

You Talkin' to Me? The Unruly History of New York English

E.J. White

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A veritable language factory, New York City may very well deserve its preferred moniker of being the greatest city in the world, at least when it comes to its influence on the way that English is spoken. The telling fact is that New York's eight million residents speak eight hundred languages; over centuries of growth, a fierce competition to become a New Yorker took place among its immigrants. How to talk, how to act, what to wear, and on and on. Fitting in yet, for many, standing out influenced the English of countless New Yorkers, from Tin Pan Alley's Jewish songwriters to comedians like Groucho Marx, Abbott and Costello, and Rodney Dangerfield; from the city's criminal underworld to hip hop at its beginnings to horse racing professionals in the 1920s, who referred to winner's purses with the slang term "apple" (thus, with New York racing's huge crowds and biggest purses, comes The Big Apple).

E. J. White's *You Talkin' To Me?: The Unruly History of New York English* offers a delightful eavesdrop of conversations over the centuries, paying particular attention to the city's unmistakable dialect and why it has proceeded to earn such derision. It's complicated.

To explain why New Yorkers talk the way they do, White explores slang, swearing, social class, economics, high culture, and the constant turnover of real estate. She lets the city do the talking and tells what may be the quintessential American story.

MATT SUTHERLAND (May / June 2020)

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