks for the Irgun.<sup>53</sup>

*Scanlan's* made the connection between the old journalist and the New Journalists more than just theoretical. The magazine was "going to start Hecht's literary renaissance," Zion told the *New York Times*, when asked about the Cohen piece. "Some kids read it and thought it was beautiful," he added. "There's closing the generation gap for you."<sup>54</sup> The excerpt, "The Unfinished Life of Mickey Cohen," ran alongside a feature written by a rising new talent named Hunter S. Thompson, who despite his success with *Hell's Angels* was still too much of a handful for the mainstream glossies. Thompson's profile of Olympic ski champion Jean-Claude Killy had first been commissioned by *Playboy*, which recoiled in horror when he turned in an 11,000-word exposé savaging the celebrity athlete as a mindless shill for Chevrolet. After *Scanlan's* published the piece alongside Hecht's, editors Hinckle and Zion provided Thompson the opening he had been waiting for. As a follow-up for their June issue, they teamed Thompson with a macabre British cartoonist named Ralph Steadman and sent the pair off to do their worst. The resulting story that surfaced out of an alcohol-poisoned delirium, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," immediately gained Thompson notoriety for a first-person style "so outrageous it needed its own name": Gonzo.<sup>55</sup>

News of Hecht's book had first come to light as Cohen was hitting the peak of national celebrity, over a year after his October 1955 release from McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, where he had been serving a five-year sentence for income-tax evasion. Cohen had risen during the 1940s as chief enforcer and protégé of Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. With Siegel's assassination in June 1947, Cohen had assumed the mantle of king of the West Coast rackets just as Hecht had reached out for help raising money and shipping guns to the Irgun. The pint-sized Jewish gangster's meteoric ascent had made him a prime target: In the late 1940s, he survived more than a dozen

assassination attempts in a gang war the press had dubbed the “Battle of the Sunset Strip.” As if this had not earned Cohen enough exposure, by the time he was incarcerated in 1951, his very public friendship with the lantern-jawed evangelist and media phenomenon Billy Graham further burnished his fame.

As Cohen had told the Kefauver senate committee investigating organized crime, he drew headlines every time he spat on the sidewalk, and news of Hecht’s upcoming book was treated with maximum fanfare. “Mickey Cohen’s bizarre quest for publicity is easily understood when you hear that Ben Hecht is writing his biography—with a view toward the big movie money,” announced Walter Winchell on May 31, 1957. Weeks earlier, the *Los Angeles Times* had reported that since the previous summer, United Artists had been considering a movie to be written by Hecht titled *The Mickey Cohen Story*, or *The Poison Has Left Me*, but no decision had yet been reached. Cohen’s delivery of a 150-page manuscript at Hecht’s home in Oceanside, California, two months after Winchell’s announcement, also garnered national attention. “He must have done it himself,” Hecht told the press. “No one but Mickey uses words that way. It’s a gold mine of facts—I haven’t seen so many facts since I was a newspaper reporter.”<sup>56</sup>

But Hecht had reservations from the start, which he mulled over months later as he waited for Cohen to emerge from the shower—his third of the day—at the Del Capri, an exclusive residential motel in Westwood. On the one hand, “[I]t could be a fine shoot-’em-up story, with important sociological overtones,” Hecht mused. “Mickey leads me into an understanding of my time, and not a jolly one.” But though Hecht was often nostalgic about his newspaper days, he had no desire to go “hopping around for data” like a cub reporter.<sup>57</sup>

Another source of concern was the ex-convict’s new claim of being a changed man. Cohen had identified himself as a florist, no less, the proprietor of Michael’s Tropical Plants operating out of a greenhouse on South Vermont Avenue, which actually sold plastic fakes. Having closed that establishment, he would soon be opening the wholesome Carousel ice cream parlor. “I lost the crazy heat in my head,” the new and improved Michael Cohen told Hecht, “even though I seen enough dirty crooked double-crosses to keep me mad for a hundred years.” For the sake of the book, Hecht certainly hoped the new Michael/Mickey wasn’t real: “Who wants to hear about a toothless tiger?” Then again, perhaps Mickey hadn’t reformed permanently, which might make for a fabulous twist ending.<sup>58</sup>

