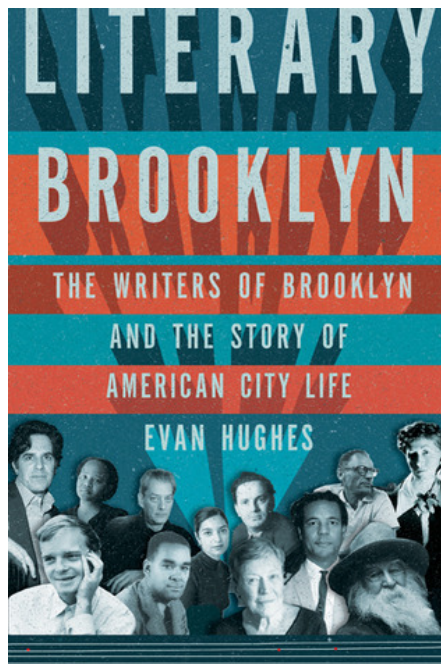




Literary Brooklyn: The Writers of Brooklyn and the Story of American City Life

Evan Hughes

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For the first time, here is Brooklyn's story through the eyes of its greatest storytellers.

Like Paris in the twenties or postwar Greenwich Village, Brooklyn today is experiencing an extraordinary cultural boom. In recent years, writers of all stripes—from Jhumpa Lahiri, Jennifer Egan, and Colson Whitehead to Nicole Krauss and Jonathan Safran Foer—have flocked to its patchwork of distinctive neighborhoods. But as literary critic and journalist Evan Hughes reveals, the rich literary life now flourishing in Brooklyn is part of a larger, fascinating history. With a dynamic mix of literary biography and urban history, Hughes takes us on a tour of Brooklyn past and present and reveals that hiding in Walt Whitman's Fort Greene Park, Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge, the raw Williamsburg of Henry Miller's youth, Truman Capote's famed house on Willow Street, and the contested streets of Jonathan Lethem's Boerum Hill is the story of more than a century of life in America's cities.

Literary Brooklyn is a prismatic investigation into a rich literary inheritance, but most of all it's a deep look into the beloved borough, a place as diverse and captivating as the people who walk its streets and write its stories.

Literary Brooklyn: The Writers of Brooklyn and the Story of American City Life Details

Date : Published (first published August 16th 2011)

ISBN :

Author : Evan Hughes

Format : Kindle Edition 352 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Language, Writing, Biography, New York



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From Reader Review Literary Brooklyn: The Writers of Brooklyn and the Story of American City Life for online ebook

Cathy Carpenter says

I found this book to be very interesting. I'm a writer, I love New York, and my grandparents are from Brooklyn. If you don't love writing, writers, and Brooklyn, you very well might be bored by it. I loved learning the history and seeing the personalities who grew along with Brooklyn to be what it is today. I can't wait to visit again so I can appreciate more fully the way the borough has changed.

Nate D says

A gift! Thanks, parents! It's probably a sign that I need to catch up on my classics and cornerstones, but I've only actually read anything by a couple of the authors mentioned in here, Jonathan Lethem and Hubert Selby Jr. In general I'd typically rather read work by authors than read about them (unless its someone I'm already obsessed with like Anna Kavan), but that said, I totally learned a lot of useful Brooklyn history and general literary history, so this book was probably a good thing for me to read. And I totally want to read some Richard Wright and Carson McCullers now, and totally don't want to read any Henry Miller and Thomas Wolfe, so helpful here too. And it reminded me that I want to find Jane Bowles' single novel Two Serious Ladies, even though this focused more on her husband Paul, and even then only in passing.

Writing-wise, Hughes doesn't really surprise a lot, but the quality of his research is clear. I just wish he'd have gone into a little more depth in the areas I did have a little pre-existing interest in about: Selby Jr's couple pages didn't really go so far as even my anecdotal knowledge of him, and Lethem's bit was largely synopsisizing of his two brooklyn novels. But I know more than I'll ever need to about Norman Mailer and Hart Crane!

Ellen says

Updating this listing because there is a launch party in DUMBO next week and I think some of you will be interested in that information.

