

On collecting memories



An interview with writer and essayist Adam Gopnik

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As told to Uli Beutter Cohen (Subway Book Review), 2224 words.

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We're currently in New York's oldest library, [The New York Society Library](#).

Alexander Hamilton used to come here. This was an alternative to the Church and King libraries that were around, because it was secularized. Let me read you a very cool thing. This is a letter, written by Hamilton, that has survived here in the library. He writes about an artist who wants to build a monument to the American Revolution. It's supposed to be a giant statue of Washington.

Hamilton goes, "You have doubtless heard of the Artist and his project. I have prepared him to find difficulties in the present political situation of New York. While I warmly wish success to the plan I would not embarrass my friends by urging it to the prejudice of public objects." It's the perfect, sinuous Hamiltonian sentence because what he's saying is: "I don't support this at all. He's a good guy and I believe that it's a decent thing, but it would be a big political mistake to ask people to put money into a project like this. There are so many more important things waiting."

If you think about it, it's an odd thing. There really isn't a monument to the Revolution in New York on the scale of Trafalgar's Square in London, or the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, or the Victor Emmanuel II monument in Rome. Which is an anomaly, right? The only unified monument we have of that scale, and most people don't even know it, is at [Grand Army Plaza](#) in Brooklyn.

What kind of value does a place like this library this hold in your life?

First of all, it's a place I come to regularly. I love libraries. And this is my favorite, certainly in this neighborhood and maybe in New York. It has a deep history and a terrific children's section. When my kids were younger, we would come here on Saturday mornings and take out everything from [The Ink Drinker](#) series to [Make Way for Ducklings](#).

At another level, I value the idea of an open library. The idea that you could have a library that you simply participated in, though we take it terribly for granted, is a radically American idea. If you live in France and you want to join the bibliothèque, even today when it's less formal than it once was, you have to show credentials that you have the right to be in a library. The spirit of a society library, from its beginnings in the Revolution until today, is that you pay a minimal fee to subscribe and that will to do it. I genuinely well up in tears when I think about it because it's the core idea of any democracy—that ideas are available to everyone.

And finally in terms of urbanism, this is a place that has survived for a very long time. One of the truths about New York is that New York is a place that exterminates memory and place with astounding repetition.

You recently wrote a book about New York, [At The Strangers' Gate](#), which is a collection of your memories.

In a city that lends itself to instances of amnesia, having places that are repositories of memory seems hugely precious. The SoHo chapter, which is a chapter that I worked hard on, is unrecognizable. Some buildings are still there, but the anthropology of SoHo is gone, vanished. 86th Street, where I eventually moved to, was a German-Hungarian neighborhood in the 1980s. You could buy paprika in four different stores and go to three different German restaurants—Café Geiger, Kleine Konditorei, the Ideal—all now completely eradicated.

You've spent a significant amount of time writing about life in New York and life in Paris. Both cities are heavily romanticized. Which parts of New York and Paris are rightfully romanticized and which parts are given too much romantic credit?

One of the mysteries of Paris we see in every painting that has been replicated endlessly is the bright, dazzling boulevard. The reality of Paris is that it's overwhelmingly gray. Six months go by when you never see the sun and it always looks like it's about to snow. The meteorology of Paris is mythological.

I think the myth of New York is the bustle, dynamism, and relentless movement. If you're doing a bad movie about New York, you start with Gershwin or Epstein—some great work of music, but a cliché. The reality of New York is that you trudge along on the crowded subway and you make your way through garbage strewn streets, and then you enter into your own world of beauty or love. It can be a big world, like the Frick Collection, or it can be a tiny basement apartment. That's the real experience of New York. These sudden moments of extreme intimacy in the midst of general indifference.

Speaking of the tiny basement apartment, a New Yorker's identity is strongly tied to their address. There are two things we ask each other: what do you do and where do you live? Both are important because they have to do with power and New York is all about power.

That's totally true. One of the great transformations that's taking place in New York in the years I've lived here, is that the great suction pump of New York has reversed directions. For most of its history, young people moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan. And if you read the great New York coming of age books—Act One by Moss Hart, or Alfred Kazin's A Walker in the City—that's what they're all about. They're about being born in Brooklyn and doing everything in your power to get out of Brooklyn, on the subway or on foot, and to get to Times Square.

Now everyone I know under 30 lives in Brooklyn. I was talking to someone yesterday and I sort of said casually, "Oh, now everybody's living in Williamsburg and Bed-Stuy." And she gave me a look like, "You should only be so lucky to find a place in Williamsburg or Bed-Stuy." Crown Heights is like Central Park West in terms of availability. That's huge, both in a real estate setting but also what has culturally happened.

Is Manhattan still a place for artists?