“How to handle my biographic dynamite?” Hecht wondered. His years as a newspaperman had taught him all too well the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too approach to this kind of story. “You hold your subject up to scorn



while titillating the reader with the details of his sadism, lechery and horrid misdeeds. . . . You identified your gangster as a vicious, rat-blooded character unworthy of human consideration, and then went on to consider every fascinating quirk of his being.” It would be the safest approach, but Hecht couldn’t summon any moral indignation about underworld criminals. “Unlike historical or political figures, they break laws on only a small scale,” he reasoned. “They do not betray trusts, bankrupt widows and orphans, or invent hydrogen bombs—and drop them.”<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, Hecht had no desire to be like the mob shysters he had watched tug a jury’s heartstrings with sob stories about “extenuating circumstances”—a beloved wife and a hungry child to feed, a rough upbringing on the wrong side of the tracks. “I have an unquestionable record as an honest man,” Hecht wrote. “Having written many books as an honest man, I do not suddenly want to seem to be the mouthpiece of a criminal. And, perhaps, to have always been that.”<sup>60</sup>

At this point Cohen had at last emerged from the tub, and Hecht’s musings were interrupted by a thumping sound that had started up in the bathroom:

The banging comes from Mickey emptying a quart of talcum powder over his naked person. Possibly the powder gets stuck and the can has to be banged against the wall. The banging ends and there is a flash of mine powdered host in the bedroom gloom. He looks like one of the Living Statues in the old Ringling Brothers Circus.

Mickey now busies himself for 30 minutes flicking the powder off his skin with a large Turkish towel. The sound effect is that of a busy shooting gallery. I curse quietly for I feel ill at ease with slow dressers, male or female. With Narcissus, two is a crowd. But Mickey is not a man to be hurried. Also there is the fact that he *is* hurrying.

The towel barrage over, Mickey appears in the bedroom. He is nude and oyster white, except for a pair of green silk socks firmly stretched by maroon garters. He darts to the cupboard, removes a fedora hat and puts it on. There are twenty-two boxed hats on the shelves. He then darts back in the bathroom.

Mickey’s apartment is so small that it is almost impossible to walk swiftly in it without bumping into the walls. But Mickey manages to sprint from wall to wall without collision.

The towel flicking starts again. Sorties in and out of the bedroom ensue. Mickey crosses the twelve-foot by fourteen-foot chamber at top speed some dozen times—as far as I can make out for no reason. He remains in an

identical state of nudity. The only thing I can figure is that he is caroming in and out of the bedroom in order to remove the powder from his body by air friction.

I ordinarily do not watch a man at his toilette so attentively. But this is one I am going to write about. And there is in Mickey's odd, nude activity in his darkening bedroom much information about the man. You put down all his aimless, compulsive movement as a mild sort of lunacy and let it go at that. But it is no lunacy. It is Mickey caught up in a mood so deep, tossed around on memories so violent, high-diving into day-dreams so vivid, that he has not the slightest awareness of darting around for an hour in a darkening room, naked and with a hat on.<sup>61</sup>

Cohen was an unknown quantity—a jack-in-the-box that the old crime reporter did not completely understand.

Nor was Hecht even sure of his own point of view. "A thing baffles me which may well be baffling the reader," he confessed. "It is—what do I think of Mickey? And what do I feel about him and his infatuation with violence and lawlessness?" Other than "outlandish fellows like the Marquis de Sade," it was typical in such matters for a writer to adopt the traditional view of society. And if Hecht was not altogether in sympathy with the law-abiding public, then what alternative did he offer?<sup>62</sup>

Six years later, Nelson Algren would conclude his contentious introduction to Hecht's first novel by observing: "It wasn't splendor that was lacking in Hecht, it wasn't gas he ran out of, and it surely wasn't brass. It was belief. For he came, too young, to a time when, like Dorn, he had to ask himself, 'What the hell am I talking about?' And heard no answer at all."<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

Hecht developed elegant theories to explain Mickey Cohen. He likened the gangster to a *gilgul*, a Kabbalistic incarnation of a soul in transition. In one passage of his most complete manuscript, Hecht described the gangster stuck in a kind of purgatory, unable to complete the spiritual journey of reform.<sup>64</sup> Hecht's wife, Rose, however, had a simpler explanation: Cohen was no damn good. Apparently the tension between husband and wife escalated during the summer of 1958, because in August, Rose's sister, Minna Emch, wrote: "I do hope the 'problems' settle down to something that will allow you to stay in California for the present if that is what you want."<sup>65</sup> When Rose oversaw the archiving of her late husband's papers decades later, she inserted a typed, one-page record of her objections: "Notes on what I think is a fallacy in Hecht's reasoning in the Mickey Cohen manuscript."

