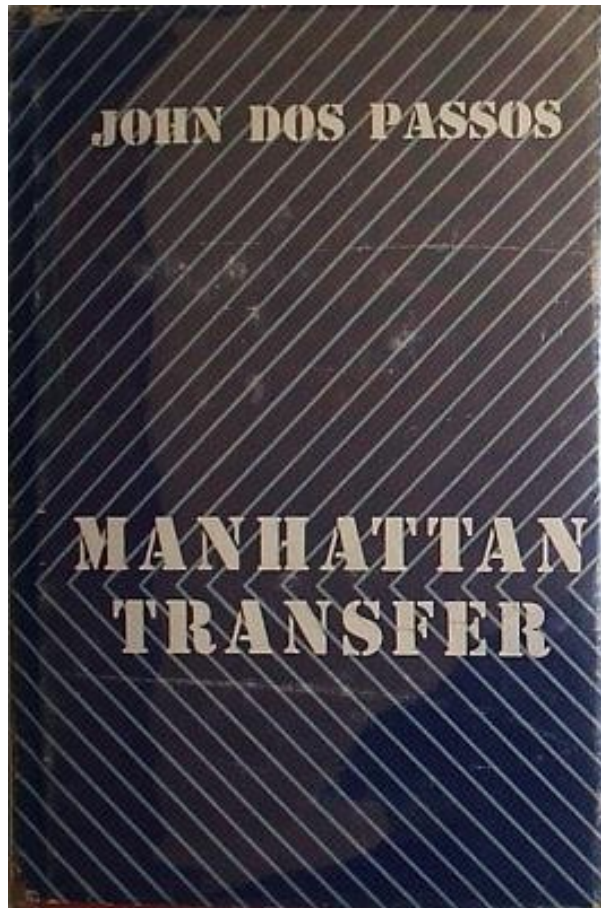
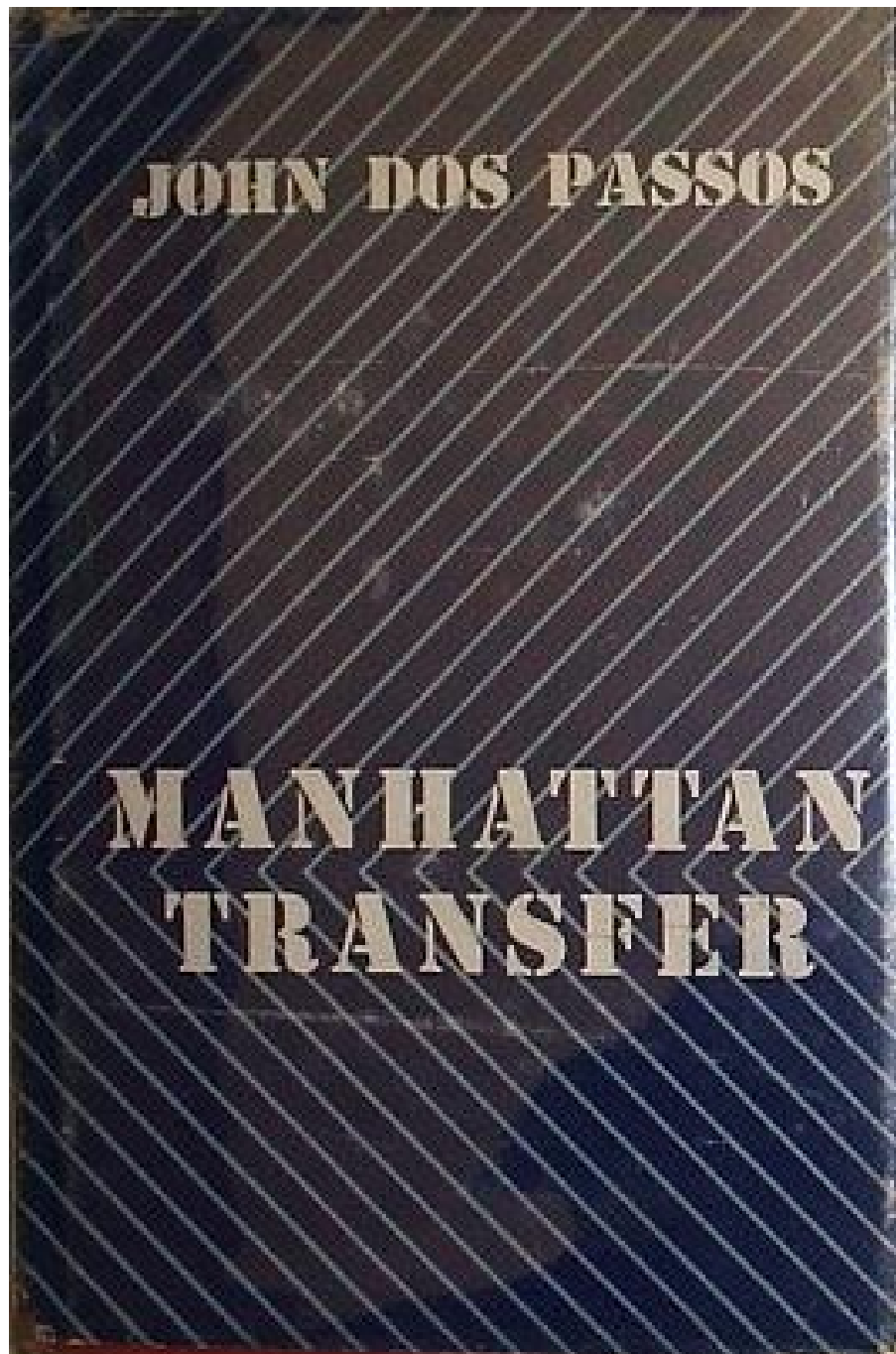


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355 pages

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An under read classic.

