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NEW YORK CALLING

FROM BLACKOUT TO BLOOMBERG

Writing New York

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My East Village apartment is a shambles. A teetering stack of novels finally collapsed. Domino-style, they slammed onto a bookcase and caused still more books to fly. Hemingway and Richard Hughes shot out like bullets from the bookcase and toppled my mountain bike onto the floor, which upset my downstairs neighbor. An argument ensued. That neighbor and I are no longer speaking.

Such is New York. Everything here is jury-rigged and tenuous. In a typical Chinese-puzzle New York apartment, we live stripped-down lives. We haven't the space for spoon collections, much less the Library of America. Unread books must go, and it's depressing, because unread books are an indictment, a call to failure. They are a dust-gathering accusation, and a testament to the many distractions of this city.

I moved to New York to be a writer. At first, I was on the Upper East Side, in a one bedroom above a deli staffed with belligerent cashiers. My roommate lived behind a wall of crappy, custom-made bookcases. When I escaped that neighborhood in 1988, I ended up behind different set of (equally crappy) bookcases in Alphabet City. I've since carted books and detritus to all my apartments, up to my present holding pen on East 13th Street.

Many of my books, whether on the floor or still on the bookshelves, are set in New York. I read about this place, because this city is where "sister" Carrie Meeber met her downfall and where Miss Lonelyhearts listened the lovelorn. A horror of New York's overcrowded streets was the driving force behind what made Sammy Glick "run." Beyond such writers as Theodore Dreiser, Budd Schulberg, and Nathanael West, its neighborhoods inspired writers as varied as Nik Cohn, Pietro di Donato, John Dos Passos, Ralph Ellison, Joseph McElroy, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Gilbert Sorrentino.

When F. Scott Fitzgerald stood on the newly constructed observation deck of the Empire State Building and looked out over New York, he wrote that he had never suspected that his adopted city wasn't infinite, that it had an actual

limit. Even today, his surprise is understandable—New York is labyrinthine, with a deep inner space that comes from so many people living atop one another. Here, jostling go-getters and slow-going daydreamers are mixed-in with slack-jawed tourists in a scattershot manner. One could live in a three-block radius in New York, and still experience the world.

This city's very nature requires a different sort of literature. We give up the wide-open spaces for competition, communion, and contact. Go back to 1855, when Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* first appeared: it applied even then. The poet wrote of the city's energy, drive, and occasional sense of shared purpose among strangers and passersby. Whitman is still the city's greatest writer. He is its standard-bearer and what New York deserves. Of course, deserving and getting are different things.

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Many of the books strewn across my floor were written after 1977, when this city went to hell. Writers whose works date from then have oscillated between enjoying the city's lack of supervision, to fighting against its decline. Others were wistful. New writers emerged as the city changed yet again. Start with the Bronx: it brought us Cynthia Ozick, Don DeLillo, and Richard Price.

Essayist, short-story writer, and novelist Cynthia Ozick believes those with firmly anchored personalities, the ones who are irretrievably principled, receive little but agony and bad luck. In her elegant 1997 novel, *The Puttermessa Papers*, Ruth Puttermessa is a lawyer "with a Jewish face and a modicum of American mistrust of it." Because of sexism and anti-Semitism, Puttermessa is consigned to the backroom of a white-shoe law firm until she leaves to work for the city as general counsel. She is promoted. She becomes vital to the city bureaucracy's spasmodic workflow until a political appointee shunts her off to irrelevance.

In Puttermessa's confused fury, she inadvertently creates a golem. Ozick's view of '80s and '90s New York City hangs heavily in the novel's background: it is a decaying, pre-dotcom bubble, vaguely hopeless place (and that's exactly what it was like), but—and perhaps this is something only a committed New Yorker can understand—it is still the only place in which to live.

Ozick isn't wistful for an imagined doily-draped past; she's gloomy for its future. Likewise, she doesn't object to the notion of an unfinished New York, the one Rem Koolhaas wrote of in 1978's *Delirious New York*: "New York is a city that will be replaced by another city." She wants a different matrix all together, a New York that allows for the civil and the smart.

