

Manhattan transfers

Salman Rushdie likes it so much he's moving there. Martin Amis fell in love with it long ago. What is it about Brits and New York? Amanda Foreman, who commutes between London and Manhattan, on the complex allure of a city that worships success

Amanda ForemanThe Guardian, Wednesday 17 May 2000

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It is easy to see why Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis and a host of other writers have fallen in love with New York. Like a femme fatale, it is irresistibly compelling. With every generation comes a new wave of hopefuls: small-town escapees, European refugees, disaffected Londoners. Once here, few are not entranced. Suddenly the rest of the world seems like an unbearable backwater. After a year of living here while researching my next book, I still look around me with a sense of wonderment. I think I understand what a citizen from ancient Athens must have felt when seeing the might of Rome for the first time.

The New Yorker writer, EB White, once compared the city to a poem, "whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents - but whose full meaning will always remain elusive". But the magic is by no means pure. The energy that New York exudes is as much the light of extinguished souls as it is the spark of individual enterprise. And while the full meaning of the city may prove elusive, all New Yorkers are painfully aware that it remains an intractable mass of contradictions. It is not just the extremes of wealth and poverty living side by side. It is as though every condition is locked in a struggle with its opposite, fixing New York in a state of permanent tension. Tolerance vies with racism, social mobility with elitism, sophistication with insecurity, efficiency with corruption, philanthropy with excess. Neither will yield to the other which is one reason New York defies definition.

It might sound strange to describe New Yorkers as insecure when they delight so much in the cult of success. The display of wealth here, especially new wealth, is indeed wonderfully frank, from the super-long limousines which clog up the roads, to the voluptuous fur coats that adorn both men and women. LA has the Oscars once a year, but it's Oscar night every night in New York. Even something relatively unimportant like a black tie gala at the New York Metropolitan Opera House means couture ball gowns and real jewellery.

I went to one for the American Ballet Theatre last week and saw two society hostesses almost have a heart attack because the designer had made them the same dresses. The "pink dress affair" buzzed through the audience like a 19th century scandal. In New York, appearance is a form of currency, or at the very least a calling card. One must look wealthy in order to be recognised as a person of worth.

In a sense the whole city is an audience and, from time to time, someone will stand up and announce, "Last year I made \$1,000,000, but this year I'm going to make \$10,000,000," while every body applauds, each drawing hope and inspiration from the example. New York magazine, the weekly bible for Manhattanites, features a hilarious

real estate section whose sole purpose is to spotlight very rich people buying very expensive homes.

However, the cult of success is inextricably linked to its malevolent doppelganger, the cult of celebrity. The two combined have had an insidious affect on social mores such as courtesy, fairness and inclusion. To be a celebrity here is to enjoy the most craven and undisguised fawning. Unlike the British press, American newspapers handle literary figures with kid gloves, as if they were national treasures. In general, these manifestations of mass sycophancy are so crude that it almost makes the British envy of success seem attractive. Life is vastly different for the celebrity. Restaurants will always find a table, most services become free or ridiculously cheap, there is no such thing as a wait, invitations to anything and everything pour in. No one is ever rude or says no to a celebrity. A successful hairdresser told me recently that he barely breaks even because he dare not charge his more famous clients. Interestingly, celebrity is relative and highly local in New York. A famous person from another country counts for nothing unless he or she also succeeds here. I once saw Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, try in vain to catch his waiter's eye while film stars Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger nearby were mobbed with attention.

Just a couple of blocks away from my apartment, there is a restaurant called Moomba. I am told the food is so-so, and from the outside the decor looks distinctly ordinary. Its chief attraction is the VIP room where celebrities can dine in their own little corner, safely tucked away from the gawping hoi-polloi. A bouncer stands outside in front of a velvet rope, presumably to deter pushy nobodies.

I can't understand why anyone except a masochist with a desire to be humiliated would frequent such a place. I suppose a certain celebrity might go to have his or her ego boosted but in a normal world we would feel sorry for such people and hardly admire them. In New York one man's fame stems from another's mortification.

The consequence of this adoration of the celebrities is that to be ordinary is to be treated at times as though less than human. My fiancé once joined a group of friends in a live audience in front of David Letterman. Not only were they herded about like cattle, they were talked to as if they were cattle. Such contempt simply for being ordinary.

