‘Inventing the It Girl’ Review: Author of Desire

With tales of women pursuing their own destinies and appetites, Elinor Glyn created both sensation and scandal.

By Jeanine Basinger

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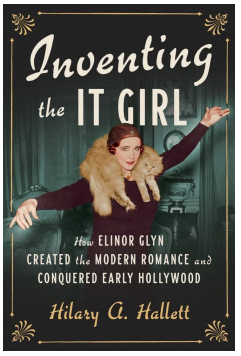
Elinor Glyn, the creator of “it” as a euphemism for sex, is the colorful subject of Hilary A. Hallett’s highly readable and deeply researched “Inventing the It Girl: How Elinor Glyn Created Modern Romance and Conquered Early Hollywood.” It is, in the words of the author, “an unconventional biography about an unconventional British woman.”

Although Glyn may not be a household name today, she can be seen in the 1927 motion picture “It,” which she wrote for the silent-film star Clara Bow. In the film, Glyn sweeps grandly down an enormous staircase on the arm of a tuxedoed escort, explaining “it” to the masses (on a title card) as “something in you that gives the impression that you are not all cold.” Hollywood assumed Glyn meant “something in you that brings in money” and embraced her concept. (Not everyone was impressed. One wag said “Elinor left off the ‘sh.’ ”)

Liveright

464 pages



“It” became a social phenomenon, and today Glyn is remembered mostly for her clever usage of the word in exploiting the advertising-dominated nonsense of her era. Writing with the right touch of occasional humor, Ms. Hallett gracefully restores Glyn’s dignity, defines her intelligence and tells the full story of her remarkable life. She makes Elinor Glyn matter.

Elinor Sutherland—always called Nell—grew up in Canada and the Channel Island of Jersey. To escape the boredom of her isolation, she became an avid reader who dreamed of adventure. Like most women of her class, she was expected to marry for wealth, preside over a home, entertain socially and give birth to the sons who could guarantee the inheritance of her husband’s lands and titles. Accordingly, Nell fled the hinterlands in 1885, moved to London to live with her married older sister, and in 1892, at the age of 27, wed Clayton Glyn Jr., a member of the landed gentry. Thus Nell fulfilled her female destiny, but did not escape her boredom.

During her first pregnancy, she began writing a weekly fashion column for a provincial society magazine. The popularity of her gossipy coverage inspired her to create a series of “letters” written by a debutante to her mother. Published in 1900 as “The Visits of Elizabeth,” this witty and sharp-eyed observation of the British social scene became a bestseller in both England and America. Elinor Glyn, the professional writer, was born.

When Glyn’s unreliable (and indifferent) husband blew their finances through excessive drinking and gambling, Glyn found that what had begun as a diversion needed to become her livelihood. She kept writing, and in 1907 published the book that skyrocketed her to notoriety, “Three Weeks.” Cashing in on the “vogue for Orientalist images of the sexually licentious East,” Glyn’s plot concerned a mysterious Slavic queen who goes incognito (as they always do) to teach a young man how to make love the way a woman wants it to be made.

“Three Weeks” was a shocker, and Glyn came under attack for her bold eroticism. Cleverly, she hid behind her respectability as a 43-year-old devoted mother of two daughters and the English wife and mistress of a proper Essex country home, and kept on writing. A red-headed, green-eyed beauty with great personal style, she swept forward into the world to take “her rightful place at the fountainhead of mass culture.”

Glyn's story soon takes on a Zelig quality. She appears on the London stage, lying on a tiger-skin rug and playing her own "Three Weeks" heroine. She shows up as a newspaper correspondent during World War I, sitting in the Hall of Mirrors during the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Next, she's in New York City, swanning around with her chum, Mark Twain. She's in Paris. She's in Cairo. She's in Spain. She's everywhere, always beautifully turned out.

In the 1920s there was only one place a glamorous globe-trotter like Elinor Glyn was going to end up: Hollywood, the land of sex, the deal and the invented persona. It was a town already well on its way to defining female sexual desires when Glyn arrived. If there's any flaw in Ms. Hallett's excellent book, it's that she doesn't give enough credit to how Hollywood was already letting women loose, free to dream whatever they wanted to dream. Ms. Hallett does, however, clearly define what Glyn brought to the party: the idea of acknowledging female sexuality off-screen as something besides a dream.

Glyn's biggest coup was her invention of "it," which she first serialized in a Cosmopolitan magazine story. "It" was her all-purpose definition, which she stretched from the innocent "self-confidence" to the mysteriously vague "strange magnetism" over to the let's-just-say-it "sex appeal." Eventually she found her best definition in Clara Bow, who would become the embodiment of the "it girl."

Glyn and Bow—both redheads—had very different introductions to the movies. Glyn began in 1920 as a mature, successful author. Bow started her movie career in 1921 as an unknown teenager, the winner of a movie-magazine contest. Glyn was welcomed and given the respect she'd earned, quickly becoming a successful screenwriter, a friend to Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin, and a key influence on the careers of Gloria Swanson and Rudolph Valentino. Bow started at the bottom and climbed the ladder rung by rung: two films in 1922 and upward through undistinguished roles, to the hard grind of filming no less than 22 features during 1925 and 1926.

By 1927 and the release of the film "It"—featuring Glyn's personal appearance—Bow had made it. She had come to personify "the flapper," an escapist creation that represented the evolution of the old-fashioned girl into something freer and sexier. It was a skirts up, morals down progression that linked Glyn and Bow together as flaunters of convention. A photo of the two women shows Glyn looking poised and aristocratic, offering a polite Mona Lisa smile. Bow is vamping and looks ready to go. Her sexuality jumps off the page. It's a portrait of Madame Glyn and her id, Clara Bow.

Ms. Hallett defines Glyn's years in Hollywood as her third act. When Glyn ultimately departed the business, it wasn't because she found herself a woman in a man's world. Ms. Hallett says silent film "was the least sex-segregated of America's major industries." But Glyn made enemies who

saw her as a snob trying to fleece America's rubes. She left Hollywood without the permanent riches she had expected to acquire, returning to England in 1928.

In Glyn, Ms. Hallett uncovers an important story. Calling her "a woman ahead of her times," the author traces a tale of self-liberation and provides ample historical and social context. The good news is that Glyn's life did not end tragically. Secure and comfortable, surrounded by tiger skins, she lived out her years in her London apartment. She died in 1943, at the age of 78, a woman who had taught the world that not all the female stories of her era were man-made.

—Ms. Basinger's latest book, "Hollywood: The Oral History," co-written with Sam Wasson, will be out in November.