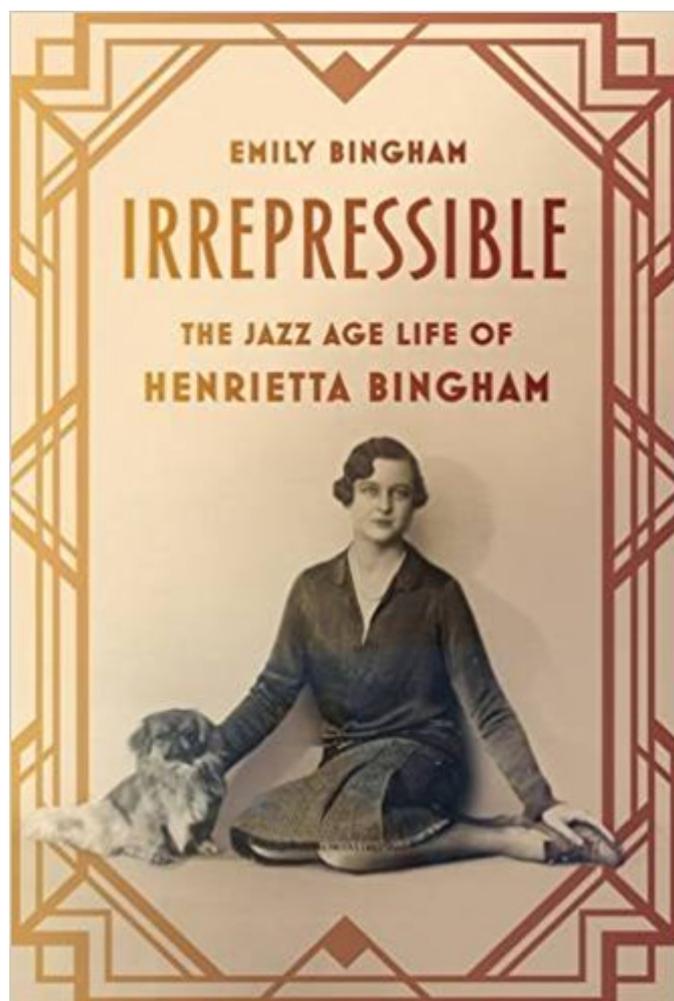


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Irrepressible: The Jazz Age Life Of Henrietta Bingham



Synopsis

Raised like a princess in one of the most powerful families in the American South, Henrietta Bingham was offered the helm of a publishing empire. Instead, she ripped through the Jazz Age like an F. Scott Fitzgerald character: intoxicating and intoxicated, selfish and shameless, seductive and brilliant, endearing and often terribly troubled. In New York, Louisville, and London, she drove both men and women wild with desire, and her youth blazed with sex. But her love affairs with women made her the subject of derision and caused a doctor to try to cure her queerness. After the speed and pleasure of her early decades, the toxicity of judgment from others, coupled with her own anxieties, resulted in years of addiction and breakdowns. And perhaps most painfully, she became a source of embarrassment for her family--she was labeled "a three-dollar bill." But forebears can become fairy-tale figures, especially when they defy tradition and are spoken of only in whispers. For the biographer and historian Emily Bingham, the secret of who her great-aunt was, and just why her story was concealed for so long, led to *Irrepressible: The Jazz Age Life of Henrietta Bingham*. Henrietta rode the cultural cusp as a muse to the Bloomsbury Group, the daughter of the ambassador to the United Kingdom during the rise of Nazism, the seductress of royalty and athletic champions, and a pre-Stonewall figure who never buckled to convention. Henrietta's audacious physicality made her unforgettable in her own time, and her ecstatic and harrowing life serves as an astonishing reminder of the stories that lie buried in our own families.