She conceded that various government officials and law enforcement of-

ficers were on the take. But it seemed a false logic to therefore label all politics as criminal, or everyone else who is “tarred by the same brush of being in politics.” That, she said, “is a criminal’s kind of reasoning, for purposes of self-justification.”

But for an author to borrow this pattern when starting from the objective (vantage point) of the criminal’s psychology . . . makes the author seem dangerously infected by his character’s point of view. I’ll admit I think, as his wife, that it is unbecoming for Ben to rail at society like England’s “angry young men,” and when he says he was “always like that,” I merely think it was less unbecoming in his youth, but not more sane.<sup>66</sup>

In September 1958, the appearance of the first installment of a four-part *Saturday Evening Post* series on Cohen somewhat settled the debate over character. Hecht and Cohen had agreed to a fifty-fifty split on the biography, but Cohen had gone behind Hecht’s back to do the series for the *Post*, with its three million subscribers.<sup>67</sup> Journalist Dean Jennings’s stories themselves imparted further revelations of betrayal, revealing that Cohen had been going behind his friend’s back for months, selling over \$100,000 in shares for a nonexistent movie that Hecht was supposed to write.<sup>68</sup> The *Saturday Evening Post* billed the series as “a revealing clinical study of a shameful American paradox,” and Jennings’s main thrust was that Cohen had manipulated the press and public, turning celebrity into a jackpot.

The fiasco of the book and movie served as the central drama of Cohen’s sensational, star-studded trial for tax evasion in 1961, which, after forty-one days and testimony from 194 witnesses, landed the mobster in Alcatraz. Sidney Zion and other authors have offered different explanations for why Hecht dropped his own book after the *Saturday Evening Post* stories appeared.<sup>69</sup> None give any weight to the influence that Rose might have had, nor do they take into consideration two other factors that may have been important—Hecht’s pride, and the pall that the whole episode cast upon the prospective book. Jennings may have stopped short of openly deriding Hecht, but his narrative had Cohen playing all the reporters and media interests as pawns, leading up to his bamboozling of the biggest, most hardboiled reporter of them all. For the climax of the *Post* series, Jennings suggested that all of Cohen’s publicity-making put the mobster in a position to leverage the reputation of the tough old Chicago newsman and screenwriting legend to rake in his own personal gold mine.

Hecht had failed to see the hustle because he had been more consumed with his own ruminations than he had been with simply being a journalist. His drafts contain much reporting on Cohen and the underworld, as well as research on outlaws past and present, but mostly the pages are packed with

the author's own insights into what a criminal represents: "As he was in the tribal civilization of thirty thousand years ago, so he is in the civilization of oil interests, hydrogen bombs, the disintegration of human thought into political jabberwock, and the attending prospect of global annihilation."<sup>70</sup> Hecht's views on society and politics were colored by his enduring anger at the Roosevelt administration and the rest of the free world for turning its back on the Jewish people. In such a deeply corrupt modern world, he admired what he considered to be the primitive purity of the lawbreakers, whom he found more honest than the lawmakers.

This underscores a crowning irony of Hecht's literary journalism. For "Front Page-era" reporters like him, objectivity did not offer a pathway to truth. Rather, a penetrating cynicism, accrued from years of covering crime and corruption, was supposed to enable them to cut through all lies and subterfuge. In this case, however, as Rose had suggested, it was Hecht's cynicism that had blinded him to Cohen's swindle.

The Cohen project was the last stage in a journey for Hecht that reflected the broader evolution of twentieth century American literature—tensions that played out between the subjective and the objective, between introspection and realism. After *One Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago*, Hecht had shifted focus to the individual and his isolation, rendering characters like Erik Dorn: publishing tycoons, theater producers, crooked attorneys and mobsters, Don Juans, and sociopaths who spiraled into their own narcissism. In these novels and movies, he had always used personal experience as grist. But when he began writing in the first person as a memoirist, he wove in real facts and characters overtly, while not abandoning creative license. The Cohen drafts represent a final amalgamation, wherein he combined this first-person approach with street reporting and research.

