

JOAN LOWELL AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN LITERARY FRAUD

*A century ago, an aspiring actress published a remarkable
autobiography. She made up most of it.*

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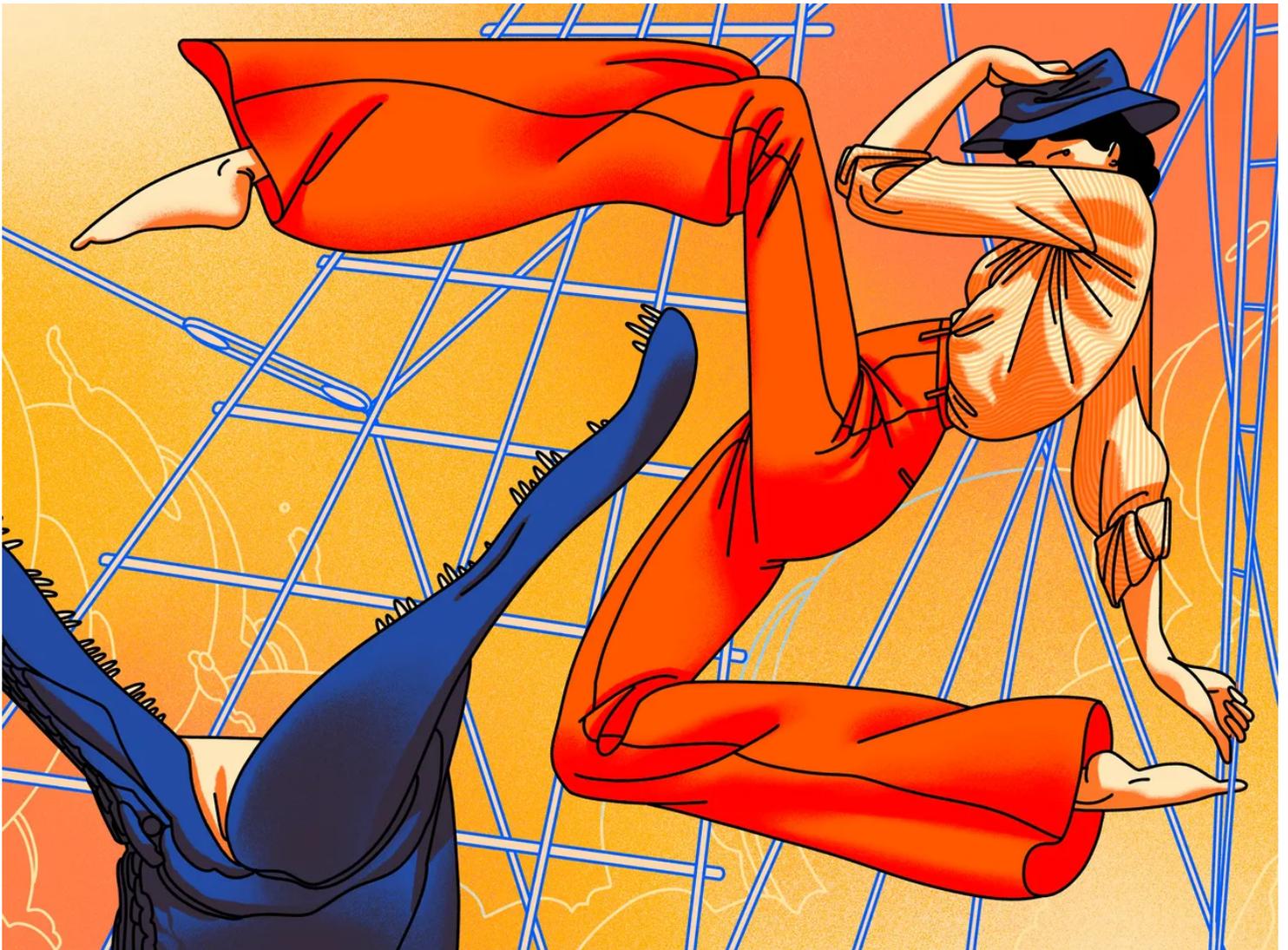


