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## **It's all 'Downtown': Talking with Pete Hamill about New York**

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Best-selling author and prolific journalist Pete Hamill is, for many, the living embodiment of New York City. In a newspaper career that began with the New York Post in 1960, Hamill has been witness to the many triumphs and defeats that have marked the city.

His latest work of nonfiction, "Downtown: My Manhattan," (Little, Brown; \$23.95), is part memoir and part neighborhood walking tour of the magical island he called "Oz" as a child. Hamill explores the history of Downtown from its earliest settlers through present day. Along the way we are introduced to both the "lost New York" and the vibrant spirit of today's Manhattan.

Hamill appears in Stamford Friday at Just Books' and Holiday Inn Select's Meet-the-Authors breakfast.

**Q:** Your latest book, "Downtown My Manhattan," comes out approximately two years after your last bestseller, "Forever." "Forever" is a work of fiction intermingled with factual history of New York City. What made you decide to write this latest book and how would you describe it?

**A:** Well, because "Forever" is a novel, my perceptions were guided by the main character, Cormac O'Connor, who is at the heart of the story. You know, it's his reaction to the city, not yours necessarily and obviously this act of the imagination is partly my view of the city and how it evolved. But I wanted to write something about the city that lends itself more to the essay than to fiction, to say this is what I think New York is about, this is, what it is and why it is and who the people are and all that. That led to this book because I could say in my own voice what the character in "Forever" could not say Š (what I) as a New Yorker and particularly a Brooklynite who crossed the bridge into Manhattan saw as the essence of Manhattan.

**Q:** What historical research did you do and were you surprised by anything that you learned in doing this research?

**A:** Well, I've been doing this research for forty-five years. You know that's the thing about a book like this. It summarizes, you know, years of trying to find out what is New York, what is this place all about. I was a reporter from 1960 on and I would go off to parts of the city I had never been to and come back and after I finished writing for deadline, I would say, "What the hell was that, where is that place, what is that about" -- start digging into the clips and the library and then buying books on New York history and trying to figure it out. So in the back of the book, I list a lot of books that were very helpful, some of which are very recent, Phillip Lopate's book called "Waterfront," is a very recent book. Mike Wallace's and Ed Burrows' book called "Gotham," which is volume one of a really long history of New York. And the books will still keep coming. The city is constantly shifting. Historians look at it and they begin to see things now that they would not have seen the same way fifty years ago, because the city is constantly changing. That's the essence of it as many people have said over the years.

Q: Your book calls to mind E.B. White's memoir, "Here Is New York." He was a New York journalist who had retired to his home in Maine only to return to the city by invitation in 1948 to write about his experiences and how much it had changed. It is now some fifty-plus years later and you've written a memoir of your own perceptions and accounts while adding considerably more historical depth than White's book.

A: I love that book. I love White's book. It's an excellent book.

Q: Very early on you make a point to tell the reader that the geographical limit of your Downtown, and I'll quote you, "extends in defiance of the conventions of guidebooks -- from The Battery to Times Square." Why did you choose those boundaries?

A: Partly because, you know, Times Square is the end of the 19th century. Once the subway starts to push up into Times Square in 1904, not exactly the end of the nineteenth century, but most of New York that I love was shaped in the 19th century and the 20th century begins when the subway opens up the other boroughs, opens up Brooklyn and Queens and the Bronx, as it had to. In 1904 when the subway first opened, 800,000 immigrants arrived in New York, I mean they had to go somewhere, there was no room left in Lower Manhattan so they had to go way uptown, and the Bronx and the other boroughs and the subway was the key to that. As primitive and short as it was in 1904, it expanded into what we have today, 700 miles of subway. So I wanted to go to the limit of the 19th century vision. All the stuff in my book that traces the history of popular music and entertainment and all that, from the Bowery and lower Broadway and Herald Square and all that, culminates in Times Square.

It's the apotheosis of what New York and its various peoples made into a popular culture, it's the American popular culture now and it's everybody, it's Irish, Italians, Africans. All had a hand in creating this amazing culture. You can't have Times Square without Tony Pastor on 14th Street. You can't have Times Square without all the guys that wrote songs and plays and so on, on the Bowery. It all ended up in Times Square. Beyond that there is no central plaza in the city past Times Square. Times Square bumps up against Central Park and can't go any further. You know, there's no equivalent plaza uptown, not even 125th Street for all of its excellences. It ends at Times Square so that uptown comes downtown to go to Times Square, downtown goes uptown and so do the other boroughs and all the tourists to get to Times Square.

Q: And the subway was key to that.

A: The subway was crucial to it. And I have an idiosyncratic part, thing, too. For me, Rockefeller Center is always mid-town, you know, and it's a triumphant piece of architecture in mid-town and it ends at 53rd Street. But P.J. Clarke's on 55th Street is downtown to me because of the patina of time, you know, the memories of the Third Avenue El, the sense of scale, being small and intimate and its ability to survive, so I wanted to have that in, too. That's downtown. In a way that Rockefeller Center is not.

