Introduction

In 2005, NYU Press published “New York Stories,” a collection of 40 essays from the City section of The New York Times, a part of the Sunday paper distributed on newsprint in the five boroughs and electronically around the globe. Those pieces, which dug into the crevices and crannies of life in New York City in search of nuggets of insight and observation, were a disparate lot. Their subjects ranged from the allure of a Greenwich Village basketball court to the voyeuristic aspects of life as an urban window washer to the daily rhythms of a panhandler on the F train.

But these works had one thing in common. They captured the mood of the city during a particularly poignant era—the years framing the events of September 11. It’s a cliché to say that nothing was the same in the years that followed the attacks on that luminous sky-blue morning, yet it’s impossible to look back on that period and not classify events as either Before or After.

As I write this, the city is reeling from events that have been searing in a different way. The economic maelstrom that began buffeting the nation and the world in the spring of 2008 hit New York City with particular vigor. This is partly because the financial industry, the epicenter of the crisis, is based in Manhattan, but also because the city itself, a destination almost from the moment of its birth for both immigrants and sons and daughters from around the nation, was suddenly, agonizingly, on the ropes. To make it in New York, the idea embodied in the jaunty Frank Sinatra anthem to the city, was suddenly very hard if not verging on impossible for the newly minted college graduate, the immigrant from halfway around the world, and even some born-and-bred New Yorkers, who for the first time contemplated pulling up roots from the city that had been their families’ home for generations.

Though many lives have continued unchanged, many more were drastically altered. Yet life in the city went on, and in the City section, we continued to take the pulse of the metropolis and tell its continuing, ever changing story.
The observation that there are eight million stories in the Naked City is the hoariest of clichés. Yet it’s the rare New Yorker who does not have a compelling tale to tell, and part 1 of this collection, “Characters,” offers profiles of some unforgettable individuals. We meet the Colombian immigrant who lives in Jackson Heights, Queens—the Chicken and Rice Man, as we called him—who has literally devoted his life to feeding local itinerant workers. We are introduced to a street person who spends most days and nights riding the bus between Chinatown and Atlantic City because he has no place to live.

Some of the lives are tragic, like that of the troubled young man who took his life on the morning of his 21st birthday. Some are tinged with tragedy, like that of the young woman who was swallowed up by the streets of Manhattan and rescued more than two weeks later in the waters off Staten Island through what can only be described as a miracle. Some of the stories are joyous, like the one about the whistler who roamed the streets of the West Village, spreading unexpected cheer amid the bleakness of winter.

In part 2, “Places in the City’s Heart,” we visit memorable corners of New York—not just the big-ticket locations like the Empire State Building but also less familiar sites like Potter’s Field on Hart Island, where the unknown dead are laid to rest; the outer-borough strip called Gasoline Alley, where shady but friendly characters will hand you a line while pumping your gas; the old Shea Stadium, oddly mourned despite its flaws; and the nondescript deli in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, that stole a resident’s heart when he wasn’t even looking. Bars especially seem to keep the creative juices flowing, as they have throughout the city’s history. So does Brooklyn: Is it the face of the city’s future? Better than Manhattan? Home to too many writers? All of the above?

Part 3, “Rituals, Rhythms, and Ruminations,” is composed of pieces that seek to capture the texture of local life, the phenomena we see out of the corner of the eye, like the battalion of flashing police cars that has become a staple of post-9/11 iconography. The inhabitants of some of these worlds are hiding in plain sight, like the intrepid cyclists who cruise the city aboard brakeless bikes. The inhabitants of others are invisible unless you know where to look for them, like the stealthy urban explorers Ben Gibberd describes in his piece “Children of Darkness.”

The city’s history is endlessly, compulsively fascinating, and in part 4, “Excavating the Past,” are works that mine some of that history. Sometimes the stories are personal, like the one told by a daughter who discovered that decades earlier her mother had lived in the very
apartment in which she herself once lived. Sometimes the stories take the form of social history, as in Amy Fox’s account of the landmark racial battles at Stuyvesant Town, the middle-income bastion on Manhattan’s East Side where she grew up. Sometimes the history is richly cultural, as with Manny Fernandez’s account of the musical legacy of Morrisania, that Bronx neighborhood that spawned a cornucopia of memorable styles. Sometimes the history is wonderfully quirky, like the debate over who really invented Eggs Benedict, the quintessential New York brunch dish.

As was true last time, the roster of contributors is studded with illustrious names, among them Kevin Baker, Helen Benedict, Edwidge Danticat, Dorothy Gallagher, David Hajdu, Colin Harrison, Frances Kiernan, Suketu Mehta, Francine Prose, Nathaniel Rich, Roxana Robinson, Jonathan Rosen, Christopher Sorrentino, and Robert Sullivan. The collection includes works by two writers who were represented in the previous volume; Laura Shaine Cunningham’s essay on a lost starling and David Masello’s on a hidden courtyard in Greenwich Village were just too good to pass up, even as we sought to fill this volume with fresh names. The book also includes pieces by the most recent crop of regular writers for the City section. Although the job market for journalists is currently in freefall, they’re so gifted that we’re confident they’ll make names for themselves down the line.

If you enjoy what you read in this collection, you might want to check out the many exceptional essays we loved but did not have room to include, such as Elizabeth Giddens’s meditation on her house with a past, Sloane Crosley on her real estate woes, Joseph O’Neill on the corners of New York, Phillip Lopate’s interview with longtime architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, Ed Park on the 9/11 echoes that refuse to go away, Brooke Hauser on the prom of many nations, Thomas Mallon on his first New York apartment, Michael Powell on New York City’s two Roberts (Moses and Caro), Nicole Krauss on the life of a modern-day walker in the city, and Alice Mattison on the subway lines New Yorkers really crave. Luckily, in a virtual world, nothing ever truly dies. These articles will live forever in cyberspace; check them out on The New York Times on the Web.

The story of the City section has a bittersweet ending. In May of 2009, after a run of 16 years, the section published its final issue, falling victim to the same economic forces that were pummeling the rest of the planet and were hitting the world of publishing, especially newspapers, with particular force. But happily, the paper as a whole continues to arrive
on doorsteps (and computer screens and mobile devices) with unfailing regularity. And thanks to the generosity of NYU Press, along with the writers, photographers, and illustrators who have allowed their work to be used in this book, the section lives again—sort of—between the covers of a book. That’s a satisfying legacy.

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