Illustration by Avalon Nuovo

In 1922, a recent high-school graduate from Berkeley, California, moved to Los Angeles, with the hope of becoming an actress. She called herself Helen Joan Lowell, eventually dropping the Helen and going by Joan. She got work as an extra in “Souls for Sale,” a movie about a young woman who tries to become a Hollywood star. The bit part didn’t attract much attention but, later that year, a detail from her biography did: Lowell told a reporter that, from the time she was an infant, she had lived on a four-masted ship, the *Minnie A. Caine*, captained by her father. She had spent sixteen of her nineteen years on the schooner, she said. Living on land was still new to her.

The following February, the *Los Angeles Times* featured Lowell in a story on Hollywood extras. Having grown up alongside an all-male crew, Lowell “never saw another girl until she was 16,” she said. Another L.A. paper reported that Lowell had survived shipwrecks and scurvy as a child, and dubbed her “the most fascinating catch of the far-flung movie net in many moons.” That June, her nautical history helped her land a major role in a sea epic called “Loving Lies.” She and the movie’s screenwriter and producer, Thompson Buchanan, began dating. Lowell soon got smaller parts in other movies, including Charlie Chaplin’s “The Gold Rush,” released in 1925. Two years later, Lowell and Buchanan were married, in a secret ceremony.

It was the era of the Hollywood starlet, when the right personal history could hasten one’s rise to national fame. Lowell was not a gifted actress, but newspapers across the country wanted interviews. The details she offered varied somewhat, though few people seemed to notice. Lowell initially said that her mother died shortly after giving birth to her, and that she went to live on the ship at six months old. Later, she’d say her mother had given her up because she was sick of raising kids, and would peg the start of her life at sea to the age of three months. Sometimes she said she moved aboard the ship even earlier, after doctors told her father that she was “too frail to live.”

Lowell hit the speaking circuit, delighting radio stations and businesswomen's groups with her story. In 1928, she and Buchanan dined with a prominent publicist, Edward Bernays, in his Manhattan home. Bernays listened to Lowell's stories with such "rapt attention" that he forgot to eat his meal, he later told a correspondent. He urged Lowell to write a book about her life; a month later, she brought him a first chapter. He forwarded it to a literary agent, George T. Bye, who contacted the upstart press Simon & Schuster, which had launched in 1924. Richard Simon and Max Schuster met with Lowell, then drew up plans to publish her memoir. Lowell asked them whether she should take writing classes. "If you study how to write, we'll break your neck!" Simon replied. Lowell later claimed that she wrote a draft in eight weeks.

The manuscript she turned in was full of remarkable tales. When Lowell was an infant, the ship's crew puzzled over how to feed her; while docked at Norfolk Island, one sailor brought a goat on board, nicknamed it Wet Nurse, and fed its milk to Lowell for months. ("I owe my life today" to Wet Nurse, Lowell writes.) Lowell also recounts witnessing a mass wedding in the South Pacific, after which the couples publicly consummated their marriages, and claims to have watched her father save their ship from a waterspout by shooting it with a rifle. At the book's climax, the *Minnie A. Caine* catches fire off the coast of Australia; to survive, Lowell swims three miles to shore, with a pair of kittens clinging to her back.

The book, titled "The Cradle of the Deep," was scheduled for publication on March 7, 1929, and Simon & Schuster positioned it as a blockbuster. The Book-of-the-Month Club, which, in a few short years, had amassed more than a hundred thousand subscribers, made the memoir an official pick, effectively guaranteeing big sales. A wire service proclaimed that the book would "be one of the literary sensations of the year." The director D. W. Griffith took an interest, eventually optioning the "The Cradle of the Deep" for film, with Lowell attached to star.

It was not long before people began poking holes in Lowell's story. But the book didn't sink—it was a great success, in part for reasons new to her era and familiar

to ours. “The Cradle of the Deep” appeared just as the publishing industry was consolidating a new kind of influence in popular culture, in concert with new forms of mass media. And Lowell weathered the inevitable controversy in a manner that feels distinctly contemporary: with a seeming awareness that, these days, fame of any kind can be profitable.

