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ENDURING CLASSICS

Bright Lights Hits the Big 4-0

Jay McInerney made his literary debut with *Bright Lights, Big City*. On its anniversary, the hedonistic Manhattan novel still defines his career, and a bygone era

BY MAX KUTNER

In Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, the Odeon “makes you feel reasonable at any hour, often against bad odds.” The Tribeca restaurant—along with the World Trade Center—appears on the original cover of the novel, which turns 40 on August 12. The book captured the early-1980s downtown-Manhattan scene: models, drugs, dance

clubs, and the desire to escape. It also earned the debut author a libertine reputation that would outlast the scene he chronicled.

The Odeon has changed over the last four decades. Though the restaurant still draws in a packed nighttime crowd and hosts the occasional party, it closes at 11 P.M. most nights. That's 40 minutes before a *Bright Lights, Big City* character deems it "too early" to arrive.

"They have gift cards here now," McInerney tells me over lunch at the restaurant. "That would have been a funny concept in 1983." Wearing a blue Brunello Cucinelli polo, off-white Loro Piana jeans, and Tod's loafers, he has recently returned from the Hamptons. He orders gazpacho and ravioli with black summer truffles.

Once "the coke-fuelled It boy of the Eighties literary Brat Pack," as *The Times* of London put it, McInerney, now 69, sticks to water. That could have something to do with what he calls his "very strange year." He had brain surgery in February for a subdural hematoma following a concussion, and open-heart surgery in May, due to an arterial blockage. He comes to lunch from the cardiologist, who gave him a clean bill of health, he says. However, the self-proclaimed "expensive wino and gastronaut" isn't eating or drinking as much as he used to.

Bright Lights, Big City made McInerney, then an M.F.A. student at Syracuse University, famous. The novel follows an aspiring writer in his 20s who is struggling to keep his magazine-fact-checking job after his wife, a model, leaves him. There are late-night parties, an incident involving a ferret, and endless lines of "Bolivian Marching Powder." It's written in the second person, a point of view McInerney chose because "that is how you speak to yourself." It's hard to not connect with the narrator, whom a *New York Times* reviewer wrote is likely "Mr. McInerney himself or a close facsimile."

McInerney, too, had been a magazine fact-checker (at *The New Yorker*) whose model-wife, Linda Rossiter, left him. "I was at a nightclub with a friend, and he picked up a girl and disappeared, and I did the last of the cocaine in the bathroom," he recalls. "Looking in the mirror, I started talking to myself, and I said, 'You're not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning.'" He jotted down

those lines. They later formed the basis for a 1982 *Paris Review* story, and, a year after that, the first chapter of *Bright Lights, Big City*. He wrote the rest in six weeks.

Playboy praised it as “*Catcher in the Rye* for the M.B.A. set.” The book sold 300,000 copies in its first two years, and hundreds of thousands more by the early 2000s. It was fresh, documenting a cultural moment that was shaping the city. “There was a sense that I was writing absolutely up to the minute and delivering this news about the city and the underground and the culture,” says McInerney. These days, he adds, you wouldn’t be able to “deliver the news in a novel.”

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McInerney’s book, which took its title from Jimmy Reed’s classic blues song, had an even wider impact. It helped usher in the era of the literary Brat Pack, whose members included Bret Easton Ellis and Tama Janowitz. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Nikki Finke wrote that “not since the ’50s with the likes of Norman Mailer, James Jones, William Styron, John Updike and Philip Roth has a generation of first novelists garnered so much attention.”

“The book really was a word-of-mouth phenomenon,” says McInerney. “Eventually it became an industry.”

That industry included a 1988 film adaptation starring Michael J. Fox. McInerney is credited for the screenplay. But the moment crystallized in *Bright Lights, Big City* turned out to be fleeting. The VCR’s popularization gave urbanites another reason to stay home and skip Danceteria. (The Manhattan club, mentioned in the book’s first chapter, closed in 1986.) In 1987, the same year a *Village Voice* cover story proclaimed, “The Death of Downtown,” Andy Warhol died. Another Odeon regular, Jean-Michel Basquiat, died the following year.

Subsequent *Bright Lights, Big City* projects didn't go far. A 1999 *Rent*-style musical adaptation never made it to Broadway. A 2009 plan for a new movie version apparently fizzled out amid MGM troubles.

McInerney, meanwhile, published seven more novels, plus collections of short stories and essays as well as a multitude of columns about wine. Now he's married to Anne Hearst, granddaughter of William Randolph and sister of Patty. The later novels weren't as autobiographical as his debut. "When you're 23 or 24, that's the only thing you know: yourself." He considers *Brightness Falls* (1992), the first of three novels about the characters Corrine and Russell Calloway, his best-written book.

He will return to those characters in his next novel, his first since 2016. Like the previous Calloway books, this one is set against a global event. Tentatively titled *See You on the Other Side*, after a sign McInerney spotted in a deli window in March 2020, the book takes place as New York City shuts down during the coronavirus pandemic.

"I just like those characters," he says of the Calloways. "I know there are a few people who just wish I would go write something else, and I don't blame them. But for some reason this continues to interest me." He's submitting the book soon to Alfred A. Knopf and expects it to come out next year. The first chapter takes place at the Odeon.

Even with the new book, *Bright Lights, Big City* will likely define his legacy. "The first book made me famous and it gave me a career," he says. "It would be peevish of me to resent that, although I did for a while. For a while I just said, 'Enough. Enough *Bright Lights, Big City*.'"

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Bright Lights, Big City, by Jay McInerney

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