

## Curt Riess, Vicki Baum as the “New Woman” (retrospective account, 1990)

### Abstract

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The Jewish-German writer Curt Riess (1902–1993) became a prolific correspondent, theater critic, and writer in the 1920s, and he circulated in the same cultural circles as Berlin’s leading cultural lights at the time, including the playwright and screenwriter Carl Zuckmayer and the author Erich Maria Remarque, who published an international bestseller in 1929, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In this retrospective account, Riess reflected on the career trajectory of the author Vicki Baum, who published over 50 books during her lifetime and achieved some of her greatest successes in the closing years of the 1920s with the novels *Stud. chem. Helene Willfüer* [*Helene*] in 1928 and *Menschen im Hotel* [*Grand Hotel*] in 1929, the latter of which was made into a Hollywood movie. Baum’s career was extraordinary, but, as Riess noted, it perhaps also typified what was possible in Berlin in the 1920s, at least if one had the talent, connections, and ambition Baum had. Her work shaped the image of the New Woman, just as Baum herself exemplified the New Woman’s energetic independence.

### Source

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[...]

The successes that Carl Zuckmayer enjoyed in the theater were granted to Vicki Baum and Erich Maria Remarque in fiction. She, too, belonged to my circle of friends and acquaintances—and her career was typical of what was possible in 1920s Berlin.

Vicki Baum was Austrian, a genuine Viennese even. She was a harpist by profession, and much respected in that capacity, even by Arthur Nikisch, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic until his death in 1922, who always hired her whenever he conducted “Carmen,” where the harp plays a dominant role in the prelude to the third act. Vicki married a young Hungarian journalist, who was a correspondent for some foreign newspapers or other, but he often drank so much that he could not fulfill his obligations. In such cases his young wife took over the assignments, and she clearly did it so well that the papers in question wondered why the otherwise quite mediocre journalist was suddenly hitting the bullseye.

Then, because of his chronic drunkenness, she divorced him and remarried, this time the conductor Hans Lert, whom she followed first to Darmstadt and then to Hanover. Lert, an extremely good looking man, had extraordinary success with women or, as the matter-of-fact Vicki once explained to me, “A general music director simply has a love affair with high drama!”

Ultimately, though, she got sick of always sitting in her corner with the harp. Couldn’t she do anything but play the harp? Couldn’t she write too? She gave it a try and wrote a novel about what went on behind the scenes of a theater. Without many expectations she sent the manuscript to Ullstein in Berlin and by return of post the publisher informed her that they would print it!

The novel was a huge success, but she earned almost nothing from it since the proceeds were devoured by inflation. After the “stabilization” she thus asked Ullstein whether they could use her in some capacity. She had a lot to offer; she was excellent at cooking and writing recipes, and was gifted at drawing, including fashion. She could also devise crossword puzzles. This time, too, Ullstein responded positively: She should make her way to Berlin.

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She was taken to a room on the third floor of the Ullstein building, as she told me in minute detail. There, all the big names of the company were assembled, from the book, newspaper and magazine publishing branches, all the prominent figures Ullstein had to offer. Vicki had no idea, however. Hermann Ullstein, head of the magazine division, was already explaining that they would be pleased to hire her, but she should have no exaggerated notions of payment.

Vicki had envisioned 800 marks. Before she could express this wish, however, Hermann Ullstein continued “We will offer you 6,000 a month to start,” as the editor of *Die Dame*, a very elegant women’s magazine. Naturally she could continue to write novels, and of course she would be paid separately for them.

And so she became a magazine editor and novelist at the same time. The *Berliner Illustrirte* serialized her novels for enormous fees, and the publishing company then printed them in book form. And absolutely all of them came out in astronomical print runs with the result that Vicki earned far, far more than her husband who, having followed her, now worked at the Berlin State Opera. She was no longer the harpist in the corner.

Most of her novels were turned into films, in Germany or France. The most successful of them was *Grand Hotel* in the late 1920s. The novel, whose already high sales were boosted even further by the wide circulation of the *Berliner Illustrirte*, was bought up by Hollywood even before the American publisher Doubleday and Doran brought out the English translation and earned Vicki an invitation to Hollywood.

While in America it became apparent to her that Hitler was on the rise, which was not yet so clear from the German newspapers. Having returned to Berlin from Hollywood, she informed her husband and their two sons that the family needed to emigrate to the USA. They agreed. The Ullsteins protested but could do nothing to change Vicki’s resolve.

Speaking of the Ullsteins, it is worth noting another phenomenon of those times. Books, including Ullstein’s, cost 2.50 to 3 marks on average. One day, I think it was already before the war, the Ullsteins decided to publish cheaper books. This was the advent of the one-mark “Ullstein Book,” the predecessor to the pocket-book later invented in America—a sensation in those days.

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Source of original German text: Curt Riess, „Weltbühne Berlin: Der Film, das Kabarett, der Bubikopf – Blitzlichter aus der ‘unzensurierten’ Reichshauptstadt“, in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, ed. Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 52–53.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

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