

Growing Up Bank Street: A Greenwich Village Memoir

Donna Florio

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Donna Florio's *Growing Up Bank Street* is a vibrant, heartfelt memoir, centered on one of Greenwich Village's most notable series of blocks. A lifelong New Yorker, Florio combines historical context with personal experiences in her kaleidoscopic account, which spans from the Colonial era to more recent gentrification.

Named after Alexander Hamilton's ambitious Bank of New York, Bank Street ends at the Hudson River. During Florio's 1960s childhood, its bustling blocks were flanked by stately brownstones and modern apartments, along with shops, bars, restaurants, factories, and tenements. Florio recounts anecdotes about various Bank Street celebrities.

Here, actor Theodore Bikel painted his brownstone blue, in honor of the Israeli flag. Here, John Lennon's anti-establishment stances put him on the FBI's radar; he avoided deportation, but sometimes ventured out for a stroll with mercurial Yoko Ono. Here, in 1979, punk rocker Sid Vicious—"stork tall and emaciated," but rather affable and polite—died; a horde of reporters soon swarmed outside, eager for details about his heroin overdose.

Beyond these better-known names, Florio includes vignettes about her neighbors and friends, who are depicted with a compassion and intimacy, making their stories just as intriguing. A creative and intellectual hub, Bank Street and Greenwich Village attracted many diverse personalities. Bank Street's sense of local community was also fascinating; people socialized often and helped neighbors in need, with a collective presence that might seem invasive in our more individualistic era.

The daughter of two impassioned opera singers and a former child opera singer herself, Florio fills each chapter with verve and colorful observations. Her decades on Bank Street gave her access to "every social, cultural, and economic layer of American life"—a breadth reflected in her knowledge of New York, and in her love for the city as well.

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