In his essay heralding New Journalism, Wolfe offered a nuanced argument for what was truly new about it. For starters, he credited friend and colleague Jimmy Breslin with "a revolutionary discovery":

He made the discovery that it was feasible for a columnist to leave the building, go outside and do reporting on his own, actual legwork. Breslin would go up to the city editor and ask what stories and assignments were coming, choose one, go out, leave the building, cover the story as a reporter, and write about it in his column. . . . Well—all right! Say what you will! There it was, a short story, complete with symbolism, in fact, and yet true-life, as they say, about something that happened today, and you could pick it up on the newsstand by 11 tonight for a dime.<sup>71</sup>

There is no acknowledgment here of Hecht's innovations some forty years previously, though in fairness, Wolfe does emphasize the difference between

realistic fiction and actual journalism.<sup>72</sup> Hecht's columns tend to blur the distinction. Likewise, while Wolfe credited the New Journalists with unprecedented experimentation with language and literary techniques—character development, mood setting, and dialogue—it is worth remembering Hecht's "comedies, dialogues, homilies, one-act tragedies, storiottes, sepia panels, word-etchings, satires, tone-poems, fugues, bourreess—something different every day."

Wolfe also credited the New Journalists with reporting that was "more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything newspaper or magazine writers, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to."<sup>73</sup> His point is that the New Journalists were the first to go deep with their reporting in order to write like novelists, but in an appendix to his essay, he does eventually acknowledge the work done by A.J. Liebling, James Agee, George Orwell, John Hersey, Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross, and other magazine writers of the previous decade. "A new journalism was in the works during the 1950s, and it might have grown out of the *New Yorker* or *True* or both, except for one thing: during the 1950s the novel was burning its last bright flame as the holy of holies," he writes.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, if there was anything truly new about the New Journalism, it may have been in the sheer ambition and volume of quality work produced within a few short years. But this all reflected a great and inevitable sea change, a turning of the literary and cultural tides that Hecht, for one, had long anticipated.

If there was nothing pioneering about New Journalism, however, cannot the same be said about Hecht's work from 1921? Literary journalism had existed since at least the days of Charles Dickens, who had begun writing for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1834.<sup>75</sup> But there had been no notion of objectivity in Dickens's day, and Hecht's column reflected a keener self-awareness than the work of Dickens or other literary journalists, like Mark Twain or Stephen Crane, possessed. This seems particularly obvious when one contrasts Hecht's columns with his simultaneous work on *Erik Dorn*. With the consciousness of a modern storyteller, Hecht was grappling with issues of subjectivity versus objectivity and introspection versus realism, probing into questions that would not have been conceivable before industrialization and the advent of mass media.

Hecht's contributions to literary journalism offer a richer understanding of modern literature, but they are hardly the only reason for his importance. His work for stage and the movies cannot be ignored, and it is precisely because he was such a protean creative force that he offers such an interesting case with which to test the canons and literary standards of the twentieth century. Moreover, beyond issues of style, approach, and even medium, there

is the essential matter of content—the question of what a writer *has to say*. In his abject cynicism, Hecht may have misjudged Cohen, but the memoirs and drafts of that unpublished manuscript contain a lifetime's worth of insights into human nature, society, and politics that remain as relevant today as when Hecht wrote them. Scholars, critics, and indeed all book lovers, owe it to themselves to read him.

---

*Julien Gorbach is a resident of New Orleans and an assistant professor of mass communication at Nicholls State University. Originally from Boston, he is a former newspaper reporter who earned his doctorate at the University of Missouri–Columbia. This study is adapted from his dissertation, which is a complete biography of Ben Hecht.*




---

### Notes

1. Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York: Primus Books, 1985), 2.
2. Richard Corliss, *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema, 1927–1973* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1974), 5.
3. Robert Schmuhl, “History, Fantasy, Memory: Ben Hecht and a Chicago Hanging,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 83 (Autumn 1990): 147.
4. Douglas Fetherling, *The Five Lives of Ben Hecht* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen, 1977), 16–17.
5. *Ibid.*, 17, 191.
6. “Ben Hecht, 70, Dies at His Home Here,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1964, 1, 84; Ben Hecht, *A Guide for the Bedevilled* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 62–64; *Child of the Century*, 65, 70; William MacAdams, *Ben Hecht: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Scribner, 1988), 11; Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 3; Gilad E. Troy, *Ben Hecht: From Literary Gadfly to Political Activist* (Bachelor of Arts thesis, Harvard University, 1982), 1; Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 73; Ben Hecht, *Gaily, Gaily* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), “Greeting,” unpaginated; *Guide for the Bedevilled*, 66. There is little agreement about whether Hecht was born in 1893 or 1894. MacAdams and the Newberry Library web page biography both report 1893, but Fetherling and most other biographical sources, perhaps relying on the reports that he was seventy years old at the time of his death, say he was born

