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## Anita Loos: The Soubrette of Satire

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Anita Loos: The Soubrette of Satire**

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Anita Loos, courtesy of the George Eastman House Motion Picture Document Collection

## [End Page 87]

Work is more fun than fun.

—Noël Coward

F. Scott Fitzgerald became the spokesman of the 1920s, but it could have been Anita Loos if she had been game for the role. Her novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a story of a beautiful gold-digger's antics, is just as evocative of the bathtub-gin era of American history as Fitzgerald's early work, *This Side of Paradise*.

Perhaps the mantle went to Fitzgerald and not Loos because of her special affection for the demimonde—shady ladies, con men and charlatans all-around—rather than spritely flappers and their coiffed beaux of the Ivy League. Maybe it was the rakish company she kept—hustlers, tarnished ladies and the occasional con artist, along with Hollywood's working class of writers and actors. Or perhaps she was simply too old when the jazz age was ushered in; she was nearly forty when *Blondes* was published in 1925. When asked if she was a flapper, she

characteristically replied, “The only thing I ever flapped was the pages of a yellow legal pad.” Like Fitzgerald’s, her first novel became an instant best seller, selling out in a day. The book sardonically depicts the underbelly of jazz-age frivolity, a theme Fitzgerald would later tackle with high seriousness in *The Great Gatsby*. Truth be told, Loos was simply too busy working to care about her cultural ranking or place on the best-seller list. She liked having a hit on her hands, but the work was its own reward.

After the fuss over *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* had settled and she’d had her fill of being a fêted author, she returned to Hollywood in 1931 to resume her screenwriting career. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had offered her \$1,000 a week to join its stable of writers. One of her coworkers was Fitzgerald, whose literary star had fallen hard. One of her first jobs for Irving Thalberg, the head of the studio, was to rewrite his adaptation of Katharine Brush’s novel *Red-Headed Woman*, about a trollop’s progress from secretary to wife of an aristocrat. It was comfortable territory for Loos—questionable class climbers were her specialty.

Corinne Anita Loos was born in 1888 in Sissons, California. Her father, R. Beers Loos, noticed right away that little “Nita,” the runt of the family with a mischievous demeanor and soulful, luminous eyes, was a natural performer. He became a stage father. His connections in the San Francisco theater world got five-year-old Anita cast in *A Doll’s House*, **[End Page 88]** followed by the leading role in David Belasco’s production of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

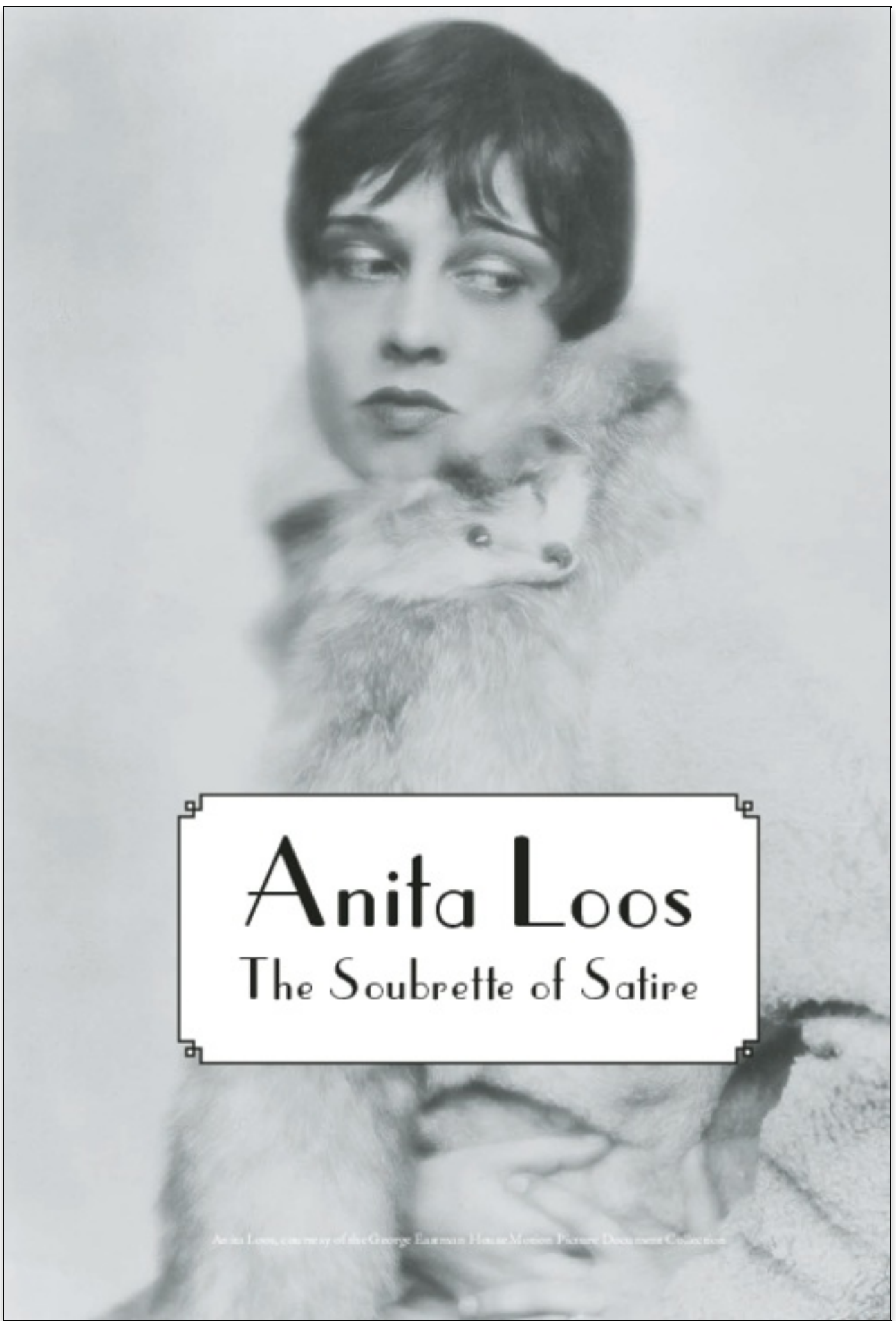
Anita’s parents were unhappily married: “My mother was an earth-bound angel and Pop was a scamp.” She preferred her father’s company, though she resented being the family’s main source of financial support when he failed to keep various theater managing jobs.

At sixteen, shy of five feet tall and with a boyish figure, she looked the baby vamp. Her youthful appearance, mature personality and versatile acting ability kept her center stage. Her father lent her to the Empire in exchange for pirated scripts that came from cribbing Broadway shows

and then selling them for a fraction of the cost of royalties. For a time, Anita did double duty. Outfitted in a blond wig and billed as Cleopatra Fairbrother, she performed at the Empire while acting at the Lyceum under her own name.

Despite her stage charisma, Loos didn't fit in at school. The girls thought actresses little better than prostitutes, while her childlike looks didn't appeal to the boys. She later recalled that she knew she was destined to be an outsider, largely commenting on life rather than participating. She also knew that she hated acting; the profession was full of "numbskulls and narcissists."

Anita Loos wanted to be a writer. She spent hours reading at the San Diego library and in her dressing room at the...



Anita Loos  
The Soubrette of Satire

Anita Loos, courtesy of the George Eastman House Motion Picture Document Collection



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