Don DeLillo has become literary shorthand for the post-Pynchon novelist whose books brim with pop culture references and skewed contours of reality. His best novels, *White Noise* (1985) and *Libra* (1988) also have a sense of impending doom—be it an encroaching cloud of noxious chemicals, or the impending assassination of JFK. His *Underworld* (1997) begins in a dazzling manner, with

perhaps the best first sixty pages of any novel. It's at the old Polo Grounds, and the Brooklyn Dodgers are playing the New York Giants in the third game of a tiebreaker; the winner will go to the 1951 World Series. With two men on base in the bottom of the ninth and the Dodgers losing 4-2, Bobby Thomson smashes a three-run homer off Dodger reliever Richard Branca. The crowds go wild. In the stands are Toots Shor, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and J. Edgar Hoover. In the confusion, Gleason, drunk, vomits on Sinatra's shoes. Someone in the stands catches the winning baseball, but the next day no one is sure which person has the the actual ball that made baseball history. It simply can't be verified.

Here, DeLillo cuts away to follow Nick Shay, a Bronx teen listening to the game on the radio. Shay spends some eight-hundred pages trying to get the authentic game-winning ball. *Underworld* brims with rooftops and skyline. So much so, that when DeLillo leaves New York, it enervates. It's as though we are in that damned car with Shay while he drifts through the Western desert in search of that baseball. Those pages go on. And on. And still on, into the horizon, as seemingly endless as the desert itself.

In 2003, DeLillo returned to New York for *Cosmopolis*, the story of a 28-year-old billionaire, his outrageously appointed limousine, an epic traffic jam, and an overpowering desire for a haircut. The novel journeys downtown, with a variety of characters entering and leaving the limo. The car may move by inches through the gridlock, but the story veers uncontrollably: *Cosmopolis* is New York



excess in satire; it's less of a Manhattan limo ride than one through a Coney Island funhouse: monsters appear, then quickly recede.

Richard Price grew up in Parkside Houses in the Wakefield section of the Bronx. Nowadays, New York makes only passing appearances in his novels. Arguably, however, Price writes about an imagined sixth borough because, even though his stories take place in the housing projects of a (fictional) New Jersey city, they nonetheless *feel* like '70s New York. His best novel thus far is *Clockers* (1992), which includes reportage on how crack is made and sold, how people get by in the projects, and how the police conduct homicide investigations.

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To the rest of America, Manhattan is New York. It's home to New Year's Eve and Broadway tripe. Countless novels have also featured Manhattan, from *Slaves of New York* and *Bright Lights, Big City*, to *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Meanwhile, historical fiction writers such as E. L. Doctorow, Caleb Carr, and Michael Chabon have approached Manhattan through its past. It charms to read these books, especially Chabon's *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000). This novel brings the cityscape of the 1940s and '50s to light: men in suits and hats jostle at the street corners; the city feels un-air-conditioned. The novel is a pleasant diversion well imagined—but perhaps too much so: as the story moves on and becomes increasingly like the comic books its protagonists produce.

While New York nostalgia is undergoing a boom, another is 9/11. Done sincerely, as in Art Spiegelman's comic *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), such books convey agony and confusion, albeit in a scattershot manner. Sometimes 9/11 is used as an ironic set piece: a character's conflict has seemingly ended, the novel is about to conclude—when in the distance, the planes approach (see Paul Auster's anemic 2006 *Brooklyn Follies*).

Too often, however, these books are about self-possessed city dwellers who find spiritual release from disaster. Their characters learn the various home truths that others living elsewhere seemingly already know: stop and smell the roses, and so on. Thus far, 9/11 novels are tragedy porn. They are for those who fall victim to the Affective Fallacy, the belief, among other things, that good writing is what makes you cry.

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Two novels published in the late '70s have managed to link Manhattan with Richard Nixon: *The Public Burning* by Robert Coover (1977) and *Jailbird* by Kurt Vonnegut (1979). Coover's *Burning* is one of the most imaginative novels of that decade. Here, Uncle Sam is real, the personification of the United States. When the President is at full-strength with a working mojo, he has more than the bully pulpit; he is *literally* Uncle Sam in his cracker-barrel glory. But Uncle Sam is in a death match with archenemy, the Phantom—the Soviet Union. Narrated

by a young Vice President Nixon, *Burning* takes place in 1953. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are to be executed in Times Square. The novel was controversial in its day, and rumors abound that it was pulled from the market at the urging of Nixon supporters—even though his callowness and lack of gravitas make him oddly sympathetic.

