

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today, I'm joined by novelist Sherilyn Decker, author of the Bootlegger Chronicles, Rum Runner Chronicles, and Moonshiner Mysteries. Now, if you can't tell by the titles, her particular area of interest is Prohibition and the women who defied it in spectacular fashion. So first, let's dispel the myth that all women in the US in the 1910s and 1920s were pro-temperance.

SD: Well, the temperance movement did claim to speak for all women. They didn't. And many people equated suffragists with the Temperance Union, which was actually true because it was one of the first sort of social activist organizations that was established after women got the vote in America in 1919. And temperance was very popular initially in theory until people got a sense of what was involved, and the impact it was going to have in their daily life. And then, of course, a lot of people changed their minds about how they wanted to approach it.

AT: Part of the reason that it was presented as a women's issue was that the reasons that they were pushing for temperance, like you said, like theoretically, it sounded good, because they were thinking that this would reduce domestic violence. It would keep husbands from spending all their money at the bars. But obviously, the actual practical outcomes of Prohibition were very counterproductive in that regard.

SD: Oh, very much so. For a couple of reasons. One is that you can't limit supply without limiting demand. So you've got this unequal balance. And so it just, it was doomed to fail right from the beginning. But the other thing, of course, is they made it illegal and dangerous. So there's a little bit of the bad girl, bad boy, in all of us, right? And if we can thumb our noses at the law, it just makes it more attractive.

The other thing that happened, of course, was when they restricted the legal production of alcohol, it became illegal, which led to no standards. Bathtub gin, which a lot of people have heard about. But there were a lot of dangerous chemicals used in the production of illegal alcohol. And in fact, the government itself sort of got into the act when they were trying later on during Prohibition in the United States, they actually started poisoning alcohol, trying to increase the danger and the risk. And so people never knew what they were going to be getting. And so again, what you wanted to do was to have a very reliable bootlegger and your local speakeasy, so that you at least had some comfort that you weren't going to go blind or die by drinking this illegal alcohol.

AT: Wow, I didn't know that they actually deliberately were trying to poison people. That is impressively awful.

SD: Well, government works in mysterious ways, Allison.

AT: Now, having taken US history classes, when I was a kid, it was very much presented as women were the cause of temperance. So you've got like Carrie Nation with, I believe it was an axe, just running around smashing up bars.

SD: Absolutely.

AT: But they didn't teach us that women were also key in the repeal of Prohibition. They sort of glossed over that part.

SD: Yeah, when women realized that there were risks involved to this, that it wasn't going to work out the way they had initially thought, that people were going to be drinking a lot more, that it was dangerous to be drinking for reasons we talked about, you know, was dangerous for your health beyond the usual, that they decided that they were going to have to change their minds. And so had a good push to try and get the government to repeal Prohibition. And women were at the forefront of that as well. And so again, it was quite interesting to see that the social activism that this cause generated because, of course, during the whole fight for the vote, they learned great organizational skills. And they had well established networks. And so it's just a matter now of picking a side.

AT: I find Pauline Saban particularly interesting because she had been a temperance advocate. But then once she saw the practical reality, she founded the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform in 1929. And by 1931, she had 1.5 million members nationwide. And this is obviously well before the internet. Like, this is all, you know, mail basically. And so she's organizing this national effort. But she was an experienced political operator. And she knew how to effectively activate that group. And they were a big part of how it got repealed. And it's also interesting that like, it's fascinating to me, the psychology of people. And the fact that she in both instances, she said that she wanted to protect her sons. And she thought that Prohibition was a way to do that. But once she saw what was actually happening, she realized repeal was the best way to do that. But this whole framework of, women aren't supposed to fight for ourselves, but we're allowed to fight for others. And so that was the way that she really galvanized the movement and was accepted for being an activist, was saying that she was doing it as a mother.

SD: It comes back to the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. And we're fortunate enough to live in a time where we don't have to sort of hide behind that. Although again, protecting families is always a strong motivator and has been sort of that driving force between a lot of social justice issues in many countries throughout time.

