



# STORIED HOTELS



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READING

THE ALGONQUIN HOTEL NEW YORK: LITERARY LEGENDS KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS



## The Algonquin Hotel New York: Literary Legends Know Why The Caged Bird Sings

Wendy K Leigh [Autograph Collection Hotels](#) [New York Hotels](#) 12 min read

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A near-silent snowstorm swept across New York City in the days before Christmas, draping the streets and buildings with a whispery Rockwell-ian veil just as my plane slid onto the icy runway. I was on my way to the storied [Algonquin Hotel](#) but now realized, with a baseless shiver, that it could be hours before the roads were cleared for a smooth ride through Times Square and over to West 44th.

It was my first journey to the long-reigning queen of Manhattan hotels, and the surreal ride through nearly deserted city streets was an anomaly in its own right. This was no 1866 “whirl-dance” of a blinding storm penned by Whittier in *Snow-Bound*, but rather a gentle deep blanket that tucked each block into its own miniature snow village.

Like slow-motion flashes of yellow neon on powdery-white streets, taxicabs slid through Times Square while the color palette of the city blinked and glittered beneath snowcapped signs: *Nike! Les Miserable! Coca-Cola!* Finally, a snow-brushed incarnation of The Algonquin Hotel appeared on the sidewalk between 5th and 6th like a ghost from Christmas Past, timeless and elegant and *comforting* in an unexpected way.

## **FROLIC ARCHITECTURE**

Snow flurries swept my lashes as I stepped onto an ice-rink version of a New York City sidewalk. The liveried **Algonquin** Hotel doorman graciously offered his arm, along with a gentlemanly nod to a time long past – yet staring me now in the face. I could have sworn I saw a twinkle in his eye.

Staring upward for what seemed like miles, I reveled in the stacked Art Deco balcony enclaves jutting into the air like iron bird cages now painted with white slashes of snow. As Sara Harowitz wrote in *Montecristo Magazine*, the buildings in Manhattan have “*a distinct New York-ness that pulses upward*” – and the **Algonquin**, the oldest-operating hotel in Manhattan, is certainly no exception. It rises over the Theater District with 12 stories cloaked in Renaissance limestone and a vermilion brick façade.

Opening on November 22, 1902, with 2-dollar rooms and 10-dollar suites, the Algonquin Hotel sits on the renowned Club Row just a three-block walk from Times Square. Only two years after welcoming its first guests, the hotel purchased a horse stable next door, which re-wrote itself over the years into Broadway-style grand openings of sexy supper clubs, a barber shop, rehearsal studios, and restaurants. The grand 5,600-foot Hippodrome theater spread gloriously across the adjacent block until it was demolished in 1939.

As I shook the ice off my boots and headed toward the Algonquin entrance, a shiver of snow showered the sidewalk, escaping from the ornate overhead canopy. No doubt by morning, with me sleeping snugly inside a panoply of the past, the snow storm would continue its subtle transformation of this deeply historic building, in what Emerson called “the frolic architecture of the snow.”

"To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone, Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work, The frolic architecture of the snow."

## THE GREATEST COLLECTION OF UNSALABLE WIT

For decades, the Algonquin Hotel has been a “famously secret” spot for creative thought and intellectual ingenuity that I feared would be diluted after recent remodels. I half-expected an unrecognizable ultra-urban transformation – but thankfully, this is a hotel that knows itself in utterly non-negotiable ways.

Even after a massive remodel in 2012 by legendary interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud, the lobby still exudes the elegance of the 1920s when the ‘literati’ of New York’s publishing world walked, stomped and drank their way through the halls, walls, nooks, and crannies of “the Gonk,” which they knew like the back of their famous pen-pushing hands. The collective unabashed wit of a self-dubbed “Vicious Circle” of intellectuals both lashed and lulled its 24 members on a daily basis for 10 years inside the hotel.

What eventually came to be known as the notorious Algonquin Round Table started with a welcome-home bash in 1919 for Aleck Woollcott, the New York Times drama critic returning from World War I. After the celebration/roast of Woollcott, a group of what would become the city’s most illustrious columnists, critics, playwrights, and journalists agreed to meet for lunch the next day in what turned into the decade-long repartee and standing date with destiny.

Along with legendary critic, poet and short-story master Dorothy Parker, who penned for the likes of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Life Magazine*, the Vicious Circle included Woollcott, playwright George Kaufman, author and four-time Pulitzer Prize winner Robert E. Sherwood, actor and humorist Robert Benchley, and columnist Frank Pierce Adams. In 1925, fellow-member Harold Ross won a poker game with Round Table members and subsequently used his winnings to launch *The New Yorker*.

Copies of the now-acclaimed magazine still grace the hotel, as do collections of *New Yorker* cartoons, *Vanity Fair* covers and biting Dorothy Parker quotes, many of which were concocted as part of ruthless wordplay games and acid-tongued barbs of the Round Table wit-sters. One of her most famous lines came from a game in which she was asked to use the word “horticulture” in a sentence and tossed out the acerbic one-liner, ‘You can lead a horticulture but you can’t make her think.’