Wes Hazard says

So I moved to Brooklyn and got a library card. While browsing my local branch I came across this literary history of the borough that looks at the life and work of notable writers of all kinds who were either born and raised in Brooklyn or who lived/worked there at least for a while. It starts with Walt Whitman who edited the Brooklyn Eagle newspaper and wrote his first editions of "Leaves of Grass" in BK back when it was its own independent town and goes all the way to Johnathan Lethem & Jonathan Safran Foer in the early 2000s.

Bottom line: if you enjoy biographical sketches and literary trivia you will most definitely find this book worthwhile. It's crammed with fun notes about famous writers and the work they created while in Brooklyn. Walt Whitman was a terrible schoolteacher, Hart Crane lived in the same room with a view of the Brooklyn

Bridge as Washington Roebling (the man who completed its design), and W.H. Auden/Carson McCullers/Gypsy Rose Lee/Richard Wright + a bunch of other luminaries all lived together in a sort of bohemian treehouse atmosphere at 7 Middagh Street. Wild.

If any of that sounds up your alley then by all means check this out. I really enjoyed the thoroughness here and Hughes' ability to consistently circle back and link to older writers he's already examined when he's looking at those who came later. This is great if you're interested in Brooklyn as a subject and want to compile a list of relevant literature. It didn't really inspire me to write anything Brooklyn related but it definitely fired me up to read more about my new hood. c

Catherine Siemann says

A good introduction to the borough's literary life. There wasn't much in it that was new to me, but the author did a nice job of situating the writers in the life (and geography) of Brooklyn itself. I enjoyed it as a survey and a reader with less background could get a great deal out of it. Reading it, I kept imaging syllabi on "Brooklyn Writers" or "Brooklyn in the Literary Imagination", but that is a hazard of my profession.

I received this book through the LibraryThing Early Reviewers' Program.

James says

Urban connections is a theme that runs through the mini-biographies that make up this interesting but flawed literary history. Using Brooklyn as the focal point Evan Hughes chronicles the lives, briefly told, of authors from Whitman to Auster. Along the way we meet authors who were Brooklyn natives like Whitman, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, and those that migrated to Brooklyn and stayed for a while like Hart Crane, W. H. Auden and William Styron. I was reminded of a favorite book, *February House* by Sherill Tippins that with a bit more focus does a better job of communicating the spirit of Brooklyn from a special era. That episode is included here as "The Birth of Brooklyn Cool", but pales as do most of the brief lives with the attempt to catalog every conceivable author and keep the book under three hundred pages. One example of the trivia that may appeal to some readers is the aside that notes that Norman Mailer went to the same high school in Bedford-Stuyvesant that also graduated Aaron Copland, Norman Podhoretz and Isaac Asimov. There is an excellent bibliography, plus notes and an index which makes the book great for browsing. Hughes claims as his "guiding principle" that "literature has a special ability to offer an intimate view of a very particular place and time." He succeeds partially in relating this special ability, but too often merely shares anecdotes about authors that, while interesting, did not rise to that level. Perhaps the grand sweep of years combined with the impressive quantity of admittedly high quality writers was too much to allow this approach in one volume. Nevertheless this is a fascinating book about a city and its writers.

Sydney Goggins says

This is a fascinating examination of a range of poets and novelists who were shaped in some way by living in Brooklyn. It includes fascinating biographical accounts of Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe, Whitman and Alfred Kazin, among others. Hughes also portrays the unique character of Brooklyn itself; a neighborhood that began as a separate city (at one point the 3rd largest in the country), it is both part of the grandeur of New York and a distinct world with a different pace and sensibility than Manhattan.

I found the sections about Hart Crane particularly interesting; his lengthy poem "the Bridge" was an attempt at writing an American national epic of sorts. Crane was criticized for adhering to an outdated romantic view of literature, but I find his literary outlook inspiring.