AT: For you in particular, you're really fascinated by the entrepreneurial women of the 1920s who saw Prohibition as an opportunity. So can you tell us a bit about that perspective?

SD: Yes, you can imagine, you look at the timing that all this was happening. It was just after World War I, the Great War, which had a cataclysmic impact on society, not just in terms of breaking down social mores, but a lot of the men didn't come back. The ones that did were fragile or damaged either physically or mentally, which left a lot of women having to cope on their own. And so you can imagine you're sitting there and you've got your children around you and they're crying because they're hungry and there's no other breadwinner. And so the first

question is, what would you do? You personally, Alison, how would you deal with that? You would try and find work. And so the next question becomes, what could you do? And for a lot of women, they had a history already of home-based brewing. I mean, women were making the beer that they consumed around the kitchen table for generating a lot of the products they already had access to in their gardens or in the fields. And so that piece of the puzzle was a skill they had. They could take in laundry or they could set up a still. And a lot of them chose just to do that. And in fact, some of them went quite a bit bigger than that, which is the fascination I have because there were some incredibly dynamic, driven women who succeeded during Prohibition. Although one of them was asked about what made her so successful and she just looked at the reporter who asked her and said "hunger." The hunger made her, that motivated to succeed. So there was that piece of it, the war. The second piece, though, was at the beginning of the 20s after the war was intense change faster than we've ever, ever seen before or frankly since maybe except because of the pandemic. That there were mothers who had spent their entire life corseted, coddled in long skirts with no aspirations beyond home and hearth. And their daughters had tossed corsets into the closet, were driving, smoking, and drinking in public. They were going out unchaperoned on dates. They were getting an education. They were buying property, that they were having passports in their own name. I mean, so from social mores to legal issues to political issues as they cast votes, to just economic drivers. So and all this happened if you can imagine in this in one decade. And so you had huge generational change. And in fact, you only have to look at family photographs from the period and you see that the mothers and grandmothers still bustled and corseted and you see their flapper daughters who were in knee-length dresses or heaven forbid, pants. So again, that also impacted it because one of the things about being an entrepreneur during Prohibition was you had to be very comfortable with crime. And so for many people, it started off by drinking in a speakeasy and drinking illegal liquor. And then at some point, there's always a lightbulb moment where you say, "I could do that. In fact, I could do that very well." And many of them did.

AT: Speaking to the sort of zeitgeist of the time as well, I think you saw in both World Wars that while the men were away, women were called upon to take up those jobs that they had not previously been allowed to do. But then when the men came home, they were expected to just go back to being wives and mothers. And suddenly, it's a lot harder to revert back to that and to accept less when you now know for a fact that you can do more.

SD: There's a lot of power in having your own money and being able to spend, make those decisions about how you want to spend that money. That there's also self actualization about being the decision maker, about being seen as a person of value. And so you're absolutely right to go back, back into the kitchen, back behind the closed front doors of people's homes. Women didn't want to do that. And again, so that there was this economic imperative that drove them out to make entrepreneurial decisions. But frankly, there were a lot of women who really enjoyed it as well. And again, I think the ramifications were that while they were working in those factories and doing those jobs for the men during the war, they also learned good organizational skills. And while they may have had a sort of egg money to learn their budgeting skills, suddenly they were running or in charge of the books for businesses. And so that it threw

opened the doors to a lot of opportunities that hadn't been opened to them before.

AT: I also love that you mentioned that women have been making alcohol for centuries. And I was recently reading a book called *Girly Drinks* by Mallory O'Meara, who really ties this correlation between attitude towards women making and consuming alcohol and attitudes towards women's rights in general, illustrating different factors for why men have tried to push women out of those industries, from wanting to remove competition so they could corner the market for themselves. But also the overlap between brewers in Europe and witch hunts. So you actually had the church correlating a lot of the classical images that we have of a witch from the hat to the cauldron to the cat, that was actually just what a brewer looked like. And so they're literally saying these women are in league with the devil. And so it's really just fascinating that connection between women's financial independence and men who want to control women, obviously trying to control or trying to remove that access to freedom. But the other factor is that drinking alcohol represents a form of freedom that women take over their own bodies, that again, I think in this particular period, that was something that they were really wanting to assert their own control and take their freedom.

