

# The Best Book Group in New York

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

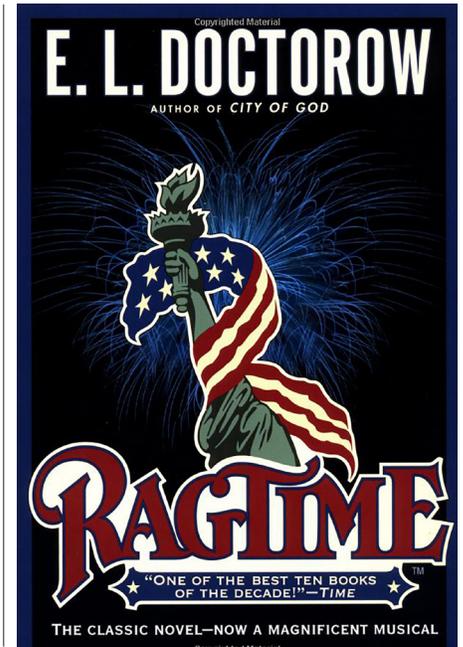
OK, maybe we're not the "best book group" in all New York. But back in 2004, author Wayne Barrett nominated us to the *Village Voice's* annual "Best Of" list, and so the name Best Book Group (BBG) stuck. We had only been around a few years back then. We were founded in 2002. According to founding member Lynne Harlow, it happened this way:

*Alex Herzan and I were having a sushi picnic at the Lily Auchincloss Foundation office when this idea was hatched. For our lunch picnics, we would sit on the carpet that was a fantastic shade of red that had been the founder, Lily Auchincloss' signature color. I mentioned to Alex that I had decided to mark my 10th anniversary as a New Yorker by reading a year of books about NYC. I hadn't*

*come up with a list of books yet, but I had decided to start with Ragtime.*

*Alex was excited about my plan and had the great idea to make it a book group. The original group included Caroline Wharton, Jamie Bennet, Janet Levoff, the late and beloved Ted Westergard, Alex, and me. Other members straggled in as the years wore on: Jonathan Kubn, Alvin Eng, John Loonam, Alden Warner, Deborah Wye, Christina Spellman, Tom Finkelppearl, Doug Chilcott, and you, Steve. We've operated with the same basic format from the very beginning, rotating through members to select each book, and giving the group about a month and a half to read it.*

So the rainstorm of words began with *Ragtime*—Harry Houdini crashing his car into a telephone pole in 1906 in New



A meeting of the Best Book Group at La Palapa. All photos courtesy of the author.

Rochelle, ushering in a host of characters ranging from Emma Goldman to Sigmund Freud and an itinerant peddler. Then *Great Fortune*—on the building of Rockefeller Center. The next month BBG was on to *Motherless Brooklyn*—Lionel Essrog, an orphan with Tourette’s syndrome, tries to keep the words straight as he solves a mystery. Next, *A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square*, followed by Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—with its transgender prostitutes and hoodlums. Then, *Astor Place Riots*—where a well-known American actor, Edwin Forrest, and William Macready, a notable English actor, fought over who was a better Shakespearean, sparking a riot that resulted in more than 20 deaths. A month later, BBG read *Time and Again*—time traveling back to 1882 NYC to solve a beguiling mystery. Ping-ponging from fiction to nonfiction, the next book was Russell Shorto’s *Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan*. BBG then read about the fall of high society in

