



City Boy: My Life in New York in the 1960s and 70s

Edmund White

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An irresistible literary treat: a memoir of the social and sexual lives of New York City's cultural and intellectual in-crowd in the tumultuous 1970s, from acclaimed author Edmund White.

In the New York of the 1970s, in the wake of Stonewall and in the midst of economic collapse, you might find the likes of Jasper Johns and William Burroughs at the next cocktail party, and you were as likely to be caught arguing Marx at the New York City Ballet as cruising for sex in the warehouses and parked trucks along the Hudson. This is the New York that Edmund White portrays in *City Boy*: a place of enormous intrigue and artistic tumult. Combining the no-holds-barred confession and yearning of *A Boy's Own Story* with the easy erudition and sense of place of *The Flaneur*, this is the story of White's years in 1970s New York, bouncing from intellectual encounters with Susan Sontag and Harold Brodkey to erotic entanglements downtown to the burgeoning gay scene of artists and writers. It's a moving, candid, brilliant portrait of a time and place, full of encounters with famous names and cultural icons.

City Boy: My Life in New York in the 1960s and 70s Details

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From Reader Review City Boy: My Life in New York in the 1960s and 70s for online ebook

Blake Traina says

In Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, when the dimmest of the students is asked to define history, he replies, "It's just one [expletive] thing after another." Reductive? Perhaps. Funny? Certainly. But also, quite true.

And it happens to be the reason I tend to avoid non-fiction...memoirs in particular. At least when one is writing a biography (particularly about someone who is already dead) or writing about history, the author has enough distance to give the story some shape and ascribe it some sort of meaning.

Autobiography is a bit stickier.

I chose to read White's *City Boy* primarily because of its subtitle, "My Life in New York During the 1960's and 70's." As a music fan, that era in NYC history has always interested me. Even though the seedy, filthy, dangerous New York of the 1970's has all but been forgotten, it was fertile ground for many of the most influential artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians of the latter part of the Twentieth Century. Over the years, books like *Edie* and *Please Kill Me* (both of which consist of edited and skillfully arranged interviews) have fed my interest in this period. I figured if anyone could conjur that time period on the page, it would surely be a skillful and evocative writer like White.

Unfortunately I found the book to be dull and almost completely formless. He flits from one episode to another, tepidly dishing the dirt on a lot of hotsy totsy (and mostly dead) literary luminaries, only about half of whom I've heard of. While he does spill a fair amount of ink on the squalid living conditions in pre-boom Manhattan, the descriptions are all fairly dry and cliche (garbage piling in the streets due to strikes, multiple locks on apartment doors) and lack any real flavour of the era. Surprisingly, the rampant sex of that time period is somewhat coyly presented and, in retrospect, primarily only as a set up for the sea change occasioned by the looming AIDS crisis that comes near the book's conclusion.

The most fascinating aspect of the story dealt with the writing of his first novel, *Forgetting Elena* and his subsequent struggle to get it edited, published, reviewed and recognized. That novel has always been a favourite of mine and, as a writer, the story of how a debut novel goes from idea to publication, was edifying and fascinating. But that, in and of itself, is not enough for me to wholeheartedly recommend White's book.

For a more lively, colourful version of this period in NY history (with a gay perspective), one should really read Wayne County's outrageous memoir, *Man Enough to be a Woman*. (

K.M. Soehnlein says

Fans of Edmund White will savor this memoir of the 1970s in New York, when the city was decrepit but artists and writers thrived. The author fills in some of the gaps of his career -- the publication of his earliest novel, *Forgetting Elena* (have you ever wondered how it came to be hailed by Vladimir Nabokov?), the way in which he came to write *The Joy of Gay Sex*, which, it turns out, everyone warned him about.

Sex, gossip, the strivings of artists on the make -- it all blends together in a narrative that is sophisticated at one moment and deliciously profane the next. The portraits of people like John Ashbery and Susan Sontag will satisfy the curiosity of those of us who wonder what it was like to live the high profile, relatively closeted lives of the public intellectual back when such things seemed to matter.

Nancy says

I look for a memoir to immerse me in the life of the author so that I can really see things from his point of view. Admittedly Edmund White's life is very different from mine. He is a gay man who really enjoys city life. I'm a straight woman who has gravitated to a very rural area. Still, there should have been a human hook but there wasn't. I simply could not slog through several hundred pages of picking up tricks, shallow party descriptions and name dropping. I finally gave up at page 158 so if it got better after than I didn't notice.

