

# CITY COURANT

SPRING 2015



# An Interview with Historian and Novelist

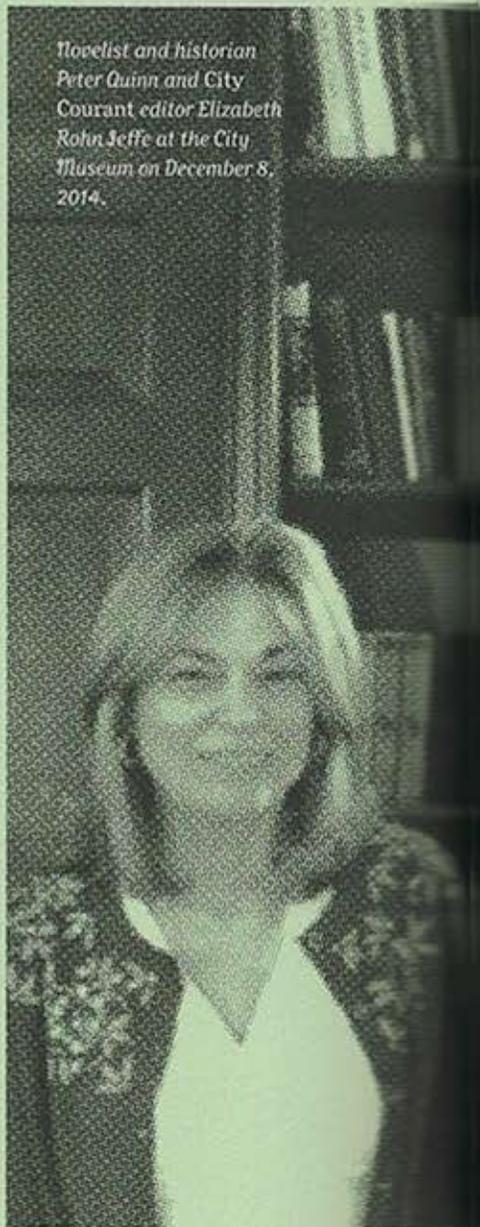
*Elizabeth Rohn Jaffe*

*Peter Quinn is a writer and historian specializing in Irish-American history. A former speechwriter for Governors Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo and a corporate writer for Time Warner, Quinn won the American Book Award for Banished Children of Eve: A Novel of Civil War New York (2004). He is also the author of the Fintan Dunne detective trilogy and Looking for Jimmy: A Search for Irish America (2007). In March 2014, Quinn participated in the City Museum program "Immigrant, Archbishop, and Politician: John Hughes and the Rise of Irish New York." In December 2014, City Courant editor Elizabeth Rohn Jaffe conducted an in-depth interview with Quinn exploring his family history, the Irish-American experience in New York, and the craft of writing.*

*Peter, you have written extensively about the Irish-American experience in New York in both non-fiction and fiction. What ignited your passion for exploring this subject?*

Some of my ancestors came to New York in 1847 during the Irish famine, and I was born 100 years later, in 1947. When I graduated from college, I joined VISTA to be an adult education teacher in Kansas City. And my roommate said, come to California, become a teacher out there, and it was an interesting idea. That was the first time I looked back at New York and thought, I don't really know what it is about, so I came back and tried to get a Ph.D. in Irish history at Fordham. But I felt the Irish experience was behind us; if I had a native land, it was New York City. And it was an Irish-New York—a hyphenated experience in the city. So it was a process of self-discovery to find out what my ancestors really went through because I think across

*Novelist and historian Peter Quinn and City Courant editor Elizabeth Rohn Jaffe at the City Museum on December 8, 2014.*



# PETER QUINN



the generations—and this is true for a lot of immigrant groups—they're interested in putting that experience behind them. You get this kind of "cleaned up" version of your history. I wanted to dig under that. I had family here during the Draft Riots and I didn't know anything about that; my grandfather was a labor organizer and I didn't know anything about that.

*Did New York possess special characteristics that transformed 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish immigrants?*

If you were born in Ireland, you pretty much knew what you were going to be. In New York, the minute you stepped off the boat, there were possibilities. You were on the bottom rung of the ladder, but there was so much more opportunity here. I also think, and this is part of the story in *Banished Children of Eve*, the Irish had never before interacted with other ethnic groups, and that was also a new dynamic. Once you step off that boat—and it's the same for everyone, Jewish, Italian—you're no longer what you were. You're something else, just because you're not a majority anymore.