Margaret Case, the daughter of Algonquin Hotel owner Frank Case, wrote in her book *The Vicious Circle* that “The Algonquin Round Table came to the Algonquin Hotel the way lightning strikes a tree, by accident and mutual attraction.”

Irreverent, unapologetic and wickedly witty, the Round Table has since been dubbed New York’s version of the Lost Generation in Paris. When they first began meeting, the vicious circlers had yet to fully make their literary marks on the world, and press agent Herman Mankiewicz left their table at the hotel one day shaking his head sadly and saying, “There goes the greatest collection of unsalable wit in America.”

They instead went on to become multiple Pulitzer Prize and Academy Award winners and to forever impact the world of American theatre, film, literature, music, humor and critical thinking.

## IF I HAD THREE WISHES

Actors with unofficial membership in the Algonquin Round Table included Harpo Marx and Talullah Bankhead, who lived in the hotel at age 15, shelling out 21 dollars a week for a room with a bath. The

Algonquin showed an early intuitive streak by being one of the first hotels in Manhattan to allow unaccompanied female guests, including Gertrude Stein, Eudora Welty, Simone de Beauvoir and actress Helen Hayes, who now has a photograph-montaged Algonquin boardroom named in her honor. Due in part to The New Yorker and Round Table connections, the Algonquin carries designations as a literary landmark and a New York City Historical Landmark.

The literary impact of this group has been unparalleled over the decades, its mere memory pulling the likes of Maya Angelou, J.D. Salinger, Sinclair Lewis, and William Faulkner to the famous lobby in a magnetized storytelling thread that time fails to unravel.

Faulkner wrote the acceptance speech for his 1950 Nobel Prize inside the Algonquin Hotel, and Angelou scribbled the beginning of her screenplay for “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” on Algonquin stationery. They followed in the earlier footsteps of Lerner & Loewe, who composed My Fair Lady, including the classic "I Could Have Danced All Night," in Suite 908. Ironically, they received management threats of getting their piano confiscated for pling pling plinging into the dead of night on what became one of the most cherished Broadway hits of all time.

Perhaps the biggest testament to the enduring legend of the Round Table is a revelation from President John F. Kennedy, who admitted:

*- When I was growing up, I had three wishes – I wanted to be a Lindbergh- type hero, learn Chinese and become a member of the Algonquin Round Table. -*

## **FASHION SHOWS AND FELINE FANCY**

When I crossed the threshold into the Algonquin Hotel lobby all those decades later, I locked eyes with a feline named Matilda and was immediately informed by the concierge that it was a sign of good luck. Cats have been in residence at the Algonquin since the 1920s, but the real fancy feline stories began in 1933. Broadway actor John Barrymore, the grandfather to Drew, often lived in the hotel during his long-running engagements playing Hamlet across the street at the opulent Hippodrome theater. Upon musing that the current cat, Rusty, needed a more dignified name, Barrymore dubbed him Hamlet – and thus the legend began.

The current Hamlet, an orange tabby rescued from a feral cat colony on Long Island, is the twelfth Algonquin cat and the eighth Hamlet incarnation. Once prowling alleys and scrounging for food in smelly dumpsters, the newly crowned prince now entertains fans from across the globe, dines on gourmet food, and has his own email, Facebook and Twitter accounts. He also receives devoted pampering from Alice de Almeida, the official Chief Cat Officer (and more formally, the Executive Assistant to the General Manager).

*“You see, Hamlet is a rescue cat, as are all the Algonquin cats since the 1920s,”* explains Alice. She describes his princely duties, stating that he reigns over the Front Desk and observes from his own private treehouse, greeting guests and supervising check-in.

Regarding his social media presence, Alice admits “I help him in responding to his many fans. He has no opposable thumbs, so he needs help hitting the space bar on the keyboard. Hamlet receives fan mail and gifts from all over the world and has a busy social schedule.”

Hamlet follows in the cat-steps of the most famous and beloved resident of all time, Matilda the III, a long-haired regal ragdoll with fans such as a Japanese weaver who created a Kimono-wearing wool replica of the cat. Alice recently told of a poignant moment when an elderly visitor from Texas returned to the hotel over and over until she got to meet Matilda, who was on the lady’s Bucket List after surviving a heart transplant.

Hamlet VIII now presides over the annual Cat Fashion Show, a New York tradition featuring feline “mewdles” parading (in the arms of their owners) on a literal catwalk to raise money and awareness for the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, which sponsors 150 shelters across the city’s boroughs.

In July 2018, the 11th annual show featured eight mewdles donning fedoras and feathers in custom 1920s garb designed by Ada Nieves, a certified animal fashion designer. Titled “The Purring ‘20s,” the 2018 show paid homage to the notorious members of the Algonquin Round Table and came with a live auction as well as rescue kittens for sale in front of the hotel. In a fitting twist, the production also featured current Broadway superstar Sarah Rice, who once incarnated the character of Ophelia in Hamlet , the role made famous by John Barrymore.

