



OUR NEW YORK

NEW YORK

by S. J. Rozan

New York, New York. It'll never be the same.

I was born here, I grew up here, so ask me to write a piece about New York and you won't get objectivity. But you won't get New York boosterism, either. Patriotism? My city right or wrong? Forget that. Sure, New York is different from every other city on the planet. So is Paris, Sao Paulo, Beijing, Bangkok. Yes, I love it here, more now than ever. On 9/11 New Yorkers showed what they're made of, and though I wish I'd never had to see it, what I saw was great. But Parisians would have done that, too, and Beijingers. The truth about pretty much everybody is, get the ideologues out of the way and people come through for each other. Most people. The people who don't, well, they're everywhere too.

Is New York the center of the universe? Probably not. The funny thing is, we don't really see ourselves that way. A lot of other people seem to see us as seeing ourselves



that way, though, and resent us for it, and go out of their way to tell us we're not. Okay, fine. This doesn't seem to be a universe with much of a center, anyway: not a lot of order here.

What we do see ourselves as is a place where a vast array of worlds, connected and unconnected, are at the top of their game. Each attracts newcomers all the time, each vibrates with so much energy it sets the others vibrating too. We see ourselves as a place so big we may be ungovernable but we're also, in the best sense, uncontrollable: anything can happen here. The separate worlds— theater, art, food, commerce; the lives of endless waves of immigrants—are valuable in themselves. The cracks between them, though, are what's critical. What falls into those cracks, what develops in the spaces where those worlds overlap, split, flow together again: that's where new things happen.

And when new things happen in New York, they happen on limited land masses: a geological determinism that forces us to live on top of each other, to keep re-inventing our lives and our neighborhoods because we can't just build new ones, we can't just spread out, move on. (The Bronx is the only borough of New York City that's on the mainland of North America. But

REFLECTIONS ON THE CITY OF NEW YORK

by Maan Meyers

They said you could see the glow in the sky from as far as Philadelphia. The flames were relentless. Firemen and volunteers raced to the scene, but it was an impossible task. Heroism abounded. Troops were called in.

In all, the area south of Wall Street and east of Broad Street was devastated.

We're in New York. But the year is 1835.

What we've described was the Great Fire. It began the evening of December 16th, a night of high winds and cold that took the temperature readings down well below zero. A spark in a warehouse on the corner of Exchange Place and Pearl Street turned the area into an inferno in minutes.

The City firemen had been up the night before fighting two other blazes. Exhausted, they raced to fight this new threat.

Because of the intense cold, both rivers were frozen. Firemen had to use their axes to chop holes in the ice, and once they started pumping, the water froze in their hoses. Even vessels in the harbor were not safe.

It took two weeks for the fire to be vanquished.

The commercial district of the City was destroyed. Yet, business continued. The New York Stock Exchange resumed trading four days after the fire began. Amazingly, only two people died.

The fire still smoldering, real estate prices for the burned out lots in the district skyrocketed.

Rebuilding began immediately. A year later, the entire area was thriving. Without the help of Congress. It was the New York State government in Albany that approved six million dollars for disaster relief.



In the dead of night, on September 21st, 1776, a firestorm hit the City with tremendous force. It did not come from the shelling from the British ships in the harbor be-

Yonkers, a whole other city, sits right on top of it.) So neighborhoods rise and fall. Waves of change wash over us, flow on, leaving some things the same, some different, leaving some new things no one ever saw before. The head of the Times



Square Business Improvement District (an interesting idea in itself) puts it this way: "Times Square is not humanity at its best or its worst but at its most, which is a lot of what New York is." Humanity at its most. A staggering concept.