By choiceweb0pen0

Within the first few pages, it becomes apparent quickly that Manhattan Transfer is not a traditional novel. Dos Passos presents a collage of New York City in the 1920's that even 75 years later describes well the modern city. His technique of jumping from character to character as they interact with each other within the city as some succeed and others fail provides a bleak, yet at the same time oddly wonderful reading. His injection of newspaper ads, songs, and advertisements captures so well the bustle of large cities. I can only wonder why he is often left out of the "canon" of American Modernists. It does take adjustment to read Manhattan Transfer, but you will be more than rewarded for your efforts.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

This book helped create "Modernism" in literature...but it's also a good read

By Reading as Much as I Can

This book is an excellent read, but it does highlight some of the problems with the early phase of so-called "Modern" writing. Passos is trying hard (perhaps too hard) to describe everything going on around him over a period of several years. That's a hefty task for a novelist and no one has done it much better (except Leo Tolstoi).

Unlike Tolstoi, though, John Dos Passos never gets very far into the minds and motivations of his characters. Like Tolstoi, he has a cast of hundreds, but he is not as deft at giving even some of the recurring characters the realistic motivations and sympathetic treatment that Tolstoi does. One does want to like or feel something for \*some\* of the characters in a novel. Maybe we want to dislike or even hate an occasional character. It's probably part of Passos's scheme to have none of that sort of thing in Manhattan, but he does early on introduce the rather sympathetic character of Ed. Red herring, really. Ed will disappear into Manhattan, his concerns and doings of only tangential importance within another 100 pages. I'm sure that literary critics have created an industry of trying to connect Ellen/Elaine's doings up with Ed's, somehow, but really, Ed is just an average guy with an average baby in an average setting in early 20th century Manhattan.

Upon rereading some of it, I get the feeling that Passos did not know where most of his characters were going or whether they would turn up again in the book. It seems as if he knew he needed some of them to recur, to make it a novel rather than a very extended book of vignettes and sketches. He does sketches very well. Most of us would be delighted to find ourselves able to write such sketches, but, like John Dos Passos,

even if we could, we would not find a publisher. We could blog our sketches, and it struck me that Passos is something like an early blogger. Lots of impressionistic, day-to-day observations, strung together mostly by the fact that one person is writing them down. The sudden development of dramatic plot lines (and their very rapid denouements) means that you can't just start reading near the back and "get" the story (unlike a blog), but that's one of the few things that makes it different from blogging.

We have lots of great observers out there in the cyberworld, observing and writing. John Dos Passos took a chance when he decided to make a living making these kinds of observations. We are indebted to him, forever, for these glimpses of the World's Second Metropolis and for those glimpses, alone, this book is more than worthwhile. Whether you love Manhattan, as I do, or you hate it, you will still enjoy much of this book. You'll also likely find yourself wanting to skim certain sections, just as you'd wish the person in the next cubicle would stop some irritating habit, you'll find some of the characters irritating. They are, however, quite real in their ability to irritate and that's something to accomplish. He's far deeper into personalities, personality types and dialects than, say, Hemingway.

This book also set up many decades of further fictions about New York City, so in that regard, it's also a must read.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Lots of energy but fades into history like the buggy whip

By Digital Rights

Ask anyone about the 1920's and they may think Jazz Age, Prohibition, Babe Ruth, Hemingway, Fitzgerald maybe Faulkner. Only a minority would throw John Dos Passos into that ring but he was in fact a giant of the time. His "USA Trilogy" and "Manhattan Transfer" were recognized and awarded the same acclaim as writers we know so much better today.

Hemingway wrote that "Manhattan Transfer" finally gave the world the real picture of New York City. Alfred Döblin was deeply influenced by Dos Passos's style. He ran with the same crowd. Drank and partied with them all and yet almost a hundred years later his own fame is far eclipsed by so many others. Why?

A great novel needs great characters and a central theme or conflict. Dos Passos was writing about a time and place; New York City in the first part of the 20 century. His focus is on atmosphere. He wants you to feel the city through it's accents, bustle, the frustrations of daily life, the food and drink and the movement of cars, taxis, subways, street cars and boats of every kind. Through all that he wants to convey the energy that's bursting in every direction but he also wants to expose the contradictions of daily life; war veterans not getting their bonuses, women yearning for more opportunity, backstreet abortions, failed marriages, banks and businesses and later drinking during prohibition.

Characters come in go very briefly, re-appearing later. There are so many that it takes perhaps the first half of the book to keep it straight. For me it was hard to follow let alone develop an empathy or curiosity for them. It felt very flat. He uses major events of the day as a timeline but aside from war and prohibition much of those references are obscure and thus one tends to lose a sense of time passing that he was likely successfully conveying to his contemporaries.

My conclusion is that it's too ambitious and there is too little for the modern reader to grasp. By doing so much there are interesting points and poignant scenes. But too often I was flipping back to see if I had already jumped to yet another vignette and double checking if he'd jumped a few weeks, months or years. Pulling this out of a time capsule I enjoyed this as a 1925 novel of early New York but I wonder if it were the book that I'd want to say best depicted New York at that time and I'd conclude that other works have

surpassed it.

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