the following year. Hecht himself is not entirely consistent: In *Child of the Century* and *Gaily, Gaily* he writes that he was sixteen when he joined the *Journal* in the summer of 1910, but in *Guide for the Bedevilled* he says that he was seventeen. William MacAdams's source for Hecht's birth date is a letter from Peter Hecht, Ben's brother, which states that Ben was born February 28, 1893, "as I figure it." However, it is worth noting Peter Hecht's uncertainty: In what appears to be a previous letter, he writes that Ben was born in 1892, "almost five years to my birth in 1897." The 1893 date comes from an undated letter that appears to be a subsequent correction, in which Peter Hecht adds that Ben was born five years and nine months before him. Ben Hecht Papers, Newberry Library Collection, hereafter referred to as BHNL, MacAdams collection, folder 141, Peter Hecht, page one of a twelve-page letter; page one of an eight-page letter. Both letters are undated.

7. Ben Hecht, *A Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* (New York: Covici Friede, 1927), Henry Justin Smith, preface, unpaginated.

8. Hecht, *A Thousand and One Afternoons*, Henry Justin Smith's preface; "Fog Patterns," 27; "The Sybarite," 60–63; "Waterfront Fancies," 68–71; "Fantastic Lollypops," 97–100; "Pandora's Box," 273; "Ripples," 265–8.

9. *Ibid.*, "The Tattooer," 242–43.

10. Norman Sims, *The Chicago Style of Journalism* (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1979), 31–34, 41; Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 29–30; Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 157–161.

11. Hecht, "Grass Figures," in *One Thousand and One Afternoons*, 285–89.

12. For cogent analyses of the evolution of "objectivity" during the 1920s, see Michael Schudson, "Objectivity Becomes Ideology: Journalism After World War I," in *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 121–59; James Carey, *A Critical Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 137–41, 162–63, 192–94.

13. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 149.

14. *Ibid.*, 122–28. See, for example, Hecht's mentor, H.L. Mencken, on the nature of the mob and the machinations of politicians in H.L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1926), 15–23, 55; on democracy as "an incomparably idiotic" fraud, 209, 211. He uses his signature phrase "stirring up the animals," for example, in H.L. Mencken, *My Life as Author and Editor* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 1081–82. See also Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), 65.

15. Hecht, *One Thousand and One Afternoons*, 285. On the new lack of confidence in the knowability of the truth, see David Hollinger, "The Knower and the Artificer," *American Quarterly* 39 1 (Spring 1987): 37–55. On how the knowability of truth ties to journalistic "objectivity," see Carey, *Carey Critical Reader*, 162–64.

16. Ben Hecht, *Erik Dorn: A Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 19.

17. "Erik Dorn," *Vanity Fair*, November 1921, scrapbooks, vol. 1: reviews, 1921–28, box 103, BHNL.

18. Hecht, *Erik Dorn*, 380.

19. Hecht, *Erik Dorn*, xiii, 9.

20. Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 35–40.

21. Actress Helen Hayes, who was MacArthur's wife, recalled that Tennessee Williams had once told her: "Your Charlie and Ben Hecht made it possible for me to write my plays. They paved the way for me. They took the corsets off American theater." Carol Lawson, "Theater Hall of Fame Gets 10 New Members," *New York Times*, May 10, 1983.

22. George W. Hilton, introduction to *The Front Page: From Theater to Reality*, George W. Hilton, ed. (Hanover, NH: Smith & Kraus, 2002), 1.

23. Hecht makes the claim regarding inventing the gangster movie in *Child of the Century*, 479. On *Underworld* as the movie that created the gangster genre, see Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies: From Griffith to The Godfather and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 1980), 15, 31–32, 34–38, 42–47, 51–53; Eugene Rosow, *Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 124. On *Scarface* as the gangster film to end all gangster films, see Clarens, *Crime Movies*, 82–83.

24. Andrew Sarris, "The Sex Comedy Without Sex," *American Film* 3 (March 1978), 8, 14; MacAdams, *Man Behind the Legend*, 7; Jeffrey Brown Martin, *Ben Hecht, Hollywood Screenwriter*, Studies in Cinema 27 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985).

25. Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 488–9; MacAdams, *Man Behind the Legend*, 7, 199–201.

26. Pauline Kael, "Bonnie and Clyde," *New Yorker*, October 21, 1967, 166–67.

27. Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 517.

28. Many books and articles recount Hecht's rescue efforts in partnership with Peter Bergson, a.k.a. Hillel Kook, and the activists collectively know as the Bergson Group. See Sarah E. Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Holocaust, 1943–1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (April 1980): 367–400; Monty Noam Penkower, "In Dramatic Dissent: The Bergson Boys," *American Jewish History* LXX, no. 3 (March 1981): 281–309; Gilad E. Troy, *Ben Hecht: From Literary Gadfly to Political Activist* (bachelor of arts thesis, Harvard University, 1982); David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Louis Rapoport, *Shake Heaven and Earth: Peter Bergson and the Struggle to Rescue the Jews of Europe* (New York: Gefen Publishing House, 1999); David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* (New York: The New Press, 2002); and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *The "Bergson Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

29. Ben Hecht, "Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 15, 1947, 17. *Chicago Daily News*, May 15 1947, 13. Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 617. Historian Rafael Medoff writes that the advertisement ran once in the *Herald Tribune* and twice in the *New York Post*. In his autobiography, Hecht reports that it ran in some fifteen newspapers and was reprinted as a news story in South America and Europe.



30. C.V.R. Thompson, "Bernadotte Was an Ass, Hecht Says," *Daily Express*, September 25, 1948, 1. "Hecht's Films Under Ban," *New York Times*, October 14, 1948. Thomas F. Brady, "Britain Objects," *New York Times*, October 24, 1948. Letters to Hecht from Peter Bergson, 1941–1952, 1962, incoming correspondence, 1914–1979, box 55, folder 1069b, BHNL. Gil Troy, *From Literary Gadfly to Political Activist*, 118.

31. See Ben Hecht, "Champion in Chains," *Esquire*, October 1942, 36, 168–89. After he "became a Jew in 1939," Hecht had originally signed on with Peter Bergson's Committee for a Jewish Army to campaign for a fighting force that would join the war against the Nazis. From that point on, the image of the tough, fighting Jew featured prominently in all his propaganda. The Zionist Max Nordau had introduced "Muscular Judaism" as early as the Second Zionist Congress of 1898, an idea that resonated because it supported the goal of Jewish nationalism as a rebirth of body and spirit. The *muskeljuden* ("muscle Jew"), or the "new Jew," broke free from the anti-Semitic stereotype of the scrawny, weak, and inferior Jew. Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, Routledge Jewish Studies Series (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–2. For the purpose of this study, Jack Lule's definition of "myth" will suffice. He explains it as "a sacred societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life." Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford, 2001), 21–25.

32. Hecht, *Gaily, Gaily*, 197.

33. MacAdams, *Man Behind the Legend*, 255. Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 607.

34. MacAdams, *Man Behind the Legend*, 255, 260–61. Foreword by Mike Wallace and Introduction and Ben Hecht, Television Performer by Bret Primack in idem, adapt. and ed., *The Ben Hecht Show: Impolitic Observations from the Freest Thinker of 1950s Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993), xi–xii, 1–4, 5–17, and throughout.

35. Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 631. Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 148.

36. MacAdams, *Man Behind the Legend*, 255. Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 157.

37. Hecht, *Child of the Century*, 359.

38. Edward Alexander, *Irving Howe: Socialist, Critic, Jew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 53. Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Jew in the American Novel," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 2 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971). Because of *A Jew in Love*, Howe characterizes Hecht as "the first to attack Jewish group existence from a standpoint close to fashionable Bohemian anti-Semitism."

39. Ben Hecht, *Broken Necks: And Other Stories* (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company, 1924).

40. Saul Bellow, "The One Thousand and One Afternoons of Ben Hecht," review of *A Child of the Century*, *New York Times*, June 13, 1954.

41. Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish-American Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16, 42.

42. Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 1–34.