Q: You mentioned Tony Pastor, who ushered in the beginnings of vaudeville. Who were some of the other influential New Yorkers who contributed to the growth of Downtown since the late nineteenth century and who would you place at the top of your list?

A: Thomas Edison to start with. You know, I know like so many other New Yorkers, including Walt Whitman, he moved to New Jersey but Edison and electricity were crucial in the 1880s. Without it, you couldn't have buildings higher than, say, six stories. You wouldn't have the subway. You couldn't have electric lights turning ... Broadway into the Great White Way. It was a city of gaslight. So Edison's crucial to it. At the same time you have people like August Belmont Jr., who saw the potential for the subway and got involved in it and you had all these other amazing characters, Stanford White, Tex Rickard, who built the third Madison Square Garden. You had various politicians who knew that there was something coming and they better get ready for it.

And it wasn't simply them. It wasn't big names. It was the common will of so many different kinds of people, the people that dug the subways and built those skyscrapers and all that. They were all here inventing the way of doing it, by the way. There was no model for a lot of them and those are the unknown soldiers of New York, but they were as responsible for it as the people with big names.

Q: They created the city.

A: It's their city.

Q: One notable politician's accomplishments you mention from the early part of the nineteenth century is Governor De Witt Clinton and his involvement with a master plan that eventually resulted in the street and avenue grid that remains in place today.

A: Well he is one of the great figures in New York history. The plan itself was created in 1811 and it became the decisive plan. This was the grid that went from Greenwich Village all the way to the top of the island and it's the one we live in now.

Q: There are several recurring themes that run through the book and one of those that you mention quite often is nostalgia or a "doomed" nostalgia, that you say every generation since the early Dutch settlers has experienced, and the other is, what you call the "velocity of change" that produces this nostalgia: Can you explain this further?

A: Well I think there's two things involved in what I talk of, speak of, as the pervasive nostalgia of New York. It's pervasive. It's in every borough, it's among all kinds of people. Even the rich, but the "velocity of change" is one factor in creating the nostalgia: Things, even today, you go away for the summer, you come back and that coffee shop you loved is gone, you know, or as I tell in the book, you go away to Europe to go to work for a magazine for a while and you come back and Penn Station is gone. You know, things you never thought would change, change. At the same time, it's a city of immigrants and the immigrants all brought with them something that contributed to the nostalgia and that was a feeling for the country they left behind, for the villages, for the places that forced them out. You know, people left the west of Ireland out of hunger, people left the south coast of Sicily because of malaria and lack of jobs and so on. They all left. But they kept in their heads the old country, the music of the old country, the food of the old country, the places where they were kids because most of them left when they were very young. Old people don't immigrate and rich people don't immigrate so as bad as the old country was, there was still a feeling for it and because we're a city of immigrants, that affected our emotions and I think those emotions live now with the Mexicans and with the Russians and the Chinese and so on, the people who are the new immigrants replacing our grandfathers, often in the same buildings, and will be there forever because it's in the DNA of New York.

Q: You make a fine distinction between nostalgia and sentimentality. You also write that the New Yorkers' version of nostalgia, if you will, is a fatalistic acceptance of life. How can fatalism ever be good, I mean, in what sense.

A: Well fatalism, the way I'm using the word, accepts certain things. It accepts death, for example, you know. I love the fatalism of Mexicans who laugh at death. On the Day of the Dead there are dancing skeletons and so on, all in a parody of what life was, you know. That you realize you are mortal. And as a result you say, "this is the only time I'm going to have here and let me live it," you know? Let me live it to the full.

Q: It seems to be more unique with New Yorkers, as you say.

A: Yes.

Q: The fatalistic acceptance was evident after 9/11.

A: Yeah, we didn't run. We didn't say, "Oh I want to live forever, let me move to North Dakota," you know, we didn't do that. We stayed. We worked. We went to school. We did all the things that living a life is supposed to be about.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you began your newspaper career in 1960 with The New York Post. You've obviously witnessed a lot of changes very close to home, and most specifically it was a time when there were seven daily newspapers in New York City. What are some of the things that you are nostalgic about?

A: You mean about newspapers?

Q: Newspapers or in general.

A: I loved having an afternoon paper to work for. You know, where you could cover a murder at two in the morning and have four and a half more hours to get the story written. You know, to try to make it the best thing you could make because the deadlines were so late. I miss that. I miss hot type. I miss people editing on the stone, as they used to call it with the trays of type all set and the three lines too long and you got to pick pieces of type right out of the racks before you could set the, lock up the page. I miss that. I miss a city in which you went to a story to find out what it was about rather than with a preconception that you knew what it was about because of television or something else. So I miss that. Most of all I miss the crazy reporters, male and female, and the photographers that I worked with on the street. It was a rowdy fraternity that I had more laughs with than any human being deserves to have.