SD: I think that men's fear of strong, independent women is well documented and has been for generations. The tough parts of my books was never finding women who were entrepreneurial, who were bootlegging and moonshining and running speakeasies. It was to try and find the men who were allied with them, who were comfortable with that strength and power and autonomy and independence. And frankly, a lot of the fictionalized characters who are men in my book, there are very, very few men who actually played that role in real life, that they were always trying to again push them back into the kitchen. Whether it was for competitive reasons or just they felt personally threatened, they didn't understand that entrepreneurial approach and how it's different, sometimes with women. A lot of things were going on there, for sure.

AT: Was there a particular archetype? Was there a specific kind of woman who was involved in the alcohol trade during Prohibition or was it just all sorts?

SD: All sorts. I mean, their personalities, every single one of them had in common that they wanted that entrepreneurial success. Their personalities dictated how they would approach it so that those larger-than-life characters tended to be running the front of the house. And so those were the broads and the dames that were running the speakeasies and the private clubs. They were very much like the actress Mae West, greeting the men at the door, "hello sucker," being extravagant large personalities. And so that they became part of the entertainment, the brand, the notoriety of their clubs, to very traditional women, women like our own mothers and grandmothers who wanted something on a smaller scale. And so they were the ones who were running the beer flats and basically turning their living rooms, front rooms into little tiny speakeasies. They had small production maybe in the basement. You know, on a Friday night they throw open the doors and they became the neighborhood bar, the neighborhood pub. And their neighbors would come in for a pint or a glass of whatever they were serving that night. So that they were more comfortable, that the kids would be in the kitchen. The neighbors would be

in the front room and they were managing it.

And then there were the women who didn't want that kind of profile. And those were the moonshiners and they were in the backwoods in Appalachia, in the mountains, in rural areas. And they were actually in front of the stills brewing it. Although what fascinated me is that they were also the most physical of all of the women. I mean, the ones who were running the speakeasies were paying off the cops and the politicians and had the clientele where they knew that if they were busted by the cops, they weren't going to be spending too long in jail. Whereas, and the women at home, there was such a natural reluctance to arrest women, especially mothers during that time period. And so they tended to get away with it as well. But those moonshining women, they were dealing with, you know, a backwoods mentality where they had a gun in one hand and their hand at the still on the other as they were making this moonshine and fighting off bears and fighting off bad guys and rival moonshiners. And so they had a whole different kind of personality. And they didn't often work together. They didn't often meet, that the speakeasy people were urban sophisticates and the moonshiners were rural, backwards creatures. So it was interesting times. But there was a spot for everyone. There was a saying in one of the newspaper headlines it came across. It says, "every night was ladies night during Prohibition." And so there was room for every kind of woman to realize that dream of financial security and independence. And again, unfortunately, when Prohibition ended, a lot of them didn't have an opportunity to continue to realize that dream.

AT: So we've talked about the moonshiners, but what about the rum runners?

SD: Oh, yes. Yeah, all along the primarily the eastern coast of the United States. Prohibition was an American law, the Volstead Act. But it was still legal in Canada, England, and so that they were surrounded by legal alcohol, which then meant that, you know, there were a lot of people who were wanting to import legal alcohol in, especially as the quality and the safety of the homemade stuff deteriorated over the course of the 13 years of Prohibition. So that along the east coast, the rum runners were the people on the water and they would be importing it from England, Scotland, Europe, Canada, holding it in large two-masted vessels. People would come from the shore in small dinghies and boats that got faster and faster, and there was this giant competition between the Coast Guard and the rum runners to who would have the biggest engines. And at one point, they were actually using airplane engines strapped to these tiny wooden boats as they were trying to outrun each other. You'd go out, you'd buy your your stuff and your alcohol, and then you would bring it back to shore and sell it. So that there was this whole sort of system of signaling about, you know, what flags the ships were flying would tell them, what products they had on board, that there were all kinds of pirates who were waiting between the pickup where they had the liquor and when the rum runner would get back to shore to basically steal it from them. And so, you know, it was also very exciting times. And there were women who thrived in that environment as well.