Peggy says

Enjoyable read that provides brief biographies of writers who lived in Brooklyn. Covers the 20th century, its demographic and economic shifts and resulting literary themes. Though not all authors used Brooklyn as a setting, many found that the borough, away from Manhattan's hubbub, supported their best work. After moving elsewhere, quality of work deteriorated for some. An interesting review of a century of writers and the place they wrote from.

Steven Pattison says

A literary history of Brooklyn, NYC and the writers who have lived, wrote about and/or been inspired by the city and culture. Each chapter examines a specific writer (Whitman, Mailer, Auster, Wright, etc) analyzes their most notable work(s) and how the city affected them — as expected some chapters were better than others but a good read for anyone who loves learning about writers and lives in Brooklyn.

Joy says

This was an interesting book, and overall, I enjoyed it. I've always found Brooklyn a fascinating place, even though I've only been there once or twice. So I found this history of its literary inhabitants very enjoyable. I have just one nagging criticism, having to do with the title: It really isn't "The Story of American City Life" as the subtitle says. Hughes does deal with city life, of course; but that title lays claim to a much broader study than this book really delivers. OK, as I said -- nagging. But it bothered me. Aside from that, I thought the book was a good introduction to an intriguing subject -- informative and very readable.

(Note: I received an uncorrected proof of this book free of charge from the publisher. No other compensation was received.)

Martin Rowe says

I'm a publisher and writer who's lived in Brooklyn for twenty years—all of it in Carroll Gardens—and I found this book revelatory and fascinating. It moves from Walt Whitman, Henry Miller, Hart Crane, and Marianne Moore through Thomas Wolfe, Daniel Fuchs, Bernard Malamud, Alfred Kazin, and Richard Wright, and a bunch more writers (including more women), until we get to the contemporary Brooklyn literary scene. Part literary criticism, part potted literary biography, and part social and political history, LITERARY BROOKLYN is a lively and at time sardonic examination of Manhattan's unruly, underdog neighbor. Evans, thankfully, has a sharp nose for the kind of macho bullshit that several of the authors he profiles exude, and he's fully aware of how Brooklyn's class, race, and economic conflicts have shaped the city/borough, and all the hidden assumptions and presumptions that they embody when it comes to who lives where and who writes what. What comes through loud and clear is that Brooklyn has always been rough-

and-tumble, to put it mildly; but it's also not hard to feel, as a reader who lives here, insanely proud of the crazy quilt that is this place—even today, in our gentrified, sanitized enclaves. (I only give it four stars because one of the first facts in the book is wrong: the Old Stone House is situated on 4th Avenue and 3rd Street, not 9th Street. If that's wrong, who knows what else is?) Although Evans supplies a useful map of where the Brooklyn writers lived, you may want to have GoogleMaps to hand just so you can get a glimpse of what these places look like today.

Jim says

I really really enjoyed this book! Starts at Whitman and takes us up to 2011. We follow the writers of Brooklyn, the evolving neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the literary trends of Brooklyn.

Amazing how many of the American literary heavy hitters of the 20th century lived in and were influenced by the area! Some chapters were better than others but all in all, it was a trip in time and an introduction to a lot of good writers.

John Hood says

Bound: Brooklyn's in the House
The Literary Legacy of a Hipster Borough
SunPost Weekly August 11, 2011 | John Hood
<http://bit.ly/oIGoOo>

Forget the suits, bespoke or otherwise. Disregard the hats and the saddle shoes, the custom shirts and the silken ties. For like Walt Whitman I am at heart “one of the roughs.” Sure, I chew with mouth closed, mostly, and can manage all of the other manners one has to summon in so-called polite society. Nevertheless (again citing Whitman) “I am the mate and companion of people, all just as fathomless and immortal as myself.” In other words, even in pretense I’m aware of my position. Okay, so maybe the “voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs” are but a mumble when they come through me. Still, they’re there all right. That’s why when I see a place remade for the safe and sound, I get irked. Then I get the hell outta town.

It happened to me in New York’s East Village, and later on the Lower East Side. It happened again on South Beach. And were it not for the economic crisis currently affecting the country, it could well have happened in the working class enclave called Silver Bluff, where I now live amid a sea of folks “just as fathomless and immortal as myself.” No, “they do not know how immortal. But I know.” And (said the fathead) that’s what counts.