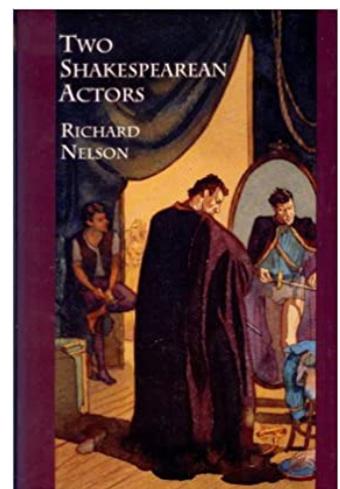
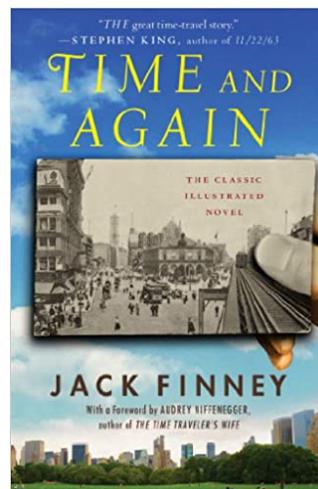
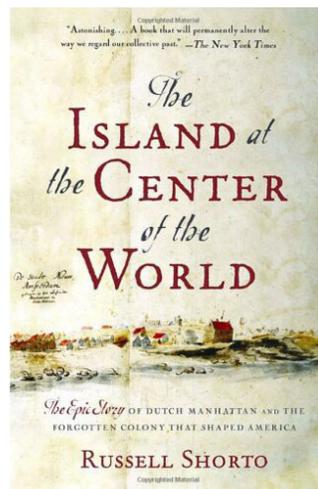
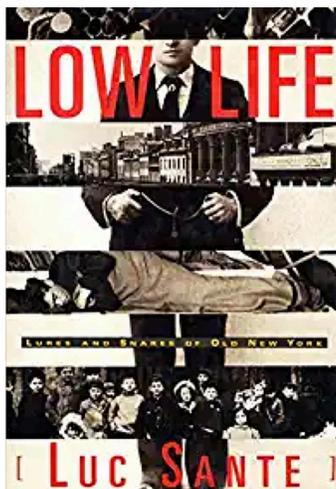
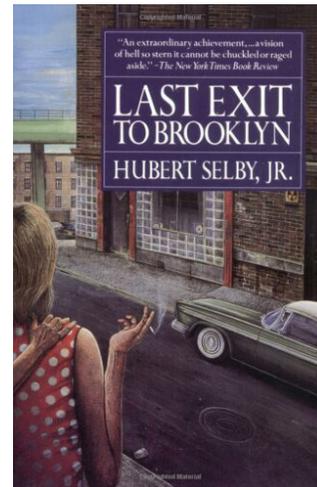
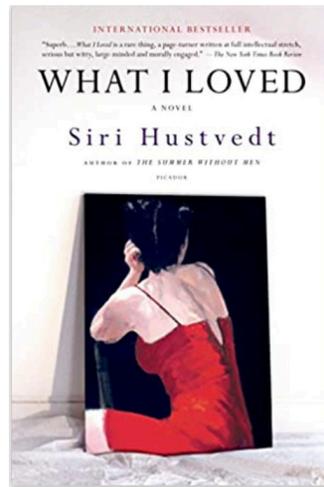
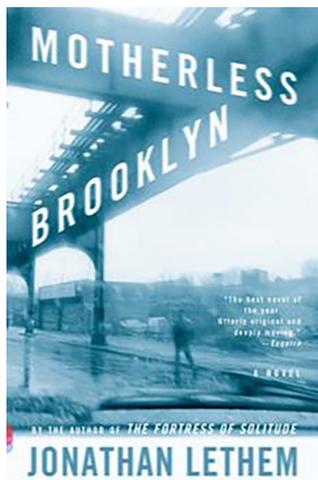
Edith Wharton’s 1905 *House of Mirth*, then tackled Luc Sante’s *Low Life*, imbibing the teeming, turbulent, and sometimes murderous story of the city’s slums. And BBG was just getting started.

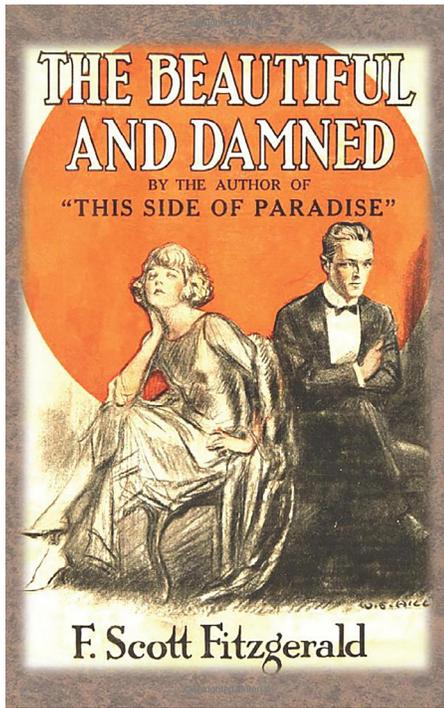
With more than 150 books behind us, picking favorites isn’t easy. David Oshinsky’s *Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America’s Most Storied Hospital* proved a favorite of a number of members. Alden Warner recalls, “When Alex Herzan chose this book, she apologized in advance for picking such a doubtlessly dull tome to inflict upon us. In the end, not only did I enjoy it, but I gave this book to at least five friends and every single one thanked me profusely.” Andrea Elliot’s *Invisible Child* was another selection of several members. John writes, “To see the drive and intelligence of the young woman portrayed here, and to see the obstacles society constantly puts in front of her is an invitation to the complex compassion that we owe each other.” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s, *The Beautiful*

and *Damned* and Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X* are two other noteworthy titles that stand out in members’ memories.