AT: That really makes me wonder how much money the government must have spent trying to enforce a fundamentally unenforceable law.

SD: I know it's madness because the other thing is that they didn't have taxes from liquor. There are lots of movies from the 20s about the Untouchables and Al Capone and they are talking about how they're trying to battle it. But there was a giant hole in the Treasury of the United States. And that was one of the, you know, very practical reasons why they overturned Prohibition is they just couldn't afford to maintain it any longer.

AT: So you've got Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who was the assistant attorney general from 1921 to 1929. And she was basically in charge, ostensibly, of enforcing Prohibition. But they never actually gave her the resources. Like she was constantly saying, "I need more money, I need more people."

SD: Oh, because the people she was trying to go up against were the Al Capones and the mobs and that, you know, people who were making huge amounts of money. The corruption within the political system in the States in that time period and with law enforcement during that time period was immense. You know, the bribes that were being passed. I was digging around in the Philadelphia police archives and they had a book where they had precinct captains right down to beat cops. And how much each was going to be getting on a weekly basis, including the number of turkeys they would get in this time, you know, again, buying people off. And so that's the other thing that Mabel was fighting against as well was not just the resources. And she had very poor, very limiting laws as well, that it started off originally as a police matter. They transferred it into the taxation and revenue, which is the revenueurs that you hear about in the movies. But again, no one trained, no one motivated. I mean, it was pretty hard to be motivated if you were a beat cop making pennies with your own family to feed. And suddenly somebody wants to pad your wallet. It's very difficult to turn away. And so again, just, it was a losing battle from the get-go.

AT: It sounds like she was really set up to fail.

SD: Yeah. By appointing a woman, they could show that they were progressive, that they were listening to their constituents. Because again, there was that huge movement that was now trying to fight Prohibition. That was, again, a large part of it was being led by women. So that they could appear to be proactive. But again, anyone who works in government knows if you've got no budget, no resources, no staff, it's tokenism.

AT: I do enjoy looking at your blog because you've got what you call Hooch and Hellraisers posts. So it looks like the first one you've got here is Belle Livingston.

SD: She was a remarkable woman, again, an American who went to Europe and and developed a lot of polish and got a lot of ideas. She was married too, many times to wealthy men, wealthier and wealthier men. But eventually when she was older, she was actually in her 50s when she ran out of money. And she was in Europe and didn't know what to do. So she decided she'd come home to New York. And she wound up getting hooked up with a couple of other women speakeasy owners. And so that her idea was to have a super speakeasy that was going to be

for the ultra rich. And again, found an investor, built this incredible club. And again, when you got that kind of profile, you're an easy target. So she was raided and shut down. So she opened another one and she was raided and and shut down. But because her her clientele was so affluent and well-to-do, she never really spent any time in jail. There was an article, a newspaper article at the time that said that the people who rated her were as gallant as old-fashioned stagecoach robbers. They made sure that all the ladies had their hats and wraps and all the gentlemen had a chance to finish their cigars before they were put into the paddywagons. That so she was a character and a real personality in New York at that time, simply because of the the glitz and the glamor and the affluence of of what she was trying to pull off with with her speakeasies.

AT: And when we're talking about big personalities, I would say Texas Guinan also falls under that category.