So what now, in this post-9/11 world? Well, this is New York. Our new mayor, one of the richest men in the country, bought the election—and is turning out on some issues to be pretty good, surprising the hell out of me. Race relations, in a very bad way for the past few years, are now, according to polls, at a high point. (They were so low earlier partly because of the fascist attitude of our previous mayor, who suddenly got to be a saint after 9/11, surprising the hell out of me.) We're getting along, the theory goes, because people who die together live together better afterwards. The economy is still bad, which may mean not a lot of new building for awhile, which may not be bad. We need to catch our breath every now and then, see what we've actually done, and that's one thing we don't usually have much time for here, breath-catching.

And for writers, especially crime writers? An interesting question. Those of us who live here and set our books here are facing a dilemma now. So much of what New York always was, it still is; the places

and the worlds we've always mined for material are still rich with untapped veins. But now there's an 800-pound gorilla in the corner. How do you deal with 9/11—a sudden 16-acre hole in the center of real estate that's been among the world's most densely-built for 300 years? The 1,700 people so completely pulverized that there are no remains to identify? The 343 fire-fighters dead, not in a single day, but in an hour? Every New Yorker thinks about it every day. But can you put it in a book about something else without it taking over? Can you ignore it, so that it won't take over, and write the book you might have written on 9/10, as though neither the city nor the writer had changed? Can you weave it in, assuming everyone understands the changes? Can you write about it directly?

We'll see how different writers answer this question over the next year or two, as we see how New York and New Yorkers deal with the unprecedented questions 9/11 brought to our own lives.

But since this city began, in the mud at the tip of the island, the unprecedented has been something we do here on a regular basis.

I love New York. ♦



S.J. Rozan is the author of the Lydia Chin/Bill Smith series, most recently the Anthony and Anthony-nominated Reflecting the Sky. Her short story, "Double-crossing Delancey" won the 2002 Edgar and is nominated for Anthony for Best Short Story. (It's included in The World's Finest Mystery and Crime Stories, Vol. 3, Forge, October, 2002.) Born and brought up in the Bronx, Rozan is an architect in a New York firm whose practice includes police stations, firehouses and zoo buildings.



The fire that began on September 21, 1776, destroyed one-fourth of New York's buildings.

cause the British had already—more or less—won the City.

Terrified shrieks of women and children rose above the blaze as hundreds of people clutching their few possessions ran from the heat and smoke.

The fire began at Whitehall Slip and burned through Bridge, Stone and Beaver Streets destroying everything in its path, then crossing Broadway, it reduced Trinity Church to ashes. St. Paul's, only six blocks north, was saved thanks to a bucket brigade of British soldiers and seamen.

One-fourth of the City's structures were destroyed.

On November 16, 1776, the British took secure possession of all of Manhattan, and the City swarmed with Crown Loyalists from the other colonies. The occupation was painful for ordinary New Yorkers. Soldiers attacked young women, looted and pillaged, seized livestock, cut down forests and shared nothing with the freezing, starving people.

New York remained in British hands until November 21st, 1783. The British left the City in terrible shape. They had not rebuilt the area destroyed by the fire years before. Trinity Church remained a burnt-out shell. Buildings still standing throughout the City were unlivable. Private homes had been made foul. The now treeless streets were clogged with filth and garbage.

Any other city might have been whipped, but we're talking about New York.



The plot to destroy New York began in the fall of 1864. Even though the Confederacy was on its last legs, Judah Benjamin, its Treasurer, allocated \$300,000 for the mission. Its purpose was to demoralize the North by burning down its most important city.

The conspirators were eight Kentucky officers. Though Kentucky was a Union state, it had many Southern sympathizers. The eight officers were assured that New York, being a city of commerce, had its share of those who believed in the Cause, and that these would rise up and join the conspirators.

Yes, New York had Southern sympathizers. The war was bad for business. But the conspirators totally misunderstood the people of New York. We complain mightily, but we stand fast.

The conflagration was earmarked for Election Day. Lincoln was running for a second term and New York was an anti-Lincoln, Democratic stronghold. Somehow, it became common knowledge that the conspirators were in the City and the army was called in to protect the election. The conspirators decided to bide their time and choose another moment when the City would be most vulnerable.