Q: Your book discusses the important role of immigrants and how it is basic to the framework of our society. This is a subject that you have often spoken and written about in the past as well. You have also expressed that you've never been an advocate for the "melting pot" metaphor as it has been applied to the immigration process. Having said that, you've opted to use your own characterization, which you describe as the "New York alloy." Can you discuss this?

A: I didn't like the "melting pot" because I thought, you know, who wants to be part of a fondue, you know? I don't want everybody to be melted down into the same thing. I want us to be something in which we can retain the thing that brought us here, whether it's being Irish or Jewish or Italian or whatever, you know, the kinds of things that we carry in ourselves as a result of the people who got us here, without homogenizing it. I didn't like it to be homogenized. The "alloy" image that I have comes from a sense that we can be this new thing that is stronger than any of the individual metals that are brought together in a place like New York. ... And then we end up stronger than anything that would be melted down. That was my basic quarrel with the "melting pot" notion.

Q: As we move forward in "Downtown: My Manhattan," you reflect on the period beginning in the mid-sixties when the streets were filled with heroin and fear began to grip the city. It would only intensify over the coming years no matter what plans were implemented. Then came the mid-nineties. It seemed that New York City underwent a dramatic transformation and suddenly there was this optimism in the air, which has remained even in spite of 9/11. But what is your take on what happened during the mid-nineties to bring about this change?

A: Well I think there were a number of things that went on. And one that was absolutely important was Giuliani, that he came in with a clear idea of how to attack crime and he had a great police commissioner in Bill Bratton and his assistant, Jack Maple, and they knew how to use the modern techniques of the computer and so on and they went at it. They had the good luck of having 5,000 new policemen that were gotten for them by David Dinkins just before Giuliani arrived. And they went at it.

But I think there were several other factors. One was that the immigrants began to come into the city and they brought with them a work ethic that had almost vanished. You know, we had at the time that Giuliani came into power there were 1,200,000 people on welfare. Astonishing! Like a major city all of its own, just made of poverty and everything that goes with that. At the same time, crack had arrived in the eighties and was beginning to burn itself out. The kids avoided it because they saw what it did to their older brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers, and the crack fad, which was unbelievably destructive, started to end. And I think all those factors made for a city that got safe within a couple years.

And I think it's still, I think there's still a feeling that it's working. The stats certainly show that it's dropping. Crime continues to drop. Sept. 11 didn't attack that because they knew that Sept. 11 was not done by New Yorkers. It was done by people from outside and so New Yorkers were not the problem. The problem when we had the depths of the worst crime thing was you didn't know who to trust anymore in your own town. Menace was everywhere. It wasn't just the drugs, it was the menace that went with them. We ended up with visible, visible change. You know, the graffiti began to go away on the subways. Simple things on the streets began to change. Times Square got literally saved; 42nd Street, the most depraved street in the city, was cleaned up. Now that wasn't only Giuliani. It was a whole lot of really hard-working bureaucrats and citizens and people with good intentions who knew what they wanted to do. And it made for a different city and I don't see what could hurt that except a major economic collapse.

Q: In your own estimation do you feel that Downtown has recovered from Sept. 11?

A: Well you're not going to have a full recovery on the site, on Ground Zero for seven or eight years. I mean it's just too mammoth a project. But among the people that I live with, nobody left. You know, they have kids in school down at Chambers Street. They get up in the morning and take them to school and, you know, they stayed. Rents and prices for condos and all that are higher than they were before Sept. 11. The restaurants are all open. Chinatown still has a little bit of a problem because certain streets were closed off by the police to protect police headquarters and other government buildings, so they didn't fully recover yet.

Q: It's safe then to say that you're optimistic about New York's future.

A: I'm optimistic about it. Who knows what will happen? You know, if you get terrorists attacking the subway system, you know, we don't know what will happen then because people have to get to work, people have to come in to the main center of the city to shop and so on. We don't know what will happen if there's sustained attacks, you know, two, three, four attacks. We don't know, but in general, I'm optimistic.

Q: I think the best way to possibly close our interview is by referencing the final chapter of your book, where you state, the old cliché is true, nothing is permanent, and especially when it comes to Manhattan, even as opposed to the other boroughs because it's forever changing. And I guess this re-invention brings about the excitement and the challenges of Manhattan.

A: Yes. You know I hope I live to see the new Trade Center, I hope I live to see the generation that's now 12, graduating from the university. I hope to see all these immigrant kids become the first people in the history of their families to go to the university and add to the "alloy." I see great literature coming from those younger people. I think there will be amazing journalism. I just hope I last long enough to savor it all.

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Pete Hamill will discuss his new book, "Downtown: My Manhattan," Louis Auchincloss will talk about "East Side Story: A Novel" and Nelson DeMille will discuss "Night Fall" at Friday's Just Books Meet-The-Authors breakfast at 8:45 a.m. at the Holiday Inn Select, 700 Main St., Stamford. Tickets cost \$30 and may be purchased in advance or at the door. Call 869-5023 or visit [www.justbooks.org](http://www.justbooks.org).

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