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Customer Reviews

This book could have been called "Irresistible." That well describes the protagonist, Henrietta

Bingham, the Kentucky heiress whose elusive sensuality and mesmerizing eyes obsessed Dora Carrington, John Houseman, Mina Kirstein and many - many - others in the 1920s and 1930s. It also describes the book itself, written with elegance and authority by Henrietta's grand niece, Emily Bingham, a respected historian who was drawn to the mystery of Henrietta, a figure of fascination and shame within the Bingham's privileged Louisville world. The book is based on deep research and the lucky discovery of hitherto undiscovered letters that open the door on a world of sexual passion and yearning that is urgent and human in a way that feels almost foreign today. At the heart of Henrietta's story is the relationship with her dominating father, Judge Robert Worth Bingham, the controversial owner of The Courier Journal in Louisville and ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Emily Bingham has done no less than rescued Henrietta by telling her moving, fascinating, and long-buried story.

If you're from Kentucky, you'll recognize the Bingham name as the Louisville Courier-Journal family, or if you're not from the Bluegrass State, you might associate the name with the poet and philanthropist Sallie Bingham. You'd be right about those connections, and while the book brings the Bingham's to vivid life, it's so much more: an intimate portrait of Old Louisville; a romping history of the Jazz Age; a twentieth-century story of iconoclasts and the family members who tried to suppress them; and, most importantly, the vibrant early life and difficult later life of a woman who hung out regularly with the Bloomsbury Group and many Hollywood names and who was an independent woman and a free thinker and free lover in a time and place that turned a blind eye to same-sex relationships and then shoved them into the cramped closet. This woman, an American Orlando, lived in the world before her time.

We all know someone who seems to have been ahead of their time or at least more courageous in pursuing their passion in life. In the Bingham family one of those individuals was Henrietta Bingham and thanks to her great niece Emily we are able to learn about the journey of her life, the risks she was willing to take and the lessons that we can all glean a little bit from. Written in such a way that draws you in, IRREPRESSIBLE tells us about the life choices and actions of Henrietta: her fearlessness, her determination and her ability to allow others to see that being yourself was the most freeing thing in the world. As the subtitle of the book alludes to music was also a part of who she was, and she was able to appreciate great music no matter what genre it might be or the color of the person making it. She was a true trailblazer, but her life was not without difficulty and costs. Definitely a book that is inspiring when it comes to dancing to the beat of your own drum,

IRREPRESSIBLE reminds us all that if you want to soar you have to be willing to spread your wings.

Having grown up in the Louisville area with the Bingham family "aura", and having read an earlier book, "The Binghams of Louisville" by David Chandler, I was especially interested in reading about Henrietta Bingham, whose real life was obviously "suitably contained" by this very powerful family. "Irrepressible" describes how a gay woman with wealth, in the Jazz Age, could seek out a fairly comfortable lifestyle in Europe where her sexuality was not as forbidden among the literary, musical and social scene in which she had privy to, thanks to her illustrious but overbearing father's political stature in England. Her beauty and personality overshadowed negative situations, and only when WW II made it necessary for her to return to the United States did her lesbian lifestyle begin to unravel this fascinating woman. Hampered by social norms of that era, and born decades too early, she was unable to find any lasting happiness, sinking into alcoholism and mental stress, fading into social oblivion and death. Written with a great deal of compassion by a niece, it is peppered with great deal of name-dropping from the rich and famous of the Jazz Age scene.

I raced through it yesterday, ignoring house guests and slightly pissing off my wife. The breadth of sources, and Bingham's mastery of them, is astonishing; she has performed a murderously difficult task, gathering bits and pieces from scores of sources, then stitching them together to form a coherent - and at times shocking - narrative of a compelling woman and her era.

This (2015) fusion of family history with social and cultural history is well-documented and compelling to read. Emily Bingham recreates the life of her great aunt Henrietta along with her family's participation in the history of 19th and 20th-century Louisville, and the tale of Robert Worth Bingham's three marriages and his appointment as US ambassador in London in the 1930s. Henrietta's story includes Mary Lily Kenan Flagler Bingham, Mina Kirstein Curtiss, John Houseman, Helen Jacobs, David Garnett, Duncan Grant, Dora Carrington, Ernest Jones, and Noel Coward. Henrietta's class and sexuality are key elements in this narrative. Her family wealth and her personal vitality afforded Henrietta Bingham many privileges and excitements, but her confidence was eventually drained away by disappointments, alcoholism, psychological conflicts, and homophobia. As compelling as Henrietta's story is the story of how Emily came to uncover it.

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