Founding member Alex Herzan picked Marie Winn’s *Central Park in the Dark*. “This book explores the natural world of Central Park after dark—and the plethora of wildlife that thrives there. For the book discussion, the author Marie Winn joined us for a meal at the Central Park Boat-house. The meeting was some time in the winter, and I remember a large languorous raccoon came and tapped on the glass as we were having dinner! Almost sending us a message. After dinner, Ms. Winn guided us to other nearby spots, including an exposé of slug sex on tree branches, definitely a scintillating moment for the group.”

The essential feature of BBG is that we have our discussions at places either mentioned in or evocative of that month’s book. The group thus becomes our own adventurous way of exploring the city. The





places and tastes take us deeper into the books, and the books enrich our experience of the flavors.

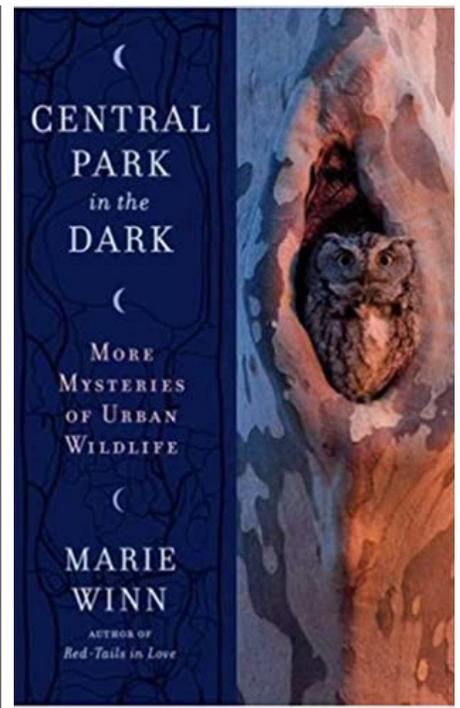
A plethora of memories overflows from the many glasses raised and clinked at the tables where we've met and dined:

*Dancing with Janet to the strains of Jewish tunes at Sammy's Roumanian Restaurant on Christie Street on the Lower East Side after we read Michael Gold's 1930 novel, Jews Without Money, about a young immigrant boy in New York. (Steve)*

*Sipping wine at the River Club, looking out over the river toward Manhattan, trying to imagine where George Washington's troops landed after being surrounded by the British in Brooklyn and having to retreat by water to Manhattan, after reading Steven Jaffe's New York at War: Four Centuries of Combat, Fear, and Intrigue in Gotham. (Caroline)*

*Listening to our own member Jonathan Kuhn singing George Cohen's "Give My Regards to Broadway," Cole Porter's "Take Me Back to Manhattan," Gerry Goffin and Carole King's "Up on the Roof," Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," and other classics at a Times Square music studio, with piano accompaniment, after reading Nancy Groce's Songs of New York.*