Sequelguerrier says

Well, I finally managed to wrest time from the holiday schedule to read the last few pages. I tend to like White's writing even when he is fictionalising his own story. Here he is in outright auto-biography mode and his voice is both very personal and unfailingly kind even when he is truthful about people's foibles and flaws. As Irving says in the blurb, this is a book for anyone interested in the nature of friendship and it is a fabulous glimpse of the New York of the sixties and early eighties. Of course it is also about a crucial period of modern gay history but, almost more than in any other book of his, the being gay is simply and completely naturally part of the story. It isn't overstressed or hung out as a campaign banner. It's as much part of the story as the burst of creativity of the era or the social pattern of rich and poor in the rotting and booming big apple. A personal book of a man I would like to know after reading this where before I wanted to simply read him.

Tosh says

i never read his fiction, but pretty much read his non-fiction - and for whatever reason I just haven't picked up any of his novels. Saying that about my eccentricity about his work, White is a superb writer. I am a big fan of memoir writing, and White has that classic quality regarding that genre. New York City was a different type of place as of now. And White captures the gay subculture around that world, yet he ignores certain aspects of "general" or popular pop culture that was taking place at the same time (circ. 60's and 70's). So due to his aesthetic taste there is no mention of the punk scene - which makes perfect sense with respect to his book - yet that was so much part of the scene at the time. Yet he does touch on the disco plane.

The broad strokes are not that interesting, but his little intense profiles on people around him are great. Especially Susan Sontag, Joe Brainard, and others. I also like how he writes about NYC as a physical place. Those who know it now, or never lived it in the 60's or 70's it would be now like visiting a ghostly presence.

Igor S says

Loads of very enjoyable name-dropping

Mel says

This book is Edmund White's delightful memoir about his life in New York (and a few other cities sprinkled in the mix to keep things interesting) in the late sixties and seventies. New York was a shit hole but that made it affordable. This affordability made it an attractive destination for creative people who wanted a place to be free to explore art, music and writing. It was literally bursting at the seams with creative and interesting people and in addition to causing a great flood of amazing art, music, writing etc.; they also seemed to be having interesting encounters both in and out of bed. He mentions a huge list of famous creative people some whom I had heard of and some whom I had not. (It really doesn't matter if you know who the people are. White's detailed descriptions of them let you know exactly what they were about and how they fit into his personal story.)

White's writing is electric, witty, funny and very charming. A great read. I loved it and highly recommend it to anyone interested in queer history, art, music, and literature. This is about the old glory days of New York when it was cool, fun, weird, affordable, sexy, seedy, smelly (there was no one to pick up the garbage... literally), and dangerous. I had never heard of this author before and this is the first book I have read by him but it won't be the last. Inspiring excellent book. One of my best reads of the year 2013.

Sarah says

A delight!

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

I haven't read this yet, but I've read the first sentence and I love it:

"In the 1970's in New York everyone slept till noon."

Albeit for different reasons to Edmund White, this describes my weekends in the 1980's.

I went out every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night in search of live bands, for the love of it, but also so that I could write about them.

I was rarely in bed before 3am.

If I was, I hadn't got home yet.

However, the next day, I would wake up and indulge myself on a can of coke and a ham and egg burger at The Windmill.

But by 1pm, I had to be back home, teeth brushed, and sitting in front of the TV.

Because that was when "Star Trek" started.

Every weekend, I slavishly followed the same ritual, so that I could boldly go where no man has gone before. I like to think that, a decade earlier, Edmund White was indulging a similar, but slightly different, ritual.

The difference being that he was boldly going where some men had gone before.

Rod says

City Boy, My life in New York during the 1960's and '70s by Edmund White 2009; read in Feb 2010
I appreciated Edmund White's clean concise writing. His objective observations about self, situations, and politics sometimes challenged my own preconceptions, but were enlightening. And I came to admire his conclusions. The name dropping was sometimes trying but more because I didn't know these famous people and their works as well as he. Overall I came to a better understanding of a history and place where I had lived too.

A humorous quote from Chapter 11, page 152; "David Kalstone invited me to join him one summer in Venice- ...David paid the rent and financed the major treats, such as dinner once a season at Harry's Bar, and a day beside the Cipriani pool once every week or two. At the pool everyone was so old that Gore Vidal reputedly referred to it as Lourdes. It was there that Marguerite Littman ...said to Tennessee Williams as they looked at a cadaverous girl shambling past in her bikini, "Look, anorexia nervosa!'" To which Williams replied, "Oh Marguerite, you know everyone."

