Alumni

Truth and Consequences

Van Doren vs. Nearing.

By
Paul Hond
|
Spring 2007



Library of Congress

“She’s terrifying,” Charles Van Doren ’59GSAS told *Time* magazine in early March 1957. “She knows everything!”

Van Doren, the reigning champion on the quiz show *Twenty One* and the heartthrob of Columbia's English department, was referring to opponent Vivienne Nearing '46GSAS, '50LAW, whose husband had lost to Van Doren in January. For two nerve-racking weeks, Nearing played Van Doren to three ties. But the scope of the deception with which Van Doren was involved, and the pressures of his meteoric, ill-gained celebrity, had begun to torment him. As his winnings swelled and the fan letters poured in, he told himself that his popularity was at least helping to promote the intellectual life to the wider public.

On March 11, 1957, Van Doren and Nearing played their final match. Millions of TV viewers watched in astonishment as Van Doren failed to correctly name the king of Belgium, which ultimately cost him the game. His prize money totaled $129,000 for 14 weeks. Shortly afterwards, he signed a contract to be on the *Today Show*. But as an introspective literary man steeped in poetry and the Great Books, his conscience was far from clear.

In November 1959, before a congressional subcommittee investigating television quiz shows, Van Doren admitted to his involvement in the rigging of *Twenty One*, explaining that the show's producer, Albert Freedman, had provided him with answers and coached him on how to act and speak.

"Freedman then told me that Mrs. Nearing was to be my last opponent, and that I would be defeated by her," Van Doren told the committee. "I said: Thank God."

Read more from ***Paul Hond***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Paul Hond***