The honest answer is no. Of course, in a city of 8 million people, which is constantly renewing itself as newcomers arrive, any absolute is false by definition. Undoubtedly some couple is reproducing my experience in some basement apartment as we speak. But I don't think it's a pattern. Manhattan has become a place that has no bohemian frontier for the first time ever. In my lifetime, it had passed from the West Village to the East Village to SoHo to Tribeca to the Lower East Side. And now, there's none. There's no place where you say that's where young artists are finding big spaces to make art. It just doesn't happen.

John Updike is a hero of mine. He said that at any moment in history, wherever we are, an old world is passing away and a new world is coming into being. We have sharper eyes for the fall than the arrival because the old world is the one we know. So naturally I feel an enormous sense of, if not loss, then certainly of transient poignance every time I cross Houston Street. You have to discipline your mind and your heart and not to be unduly nostalgic about those losses. I notice the people who thrive longest in New York tend to have a lightness of foot and heart. Richard Avedon tends to be extremely light in heart, and mind, and foot. He has not heartache about it.

In your book, *At The Strangers' Gate*, you write about being a docent at the Museum of Modern Art where you gave also gave tours, and you say that: "art appreciation was considered weak, scholarly, and feminine. But an

appetite for art was considered acceptable and masculine."

I was an art appreciator and you weren't supposed to be an appreciator of art. That wasn't what you were being trained to do as an art historian. If you were someone who exalted about beauty, that was not sufficiently macho. It was one of the reasons I've always felt sort of miscast as an art historian. I enjoyed standing up around the pictures and exalting.

The domination of our history by the false idea of masculinity is very powerful. Appetite is synonymous with aggression. There's no mistaking that this comes to us with particular pain in the Trump era. Skyscrapers feel like representations when you see what Jared Kushner is trying to build on 5th Avenue.

It can be easy, and convenient, to forget that Trump has been an aggressor in New York for a long time.

What happened in the 1980's, was that a new style of aggression became acceptable. One of the things I wish I had remembered to say in my book is that, as I left *GQ* magazine, the first cover story about Donald Trump ever was done by Graydon Carter. Trump was a completely obscure New York real estate developer. We put him on the cover, if I remember correctly, because he seemed to be an embodiment of this new aggression in New York. And at the time, god help us and god forgive us, it seemed like an interesting anecdote to the depression that had overwhelmed New York in the previous decade.

In the 1970's, New York was perceived as a dying city. That was the standard view of it. It's embodied in great art like the movie *Taxi Driver*, where New York is hell, New York is simply hell. And that's how Martin Scorsese, a New Yorker, saw it. He saw it as hell. There's another good movie called *Heavy Traffic* by Ralph Bakshi, an animated film. For some reason, people totally forget it. But it's about New York as hell as well.

So, Trump emerging to rebuild, even if the buildings themselves were meretricious, it seemed like a powerful infusion of energy into New York at that time. Now we see it differently, of course.

On that note, do you think it's a bit of a luxury to write a personal review of the past when there's so much future we have to worry about?

My response is that you do both. I've spent the last five years writing largely, if not entirely, about gun control and mass incarceration. Over and over again. That's the work I do. I will leave you today and go write some more of it. At the same time, as an artist, I have a responsibility not to let my own imagination become too narrowly straightened by civic responsibility.

So I hope, and you may laugh at this, that a book like *At the Strangers' Gate*, does the right kind of political work. In that it is about how you build significance and how you build meaning in the world. You don't build meaning in the world by rapacity and brutality. You do it by communion and shared purpose. In trying to describe all the tender emotions and transactions that we experience in a lifetime, you are actually building a bulwark. It may not be a terribly effective bulwark, but it is at least an imaginative testimony to the idea that there are values in the world that are more important than aggression and hatred.

If you could travel either into the past or into the future, which would you choose?

I'm going to answer in a terribly sentimental way. One of the most beautiful scientific ideas I know of, is one I read about in a book by a physicist named Lee Smolin. This is a serious idea in contemporary physics, that time cohabits in the real world and in multiverse universes. What if we could live simultaneously in every time at once? I've always contemplated writing a science fiction novel in which that would be the key device: confronting the totality of experience all at once. And honestly, I would love to be able to see my kids at each moment simultaneously: as 2-year-olds, 4-year-olds, 6-year-olds, 8-year-olds. So in that sense, I'd like to live in time past, but more simultaneous than just one past.

Recommended by Adam Gopnik:

Two books about New York:

Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* – a classic that holds many memories about New York City.

Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady* – a collection of *The New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town" section that perfectly describes the fragility of New York.

Two places you love in New York:

Grand Central Terminal – I practically lived there in my early years in New York. I love the Oyster Bar and the star ceiling which was designed by a fancy French painter named Paul César Helleu.

Central Park – I love the view of the skyline along 59th street, looking south. I find the juxtaposition of the lawn and the hard-edged architecture moving and symbolic of New York.

Name

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Vocation

Writer, Essayist



Photo credit: Brigitte Lacombe