*How did your family fare over the generations? You've observed in *Looking for Jimmy*, which discusses your family's history, that much of the past was treated with silence. Why do you think this was the case?*

After a couple of generations, my parents made this tremendous leap. My mother's mother came over as maid, and her father was a mechanic. They hadn't gotten past grammar school and neither had my father's parents. My father

wound up becoming an engineer and a lawyer, and my mother went to Mount St. Vincent College. So in one generation they embodied the genius of America, and they weren't really interested in giving us the "past." My parents had a certain mentality that was very American. We could vaguely identify with our Irish background, but it wasn't real. We Irish had been stereotyped as drunk and disorderly Paddy-wagon types, so respectability was important to prove that we were not what we were portrayed as being. My family used to go out to Shelter Island in the summer and my mother said, "Don't forget you're just as good as anybody else," and it never crossed my mind that I wasn't.

*What were the factors that held together the Irish Americans in New York? How would you describe the role of the Catholic Church as a unifying and educational force for Irish Americans?*

The Catholic Church was the reorganizing principle for the Irish in America. It was the one transatlantic institution that the Irish had because Irish rural society had fallen apart in the Great Famine. In fact, the Irish-American experience was all about organization—through the church, and then the labor unions, and politics. My grandfather Patrick was a labor organizer for the A.F.L. Tammany Hall called itself "the organization." The structure of Irish-American life in cities was all about parishes, and it was a territorial thing. An Irish church was the center of an urban village. You can still meet people today, and if you ask where they're from, they'll say, St. Raymond's or Sacred Heart. John Hughes came over from Ireland, became archbishop, and built schools. He also founded Fordham University, because one thing that held Irish Catholics back in Ireland was that higher education was prohibited to them. That was the tremendous accent of the Irish and the Catholic Church in New York, and it was true of other cultures, too. The thing you "knew" about America was the importance of education.

*Much of what we are talking about here could apply to Al Smith, the subject of an article in this issue of the Courant.*

St. James Parish was central to him. His father died when he was young, and he was in an Irish parish with an Irish mother, so he was culturally Irish. Ethnic identity has nothing to do with genes or race. It's the cultural thing that you're handed. And that's one great thing about being a New York Irish American, because nothing is imposed on you. If you're in Ireland, you're Irish. But if you're in New York, there's such elasticity. I would say that three-quarters of my friends are products of intermarriage—Italian and Irish, Jewish and Irish... the one

State of New York  
 Certificate and Record of  
 Birth of Peter Quinn, 1904  
 Courtesy Peter Quinn

The birth certificate of author Peter Quinn's father and namesake indicates that his mother, Margaret Quinn, was a Manning. She was born in the 1860s, most likely in the village of Fordham. Patrick Quinn, the father, is listed as a "copper smith." In 1904, the Quinn family lived on East 11th Street where Peter was born above a saloon.

STATE OF NEW YORK BUREAU OF RECORDS		STATE OF NEW YORK CERTIFICATE AND RECORD OF BIRTH	
RECEIVED MAY 20 1904		Name of Child: <u>Peter Quinn</u>	
Sex: <u>Male</u>		No. of Certificate: <u>21462</u>	
Color: <u>White</u>	Father's Occupation: <u>Copper Smith</u>	Mother's Name: <u>Margaret Quinn</u>	
Date of Birth: <u>May 10 1904</u>	Mother's State before Marriage: <u>Manning</u>		
Place of Birth: <u>724 E. 11<sup>th</sup></u>	Mother's Residence: <u>724 E. 11<sup>th</sup></u>		
Father's Name: <u>Patrick Quinn</u>	Mother's Residence: <u>U. S.</u>		
Father's Residence: <u>724 E. 11<sup>th</sup></u>	Mother's Age: <u>35</u>		
Father's Birthplace: <u>Ireland</u>	Number of Children: <u>1</u>		
Father's Age: <u>37</u>	How many live with the child: <u>2</u>		
Name and address of person making this report: <u>D. G. Barry</u>		Signature: <u>D. G. Barry</u>	
Date of Report: <u>May 15 1904</u>		Residence: <u>447 1/2 E. 11<sup>th</sup></u>	

