Change with a jazz beat

"Supreme City: How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern" by Donald L. Miller.

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Supreme City

How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern America

By Donald L. Miller

Simon & Schuster. 762 pp. $37.50

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

As they entered the lavish lobby of his skyscraper on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-fifth Street in 1934, two characters in Don DeLillo's novel Underworld asked, "Who in the world was Fred F. French?"

Although Tudor City, 10 buildings that constituted the first residential skyscraper complex in the world, was also part of French's real estate empire, the narrator of Underworld noted that the average New Yorker "did not have a clue" about his identity.
But readers of Donald L. Miller's *Supreme City* will come away with more than a clue about who French was. *Supreme City* is a splendid account of the construction boom in Midtown Manhattan between World War I and the Great Depression, and the transformation of transportation, communications, publishing, sports, and fashion that accompanied it. Miller brings to life three dozen men and women who were inspired by Jazz Age New York "to test the limits of the possible."

Miller, a professor of history at Lafayette College and the author of nine books, including *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America*, does not explain why this burst of achievement occurred when it did. A virtuosic storyteller, he is content - and well he should be - to bring to life the outsized ambition, creativity, idiosyncrasies, and achievements of his extraordinary cast of characters.

Miller rounds up the usual suspects, with informative and charming sketches of Mayor Jimmy Walker, Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Duke Ellington, David Sarnoff (the founder of NBC), and William Paley (the founder of CBS). *Supreme City* snaps, crackles, and pops, however, when Miller gives the long-forgotten doers their due.

Consider his portrait of the man who designed the tunnel connecting Manhattan and New Jersey. Named chief engineer of the project in 1919, Clifford Holland was responsible for a monumental, and revolutionary, ventilation system that relied on 84 fans located in four buildings, two on each side of the Hudson River. The fans produced winds that directed the foul air in the tunnel to the "storm factories," which then returned them to the atmosphere through stacks in their roofs. Without them, Miller writes, the Holland tubes "would have become lethal gas chambers." Alas, he adds, Holland died of heart failure in 1924, five years before Manhattan officials deemed the Holland Tunnel (originally called the Hudson River Vehicular Tunnel) the city's "greatest wonder" (tied for first place with the subway system).

Miller reveals that Richard Simon and Max Schuster, who would become mainstays of "Publisher's Row" in Midtown Manhattan, where more than 70 percent of books in the United States were published, burst on the scene with a risky plan: They would come up with ideas that had commercial potential and recruit writers to carry them out, instead of waiting for manuscripts to be submitted to them. They hit pay dirt in 1924 with *The Crossword Puzzle Book*, which appeared with an eraser-topped pencil attached to each copy, and attracted half a million customers by Christmas. The pair used modern methods of merchandising and marketing, including odd prices ($4.95 instead of $5), pushed how-to books and travel books, and invited bookstores to return unsold copies to Simon & Schuster.

Miller looks ahead a bit as well, to some of the social and economic implications of the Jazz Age boom. The cosmetics trade, dominated by Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden, provided a good income for the female graduates of beauty culture schools and opportunities for entrepreneurship. The
small, single-plant firms of the garment industry, Miller claims, helped produce what was "probably the largest middle class of any city in the country." On the other hand, he points out that for publishing as well as clothing, improved transportation paved the way for production plants and storage houses to be located outside the city, where land and labor costs were substantially lower.

The boom ended, of course, with the stock market crash in October 1929 and the Great Depression. Fred French, who offered investors equity in his projects, defaulted on millions of dollars of preferred stock he had issued. His latest initiative, a plan to build a "walk to work white collar community" on 15 acres of slum property on New York's Lower East Side, came to naught. The Depression also brought down, among others, publisher and Broadway producer Horace Liveright and Florenz Ziegfeld, the inimitable impresario. Both died virtually penniless.

New York City recovered, of course. Nonetheless, as Miller suggests, it never again was as "exuberantly alive or endurably creative" as it had been when "the blazing towers of the Manhattan skyline" and the now iconic bridges and tunnels went up - and down.

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