It is said that LA welcomes unknowns because today's unknown is tomorrow's discovery. New York, on the other hand, regards them as pests who won't go away. Both perceptions are probably exaggerated. However, I remember when I first arrived in New York, having an interview with a senior editor at a literary magazine which ended in farce. It was a boiling hot day and I arrived for a lunch appointment dishevelled and unnerved by the intense humidity. The editor looked up at me from his desk, smiled distantly, and said that he was too busy for lunch and it would have to be rescheduled. He then carried on writing and, humbly, I left.

Yet New Yorkers not only revel in the status quo, they participate in their own humiliation. The clubs, naturally, have rules; some will accept Jews, blacks, and self-described homosexuals, some will not. But many of the co-ops, which constitute the majority of affordable and attractive New York housing, are also segregated. A co-op is a residential building owned by all the lessees; it is run by an elected board who have the right to determine who can buy an apartment. It is so routine for buyers to be rejected by boards that no one complains. Snobbery reigns supreme. I did not believe the stories about covert racism or social black-balling until I saw it for myself. For brief time, my fiancé and I toyed with the idea of buying a place, so I contacted Stephen, the broker we had used for our rented flat. We wanted to live downtown, I told Stephen, in a pre-war building.

He was disarmingly honest about the co-op process, and even went so far as to list which buildings accept Jews and non-whites, and which do not. "But you won't have a

problem getting past the board," he said, "because you are Wasps." I am in fact Jewish. We decided to rent after that.

As far as I know, such naked exclusionary tactics do not exist in London, my other home town. Nor is there the same frenzy of consumption and self-congratulation. It may be that the worst is yet to come, and London is merely catching up to New York's excesses. But then it is not ruled by the City to the same extent that the stock exchange powers New York. "Believe me," said an editor at New York magazine, when I told him that everybody wants to move to New York. "If the Nasdaq or the Dow Jones dropped 500 points, Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis would move elsewhere."

Such impermanence is the great irony and, of all New York's contradictions, perhaps the biggest. What seems to be creative energy is often just feverish activity inside a ballooning bubble. New York is like a Potemkin Village, its inhabitants mere imports for the day. VS Pritchett despised the deracination of New Yorkers. "There is no place where newness is so continuously pursued," he wrote. "The past is a shame. It must be wrong. New York lives in the present because it is real estate. It has been more for sale than any other city I can think of."

However, the real threat to New York's predominance is not the instability of its wealth, but the momentum of its own success. The city is in danger of becoming the Monaco of America. The more New York attracts the famous and the established, and celebrates the successful at the expense of the striving, the more it poisons its own creative pool. If the pendulum continues to swing in favour of the have-it-alls, the extraordinary tension which sustains this city will collapse.

. . . and the Americans who love London

Warren Hoge, London bureau chief, New York Times

"London appeals to New Yorkers with a certain interest in creative life, in cities. For me, the attraction is built around theatre: I used to come each fall to see whatever the new David Hare play was. As for the underground - well, I grew up on the New York subway system, and this is Valhalla compared to that. When people ask if I miss New York, I say: I'm a real New Yorker, but the one place I don't miss New York is London."

Harriet Gugenheim, Film company executive

"I can't see myself leaving now. I enjoy visiting America, but it's very small-minded. I like the access to the rest of the world you have in Europe - and the feeling that you don't have to worry about being mugged. The one thing that makes me want to leave London? Property prices."

Rafael Lago, President, American Intercontinental University

"They say the British can be unwelcoming, but it's all to do with attitude: if you're determined to find people unfriendly, they will be unfriendly. There's also a feeling of safety in London that is unlike any other city I've visited. Eventually I guess I'll have to go back but if right now I were to receive a call telling me I had to return, I'd be very disappointed. I've fallen in love with this city."

Jennifer Waddell, Graphic designer

"I'm attracted to the ease of living in London. Transport is convenient - it makes the pub more enjoyable when you don't have to drive home afterwards. It seems generally safer here as well. Some people find Londoners unfriendly; I like that they generally keep to themselves. But then again, it's expensive and dirty."