43. Austin C. Wehrwein, "Hecht Attacks Algren Preface," *New York Times*, November 21, 1963.
44. Nelson Algren, "Erik Dorn: A Thousand and One Afternoons in Nada," introduction to *Erik Dorn*, Ben Hecht (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), x.
45. Wehrwein, "Hecht Attacks Algren Preface."
46. *Ibid*, xiii, xvii.
47. Letter from Margaret Cousins, Hecht's editor at Doubleday for *Gaily*, *Gaily*, to Stephen Fuller, a.k.a. William MacAdams, February 4, 1976, p. 2 of 3, folder 378, MacAdams Collection.
48. Tom Wolfe, Introduction, *The New Journalism* ed. Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
49. Ben Hecht, *Gaily, Gaily* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963).
50. Fetherling, *Five Lives*, 157.
51. *Ibid*, 167.
52. Weingarten, *Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 228.
53. Sidney Zion, "On Ben Hecht," preface to Hecht, "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen," *Scanlan's Monthly*, March 1970, 56.
54. Henry Raymond, "Scanlan's, a Monthly Magazine, Promises to 'Vilify' Institutions," *New York Times*, February 25, 1970. Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 228–35.
55. Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," *Scanlan's*, June 1970. Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 235. Weingarten is quoting from a letter to Thompson from Bill Cardoso, who was editor of the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*.
56. Walter Winchell, On Broadway column, *Humboldt Standard* (Humboldt, CA), May 31, 1957, 4. "Bandsman With Welk Turns Cinema Villain," in Movieland Events column, *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1957. "Cohen Takes Manuscript to Author," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1957, 34.
57. Hecht, "About Me, First," 2, folders 216, 219.
58. Hecht, "About Me, First," 1, 2, 13, folders 216, 219. United Press International, "One-time Mobster Takes Up New Life in Greenhouse," *Salina Journal* (Salina, KS), July 30, 1956, 19.
59. Hecht, "About Me, First," 3, folders 216, 219.
60. Hecht, "Author Confessions," 2–3, folders, 216, 222.
61. Hecht, "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen," *Scanlan's*, 62.
62. Hecht, "Author Confessions," 1, folders 216, 222.
63. Nelson Algren, "Thousand and One Afternoons in Nada," introduction to *Erik Dorn*, xvii.
64. Hecht, "Night Club Gilgul" in "About Me, First," 68–72A, folder 216; "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen," *Scanlan's*, 75–76.
65. Letter from Minna Emch to Rose Hecht, August 13, 1958, folder 2228.
66. Rose Hecht, "Notes on what I think is a fallacy in Hecht's reasoning in the Mickey Cohen manuscript," in "Cohen, Mickey, n.d., 1951–1976," subject files, 1919–1981, box 77, 2341.

67. United Press International, "Hecht Discovers Little Interest in Life of Cohen," *Terre Haute Star* (Terre Haute, IN), May 18, 1961, 33. Three million subscribers: Tere Tereba, *Mickey Cohen*, 238.

68. Dean Jennings, "The Private Life of a Hood, Conclusion," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 11, 1958, 118.

69. Sidney Zion, "On Ben Hecht," preface to Hecht, "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen," in *Scanlan's*, 56–7.

70. Hecht, "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen," *Scanlan's*, 58.

71. *The New Journalism*, 12–14.

72. *The New Journalism*, 42, 46. Wolfe argues that many who question whether the New Journalism is really new often offer names of writers who did this decades, even centuries ago. But upon closer inspection they fall into four categories: 1) their work isn't really nonfiction at all, such as Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Sir Richard Steele in the "Sir Roger de Coverldey Papers"; 2) they are traditional essayists who have done very little reporting, such as Murray Kempton, I.F. Stone, and James Baldwin; 3) they are autobiographers, such as Thomas De Quincey (*Confessions of an Opium Eater*), Mark Twain (*Life on the Mississippi*), and George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia*); or 4) they are what Wolfe calls "Literary Gentleman with a Seat on the Bandstand," writers who don't seem to have much use for a reporter's notebook and carry on a tradition that spans from William Hazlitt to modern writers such as D.H. Lawrence and the "socially conscious" nonfiction writers of the 1930s such as John Dos Passos, and even James Agee.

73. On New Journalism reporting and literary experimentation, see Wolfe, "The Birth of New Journalism," 35, 37–8, 43–5; and *New Journalism*, 11, 14–22.

74. Wolfe, *New Journalism*, 46.

75. Ruth F. Glancy, *Student Companion to Charles Dickens* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 5; Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), 174–76. Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 41, 45. Wolfe notes that some scholars credit the birth of the realist novel to eighteenth-century writers Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. To cover his bases, Wolfe also credits the contributions of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Stephen Crane's vignettes about the Bowery, John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and a few others.

