



# **Rough Amusements: The True Story of A'Lelia Walker, Patroness of the Harlem Renaissance's Down-Low Culture**

*Ben Neihart*

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From acclaimed novelist Ben Neihart, a vibrant portrait of gay Harlem's most memorable diva: A'Lelia Walker.

When A'Lelia Walker died in 1931 after a midnight snack of lobster and chocolate cake washed down with champagne, it marked the end of one of the most striking social careers in New York's history. The daughter of rags-to-riches multi-millionaire Madame C.J. Walker (the washerwoman who marketed the most successful straightening technique for African American hair), A'Lelia was America's first black poor little rich girl, using her inheritance to throw elaborate, celebrity-packed parties in her Westchester Mansion and her 136th Street would-be salon, 'Dark Tower'.

In *Rough Amusements*, third in Bloomsbury's *Urban Historicals* series, Neihart takes us into the heart of A'Lelia's world-gay Harlem in the 1920s. In tracing its cultural antecedents, he delves into the sexual subculture of nineteenth-century New York, exploring mixed-race prostitution; the bachelorization of New York society; French Balls ("the most sophisticated forum for testing the boundaries of urban sexual behavior"); and The Slide (New York's most depraved nineteenth-century bar). Using A'Lelia's lavish parties as a jumping-off point, Neihart traces the line connecting Davy Crockett's world without women to Walt Whitman's boundless love of beautiful men to A'Lelia's cultivation of the racial, social, and sexual risk that defined the Harlem Renaissance.



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