All of the above is merely a roundabout way for me to mark the loss (and the gain) which has plagued the Borough of Brooklyn. On the one hand, it’s become the much-ridiculed haven for way too many hipsters. On the other, it possesses a legacy that will endure as long as we do. In Evan Hughes’ Literary Brooklyn (Holt \$16) that legacy is writ as large and as forceful as the writers who’ve left it behind.

As you might suspect, it all begins with Whitman, “The Grandfather of Literary Brooklyn,” who went from being the “eccentric” editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, to becoming the “social dropout” behind the sensation we now know as Leaves of Grass. The epic was the ultimate DIY project, created despite rather than because of filthy lucre. And one suspects that were Whitman to be alive in today’s Brooklyn, he’d have

little chance to do likewise.

Or would he? As Hughes notes, the Brooklyn of today teams with writers, among them Jhumpa Lahiri, Colson Whitehead, Jennifer Egan, Rick Moody and Jonathan Safran Foer, not to mention Paul Auster (who inadvertently became a harbinger of the boom) and Jonathan Lethem (who was born and raised in the borough). The Brooklyn Book Festival, “an enormous event,” has become “the most prominent of its kind in New York and among the most prestigious in the country.” The borough is also the home of such publications as *n+1*, which, depending on your temperament, is either startlingly keen or annoyingly elite. Things have gotten so bad in fact that Whitehead felt compelled to pen an essay for *The New York Times* entitled “I Write in Brooklyn. Get Over It.”

But to me it’s the between things that really give Brooklyn boasting privileges, be it the bear-like Thomas Wolfe (who scribbled madly from Cobble Hill), and the madcap cool of February House (the “wedding cake” home to everyone from Carson McCullers to Paul and Jane Bowles), or the post-War wile of William Styron, Arthur Miller and Hubert Selby Jr., neither of whom would have become what they had without the peculiar bite of the borough. Then there’s Norman Mailer, who seemed to epitomize the gruff and tumble characteristics of Brooklyn, even so far as loudly touting his “genius” ala Whitman.

Hughes, himself a Brooklyn resident writer, captures each and every one of the aforementioned immortals (and more) with the flair and devotion of a true Brooklynite. Whether he does so in praise or in defense of his newly beloved borough is beside the point. The fact of the matter is that he does so, and he does so with a style and a swagger befitting a city too long in the shadows of another.

Ashley Boggs says

I loved learning about authors living in BK and I was surprised to learn that some lived on my very own street! While I enjoyed this book overall, it was a bit of a slow read. This isn't the type of book you would pick up if you've had an extremely long work week, which is probably why it took me so long to get through it. This was as much a history of Brooklyn as a study of authors, and I learned a lot about the changes the borough has gone through in the last 100+ years.

I think this book would have benefited from some photographs of the areas it was describing, or more maps and visuals. I'm assuming that those who read this book are at least familiar with Brooklyn, a nice then/now look would be a great addition to the book. I found myself looking up the locations in Google Maps to get a feel for areas I haven't been to yet.

Will Byrnes says

Beginning my Studies

BEGINNING my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact, consciousness—these forms—the power of motion,
The least insect or animal—the senses—eyesight—love;
The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone, and hardly wish'd to go, any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time, to sing it in extatic songs.

It is an easy, and perhaps a dangerous thing to indulge in this joyful vice of Walt Whitman's, in which he captures the ecstasy inherent in the new. That would be *new* to the observer, for the most part, as the thing learned, the newness experienced, had usually lain in wait for that discoverer, possibly still glistening from birth, but more likely in wait an untold age. Easy, because it pleases the eye, the soul, the imagination, to learn, to see the new and to see the familiar, *anew*. The danger is the highwayman of piqued interest, robbing our currency of attention and diverting it down myriad unexpected paths. *Literary Brooklyn*, as it must, begins with Walt Whitman, a literary lion king, with the mane to prove it.