SD: I know she was the Mae West character that is in everyone's imagination. Brainy and brassy. She was from Texas and they always do everything bigger and better in Texas. That she knew from the get-go. As soon as they dropped the Volstead Act, they started Prohibition, she could see how she would make money. And so her nightclubs were fun, fast, loud, gaudy, men and women went there because of just how outrageous everything was. So again, she was paid if you can imagine 1920, \$750,000 to sing at a speakeasy. Three quarters of a million dollars for one night. Not bad. And again, showgirls coming out the yin-yang that her big line at the beginning of the evening was, "hello suckers! Come on in and leave your wallets on the bar. It's a fight a night or your money back. You may be all the world to your mothers, but you're just a cover charge to me." Celebrities ate that stuff up because she was always in the paper for outrageous behavior. Babe Ruth, Charlie Chaplin, Rudy Valentino, they were all there. Even the Prince of Wales who later became King Edward VIII was there. They've got a wonderful photo of him in an apron cooking some eggs, trying to pretend that he was just an innocent fry cook so he didn't get arrested. And so again, those were the Roaring Twenties in all of Texas's speakeasies.

AT: And then there was Helen Morgan.

SD: She was so beautiful and so elegant. And again, an entirely different kind of a personality. She was very classy. A lot of the musicals that were happening on Broadway wound up going to her speakeasies after the show. Much lower-key than Tex Guinan and none of the flashy, brassy stuff. She wound up dying very early of kidney ailments and liver ailments, but she's the one that basically said what made her so successful, she would reply simply "hunger." And again, she grew up poor and saw an opportunity to make money. For every kind of customer, there was a speakeasy available.

AT: And you mentioned kidney and liver ailments. And I'm just wondering if she got poisoned by the alcohol.

SD: I don't know that they didn't really go into any detail, except she died so young. She was only very early 40s. And so again, she never saw what happened at the end of Prohibition. She was also an alcoholic. They always say there are two kinds of bar owners, the ones that drink and the ones that don't drink at all. And she was a drinker. And so that could have also contributed to her issues, because again, it was hard to get good imported liquor. So you were relying more and more and more on the domestically produced liquor and that carried issues.

AT: And you also mention on the blog, you've got Cleo Lythgoe, Queen of the Bahamas.

SD: Oh, she she's a character. She was, in real life, Cleo was an American who went to England, worked in the front office of a Scottish distillery that wound up again making a lot of money during Prohibition by being part of that rum running scene. She also worked sort of with French champagne manufacturers, but again, not in a sales capacity or a managerial capacity, always in a clerk capacity. And she just had a lot of really good ideas of how to get the job done better. And so eventually they sort of gave her the glass cliff and sort of said, "okay, fine, you go off to Bahamas and you become the distributor for our company there," thinking she would fail and we could get rid of this mouthy woman in the office. What happened instead is she became incredibly successful. But cards were stacked against her right from the get-go. Like there was a rule where she had to have her importer's license on an annual basis. Everyone else could mail theirs in. She always had to go down to the courthouse and sit, wait in line and it took her days and days to get it. You know, little things like no one would rent her an office that but she had some very interesting alliances, and we talked a little bit about the man. And she was one that was lucky enough to come across some very important men who made her life easier. Bill McCoy was a rum runner, he had several large boats. And he preferred to work with Cleo because she was honest. She delivered her product on time. And much like he, she never cut her liquor. So again, if you've got one barrel, you can sell for a wad of cash if you cut it, and dilute it, you can sell two barrels for twice that much. She never did that and neither did he and he was the reason why there's a phrase talking about the real McCoy because you could always trust the liquor. So he gave her all the breaks and allowed her to sort of step into the limelight because of his success and her success with it. And in my book, I used her as the importer for a woman who is running a small speakeasy in Florida, Edith Duffy, who again wound up establishing quite a network of speakeasies and rum running along the Florida coast.

AT: If you had to sum up the feel of your books and how that reflects on the period, what would you say?

SD: Prohibition was a unique opportunity for women to become independent, whether it was financially or socially or educationally. But it's that steely determination and hope that is what I want readers to feel because these women were battling, they were riding that wave of social change so successfully. And there are many real characters who show up in my books who were the inspiration for my fictionalized characters. And the thing that they had in common was that backbone of steel, that they were going to succeed, whether they were doing it for their families or they were doing it because they had a dream, that they were doing it because they

were wild women. For whatever the reason, that they were taking charge of their own life. And I love that energy. That it's what I was raised with and what I hope I've instilled in my own daughters.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.