Coover's New York isn't meant to be realistic, except for its asides on the meaning of Times Square (he calls it the "ritual center of the Western World") and the harsh reality of the Rosenbergs' Lower East Side. This is done purposefully: the Rosenbergs are ordinary idealists, not the cartoonish Uncle Sam, nor the conflicted Nixon. They are people who died so that America could feel a momentary sense of moral vindication.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick: Or Lonesome No More!* (1976) a near-future, almost-deserted Manhattan is called "Skyscraper National Park," and had the King of Michigan living at the top of the Empire State Building. For *Jailbird* (1979), Vonnegut ventures from underground catacombs to the top of the Chrysler Building. His protagonist, Walter F. Starbuck, is a former-everything: former Communist, former Nixon advisor on "youth affairs," and a former prisoner who wanders Gump-like through the last century's major events. Vonnegut weaves together the Nuremberg Trials, Nixon, Roy Cohn, Watergate, Sacco and Vanzetti, Whittaker Chambers, and relentless capitalism into a cohesive whole, held together by New York itself.

However, Vonnegut is a fabulist: the book isn't about the city we live in, except in the deepest sense. A single conglomerate, the RAMJAC Corporation seems to own everything in New York. In a city whose streetscape has become increasingly denuded by the faceless proprietors of Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts, and the latest consulates for Banana Republics, the book is not too far from the truth.

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In Californian Steve Erickson's fantastical novel *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999), the East Village is a tacky-tacky Hell. It's an area is for people too drug-addled and self-destructive to care. However, they're also privileged; they seek out this destructive environment as amusement, not because they need cheap rent. Any downtowner can attest to that area's pervasive truth.

Best known as a poet, writer and activist, Eileen Myles has often covered the downtown scene as a true bohemian. Her *Chelsea Girls* (1994) is a group of short stories, or "autobiographical fiction," about an alcoholic lesbian named Eileen Myles. It's laced with hypnotic sentences that flow like rivulets in the gutter, or down tenement windows. They are finely crafted, only seemingly top of the head. In her 1991 collection of verse, *Not Me* (1991), Myles writes in telegraphic reverie:

Brooklyn is just a
ride away. I'm hungry
again! While the ponytail
drips down my back &
I pull on the black shirt that's wet from
the pool, but so
what, it's August and
the six birds in
New York sing back.

Taken as a whole, Myles' work is part of an increasingly lost New York, where dissipation and production were still possible. "Downtown," was once an area without hall monitors, towering NYU dorms, and uninspired, so-called bistros.

In Harry Matthews' richly complex 1987 novel, *Cigarettes*, New York was where they once practiced total-control sadomasochism. Mathews is the cofounder of the journal *Locus Solus* (named after the Raymond Rousseau novel) with John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler, and in 1972 he was elected to the French writing group OuLiPo. The structure for *Cigarettes* is perhaps Mathews' most OuLiPian: each of the fourteen chapters examines the relationships between two of thirteen primary characters. Although a complex whole, the book engages on numerous levels: as an urban comedy of manners, art world satire, and threnody.

Downtown aspirations and energies feature prominently in Meredith Brosnan's *Mr. Dynamite* (2004). Jarleth Prendergast, a thirty-seven-year old experimental filmmaker and copy-shop flunky, is awaiting an inheritance from a recently deceased Irish aunt. When Prendergast's inheritance turns out to be a teapot instead of the much needed "cash fuel injection," he copes by drinking, a lot, reading the *I Ching*, and living in a whorl of cinematic and musical *noir* (*Point Blank*, John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman, Scott Walker). Prendergast's exploitation of trendy Celtic fetishism will also make you think thrice the next time you watch *Riverdance* or step in St Patrick's Day vomit. Interestingly, much of *Mr. Dynamite* takes place in areas little served by literature: Inwood, Long Island City, pre-hipster-mecca Williamsburg—even the concrete plaza, brocade curtains, and men's room urinals of the Metropolitan Opera. Along with Turkish immigrant Erje Ayden's *The Crazy Green of Second Avenue* (1965, with introduction by Frank O'Hara), this might be the most honest novel about the discovery of New York.

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Queens, the city's largest borough in terms of area, is also the most ethnically diverse county in the United States. It's a hip-hop capital and in the television



universe, the blue-collar worker calls it home. Strangely, except for Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, (2004), which is concerned with the everyday life of Haitian immigrants (one of whom was a Duvalier goon), novels aren't generally set there.

A relatively new exception is *Paradise Travel* (2006) by Jorge Franco. It's the story of a young Medellín couple's journey to New York City as visa-less immigrants. When Marlon and Reina finally arrive in Queens, things go awry: they are quickly—and accidentally, or so it seems—separated. Marlon makes his way in the émigré community of Jackson Heights alone, never forgetting Reina, for whom he continues to search, deciding that he “would live through whatever hell New York had to offer” in order to find her. The book is somewhat slight (it doesn't have much by way of shading), but it performs an all-to-rare service—it lays bare the New York immigrant experience.