It offers glimpses of some of the many who have put pen or pencil to paper, or converted their notions into reality via keyboards, mechanical and electronic. The organization is chronological, and offers the side benefit of a look at the history of the place. Many more are excluded than are to be found here. But that is the nature of the creatively fertile land that has again become, arguably, the literary capital of the country.

You might drop in on Bartleby's if you do not have handy a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, perhaps the greatest indie-publishing effort ever. It is a touchstone for this collection of essays. Whitman presumed to speak for the multitudes, the common men and women of his time and into the future. Evan Hughes notes how the authors he subsequently profiles reflect the common people of *their* times.

The list is, of course, a who's who, even for those of us who managed to get through our education with only minimal inconvenience from English/Literature classes. The primary focus is on the 20th century. Whitman, of course, anchors the 19th, and the 21st is offered some consideration as well. There are thirteen chapters in all. You may recognize some of these names from chapter headings: Henry Miller, Thomas Wolfe, Bernard Malamud, Richard Wright, Truman Capote, William Styron, Norman Mailer, Pete Hamill and Paul Auster. At least these were the ones known to me. There are others whose names, if not necessarily their work, was new. Their stories are definitely worth the time to stop and loiter.

"In those days cheap apartments were almost impossible to find in Manhattan, so I had to move to Brooklyn."

Thus opens William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, and it tells the tale of why many of us have settled here.

I am extremely proud to be a Brooklynite, and would be even were the place not so rich in history. I came here in 1980, for the same reason most of these writers did, those who were not raised here, anyway, namely Manhattan was prohibitively expensive. Although it is not the case today that Brooklyn rent is manageable, at least in neighborhoods closer to Manhattan, (I know mine isn't, and I do not live in one of those frou-frou neighborhoods you *might* have heard of) the cost of buying or renting a place in Manhattan is enough to induce a cardiac event or a sudden compulsion to either rob banks or, less dramatically, reverse Horace Greeley's (another transplant to NYC, although not Brooklyn) advice and "go east." Jimmy McMillan would have been right in any era.

(Here is a brief summary of *my* sojourn from Manhattan to Brooklyn, but really, who cares? So, I am tucking it under a spoiler rug. It is not really a spoiler, just some self-indulgence.)(view spoiler)

While Hughes does dip into earlier times (The Revolutionary War "Battle of Long Island" took place in Brooklyn, only a few miles from home. Abolitionist activity in the mid 19th century was significant) mostly he tracks some of the development of Brooklyn over a century or so with each piece of his story, showing how the writing of each particular era reflects what was going on at that time. From Whitman's pre-bridge days, when Brooklyn was its own city, through the construction of one of the true marvels of its time, The Brooklyn Bridge, in 1883, through 1898, when Brooklyn merged with and became subsumed under New York City (in what many called the "Great Mistake of 1898"). He touches on the boom era of the 20s, the

Depression, World War II and its aftermath, (Brooklyn Navy Yard ring a bell?) suburbanization and the national abandonment of cities in the 50s, and not just by the Dodgers, a bit of the decline of the city in the 60s and 70s, and then the revival from the 80s onward. He even takes note of the more recent real estate gentrification, and the blossoming of Brooklyn, again, as an artistic and literary capital.

There does seem to have been a particular concentration of talent in the neighborhood known as Brooklyn Heights. A few of the writers find themselves in digs that were once inhabited by the Roeblings, the family responsible for constructing the bridge. Generations touch each other in such ways. The Heights is economically inaccessible to all but the well-to-do and has been for a long time. But there have been times when less fearsomely expensive accommodations could be found at the fringes of the neighborhood, particularly as one neared the water and descended from the high ground to the lower. Where today there is a lovely park along the water, in days of yore, it was more of a working port, with the associations one could expect with places maritime, boarding houses, rowdy drinking establishments, houses of ill repute, crime. Mother's milk for the adventurous wordsmith.

[Despite having lived in NYC all my life, and having lived in Brooklyn for over thirty years, I have never, ever heard anyone use this word/expression anywhere outside a commercial or other prepared media.]