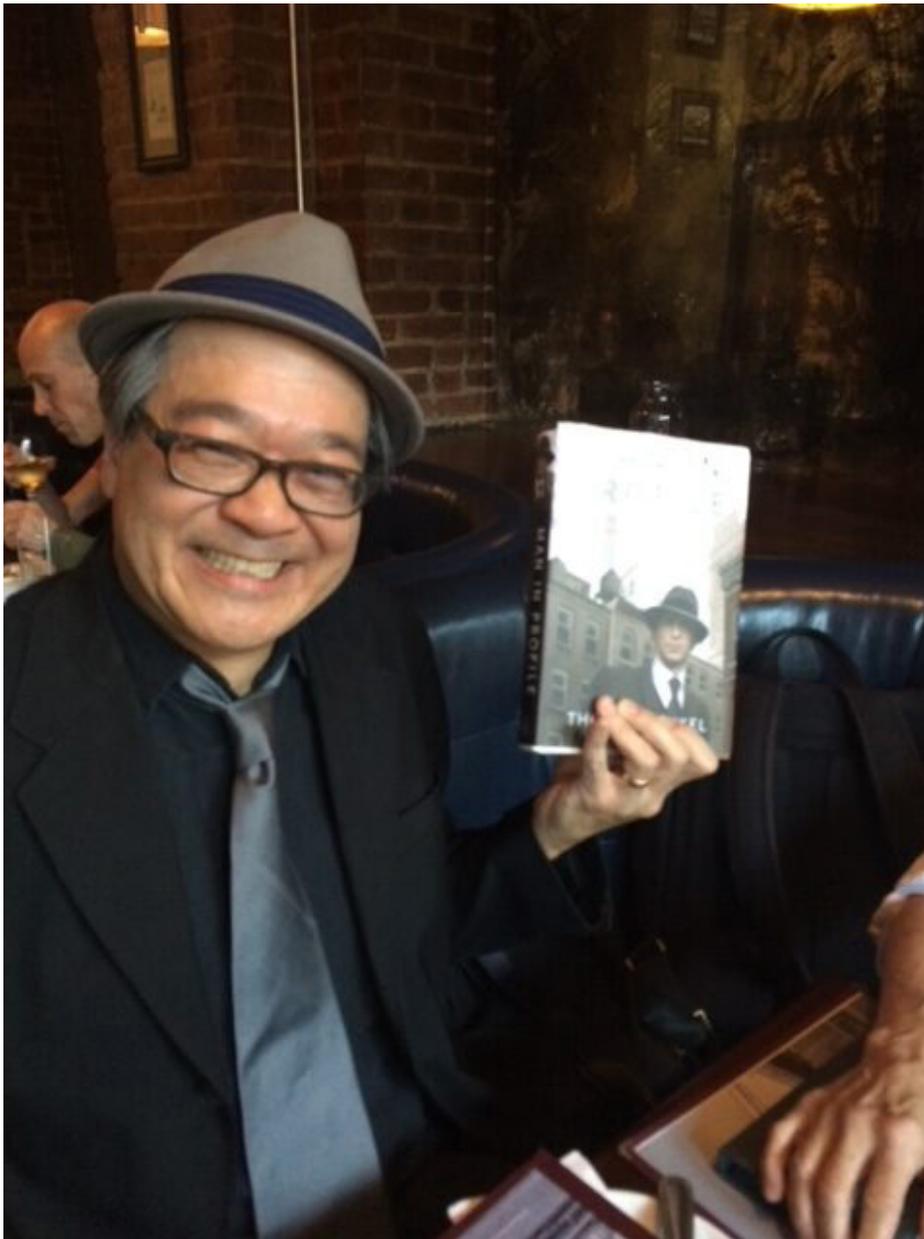
*Biting into the beef tibs wrapped in soda bread at Awash Ethiopian restaurant on 6th street after reading Sister Rashidah Ismaili's, The Autobiography of the Lower East Side. (Steve)*



*Feasting on soy-braised Pork Belly and Beef with Bitter Melon, among many other old school Toisan standards at new Chinatown fave, Uncle Lou's. The perfect now-and-then table to discuss Chinatown and Flushing family memories from book group member Ahin Eng's own memoir, Our Laundry, Our Town.*



Janet Levoff dancing at Sammy's Roumanian (screenshot).



Alvin Eng holding up his selection, *Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of the New Yorker*.

*Daintily drinking tea, eight pinkies up, with Ted Westergaard at the Carlyle, to discuss Breakfast at Tiffany's.*

*Picnicking on the grass in Central Park by the Andrew Haswell Green bench, as we discussed his remarkable life and shocking death in Jonathan Lee's 'The Great Mistake.' (Deborah)*

The featured books and our discussions are now part of our own lives and memories. Yet, not all the memories were positive.

Alex selected Hella Winston's *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*. "We met at a deli in the heart of Hasidic Williamsburg, and all of us felt very much that we

were "the other." An uncomfortable dinner—it was also pretty difficult to discuss this book in that setting. We felt conspicuously unwelcome!"

At each of our meetings, it's as if we arranged our chairs around an oversized book that serves as a table for a riveting discussion and a sumptuous meal served right on it. And New York City is always the silent partner joining us at the table and the hero of the story.

