



Writing New York: A Literary Anthology

Phillip Lopate, Editor

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Newspaper writers get side-by-side billing with the literary elect in this thoughtful, nicely bound anthology, which is a comprehensive literary gathering of writing inspired by the city. Perhaps only newspaper writers will find a special charm in this juxtaposition, but it reveals the diversity of this massive collection. More than 100 poets, novelists, essayists, journalists, historians and other writers inhabit these pages, and they give voice to millions. My first impulse was to seek familiar ground, rather like a tourist's first impulse may be to rent a room at a known hotel, from which it is safe to explore strange terrains.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," has aged well. The ending is still bleak, but the story has humorous personalities and episodes that had been long lost to memory. Washington Irving's account of the pioneer days of New York remains to my ears as flat as ever, although thanks to the editor's introductory note I knew this time that, yes, it was written tongue-in-cheek, not as a literal history.

Working my way through the short fictions, the memoirs, the poems about the Brooklyn Bridge and the time Allen Ginsberg got mugged; I came across unexpected gems, like a 1941 New Yorker column by newspaper writer John McNulty. I can't imagine my ever having come across this hilarious short piece, "Atheist Hit By Truck," if not for this collection.

A sub-genre revealed here is the literary good-bye to the city. John Cheever's "Moving Out" is particularly fascinating. Forced by economic change to unwillingly flee the city, he ends up happy with his life on the suburban shore. Or does he? He claims happiness, but there is something unconvincing in his account of watching the trains carrying New Yorkers back to their city: "I salute the sometimes embarrassed passengers with my beer can, wishing them God-speed and prosperity in the greatest city in the world, but I see them pass without a trace of longing or envy."

Lopate, the editor, is a novelist, poet, essayist and critic who was born and currently resides in Brooklyn.
RICH WERTZ (January / February 1999)

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