

TALL STORIES

A MONUMENTAL COLLECTION OF WRITING ABOUT NEW YORK

By Paul Zakrzewski

WRITING NEW YORK: A LITERARY ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Phillip Lopate
(Library of America,
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Greater New York was established one hundred years ago, and just in time for the centennial party arrives the newest literary companion of the

city, WRITING NEW YORK (Library of America; \$40.00). While finishing all 1,034 pages of this anthology could take you until the next centennial, you'll be hooked long before then.

Part birthday card, part love letter to the city, this anthology spans more than two hundred years—from a crotchety

account of the city's founding by our first literary star, Washington Irving, to incisive portraits of today's New York by such shrewd citizens as James Baldwin, Vivian Gornick, Oscar Hijuelos and Gay Talese.

But WRITING NEW YORK is not limited by an academic approach to these writers. In fact, while he eschews a systematically historical or scholarly approach, editor Phillip Lopate manages nonetheless to capture several facets of the city's staggering scope.

Roughly one half of the volume is comprised of writing from them nine-

teenth century, and these writings tend to be sociological more than anything. Meanwhile, most of the stories, essays and poetry from this century are more concerned with the psychological effects of living in New York—what Henry James calls, in an excerpt from the American Scene, "the supreme relation."

Phillip Lopate has also included a few party favorites. Once again, we watch the enigmatic decline of the Herman Melville's troubled scribe,

Bartleby ("Bartleby, The Scrivener"); join Walt Whitman as he commutes across the East River seeking enlightenment ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"); and marvel, with E. B. White, at how the whole precarious city can function (his classic and still unsurpassed analysis, "Here is New York").

Certainly it's not the case that our most familiar writers

understand the city best. Edgar Allan Poe's gossip column, "Doings of Gotham," is at times sly and witty, but he adopts an overly-refined tone that seems a little out of place in the rabble-rousing of mid-1800s Manhattan. And Mark Twain takes a swipe at a (then) new social phenomenon in his essay "Personals," but he comes off like a nineteenth-century Andy Rooney—mostly irascible and not particularly wise.

In fact, it's to Lopate's credit that he's invited some lesser known (but no less observant) citizens to the

party. In "New York Under the Snow," Cuban poet José Martí walks the paralyzed streets of the city after the infamous blizzard of March 1888. Martí's



occasion the author of one piece will show up as a character in the another one, and this kind of double vision provides a literary analogy to



The gathering includes E.B. White's classic and still unsurpassed, "Here is New York."

eye misses nothing: his account is haunting yet pointed and fresh, much like Norman Mailer's most muscular and graceful writing.

Little known Grant Thorburn is similarly engrossing. In an excerpt of his autobiography ("Life and Writings of Grant Thorburn"), the Scottish grocer and writer stumbles into building the first big seed catalogue business in nineteenth-century America. His pluck and his superstitious ways make for fun reading, but when you consider the ups and downs of his business, the story becomes something more—an early example of a New York success story.

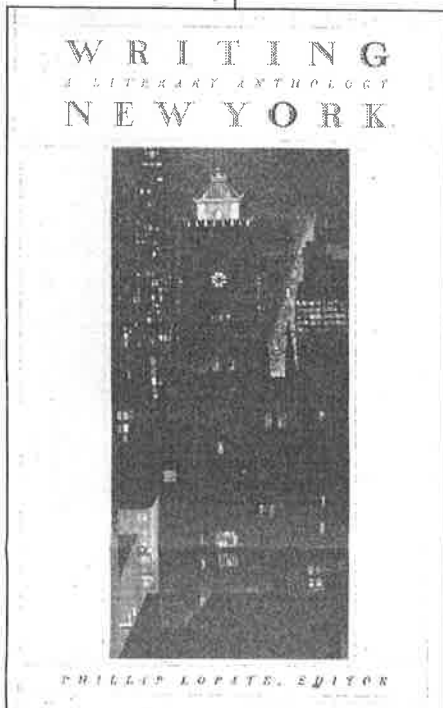
If the collection has a several rag-to-riches accounts of New York life, there's plenty of cautionary and sordid stories, too. Wong Chin Foo's "Experiences of a Chinese Journalist" humorously recounts the failure of the author to launch a Chinese-American newspaper. Foo is derailed on one hand by the racist characterizations of Western journalists and by the drinking habits of his own countrymen on the other.

There are plenty of other New York moments in this anthology, and not all of these are planned. On

the way lives intersect in this city. Take the example of crusading journalist Jacob Riis. His own account of the horrible conditions of immigrant buildings in the Lower East Side ("How the Other Half Lives") seems both sobering and yet strangely flat. Meanwhile, a funnier and more nuanced portrait of Riis emerges in "The Police," a memoir by fellow muckraker Lincoln Steffens.

At odds with the humor, sadness, passion and anger—in a word, the personality—of all these writers is the editor's own cold and careful approach to WRITING NEW YORK. In the introduction and prefatory notes, Phillip Lopate seems at his most intellectual and restrained. Sadly, that's a far cry from the gruff, brash and unusually bright personality he reveals in his previous collections of essays (Bachelorhood, Against Joie De Vivre, Portrait of My Body).

Nonetheless, while this anthology sags from time to time—it's hard to imagine an anthology this size that wouldn't—it's most often engrossing. Like this city itself, WRITING NEW YORK is big and overbearing and reveals the most in places where you'd least expect it to.



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