We go around the table, and each of us offers our take on the reading. We always end with the exuberant Deborah Wye, ever the scholar, who reaches into her satchel

for her copious notes taken on each book. She makes sure our discussion has covered every point. We order one, sometimes two desserts with a bunch of spoons. After dessert, we ask the waiter to take a picture of the group. Then we go our separate ways, having taken one more bite of what might best be called, not the Big Apple but the Big Onion, with each book revealing a startling new layer of the City's history, humor, stinkiness, and tears.

As Alex writes, "What I have loved all through this is that our reading reveals layers of New York that are new to me, and that I always learn something unexpected. Our group has only enhanced my love of NYC and my sense of belonging here—happy to be part of a throng of diverse humanity."

Among this throng in New York, there are those who paint and write and sing—and in the process, these souls reflect, reorganize, and reimagine reality, so we can experience it from vantage points other than our own, and then feel the beauty in it all.

There are also those hearty and intrepid souls who risk opening neighborhood restaurants, bringing the flavors of myriad long-standing and new immigrant cultures to our lips, the way books bring those worlds to our minds. Our mission, as Janet Levoff put it, "is to love our city, to learn about her continuously and to enjoy the company of people who cherish her."

Era after era, New York's tiny apartments squeeze us, elevators pack us in, railroad tenements once made us take a bath in the kitchen, tar beach on tenement rooftops and fire escapes give respite from the heat, basement apartments make us sweat, Central Park carves out a usable wilderness, office cubicles pay our salaries, unscrupulous drivers steal our parking spaces, tin can subways rattle the bejesus out of us, and the urban beehive buzzes. We are hemmed in, pushed around, squeezed out, hassled and harassed, but New Yorkers are sculpted and shaped—individualized—by the tight spaces, the jostling of a human traffic jam. And we are blessed by the endless possibilities for serendipity, with so many

people squeezed into so small a space. It's like ... nuclear fusion ... where small spaces force New Yorkers together, releasing huge amounts of creative energy and always a new entity, a reimagined City.

The books we read are filled with mishaps and tragedies, and a New York continually on the skids, but always redeemed by the people—for us, the City is always saved by the characters in the books, the owners, waiters, and waitresses we meet in the restaurants, and our own circle of book group friends who know each other better each time we meet. BBG has offered us a way to experience this endlessly layered metropolis, which James Baldwin, in *Another Country*—one more book on our fabled list—describes as the “city which the people from heaven made their home.” ▼

## Here is our complete list of books, and partial list of restaurants.

### BOOKS 2004–2023

*Subject to repairs & improvements*

1. *Ragtime*, E. L. Doctorow
2. *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center*, Daniel Okrent (The Rainbow Room)
3. *Motherless Brooklyn*, Jonathan Lethem
4. *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square*, James Traub. (Sardis)
5. *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Hubert Selby, Jr. (Last Exit)
6. *Two Shakespearean Actors*, Richard Nelson
7. *Time and Again*, Jack Finney (Pete's Tavern)
8. *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America*, Russell Shorto
9. *What I Loved: A Novel*, Siri Hustvedt (Fanelli's)
10. *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton
11. *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*, Luc Sante
12. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer
13. *East Side Story*, Louis Auchincloss (Knickerbocker Club)
14. *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, Jerald E. Podair
15. *de Kooning: An American Master*, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan
16. *A Time to Be Born*, Dawn Powell
17. *New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster



The book group dines overlooking Grand Central Station.

18. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith
19. *740 Park Avenue: The Story of the World's Richest Apartment Building*, Michael Gross (Cosmopolitan Club)
20. *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Oscar Hijuelos
21. *The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York, and the Genius of American Life*, Fred Siegel
22. *Butterfield 8*, John O'Hara
23. *Boss Tweed: The Rise and Fall of the Corrupt Pol Who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York*, Kenneth Ackerman
24. *Garlic and Sapphires*, Ruth Reichl
25. *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood*, Kate Simon
26. *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*, Dito Montiel
27. *Bad Blood*, Linda Fairstein
28. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, William Dean Howells
29. *Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him*, Danielle Ganek (Bottino)
30. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin
31. *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*, Hella Winston
32. *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay McInerney (Odeon)
33. *Hotel de Dream: A New York Novel*, Edmund White
34. *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc
35. *Call it Sleep*, Henry Roth
36. *The Extra Man*, Jonathan Ames
37. *The Red Leather Diary: Reclaiming a Life through the Pages of a Lost Journal*, Lily Koppel
38. *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, Julie Powell (Chez Herzan)
39. *Netherland*, Joseph O'Neill (Chelsea Hotel/El Quijote)
40. *Central Park in the Dark*, Marie Winn (Central Park Boathouse)
41. *Wall Street: America's Dream Palace*, Steve Fraser
42. *Crossing the BLVD: Strangers, Neighbors, Aliens in a New America*, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan
43. *Banished Children of Eve: A Novel of Civil War New York*, Peter Quinn
44. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Truman Capote
45. *Brooklyn*, Colm Toibin
46. *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison
47. *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City*, Anthony Flint (The White Horse Tavern)
48. *Strength in What Remains*, Tracy Kidder
49. *Let the Great World Spin*, Colum McCann
50. *Man on Wire*, Philippe Petit
51. *The Beautiful and Damned*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (Grand Central Oyster Bar)
52. *Coney Island: Lost and Found*, Charles Denson
53. *Diamond Ruby*, Joseph Wallace (Foley's Bar, W. 33)
54. *New York*, Edward Rutherford (Delmonico's)
55. *Super Sad True Love Story*, Gary Shteyngart (Miss Korea)
56. *Whatever It Takes*, Paul Tough
57. *Just Kids*, Patti Smith (El Quixote)
58. *Object of Beauty*, Steve Martin (Bottino)
59. *Mrs. Astor Regrets: The Hidden Betrayals of a Family Beyond Reproach*, Meryl Gordon
60. *The Puzzle King*, Betsy Carter
61. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*, Anatole Broyard (Cornelia Street Café)
62. *Chinatown Beat*, Henry Chang
63. *Rules of Civility*, Amor Towles (The Algonquin)
64. *Boulevard of Dreams: Heady Times, Heartbreak, and Hope along the Grand Course in the Bronx*, Constance Rosenblum
65. *Manhattan '45*, Jan Morris (Frankie & Johnnie's on 45th)
66. *The Gods of Gotham*, Lyndsay Faye
67. *New York at War: Four Centuries of Combat, Fear, and Intrigue in Gotham*, Steven H. Jaffe (The River Café)
68. *Love, Fiercely: A Gilded Age Romance*, Jean Zimmerman (Robert, at the Museum of Arts and Design)
69. *Under Their Thumb: How a Nice Boy from Brooklyn Got Mixed Up with the Rolling Stones (and Lived to Tell About It)*, Bill German (Josie's)
70. *Lowboy*, John Wray (Steak Frites)
71. *Grand Central: How a Train Station Transformed America*, Sam Roberts (Michael Jordan's Steak House)
72. *Psmith, Journalist*, P. G. Wodehouse
73. *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky*, Joshua David and Robert Hammond (La Luncheonette)
74. *The Godfather*, Mario Puzo (Umberto's Cafe)
75. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Serge Guilbaut (The Jane Hotel)
76. *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, David von Drehle (Favela Cubana)
77. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid (Masala Wala)
78. *L is for Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir*, Annie Rachele Lanzillotto (Trattoria Spaghetto)
79. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan (Café Mogador)
80. *Dissident Gardens*, Jonathan Lethem (Our 10th Anniversary Selection!) (Quaint)
81. *The Goldfinch*, Donna Tartt
82. *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*, Charles Montgomery
83. *The New York Stories of Henry James*, selected by Colm Toibin (Chez Jaqueline)
84. *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*, Mark Kurlansky (Grand Central Oyster Bar)
85. *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, Neil Simon
86. *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe (Orsay)
87. *Subway Lives: 24 Hours in the Life of the New York City Subway*, Jim Dwyer
88. *10:04*, Ben Lerner (Jack the Horse Tavern)
89. *Island of Vice: Theodore Roosevelt's Quest to Clean up Sin-Loving New York*, Richard Zacks (La Pizza Fresca Ristorante)
90. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon
91. *Up in the Old Hotel*, Joseph Mitchell (McSorley's)
92. *Man in Profile*, Thomas Kunkel (Paris Café)
93. *Burr: A Novel*, Gore Vidal (Morris Jumel Mansion)
94. *Downtown*, Pete Hamill (Pete's Tavern)

95. *Lush Life*, Richard Price (Schiller's Liquor Bar)

96. *Trump: The Deals and the Downfall*, Wayne Barrett (at Wayne and Fran Barrett's)

97. *Down These Mean Streets*, Piri Thomas (La Fonda Boricua, turned Sapitos!)