By the time Richard Wright moved into a particular Brooklyn Heights house in 1942, the place had already "been home to a rotating ensemble cast of writers and other artists for two years. During that span it hosted not only nightly dinner parties of a kind but frequent all-night parties where the guest list doubled as a Who's Who of twentieth-century creative and intellectual life." At one point a group of writers shared this place, which had become known as the "February House" for the number of residents who had birthdays then. You might recognize some of these names, Carson McCullers (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*), W.H. Auden (at the time one of the most famous poets in the world), Gypsy Rose Lee ("I wasn't naked. I was completely covered by a blue spotlight"), who was writing a novel, Paul Bowles (*The Sheltering Sky*), in addition to several of Thomas Mann's children. The social set included Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copeland, Kurt Weill, and Lotte Lenya, among others, and a few blocks away Truman Capote was working on his magnum opus, *In Cold Blood*. Not exactly the stuff of a caricatured, "toid avenue 'n toidy toid street" accent fame.

The changes to Brooklyn have been considerable. Completion of the bridge was a dramatic leap, allowing access to many more people, increasing demand for housing and other services, and allowing folks to live in relatively inexpensive Brooklyn, while working in Manhattan. Connecting Brooklyn to Manhattan by subway was another great jump in integrating the two cities. For each period, Hughes offers one or several writers, and for more recent times, creative sorts in areas outside the purely written word.

There are many images that will stay with you from this reading. Richard Wright sitting on a bench in Fort Greene park, with pad and pen, (There is a bench there now, dedicated to him) Hart Crane looking through his apartment windows towards the bridge built by Roeblings, who had worked in that very apartment, Gypsy Rose Lee joining a small group of writers sharing a place in the Hts and shaking things up, William Styron hearing the noise of lovemaking upstairs in his Flatbush rooming house, an introduction to the character of Sophie he would write about decades later, Norman Mailer sitting down to eat with his mother every week over the years as he blusters, and occasionally stabs his way through six marriages, a very large Thomas Wolfe pecking away at his typewriter, generating avalanches of paper in his minimally appointed living space.

The books cited in this modest volume could fill a lifetime with superb reading. The bibliography would serve well for required reading for a PhD or three. There is a lot going on here and a lot has gone on before, with or without tiny hats, irony and attitude.

Betty Smith, brought up in Williamsburg, wrote, in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, about how life persists, and even thrives in a seemingly difficult place. Maurice Sendak, a Brooklyn born and raised child of immigrants, in *Where the Wild Things Are*, tells us, “That very night in Max’s room a forest grew...and the walls became the world all around.” And so it is with Brooklyn. It can be difficult to tell the forest from the trees. There are rather a lot of them reaching for the sky here these days, even with the loss from Sandy, a rare *unwelcome* immigrant, as more and more creative sorts take up residence in New York City’s most populous borough, not only writers but film-makers, musicians, visual artists, dancers. Evan Hughes has offered a framework in which to try to get a handle on how Brooklyn has changed over the decades and on how the premiere literature that has been written and/or was inspired here reflects those changes. It remains to be seen what artistic wonders will emerge in the years to come, but if history is any guide, there will be continuity of greatness with the past, likely to be achieved, ironically, by considering the lives of the ordinary.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more
curious to me than you suppose;
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in
my meditations, than you might suppose

From *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* - W. Whitman

P.S.

There is a map at the beginning of the book. It shows the borough, with numbered dots, each number associated with a writer, most writers having more than one entry. If you get the urge, this would help organize any tour you might care to make.

Our most famous film star, one of the most popular film characters of all time, was born under Ebbett’s field, Bugs Bunny. And Brooklyn has produced or housed a plentiful supply of other performing artists. Barbra Streisand, Lauren Bacall, Mel Brooks, Neil Diamond, Mae West, Harvey Keitel, Woody Guthrie, Jackie Gleason, Howard Cosell, Mel Brooks, and Steve Buscemi, to name a few. To see a larger selection, you might try here .

=====LINKS

A literary map of Brooklyn – this is amazing

A nifty Currier and Ives image of Brooklyn

NY Times review by Dwight Garner

California Literary Review

Famous Brooklynites – there are more than a few