While they waited, they attended lectures and concerts and church services, even played baseball in Central Park, mix-

ing freely into cosmopolitan New York life. Truth to say, they got swept up in the magic of the City. The news of Sherman's burning of Atlanta brought them back to their mission. Swearing revenge, the eight determined to carry out their original plan.

They chose the day after Thanksgiving, which Lincoln, after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, had fixed as November 24th. Since municipal buildings were now guarded, the conspirators selected as targets thirteen of the City's finest hotels.



Confederate officers set a fire in Barnum's Museum on Broadway (center; St. Paul's at right).

Teams went to several of them and rented rooms. They decided that with fires in many of the hotels throughout the City proper, flames would race through entire neighborhoods, causing great panic. In addition to the hotels, fires were set in warehouses and ships along the waterfront, in Barnum's Museum, Niblo's Theatre, and the Winter Garden Theatre, where the Booth brothers were performing *Julius Caesar* to raise money for a statue of Shakespeare for Central Park.

But the conspirators were poor scientists and worse arsonists; they made a crucial mistake. By closing the doors and windows tight, they suffocated their fires. The result was more smoke than fire. Volunteer firemen and the police performed admirably. Although the damage was calculated to be about \$400,000, no lives were lost.

We're not surprised that the conspirators, in what newspapers of the day dubbed The Incendiary Plot, were dazzled by the amazing City of New York.

We were born here, and the City still has this affect on us.



In November of 1783, after occupying the City for eight long years, the British, smart in their fine red coats and arms, marched down the Bowery to the East River wharves and out of New York forever. George Washington and his troops returned, tattered, but triumphant.



Once more our City rises from the ashes. ♦♦



Martin and Annette Meyers write The Dutchman New York historical novels and short stories using the pseudonym Maan Meyers. The Incendiary Plot is the basis for their historical mystery, The Lucifer Contract. On their own, Marty is the author of the Patrick Hardy series, and Annette writes the Smith and Wetzon series and the Olivia Brown series.

MY NEW YORK

by Charles Mathes

I'm the author of a series of stand-alone mysteries, each featuring a different young woman with a problem in her past. A hotel-inspector orphan searching for her family. The professional magician desperate to understand why her grandfather

was murdered. A pair of antique-dealer sisters whose grandmother sank into poverty after a Broadway career. A professional stage fight director whose father lies in a coma.

The books appear to be connected only by the word "Girl" in the titles, but in fact each novel includes the same pivotal character with whom all of my heroines interact. The character's name is New York City. Like any pivotal character my New York is a catalyst that forces my heroines to change, to grow, to develop.

Perhaps this is because New York forced me to change. Everyone who comes to the City to forge a career has to put aside old concepts of how things are supposed to work and reinvent him or herself to survive in a town that sometimes seems to be both without limits and without mercy.

The stereotype is that you have to move fast here or you'll get trampled, talk fast or you won't get in a word edgewise and think fast or you'll be left without the shirt on your back or a penny to your name.

The reality is that the city lets you be anything you want to be (which is probably why so many misfits end up here), but always makes you keep things in perspective. It's hard to think you're such a big deal when buildings soar sixty stories on every corner, but it's hard not to feel like a king or queen when you're walking down Fifth Avenue and the sun is shining and the city is pulsating with the energy of eight million people certain that they are in the nexus of the world.

Like most "real" New Yorkers I was born out of town—Cleveland, Ohio, to be exact. My first taste of the Big Apple came on a family vacation when I was just a kid. I was used to the suburbs and had never seen anything like Manhattan before. Our hotel was something out of a movie, as bustling and gigantic as an airport, full of little shops and high ceilings and bellboys running around in red uniforms. A cab took us to a nondescript building on a seemingly deserted street. We opened the door and found ourselves in a cavernous restaurant full of beautifully dressed sophisticates. I ordered Lobster Thermador and nobody batted an eye.