98. *Jews Without Money*, Michael Gold (Sammy's Roumanian Steakhouse)

99. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*, Jean H. Baker (Edo Sushi)

100. *Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum*, Edward T. O'Donnell (Malai Marke)

101. *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow

102. *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*, Steve Zeitlin (The Purple Yam)

103. *Christadora*, Tim Murphy (Gnocco)

104. *The Letter Writer: A Novel*, Dan Fesperman

105. *Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital*, David Oshinsky (Riverpark)

106. *The Gargoyle Hunters*, John Freeman Gill (Walkers)

107. *Gowanus: Brooklyn's Curious Canal*, Joseph Alexiou (Runner and Stone)

108. *New York 2140*, Kim Stanley Robinson (Sabbia)

109. *February House: The Story of W. H. Auden*, Sherill Tippins (Jack the Horse)

110. *Manhattan Beach*, Jennifer Egan (Vinegar Hill House)

111. *Golden Hill: A Novel of Old New York*, Francis Spufford (Fraunces Tavern)

112. *Our Laundry, Our Town: My Chinese American Life from Flushing to the Downtown Stage and Beyond*, Alvin Eng (Salam)

113. *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin (Cornelia Street Café)

114. *M Train*, Patti Smith (Dante Cafe)

115. *The Black Hand: The Epic War Between a Brilliant Detective and the Deadliest Secret Society in American History*, Stephan Talty (Café Select)

116. *New York: Song of the City*, Nancy Groce (Rehearsal Studios, Barbetta)

117. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh (Bottino)

118. *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul*, Jeremiah Moss (Bamonte's)

119. *Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants*, Robert Sullivan (Dead Rabbit)

120. *The Poet X*, Elizabeth Acevedo (Nuyorican Poets Café, with D. Gallant, Café Cortadito)

121. *The Friend*, Sigrid Nunez

122. *Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*, Mary Gabriel (June 2019)

123. *Jazz*, Toni Morrison (Melba's)

124. *The Policewomen's Detective Bureau*, Edward Conlon (Da Nico)

125. *My Young Life: A Memoir*, Frederic Tuten (12th Street, "old red sauce Italian")

126. *Poet in New York*, Federico García Lorca

127. *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown (The Grange Barn)

129. *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan*, Jill Lepore (11 Hanover Greek)

130. *The World to Come*, Dara Horn

131. *Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad, & Criminal in 19th-Century New York*, Stacy Horn

132. *Deacon King Kong*, James McBride

133. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, E. L. Konigsburg

134. *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, as told to Alex Haley

135. *The Lebrman Trilogy*, Stefano Massini

136. *Red at the Bone*, Jacqueline Woodson

137. *Behold the Dreamers*, Imbolo Mbue

138. *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.

139. *The Lions of Fifth Avenue*, Fiona Davis

140. *Boss of the Grips: The Life of James H. Williams and the Red Caps of Grand Central Terminal*, Eric K. Washington

141. *Guided Suffragists: The New York Socialites Who Fought for Women's Right to Vote*, Johanna Neuman

142. *Another Country*, James Baldwin

143. *The Great Mistake*, Jonathan Lee (A picnic in the park! By Andrew Haswell Green bench)

144. *The Barbizon: The Hotel That Set Women Free*, Pauline Bren (Cos Club)

145. *Passing*, Nella Larsen (Settapani)

146. *When No One is Watching*, Alyssa Cole

147. *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival & Hope in an American City*, Andrea Elliott (Walter's, Fort Greene)

148. *Our Laundry, Our Town: My Chinese American Life from Flushing to the Downtown Stage and Beyond*, Alvin Eng (Uncle Lou's)

149. *Save the Village*, Michele Herman (chez Kuhn & Herman)

150. *Secret Identity*, Alex Segura (Pete's Tavern)

151. *The Golem and the Jinni*, Helene Wecker (Nish Nush)

152. *Also, a Poet*, Ada Calhoun (La Palapa)

153. *The Autobiography of the Lower East Side*, Rashidah Ismaili (Awash Ethiopian Restaurant)

154. *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Bronx is Burning*, Jonathan Mahler (to be selected)



Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016). His latest book, His latest book is *JEWels: Teasing Out the Poetry in Jewish Humor and Storytelling* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023). Special editorial thanks for this column: Martha Dahlen. Photo by Amanda Dargan.