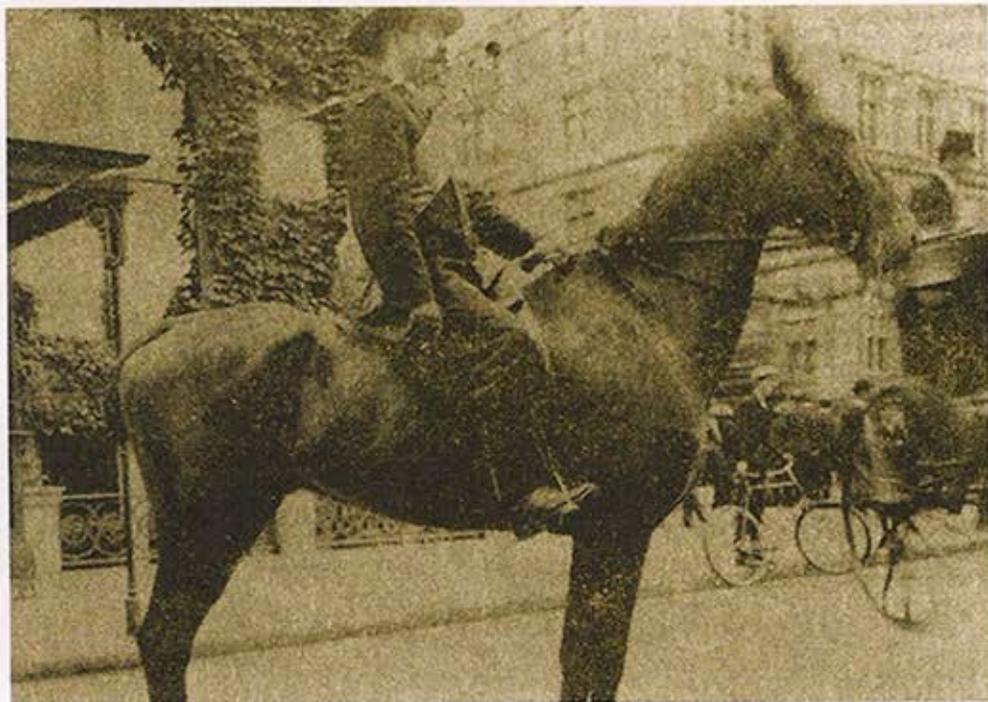
great missing link in that, and I hope it will come in the next generation, is interracial marriage. If you have a Jewish grandparent, and an African-American grandparent, and an Irish grandparent, who's left to hate?

*Was there a time when this strong sense of cohesive Irish-American urban identity began to wane?*

I think the Irish-American community stayed cohesive until John F. Kennedy became president. What keeps ethnic groups together is not self-love, it's the sense that there's a common enemy out there—that if we lose that cohesiveness, they'll overwhelm us. In 1961, when Kennedy became president, the Irish could look around and say that the enemy is gone.

*Any regrets about not being an academic?*

Not to put academics down, but that career would have created a different "me." I would have been much more narrowly channeled. Living a public life in politics and business was a tremendous lesson in human nature—the drama of it, the scope of it, watching powerful people make decisions, watching the inner workings of politics. It all helped in being a novelist. It was a broader experience than studying books or reading about the past. While I was studying for a Ph.D., the more I read history, the more I realized that about 99% of history is not in the records. You can read a four-volume life of FDR and still not know what he said to Eleanor in the bedroom. If you're in a corporation like Time Warner that's taking over another corporation, you see human beings in high stress situations, and you see how much is chance and how much is personality. What comes across in all this is the importance of the individual. I also learned



about the inner workings of New York. Bismarck said, "Nobody should see sausage being made." But you should, if you're a novelist.

*What prompted you to write *Banished Children of Eve*? Did you feel that the book was filling a hole in the fiction canon?*

I wrote *Banished Children of Eve* because it impressed me that there was no real history at that point of how the Irish Famine immigration changed the city. Two million people left Ireland, and a million died, out of a population of eight million. This was a traumatic event because of the deaths and because the people who came to New York in the 1840s had never been more than three miles from their villages. They were very agricultural. They crossed the Atlantic and found themselves in the fastest industrializing city in the world with no translatable skills except for manual labor. When I started to write the book, I said to myself, the Irish love to write, and here's the seminal event in the coming of the Irish to New York, so where's the fiction? And there was none. And it was not part of our family history either. It took *Banished Children* to connect my own family to it.