Kerry says

I couldn't finish it. I wanted to read it because I had heard that White was a good writer, and because I thought it would be a documentation of life in NYC in the 60s and 70s. But it was really more a narrative about the author's career start and I wanted more detail about life in NYC during that time period. The thing is, when he finally gave you some overview or detail, it was uninteresting. And his story kept leaping back and forth: there was no focus, no continuum, no sense of the emotional details that one would hope to take away from a book like this. I wanted to leave the story with a feeling of "wow, I wish I could have lived there back then" but sadly, it didn't leave me with that feeling at all. I read up to the halfway point and then just stopped. I'm disappointed.

Chris says

"In the 1970s in New York everyone slept till noon." Thus begins this book and it's a gold mine for any sociologist interested in the artistic culture of New York in the 1960s and 1970s. It also will be eye-opening for younger gay men who want to know what they missed: for those two decades represent the exhilarating breakout of gay *political* freedom (1960s) and by almost any reckoning the high point to-date in gay *sexual* freedom (1970s). In the decades since, there has been of course a tragic retrenchment of both due to AIDS and the rise of the religious-right conservative movement. Only now, some forty-plus years later, is significant progress again being made on both the health and the political fronts.

As White states,

"Just as the crash of 1929 ended the Roaring Twenties, so the AIDS epidemic of 1981 ended the sexy 70s. [Susan] Sontag once said to me that in all of human history in only one brief period were people free to have sex when and how they wanted—between 1960, with the

introduction of the first birth-control pills, and 1981, with the advent of AIDS. For those two decades all sexually transmitted diseases could be treated with antibiotics, unwanted pregnancies were eliminated through the pill and legalized abortion, and AIDS did not yet exist. Religion seem to be on the wane and promiscuity appeared to be the wave of the future."

White was its eyewitness. In page after page we read about the famous people he worked with, and indeed the name dropping becomes burdensome yet beneficial, causing many side trips to Wikipedia to learn who they were, what they created, and what they looked like. Interleaved between the artistic rambling a is plenty of sex, frankly described. If we can believe White, and I think we can, the ease at which sex could be had, with almost anyone, including celebrities, is astounding. And by no means is it restricted to monogamous couples, same-sex or otherwise. Much of these antics are fictionally reproduced in his 1985 novel *Caracole*, which if otherwise a failure, quite viscerally animates a whole crowd of sexual "nymphs and satyrs" drawn from White's intimates.

Apart from certifying to us "moderns" that sex was so much different then, White does have a message, one which might not be agreeable to all:

"Love is a source of anxiety until it is source of boredom; only friendship feeds the spirit. Love raises great expectations in us that it never satisfies; the hopes based on friendship are milder and in the present, and they exist only because they've already been rewarded. Love is a script about just a few repeated themes we have a hard time following, though we make every effort to conform to its tone. Friendship is a *permis de séjour* that enables us to go anywhere and do anything exactly as our whims dictate."

I'll leave it there to discuss amongst yourselves, but this theme is prominent in *Caracole* (1985) and persists to his latest work, thus marking him an outsider in today's mainstreaming, marriage-equality-based gay culture. Whatever your political motivations today, there is no denying what it was like back then, and White describes it well and factually.

City Boy also covers a lot of New York ground. White lived there when the city was a dump, was floundering financially, and was a truly dangerous place to live. This is almost entirely unknown today.

"It was a grungy, dangerous, bankrupt city without normal services most of the time. The garbage piled up and stank during long strikes of the sanitation workers. A major blackout led to days and days of looting. *We gay guys wore whistles around our necks so we could summon help from other gay men when we were attacked on the streets* by gangs living in the projects between Greenwich Village and the West Side leather bars. The upside was that the city was inexpensive..." [emphasis added]

Wow. Can any of us imagine this as reality today? Maybe someone, but not most. So, it was pretty bad back then in the great City of the East. Thank goodness it's better now...at least we hope White thinks so. But it's not that simple to White. Art thrives in adversity, political progress is driven by pain and suffering. His conclusion is ambiguous, his outlook undefined. Now at the end of a long fruitful career, how majestic for him to leave the ultimate truth finding to us, if only we can rediscover the source locale. He does warn us in the quote below that it won't be found any longer in the mythical City of Fog on the West Coast. I'm inclined to agree. So where is it?