The first warning sign surfaced shortly before the book was published. When Simon sent a copy to a wholesaler, one employee, an avid sailor, told him that he thought the book was the “biggest hoax of the century.” Simon took the accusation to Lowell, asking if she might have embellished parts of her life. Lowell denied it. Then, in early March, Simon got a call from an editor at the New York *Herald Tribune*, who warned him that her paper had asked Lincoln Colcord, a freelance writer and hobbyist sailor, to review the book. Colcord had filed an article so critical the paper worried that it verged into libel. A meeting was set to broker the peace.

Lowell and her publishers met with Colcord and his editor at the Simon & Schuster offices. Colcord said that she did not write like a person who had spent any time at sea, insisting that her book was riddled with fictitious slang and technical impossibilities. For instance, Colcord said, Lowell’s crew “reefs,” or folds, a topsail, which was not possible on the ship that Lowell was riding. Lowell whipped out a pen and paper and attempted to diagram how to fold the topsail. But Colcord kept probing, and Lowell grew agitated. Finally, a *Herald Tribune* book critic who was present interrupted: a friend of his worked on an ocean liner, he said—he’d call him up to settle the debate. “Hey, can you reef the topsails of a four-masted schooner?” he asked the man on the phone. A voice shouted back, “Hell, no!”

Sensing that she was losing the argument, Lowell rushed at Colcord, winding up to throw a punch before stopping short a few feet away from him. “If you weren’t so old,” she said, according to Colcord, before sitting back down. “God damn it!” she shouted. “No one has ever called me a liar before!” Both Simon and Schuster hurried to Lowell’s side. “Never mind, Joan,” they told her, according to Colcord. “We still believe in you.”

Days later, “The Cradle of the Deep” became a best-seller. This magazine called it “vivid, rich, and vigorous”; as far away as Honolulu, booksellers struggled to keep the book in stock. At the launch party, celebrities and high-society types gathered on an ocean liner, the Île de France. Griffith was there, as was the adventurer Robert Ripley and the editor John Farrar. “Gee, I can’t tell you how happy I am,” Lowell wrote to her publishers. “I feel as I used to feel on the ship when we were in the center of a hurricane, and the air suddenly becomes still and every heart-throb sounds like a canon.”

That metaphor, with its unspoken promise of imminent peril, was more apt than she knew. Ten days after the book’s publication, the *Herald Tribune* printed Colcord’s review, under the innocuous headline “Sea Movie.” Based on her descriptions of sailing, Lowell was “far from being a real seaman,” Colcord wrote. In fact, he argued, her book—destined to be the biggest memoir of 1929—read like an elaborate hoax.

After the review appeared, reporters began to dig in. Joan Lowell, they discovered, was not her real name—she had been born Helen Joan Wagner. The Minnie A. Caine had not burned at sea; it was docked in Oakland, California, and very much intact. Four different acquaintances came forward to say that Lowell had attended school with them in Berkeley through middle and high school. An old next-door neighbor of several years said that Lowell was “not gone for extended periods.” A classmate showed the *Herald Tribune* a photo of Lowell starring as Lady Macbeth in a school play.

Some details held up. Lowell’s father really was a ship captain. And he, at least, had experience with disaster: in 1908, his ship, the Star of Bengal, struck a rock off the coast of Alaska and sank, and more than a hundred crew members died. Lowell was not on that ship, though she did sometimes sail on the Minnie A. Caine as a child. Her mother worked on board as a stewardess, preparing meals for the crew. A sailor named Harvey Jeans said that Lowell gravitated to the books on deck, and had appointed herself the ship’s librarian.