*What was your jumping off point?*

When I was working for Governor Cuomo, I got a book about the New York Draft Riots of 1863, which is a central event in *Banished Children*. The author, Adrian Cook, had done what no

Grand Marshal Patrick F. Quinn as he prepares to lead the Labor Day Parade, September 5, 1904

Courtesy Peter Quinn

*Author Peter Quinn's grandfather, Patrick Francis Quinn, served as the president of the Central Federated Union. The horse was rented for the occasion.*

Storytelling  
is the  
fundamental  
human activity.  
Every ethnic  
group, every  
religion, every  
nation, every  
family, is built  
around a story.

historian had done before—he had gone down to the morgue and gotten the names of the people killed. And I read the names, and one of them was Peter Quinn, shot and killed at 34<sup>th</sup> Street. At that point in New York, the part of my family in the city were Mannings, but a kind of bell went off in my head. The more I looked into it, I could find events, but I couldn't find the people. So I began to “look” in fiction. I took this great leap, never having written fiction, and decided that I would do this. I just held my breath and jumped off the cliff.

*Did you follow a regimen to fit this project in with your other work?*

I started to get up early. I wasn't a morning person, but I had a full-time, high-pressure job, two kids, and a mortgage. I kept saying to a friend, “I don't have the time.” He kept saying to me, “Make the time—nobody's going to give it to you!” So I got up at 5:30 for 17 years. *Banished Children* took three and a half years to write. One of the things I learned is that you never set out to write a book; you set out to write a story as a fiction writer. Storytelling is the fundamental human activity. Every ethnic group, every religion, every nation, every family, is built around a story. It defines us as human beings, and it defines every culture. Even a really good speech is a story. You have to find a hook and then pull through a thread. Some people have said I learned fiction writing by being a political speechwriter! And it's just piece by piece, page by page. You launch into a book and you kind of lose sight of land. And you get about halfway out into the ocean and you say, “What am I doing?” I felt stranded at times but I just kept going.

*Any other “rules” for writing?*

Well, as I said, first you have to have a set time; it has to be four or five days a week that you show up at the desk. A second thing is that you have to be able to write badly and then rewrite and rewrite. And the third thing is the opposite of what they always say about knowing your audience. I think you have to know yourself. There is so much in every human being and you have to work to get it out of yourself.

People go to writing schools, but I didn't. And because I had a full-time job and I had to go to bed early, I was never part of any literary society. I was off on my own, and in a way, I think that was an advantage. I would read the work of other writers and copy out paragraphs, just trying to see why that paragraph is different and why it works...how do you do a scene? So I've given you three rules, and I have a fourth if these rules don't work: throw them out and get your own rules. I've been offered jobs teaching writing, and I say, “I don't know what to teach.”

*Have you ever had writer's block?*

Oh yes, I've sat for two hours and nothing came, but if you sit there and are committed, it will come. I never start with an outline. I always "hear" characters and the story comes out of them. So I've had characters that I felt had reached a dead end, but I've been lucky enough that eventually they always told me what they were going to do next. When I was living in Park Slope, and my daughter was about four or five, I took her to Prospect Park one day. She was playing with other kids, and she came over to me and she said, "Daddy, you look sad." I said, "No, honey, I'm just brooding." And I meant "brood" in a literal way because I was sitting on an egg, trying to figure out what a character was going to do. I never really write villains because even the worst scoundrels have their reasons. There are always nuances. That's what it means to be a human being.

*How do you make historical fiction connect with readers?*

I think the prime duty of a fiction writer is to make the reader believe the story. Maybe you're making it up, but they have to be drawn into this sense of a real-life story in which it's important to follow these characters to find out something from their lives. Good historical fiction can get places the historian can't. So you have to know what it was like, what it smelled like, how the streets were, and then you write out of that situation. And when you don't, I think you get bad historical fiction where an author starts throwing in all these details such as "he was smoking a Lucky," whereas if you get into the material, it just surrounds you. I read all the newspapers for the Civil War period in New York City, and I didn't use a lot of specific details in *Banished Children*, but I felt that I could walk around the streets and know what the city looked like and what went on: somebody was murdered here, some rich person lived here. It got to the point where I was getting a little crazy, because the city that wasn't there anymore was more real to me than the city that is.

