

In Brief

Downtown: My Manhattan

Pete Hamill
Little, Brown, 304 pp., \$23.95

REVIEWED BY JOHN ESPOSITO

It is Saturday morning in the summer of 1941. A 6-year-old Brooklyn native is embarking on his first walk across the famous bridge bearing the borough's name. The child's eyes gravitate to the spires aimed at the sky, guiding his path to the special place that looms ahead. It is the enchanted island that he will always remember as "Oz."

So begins "Downtown: My Manhattan," a well-crafted, loving memoir by best-selling author and journalist Pete Hamill, recognized by many as the living embodiment of New York City. The author's personalized walking tour traces downtown's history from the Dutch settlers onward. The journey captures the essence of both the "lost New York" and the vibrant spirit of today's Manhattan.

Many influential New Yorkers make appearances: De Witt Clinton, whose 1811 master plan resulted in the street/avenue "grid" that changed the urban geography; A.T. Stewart, whose first department store introduced "sale" items; Thomas Edison and electricity, the crucial ingredient needed to erect buildings higher than

six stories, run subways and transform Broadway into the Great White Way; Tony Pastor, who ushered in vaudeville; and Rudolph Giuliani, whose leadership and clear vision on attacking crime in the 1990's brought a sense of calm the city had not seen in 30 years.

Throughout the book two interlocking themes recur: the velocity of urban change and the sense of nostalgia that inevitably results. The author opines that New Yorkers have a "fatalistic" approach toward living, an acceptance that nothing lasts forever. His neighbors did not leave after 9/11; instead, they recognized the importance of moving forward, by getting up the next morning and returning to school, work and all the things that life is supposed to be about.

The greatness of New York is derived from immigrants, Hamill tells us. The city is a "human alloy," forged by a familiar pattern of resistance followed by absorption, beginning with the Dutch and English, then the Irish, and later the Italians, Jews and each successive wave. Through marriage and falling in love, immigrants create a city, in effect, an alloy that is much tougher than any single metal.

John Esposito is a freelance writer who lives in New Providence.