The fraud became a national story. “Any damn fool can be accurate—and dull,” Lowell told one reporter. “I’ll admit that the cats were thrown in for color,” she

said. But she was defiant, and would confess to no other major inaccuracies. Meanwhile, the book only grew more popular. The Book-of-the-Month Club offered its subscribers the option to return the book for a full refund, but only a few thousand did. Simon & Schuster reclassified the book as fiction and, to the firm's surprise, more orders poured in—the following week, the book topped the best-seller list again, in its new category. “The Cradle of the Deep” became the third-best-selling nonfiction title of 1929, and Lowell made forty-one thousand dollars in royalties, equal to more than three-quarters of a million dollars today. By 1930, she had become slightly more candid, allowing that the book was “80 percent true.” But she insisted that at least one of the changes she'd made—the burning of the ship at sea—was a charitable act “to save the hide of the insurance company.”

The literary journal *The Bookman* published a debate on the moral significance of Lowell's fraud, and invited Colcord to contribute. “If today we have reached the point of progress where a literary hoax is condoned as good business ... then we have fallen on evil times in American literature,” he wrote. Fake memoirs were not new, certainly; the early twentieth century saw a spate of them, including “The Memoirs of Li Hung Chang,” which was ostensibly the autobiography of a Chinese general but was actually spun up by a white American fraudster, and “Long Lance,” the first-person account of a Blackfoot warrior from Montana, written by a North Carolina-born Black man with no documented Blackfoot heritage. (Literary acts of racial fraud constitute a subgenre of their own.) Still, Colcord was not wrong to suggest that something different was afoot.

Hollywood, suddenly an entertainment powerhouse, was turning a parade of young women into stars; radio stations such as CBS and NBC—along with a new generation of mass-media outlets, including *The Saturday Evening Post*—could now ferry stories of scandal across America. Celebrity and publicity were beginning to take recognizably modern forms. The trajectory of Lowell and her book seems less reminiscent of “The Memoirs of Li Hung Chang,” which was debunked just six years before “The Cradle of the Deep” was published, than of James Frey's “A Million Little Pieces,” published more than seven decades later. Like Frey, Lowell was a self-dramatizing fraudster, taking elements of her real life

and grandly embellishing them. And she responded to the ensuing notoriety in a similar way. For all of the public humiliation, neither Lowell nor any of her enablers seemed much hurt by it. The book kept selling, reporters kept scheduling interviews, and Lowell, rather than run from the bad press, decided to lean in.

In 1930, Lowell divorced Buchanan. Despite, or perhaps because of, her dubious relationship to facts, she landed a job as a reporter at a Boston tabloid owned by William Randolph Hearst, the *Daily Record*. Soon, she was churning out scoops that stretched credulity. Among the highlights was her alleged abduction by a naturist colony, in which a group of nude dancers encircled Lowell during a “weird, bacchanalian revel,” and a naked fireman pulled her in for a kiss. Just days after the infant son of the aviator Charles Lindbergh disappeared, in March, 1932, Lowell claimed that she spoke to a woman who knew the kidnappers.

She began pitching a second book, to be titled “Gal Reporter.” The “Cradle of the Deep” fiasco had reportedly given Richard Simon a “nervous breakdown,” and Simon & Schuster did not elect to publish this one—but Farrar & Rinehart stepped in, and it came out in 1933. “I was hailed as a genius, a sensational young-girl author,” Lowell writes. “Book publishers asked me to sign contracts for my next ‘works.’ Cameras clicked, wine flowed, telegrams arrived.” Compared to that reception, “Gal Reporter” got a modest response. Lowell decided to go bigger: in the spring of that year, she announced her imminent departure for a trip around the world, with her aging father, in a forty-eight-foot schooner. At each new port they reached, they would “bite a chunk out of the nearest tree to show we’ve been there,” she told the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*. They would be at sea for “three to five years,” she said, adding, “If the landlubbers don’t like it this time they can eat it.”

Hundreds of spectators gathered outside a Brooklyn port that April to see Lowell set off. She’d hired two crew members after placing a classified ad in a local paper: “Wanted. Able bodied men. Object adventure. No pay.” She’d received hundreds of applications, she said, from doctors, bankers, dentists, and engineers—including five men who’d offered to marry her. She hired a former marine named Solon J. Sawyer and a firefighter named Otto Siegler. Also onboard was Harry Squire, a cameraman who planned to film Lowell’s journey for RKO Pictures; a film contract had already been signed.

