

Summer Sundays in the Park



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BOOKS

That night in June

Senior drag queen is star of Harlem Renaissance history

BY GARY MORRIS

ROUGH AMUSEMENTS: THE TRUE STORY OF A'LELIA WALKER, PATRONESS OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE'S DOWN-LOW CULTURE by Ben Neihart; Bloomsbury USA, 2003; \$21.95 hardcover

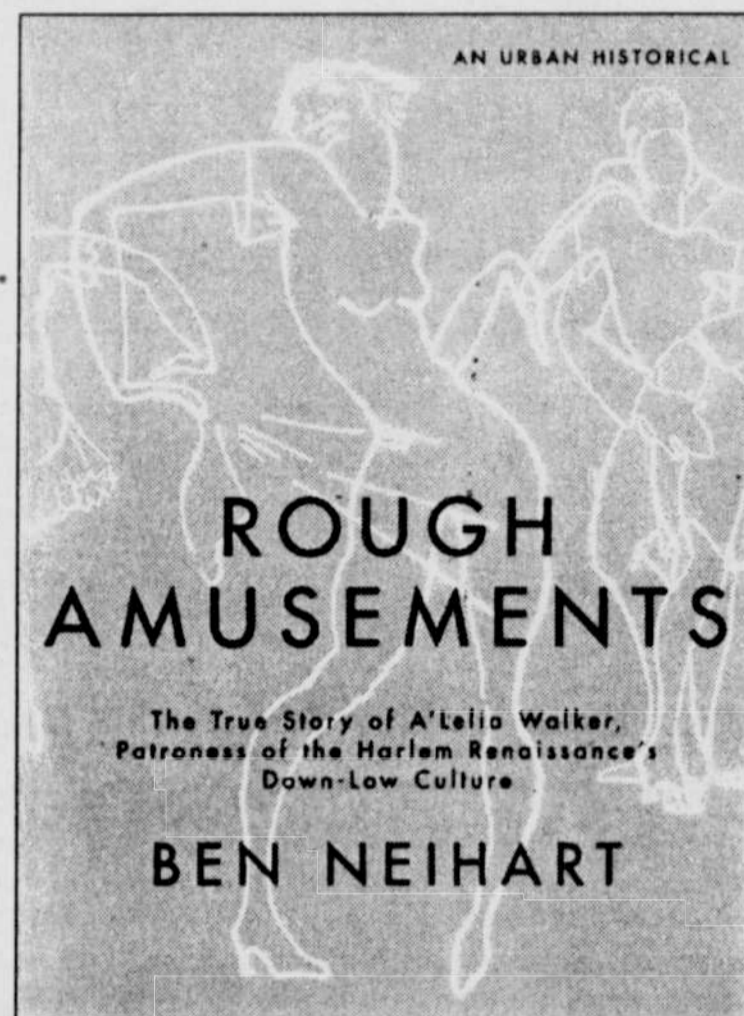
Rough Amusements is the third book in the "Urban Historicals" series, which, judging by this entry, means a curious, sometimes compelling mix of real characters, true events and fabricated conversations set in some specific time and (urban) place—an echo of the "nonfiction novel" pioneered by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* but in a lighter mode. Think long *New Yorker* essay with fictionalized moments.

The book's subtitle, *The True Story of A'Leilia Walker, Patroness of the Harlem Renaissance's Down-Low Culture*, is colorful enough but misleading. Walker, the daughter of legendary black hair care magnate and activist Madame CJ Walker, does pop in and out of the narrative. But she's only one of several figures in what is essentially a portrait in tableaux of queer black Harlem circa 1930. And she's overshadowed by the book's most compelling figure by far: a "castrated fairy" known as Jennie June.

Rough Amusements takes place at a 1930 Harlem "Faggots Ball" but uses that event as a springboard for a lively, if not always gripping, survey of the queer high life of the period. We see A'Leilia happily spending her considerable inheritance on endless parties, poet Countee Cullen spurned by Langston Hughes, shipping heiress and "Negrophile" Nancy Cunard exhorting her racist mother to a distracted Carl Van Vechten. Ma Rainey and Tallulah Bankhead (or her drag queen look-alike) make brief appearances.

More enticing are the details of early queer life, which fall like confetti through the text. Who knew that New York had queer sex clubs in the 1800s? Or that a "consumer guide to whores" was published in 1839? The book is loaded with this kind of choice information that stretches backward a century from the setting.

Author Ben Neihart's triumph is a searing



portrait of 60-year-old drag queen Jennie June, who conjures a heartbreaking history whenever she appears (which is often). It's hard to know how much of this power to attribute to Neihart and how much to June, whose actual words are quoted extensively. "His voice was so distinctive," Neihart admits in a postscript, "that I've tried to make as few alterations to his actual memoirs as possible."

June was a highly educated queen and masochist who fearlessly lured straight toughs into her arms. This sometimes triggered brutal assaults, including numerous rapes. Other times, despite her diminutive size, she scored entire platoons of soldiers entranced by her "baby girl" routine, which included torch songs and slavish rituals with names like "Ceremony of Adoration" and "Enslaving Ceremony." (Interested readers can look for her two books, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* and its sequel, *Female Impersonators*, published under her birth name, Earl Lind.)

June and the striking inner and outer worlds she inhabited make this quick read a worthy one. **JM**

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