When we came out of a movie theatre on Broadway at eleven o'clock at night



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Times Square

the streets were more crowded with people than downtown Cleveland was at rush hour. And such people! Ladies with faces thick with make-up and cynicism smiling out from dark corners at passersby; pug-nosed guys in sharkskin suits lighting up Parliaments with gold cigarette lighters; a leathery old broad dressed like a fireworks display bellowing to herself about how the Commies had taken over the government.

My father, the traveling salesman, told me that if you waited around long enough in Times Square, you would eventually run into everyone you had ever met. I gave a skeptical glance around and to my astonishment was hailed by a kid I recognized from summer camp in Indiana the summer before. I was hooked. New York was pure magic, a place of miracles!

Later, as a college freshman I came back to New York by myself. Confident that I would have another great time, I checked into a "reasonably priced" hotel in midtown. The room was tiny and dark. Sirens

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wailed in filthy streets far below. I walked through Times Square again, this time without my friends or my family. I didn't recognize a soul. Thousands of people rushed by, none of them caring whether I lived or died. I ate alone in a greasy diner, the only place I could afford, and was hustled out when they wanted the table for a larger party. The city was overwhelming, gigantic, anonymous. I never had felt so lonely in my life.

So which was the real New York? The stage set filled with miracles or the indifferent colossus that chewed up idealistic young people and spat them out?

It was both, of course, and more. It's a place where inconceivable cruelty lives next door to impossible kindness, where some people eat caviar on penthouse terraces and others search hopelessly for a studio apartment renting for less than \$1,500 a month. It's a town filled with smug billionaires, alcoholic losers, beautiful women, petty criminals, captains of industry, sadistic killers, saintly grandmothers and nice doggies. It's a thousand different universes existing side by side and never even suspecting each other's existence.

Here you'll find people from every country under the sun, ideas ranging from the ridiculous to the sublime, and stores specializing in everything from counter espionage to darts. We have giant skyscrapers and we have little wooden houses. We have food that you could die for and food that you can die from. We have the hopes and dreams of the nation, and its darkest fears as well.

The city's very mass and complexity is what gives it the power to turn grown men and women into children when they see it for the first time. This, I think is the reason why my heroines all end up here at some point. When a person sees New York for the first time, he or she invariably sees it as a child, with a child's terrible sense of magic and wonder and awe. That's what changes them. That's what makes them grow. Frankly it's something I want to experience again and again, something I want to share.

My books take place in a sophisticated, fairly kooky version of New York that's full of beauty and heart because that's the New

York I decided to look for and is consequently the one I see. Other authors look for different, darker New Yorks and have no trouble finding them. Every New York is the real New York. The city's reality is like the reality of quantum physics as articulated by Yogi Berra: wherever you look for it, there it is.

But nobody knows that when they first arrive. I certainly didn't. I was just out of graduate school. I had sold my car and cashed in my coin collection and made arrangements to stay with a friend. All my bridges were burned. As my plane landed at LaGuardia I knew I had enough money to hold out for three months. If I couldn't get a job in that time, I didn't know what would become of me. I was scared to death. What would I find?

As the taxi carried me and the three suitcases which held everything I owned in the world over the Triborough Bridge, the towers of the city suddenly flashed into sight, twinkling with sunlight and the dreams of a million young people like me. It was majestic and awesome and magical. Gershwin seemed to well up out of nowhere, just like in that Woody Allen move. My own personal New York had been here all along, waiting for me to take the chance.

Suddenly the fear, bad memories and awful anticipation were gone. I was a child again. I knew I was home. ♦♦



Charles Mathes' most recent mystery novel is The Girl in the Face of the Clock (St. Martin's, 2001). Charles is also the director of a prominent Manhattan art gallery. He and his wife, the artist and writer Arlene Graston, live in Manhattan. Some of the material in this article appears in a different form on the author's website <www.charlesmathes.com>.