"I was lucky to live in New York when it was dangerous and edgy and cheap enough to play host to young, penniless artists. That was the era of 'coffee shops' as they were defined in New York—cheap restaurants open round the clock where you could eat for less than it would cost to cook at home. That was the era of ripped jeans and dirty T-shirts, when the kind of people who are impressed by material signs of success were not the people you wanted to know."

Jamie says

White suggests in the brief Q&A following this memoir that autobiography should be concerned strictly with the "truth." I found this a peculiar invocation, having just finished reading Isherwood's "Christopher and His Kind," where Isherwood invested half his time in the metatext of life writing—in other words, was constantly conscious that memory is faulty and one's perspective on an event is never true, but is one lens on that happening among many. Isherwood goes so far as to refer to his earlier selves as "Christopher," and to discuss their experiences and understandings of things as radically different than the memoir-writing-'I' of the book.

So White believes that his text, at any rate, is an accurate portrayal of around two decades of life in New York (with a bit of time out for San Francisco and Venice). I wonder whether the figures in this—diverse as Mapplethorpe and Sontag, John Ashberry and James Merrill, White's numerous lovers, and even with a cameo from Patti Smith—would see it his way, but nevertheless this is a thrilling read. I was born in 1987, a handful of years after the advent of HIV/AIDS, and so the sexual and erotic world of White's New York remains as if in a foreign language. By the time he discusses the early 80s, noting that the "specter of death" hung over each pulse of desire, I begin to recognize my own erotic identity. But the sense that gay liberation was, at least for White, primarily a sexual freedom, a radical anti-monogamy, a blurring of the bounds between friends and lovers and fucks and tricks, a sense that at any turn of the corner, one could make a connection with a desired and desiring other...this began to feel to me like a tragedy. One describing the rise of a non-normative system of relating emotionally to others—and its fall, that familiar story we now know, to the horrors of a virus that, while no longer a death warrant, still carries with it profound consequences and great stigma. Suddenly, it seems that the sort of assimilationist politics of contemporary queer mainstreams had to have been the inevitable toughing up against AIDS, but also required the disavowal of any sort of true radicalism, any real resistance to the conventional romance plot that we are stuffed full of now. It gets better & all that.

Thus the memoir seems to me required reading in some sense, because it offers a rare glimpse into possibilities for violent change in imagining our desire. Nevermind the fact that all NYC memoirs seem to be fantastic (in many ways, this reminded me a great deal of Patti Smith's recent "Just Kids," and of course even featured some of the same circles and happenings), White's sense of enthrallment with the city and with every figure he encountered, with the life of the writer (another experience that seems dead now), and so forth—these make this a memoir that begins to have an erotic charge with its own narration of the past, a sensual relation to memory. It's also fucking laugh out loud funny, and often very hot to read. We know the sad ending, and that's always unavoidable, but White doesn't allow melancholy to eclipse the thrill.

Casper Hach says

Attitude magazine mentioned this book as a must read classic. I found it to be the most sinfully boring book I have ever opened. I wish I was a quitter and had just skipped reading the rest, but I decided that I could not form an opinion without reading the whole thing, so I pulled myself together and 1-2 pages at a time, I finished the book in just a year and a half.

If you need something to put you to sleep every night, this book is the perfect choice.

David Cerruti says

City Boy is about Edmund White's life in New York City from the early 1960's through the early 1980's. The main themes are:

1. Writing and publishing. This was the most interesting. Some writers are supportive of others. Some are bitchy.
2. Gay life, before and after Stonewall. White is more than candid. He is HIV positive, and a founder of the Gay Men's Health Crisis.
3. Gossip. He must have known damn near everyone in the arts. The name-dropping doesn't stop with Peggy Guggenheim, Jasper Johns, Susan Sontag, Robert Mapplethorpe, and William Burroughs. It just goes on and on.
4. NYC in the 60's & 70's was not a pretty place. The garbage strikes, crime, and graffiti are noted. That time also had spirit and excitement. Another reviewer noted that the book ignores the punk scene, which was very present in NYC. White did mention Patti Smith and her connection with Mapplethorpe.

City Boy is well written and concise. The same content could fill two books. White acknowledges the many friends and associates that helped edit, research, and proofread this book. It's odd that he called the f-holes in a cello "S curves", and no one caught it. Sometimes the details were tiring, but City Boy was fascinating. I'll look for some of the many other books by Edmund White.

Edit: Disclosure - I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads.
