

## Have Writers Forgotten the Ordinary New Yorkers?

By Jim Sleeper

However badly things are going for ordinary New Yorkers, rest assured that writers slumming for thrills will help make it worse, and that too many reviewers and pundits will adore them for it. If Louis XIV's France was a despotism tempered by epigrams, in New York "epigrams" have got the upper hand, in that writing that's racy and clever is asphyxiating writing that thinks and breathes.

Most of the things tearing us apart as a city aren't racy: the housing crunch, structural unemployment, the decay of once-proud public institutions where earnest immigrant children sometimes became sophisticates in the best sense of the term, but in which most of our literary lions no longer have much of a stake.

Tackling these problems is no longer chic because urban capitalism has no way to do it, and since most ambitious writers are wired into that paralysis, they'd rather divert one another with lurid caricatures of the problems than be caught saying something stupid and foredoomed like, "It's unfair! People are hurting!"

I'm not calling for a "proletarian" literature in harness to a political agenda; something like Alan Paton's heart-rending South African racial tragedy, "Cry, The Beloved Country," would do. Instead we've had Tama Janowitz's "Slaves of New York" (and sequels), Jay McInerney's "Bright Lights, Big City" and, now, Tom Wolfe's "The Bonfire of the Vanities"—terminally cynical tours de farce of a city beyond redemption and supposedly the more stimulating for that.

The New Yorkers in these novels have become resigned to the failure of the liberal urban experiment that ran from Al Smith to John Lindsay. As

Anatole Broyard noted recently, some of Tom Wolfe's New Yorkers "enjoy the devastation almost sexually, as a form of sadomasochism. . ." They "have lost their belief in justice, perhaps even their belief in order—and giving up these demanding beliefs has freed a lot of energy. . . like a cocaine rush. . . Of course Mr. Wolfe may be teasing, for he is a satirist as well as a reporter. . . Still, the picture is not reassuring, for in New York City today's satire is tomorrow's reality."

That clever little *frisson* ends Mr. Broyard's comment on "Bonfire," but something about the shudder comes a bit cheap. Sure, Mr. Wolfe's sensationalist vignettes of New Yorkers immersed in a war of all against all often hit the mark; and those caricatures can become self-fulfilling prophecies, scaring middle-class whites off the subway at night (when it's safest, incidentally). Still, I shudder to think how many New Yorkers will accept Mr. Wolfe's caricatures as the whole truth.

All along the boulevards and side streets of Brooklyn, Queens and, yes, the Bronx, people work two and three jobs to pay mortgages on little row homes, send their kids well-scrubbed to school, attend community meetings, take evening courses in the community colleges and read self-help books on the trains. They're courteous to a fault. The number of them who live below the poverty line and work is rising faster than the number on welfare.

These New Yorkers are ill-served, caricatured, demeaned by the selective realism of "Bonfire" and whatever other fiction even notices them. If the New York of their dreams is doomed, our scribblers are complicit in the destruction.

As Mr. Wolfe nearly acknowledges in his brilliant portrait of a Bronx judge, the sophistication

our literati associate with the city's glitter really belongs to those who are its glue, who shuttle daily back and forth across lines of color and class to teach the children, run the transit, rebuild the housing. Yet, outside a few novels by some who came up through the public institutions, like Richard Price ("The Warriors") and Jimmy Breslin (at his best in "Table Money"), ordinary New Yorkers are invisible to the writers, reviewers, and their coterie who presume to give us New York.

The little people no more figure in the imagination of the trust-fund left, with its taste for a politics of moral posturing, than in the imagination of clever preppies whose very humor gives off the faintly disagreeable air of coddling on the upside of oppression. Schools Chancellor Richard Green is likely to bore them. Howard Beach prosecutor Charles Hynes, who has a tale as haunting as Alan Paton's to tell, doesn't show up on their radar. You won't find him in "Bonfire."

Our salon-dwellers have developed what Mr. Broyard calls "a sophisticated attitude" toward New York's "utopian dream in tatters." Airily they call for revolution or for the abandonment of all pretense to justice—it scarcely matters which—while caring nothing for the experiences and feelings of people who live exposed, vulnerable, in changing neighborhoods where the upkeep of old-fashioned decencies is a matter of survival and where both revolution and resignation are luxuries.

Luxury housing and glittering monstrosities like Trump Tower contribute much to the decay of the civic traditions that are ordinary New Yorkers' greatest monument. But the failure of our writers to care enough about those traditions to place themselves at risk in them—that is the most obscene luxury of all.