D. Keith Mano's *Take Five* (1982)—roughly comparable to the novels of William Gaddis and glowingly reviewed by cognoscenti—was a commercial flop. Few, including the publisher, seem to have been ready for a six-hundred-page, obscenity-filled and sacrilegious novel about a failed filmmaker who finds salvation while approaching death. Simon Lynxx is the misanthropic scion of an old Queens family whose grand old manse has been turned into a house museum. He drinks in its backyard, pelted by trash from the surrounding apartment buildings. He thinks about his filmic masterpiece, *Jesus 2001*, a Christian *Godfather*. One mishap after another ensues; Lynxx loses all of his senses. *Take Five* is reminiscent not only of early Christian writings, but also of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*. While an easier read than Broch, there is also its Rabelaisian spirit, freneticism, and its vacuum-packed prose. These things (of course) can either exhilarate or exhaust.

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“Brooklyn is the new downtown,” magazines breathlessly proclaim. But even though significant parts of the borough are nowadays manicured and populated with VW Touaregs and Bertini baby-strollers, there is nonetheless a distinct attitude that is Brooklyn. Perhaps it's best illustrated in Brooklynite Rafi Zabor's 2005 memoir *I, Wabenzi: A Souvenir (Aporia)*. When Zabor finds himself in a battle for a parking space with some privileged kids in a shiny new car, he leans out the car window and shouts at them in “a voice so full of a barbarian and pure Brooklyn savagery that it shocked even me: ‘HOW'D YA LIKE A BIG DENT IN YOUR NICE NEW FUCKING MERCEDES!’”

Brooklyn is also (for better or worse) Paul Auster. He is a prolific, popular, and Park Slope-identified. In *The New York Trilogy* (1985–6), Auster introduces us to his style: engaging, digressive narratives marked by strange, often untenable coincidences and disquieting word play. About his writer-detective Quinn, he writes: “New York is an inexhaustible place, a labyrinth of endless steps, and



no matter how far he walked, no matter how he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost.” Auster has his staunch supporters and impatient detractors. He is, however, the writer for the rising Brooklyn: the one of shimmering towers, yoga classes, and weekend retreats.

Jonathan Lethem’s milieu is more working-class; often his characters, like the author himself, grew up in the realtor-christened area of Boerum Hill. His *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) is a detective novel with a twist: the detective isn’t a professional, but rather a townie among the gentrifiers. He also has Tourette’s Disorder. While entertaining in parts, readers would have been better served by reading the likes of Ross Macdonald or Charles Willeford.

Fortress of Solitude (2003) was to be Lethem’s masterpiece. In the *ur*-Boerum Hill we encounter the painfully named Dylan Ebdus, the child of hippie gentrifiers who force him to attend public school with African-American kids from the nearby projects. He’s harassed (“yoked”) on the street and robbed of his change. His mother leaves him. Eventually, he meets Mingus Rude (more straining at Significance), the motherless biracial child of a former R&B singer, who becomes both his friend and protector. Ebony and Ivory take up graffiti. Later, they become (in something of a plot lurch, due to the possession of a magic ring) superheroes. While there are strong, incantatory passages, *Fortress* as a whole is not unlike a slide show of someone’s vacation, in which the host is a one-sided conversationalist and doesn’t notice that you’re glassy-eyed and looking about for an escape.

A straight-shot autobiography is better. Vincent Fedorchak's *Fuzz One: A Bronx Childhood* (2005) dispenses with magic rings to tell a similar story. Vincent, a white boy misfit becomes a graffiti artist—and the book has hundreds of pictures to prove it. Of the homeless in the subway system, Fedorchak writes: “When they were bombed on that bum juice and the trains would fly by them, it was like watching tv, and the only channel they had was the New York City Subway . . . But I’m sorry to say that graffiti is gone. The die-hard bombers have passed on by . . . New York city is different now. Somehow, we let it get away from us.”

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Perhaps we let New York get away from us, or perhaps we’d grown tired of what it had become. While living in New York has always been difficult, in years past there was a vital difference: the city had always seemed inevitably and *necessary*. It was the Big Time. Writers were drawn it not only for its opportunities, but also because it easily symbolized both the benefits of capitalism for those who won or the dire consequences for those who lost. As Robert Coover writes in *The Public Burning*: “New York was like some kind of Jerusalem, an El Dorado. There were picture books and photos in the papers, newsreels, stereoscopes, and later, Tru-Vue films, all those movies about the great Empire City. . . [It was the] place where the melting pot melted . . .”