*"And what did Hamlet wear that evening? Only fur, of course,"* reveals Alice.

## **BECAUSE YOU LOOK BETTER IN BLUE**

Barrymore made his enduring mark on the Algonquin Hotel in more ways than one. After Prohibition ended and the hotel bar reopened in 1933, Barrymore insisted that the lighting needed blue gel coatings because “one looks most attractive under blue lighting” – and because diffused lights help with hangovers. Thus, the birth of the now-famous Algonquin Blue Bar, home to the \$10,000 Martini tradition that involves a single ice cube and one enormous engagement diamond.

It’s now a favorite gathering spot for watching the annual Academy Awards, which once featured some of the Round Table creatives who migrated to Hollywood, including Dorothy Parker. She co-wrote the screenplay for the original 1937 film "A Star is Born" starring Janet Gaynor, which won the 10th Academy Award for Best Story. A third remake of the film debuted in 2018 starring Lady Gaga and directed by Bradley Cooper.

Since 2014, the Algonquin has sponsored exclusive installations of Al Hirschfeld drawings featuring Broadway playwrights, composers, lyricists, and performers, many of which hang on the walls of the Blue Bar. In a fitting tribute to the artist’s longtime patronage of the Algonquin, his work includes iconic images such as the My Fair Lady poster, portraits of Lerner and Loewe, and John Barrymore as Hamlet.

The renovated version of the Blue Bar showcases modern glass sculptures and glows with LED instead of gel filters. But it still retains the pervasive blue-ness and perfectly poured martinis from the 1930s, both of which do indeed make us all look better than we actually are.

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*"I like to have a martini / Two at the very most / After three, I'm under the table / After four, I'm under my host. "* – Dorothy Parker –

## SUPPER CLUBS AND CABARET

In 1981, the Algonquin Hotel reopened its Oak Room, a sultry cabaret supper club tucked inside the original Pergola Room where the first meeting of the Round Table took place. With little fanfare, the jazzy little enclave suddenly found itself launching the careers of now-veteran performers such as Harry Connick, Jr., Michael Feinstein, Dianne Kroll, and Andrea Marcovicci.

When the Oak Room closed for good in 2012 prior to the big renovation, the supper club devotees did not go silently into the night. More than 3,000 people stood in indignation with a signed petition from the likes of singer Carly Simon, actress Carol Burnett, director and film historian Peter Bogdanovich, and Broadway star Tovah Feldshuh. Michael Feinstein reminisced about the days when Leonard Bernstein and Jackie Onassis came to hear him perform at the Oak Room, telling the *New York Post* that “*Every night was a party.*”

But the supper club’s “shining hour” had finally flickered out – just like when 72-year-old lounge singer Sylvia Syms stood onstage at the Oak Room in 1992 to belt out “My Shining Hour” in the final encore of an evening tribute to her friend Frank Sinatra. Steadying herself for a moment with her hand on the front-row table of patron Cy Coleman, composer of “Sweet Charity,” Sylvia suddenly slid to the floor and died.

*"This moment, this minute and each second in it*

*Will leave a glow upon the sky*

*And as time goes by*

*It will never die"*

– Frank Sinatra, My Shining Hour –

## THE NOT SO FAMOUS

For all the tales of glitterati and literati haunting the halls of the Algonquin Hotel, even more mysteries and histories of ordinary people comprise the stories of this storied hotel. In February of 1977, journalist Jane O'Reilly from New York Magazine put it this way:

*"If Mo Udall, Tom Stoppard, Kyle Rote, and Ellen Burstyn are all in the same room, the room must be in New York. If your college roommate's first husband and the person you're thinking might be right to back your next project and a woman you mistake for your Great-aunt Martha are also in the room, then the room is the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel."*

Those many years later, awash in all this history, fame and drama, including the attempted suicide of Dorothy Parker in an upper-floor suite of the Algonquin in 1932, I watched

through the lobby window as the snow continued to fall on the streets of Manhattan.

More than 10 inches of powder had collected in Central Park, prompting the Parks Department to hand out free plastic sleds and cups of steaming hot cocoa. In an altered- reality version of the 1940s Christmas Song, chestnuts simpered on modern street-cart versions of open fires, and straggly choirs shivered out yuletide carols. Federal offices closed, air traffic was backed up for days, and snow plows magically created frosty mini- mountains of snow and ice every few feet, interspersed with curbside drifts harboring abandoned cars, bicycles, and food carts.

But inside the Algonquin Hotel, I ordered a martini on Christmas Eve and toasted with strangers to imagined ghosts of Christmases past who gathered at a roundtable of camaraderie just yards away. We pilfered books from hotel shelves and libraries and took turns reading from poets and authors long gone. One guest selected anecdotes from longtime Algonquin owner Frank Case's "Tales of a Wayward Inn", while I chose the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson in The Snow-Storm, written in 1835:

***"Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit around the radiant fireplace,  
enclosed, in a tumultuous privacy of storm."***

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