Lowell claimed that, a few weeks or so after setting sail, a storm destroyed her water supply. Her father grew delirious, and when she tried to call for help she found that the radio was broken. Someone on the ship found a ginger-ale bottle with water left in it; bafflingly, everyone in the crew agreed to offer the water to a dog on board. Lowell sent out distress signals. When the schooner was just off the coast of El Salvador, a tramp steamer spotted them and finally supplied fresh water.

Lowell returned to Brooklyn just two months after she left, asking friends and fans for money—she said that she'd use the funds to repair the ship and set sail again. She'd left her schooner, and seemingly her father, in the Caribbean Sea. "Joan Lowell Is Home and Broke," the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* announced. By the time she sped back to her father, in July, she had somehow recruited Leo Tolstoy's grandson to work on her ship as a deckhand; New York gossip pages reported that the two were "romancing." But, even with a second go-round, the planned multiyear expedition lasted only about ten months. Lowell was back in New York the following February, now on crutches—thanks to a skirmish with an alligator, she said.

She sent her producers a hundred thousand feet of film, which eventually became "Adventure Girl." To promote the film, RKO ran an essay contest, and a fashion brand put out a "line of silks" inspired by the new release; the studio touted Lowell as "The Most Publicized Girl in the World." The opening credits acknowledge that pivotal moments have been restaged but leaves the impression that everything really happened. Lowell plunders an emerald out of a wrecked ship, starts a fistfight with a local ruler, nearly dies when a boa constrictor wraps itself around her neck, and is wounded by an alligator. Journalists were suspicious. A reporter for *Photoplay* wondered how Squire could have kept filming during a storm while a crew member was flung into the water and after Lowell dove in to save him. "That's why I think Harry is a wonderful cameraman," Lowell replied.

Box-office results were disappointing. Lowell sued the production company, claiming that she was unable to work because of injuries sustained on set. The lawsuit was later dismissed; by then, Lowell was in Anápolis, Brazil, living with a New York ship captain named Leek Bowen in an eleven-room country house.

They'd started a coffee plantation. Lowell offered land to other American celebrities she knew, eventually trying to sell plots to Janet Gaynor and Mary Martin; later accounts credited Lowell with starting a "land boom" in the region. Lowell did not have the right to sell the property that she sold to Martin, however, and Martin discovered this only when she arrived at her new home and the real owners shot at her.

Lowell wrote a third and final memoir, which she hoped to call "Westward Whoa!" It was pushed, in 1952, under the less enthusiastic title "Promised Land." Her editor insisted that the book include photographs, to show that it was true. The Oscar-winning actress Joan Crawford pushed her producer to option the book, later calling Lowell a "very special person." But the adaptation stalled, and the option lapsed. In July, 1957, Brazilian officials arrested Lowell, alleging that she'd written bad checks totalling fifteen thousand dollars. True to form, Lowell had her own version of events, telling a local paper that one of the claimants had brought a gang of thieves to her farm and threatened to kill her husband. "I am a victim of persecution," she said, during the three weeks she spent in jail. The *Daily News* reported that she looked "pale and haggard" in her cell.

Her fame had diminished: after the first reports of her arrest in Brazil trickled out, the *Daily News* wrote that "few eyebrows were raised in Manhattan," although "here and there, old friends and readers with long memories talked of Joan Lowell and the sensations she created in the '20s and '30s." Her longtime agent, George T. Bye, died a few months after her release—when an agency took over his client list, no one there seemed to know who she was. Lowell died in her home in November, 1967, likely of pulmonary edema. The *Times* ran an obituary describing her as the author behind "one of the most sensational literary controversies of its time."

When it came to her death, truth and subterfuge again seemed to blur. One Brazilian newspaper reported that Lowell had received an arson threat a week before she died—and Lowell's maid told the press that her boss had woken up uncharacteristically early that day and made herself coffee, something she apparently never did. Could she have poisoned herself? Probably not, but you could hardly blame the public for asking. ♦