

BIG CITY

40 Years Later, Does ‘Bright Lights, Big City’ Still Resonate?

Remembered for capturing ’80s downtown decadence, Jay McInerney’s iconic novel predicted the mood of New York City today.



By Ginia Bellafante

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Late in the summer of 1984, as Nancy Reagan was bringing her “Just Say No” campaign to potential teenage drug hounds around the country, the publishing world was transfixed by a first novel set amid the fleeting, febrile pleasures of *yes*. Jay McInerney’s “Bright Lights, Big City” arrived 40 years ago this week with an initial print run of 15,000 and a future that was hard to envision.

Maybe you were present at the creation, young, living in New York and over-identified with your literary pretensions — just like the book’s nameless hero, a mostly strung-out, apathetic research assistant at a patrician literary magazine. If you were, maybe you were not impressed.

Maybe you were not impressed. For some, an initial aversion was triggered by the novel’s signature narrative device, or gimmick, depending on your view — the story told in the second person. “You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head,” our cocaine-addled fact-checker tells us on the first page. “You shake a healthy snort onto the back of your hand.” McInerney arrived on the scene with a party-boy persona of his own, making it too easy to think of him smugly coming up with the conceit as the third bottle of Krug landed at the table — jotting down a

note to himself on the back of a \$50 bill to be reminded of his cleverness when he woke up next to a beautiful woman somewhere in SoHo the following afternoon. Tammy? Tamsin? He wouldn't remember.

All that conjecture, invited by the writer's emergent tabloid celebrity, made it too easy to dismiss the originality of the ploy, to overlook the sly utility of a form that created a necessary distance not only between the narrator and his inner self but more crucially between the narrator and his audience. Even as he is hit with setbacks that might otherwise provoke feelings of sympathy — a firing at the hands of a preening, fastidious boss; a destabilizing breakup marked by proto-ghosting — it is hard to shake the idea that he is basically ridiculous until the point at which that is no longer possible, until the distance contracts.

The considerable emotional impact of the book rests on a distinct shift in an understanding of the character — a turn from distaste for his nihilistic posturing toward a compassion for the pain, slowly revealed, that underlies it. The shallow 24-year old, spelunking his way through the night caves of Lower Manhattan, is driven not by the world-weary boredom of post-adolescent self-regard, we learn, but by a recent and profound loss, a grief immune to all the very 1980s ways he has tried to appease it.

That “Bright Lights, Big City” succeeds both as a psychologically meaningful coming-of-age story and a kind of satirical picaresque is surely the reason it has endured. The book has sold nearly a million copies and has never been out of print. McInerney's editor, Gary Fisketjon, a friend from their days at Williams College, acquired it for \$7,500, he told me recently; it had originated as a short story in *The Paris Review*, and he doubted the second-person voice could be sustained for the length of a novel.

When it was finished, he shared the manuscript with a good friend, the editor Morgan Entrekin. “I said, ‘This book is going to change your life,’” Entrekin, the longtime publisher of Grove Atlantic, recalled not long ago. “What I thought at the time was that it was a serious book, a social novel. Fiction had moved so far away from that in the '70s. The social novel had been left to people like Judith Krantz.”

The world had changed enough that the genre was primed for a revival. Tom Wolfe would make his fiction debut with “Bonfire of the Vanities” three years later, in 1987, an excavation of wealth and class in the city, broader both in its ambition and geographic scope, more attuned to the various reverberating animosities. But McInerney’s novel, much like Martin Scorsese’s “After Hours,” a downtown comedy of the same vintage, had a prescience about where all the debauchery and lost time of the late ’70s and early ’80s were headed, about the sort of conventions that would soon enough replace ordering the sweetbreads at Odeon, two hours before the gate came down at 4 a.m.

The preppies would move on from their “Bolivian marching powder” to the fair-trade coffees of Guatemala; the wild people they slept with would be rotated out for tamer surrogates, experts in co-op board bylaws and arbitrage opportunities. By the end of the novel, our hero has righted himself erotically — finally over the trashy model who left him for Paris, he is drawn instead to a caring graduate student working on a philosophy degree at Princeton.

If Wolfe documented an immediate present, McInerney managed to capture a very near future — a moment of transition in the city, between art and money, between the reign of chaotic bohemian creativity and the religion of the leveraged buyout. Oliver Stone’s “Wall Street” would premiere in December 1987. Jean-Michel Basquiat would die in his apartment on Great Jones Street eight months later at the age of 27.

“Have you ever considered getting an M.B.A.?” Alex, a once-important editor, asks our hero over a boozy lunch, before warning him not to be “seduced by all that crap about garrets.” Alex is not instructing him to go into business. “But write about it,” he suggests. “That’s the subject now. The guys who understand business are going to write the new literature.” More specifically, the new literature would concern itself with “technology, the global economy, the electronic ebb and flow of wealth.” If nothing else, “Bright Lights, Big City” seems to have foretold Michael Lewis’s career.

Alex believes that fiction is dead. Thankfully McInerney did not. There is not much debate now about the book's place in the pantheon of great New York City novels. It shows up on lists of them all the time. But that was not necessarily predictable at the outset. Writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 1984, the critic Darryl Pinckney observed, "The city, as the theater of experience, the refuge, the hiding place, has in turn been replaced by an abstraction, the fast lane."

McInerney may have been living in it, but he wasn't trying to persuade anyone to join him. The fast lane is neither romanticized nor given over to wrenching moral review. Rather than exist as an abstraction in the book, it comes as close to signifying as literal a place as it possibly could. All the vice coursing through it is merely a passageway, the lane you occupy just briefly before entering a more manageable one — the lane in which the whole urban universe, post-AIDS, pro-yoga — eventually merged.

The last few pages of "Bright Lights, Big City" find the narrator ascending from the netherworld very early on a Sunday morning — a resurrection — in a place so vividly New York, you could confuse it for nowhere else on earth. His nose bled dry and ready for his redemption, he sees a delivery driver loading a bread truck. He asks for something to eat, but the driver refuses, so he offers him his Ray-Bans. The driver agrees to take them and tosses a bag of hard rolls in return, but not without first letting him know that he is crazy. We are unmistakably in the city where everything has a price.

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