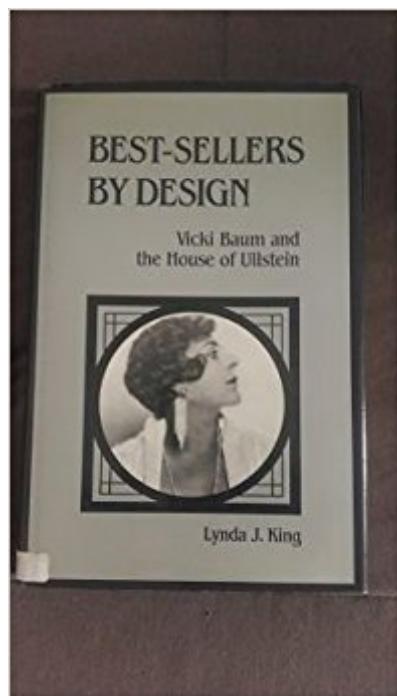


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Best-Sellers By Design: Vicki Baum And The House Of Ullstein



Synopsis

Focusing on the relationships among the publisher, the writer, and the reader, King provides a compelling case study involving the sociology of literature and the history of publishing in the context of Weimar Berlin. King begins with a thorough discussion of the economics of popular publishing from the nineteenth through the early twentieth century and then concentrates on the fascinating example of the House of Ullstein. She also details Baum's relationship with her publisher and Baum's conception of her art and its purposes in a commercial context. The work concludes with an in-depth analysis of *Grand Hotel*.

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Lynda J. King, a Ph.D. in German from the University of Southern California, is an assistant professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Oregon State University. She has published a number of articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature

Ms King has really written a very authoritative book on that literary phenomenon of the 20's and 30's who was Vicki Baum. I used to read a lot in the family library when I was a boy. I remember that my

father had in very high esteem the collected works of Vicki Baum. There were four volumes of them in a beautiful Madrid de luxe Edition, with leather and everything. I was very curious about a writer who had been able to write so many novellas (she wrote like 50). To put it shortly, I decided to study chemical engineering because of her novel WEEPING WOOD (A history of the Rubber Tree). And also, HEADLESS ANGEL (a romantic novel about the Mexican years of the Colony) made me long for adventures. Many years have elapsed and I always wanted to re-read those books, but with more information at hand, so I could savour what was before me. I found that information in the essay **BEST SELLERS BY DESIGN** by scholar Lynda King. She didn't write a biography in strict sense, but rather went very successfully to explain why Vicki Baum was such an exceptional literary phenomenon in the Berlin of the 20's and 30's. According to her exhaustive survey, Ms King says that Germany in those years was (because of the economic depression with an inflation of 5000% - people had to carry money in wheelbarrows) hungry for reading things that the man-in-the-street -like the enormous majority of the population was-, could achieve in life. The House of Ullstein (Germany's largest editorial Firm) found in the person of Vicki Baum the writer who could address the hearts of the ordinary people. And so and with the fashion of the epoch of delivering chapters each month in Ullstein's different publications destined to housewives, workers, even professional people, they were able to read a whole story on woman emancipation (**THE STORY OF HELENE WILLFEUER**) which produced antagonistic reactions. But it was Baum's first best-seller. And then came the quintessence of dreams-come-true, her most famous novel **GRAND HOTEL** in which Baum takes pains to show that an ordinary man as the hero who comes to Berlin from a small town manages to be admitted into the exclusive and aristocratic Grand Hotel and mingles with all sorts of important people before he dies (he's terminally ill). **Grand Hotel** has been used to explain what a best-seller is, but Ms King has written a very comprehensive allegory of it. I thoroughly enjoyed this essay with b/w rare photographs of Baum. And yes, it helped to recreate in my spirit those scenes of boyhood. It also helped to understand that Baum was a very talented writer, deep and skillful, and that the accusations of her being a writer of **TRIVIAL LITERATUR** were not shared by all literary critics of the day. Even today, says Ms King, opinion is divided. Baum chose otherwise because she needed the money and decided to write best-sellers. But what is true is that she remains a fascinating writer who can get you into the plot of her rich imagination. In short this is an essay which will appeal to all those interested in the making of a best-seller and some description of that most fastidious of cities which is Berlin.

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