One example of writing out of the situation was finding out that Stephen Foster, the first great popular songwriter, died on the Bowery after the Draft Riots. It was the first time that I had this experience I'm talking about where I realized that I can't reach him as a biographer, but I can talk out of his mouth if it's a novel. I also had a character who became an orphan, and I read some accounts of what it was like at the asylum on Randall's Island, and then I got into the underworld of life there. Orphans wore burlap sacks, and laundry wasn't done. The life of the poor is one of the great consistencies in history.

MANUAL.

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ELECTION, REGISTRATION

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AND

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PRIMARY OFFICERS.

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TAMMANY HALL.

1904.

*This is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Banished Children of Eve. When you were writing this book, did you have any inkling that it would become a classic and win the American Book Award?*

I told myself that if I could finish it, that would be enough—because if I didn't, I thought I would be on my deathbed gasping for air trying to finish the book. I had to do this or I wouldn't rest in peace. I had begun my research for what I thought would be a work of history in 1982, but when I realized that I had to find the story through fiction, I started the novel on Columbus Day, 1988, and finished it on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1992. And I said to myself, that's enough. If it's published or not, I did it. And then about three weeks later I started having a nervous breakdown that it wouldn't be published and that I'd wasted 10 years of my life. I could have learned to play golf!

*That's one of the difficult things about writing books. The outcome as far as going beyond your desk is a total unknown. Do you think that discourages a lot of people?*

I get a lot of manuscripts, and I think people are writing more than ever now. Every art form is about telling stories, and it's a

## REPORT OF MISSING PERSON

CRATER Joseph Force

MR

ST BORN AT

ORDINARY DESTINATION

CONFIDENTIAL

13.000

8-Oral

13-595

9/4/30

Justice Dept.

40-5th Ave

West 45th St

1916/30

19-15

CAUSE OF ABSENCE

None

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

SEX	NATIVITY	AGE	HEIGHT		WEIGHT	EYES		HAIR	MUSTACHE	BEARD	COMPLEXION
			FEET	INCHES		COLOR	COLOR				
MALE	U.S.	41	6	-	185	Blue	grey	Mix			Dark Red
TEETH	CONDITION	PHOTOGRAPHED	TEETH		CONDITION		PHOTOGRAPHED				
			PECULIARITIES	PHYSICAL	MENTAL						
DEFORMITIES	SCARS	TATTOO MARKS									
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REMARKS

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CIRCULAR No. 9  
SEPTEMBER 8, 1930POLICE DEPARTMENT  
CITY OF NEW YORKBE SURE TO FILE  
THIS CIRCULAR  
FOR REFERENCE

Police Authorities are Requested to Post this Circular for the Information of Police Officers and File a Copy of it for Future Reference.

## MISSING SINCE AUGUST 6, 1930

HONORABLE JOSEPH FORCE CRATER,  
JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT, STATE OF NEW YORK

DESCRIPTION—Born in the United States—Age, 41 years; height, 6 feet; weight, 185 pounds; mixed grey hair, originally dark brown, thin at top, parted in middle "slicked" down; complexion, medium dark, considerably tanned; brown eyes; false teeth, upper and lower jaw, good physical and mental condition at time of disappearance. Tip of right index finger somewhat mutilated, due to having been recently crushed.

Wore brown sack coat and trousers, narrow green stripe, no vest; either a Panama or soft brown hat worn at rakish angle, size 6½, unusual size for his height and weight. Clothes made by Vroom. Affected colored shirts, size 14 collar, probably bow tie. Wore tortoise-shell glasses for reading. Yellow gold Masonic ring, somewhat worn; may be wearing a yellow gold, square-shaped wrist watch with leather strap.

COMMUNICATE with CHIEF INSPECTOR, POLICE DEPARTMENT, 18th Division, (Missing Persons Bureau), New York City. Telephone Spring 3100.

gamble. It's a gamble setting out to be an actor; you can spend 10 years and never make it. It's a gamble writing a book; it's a gamble becoming a musician. In the end, do you just do it for yourself? I think at some level, and I'm not trying to downplay the joy of being published, part of it has to be about doing it for yourself. It is very hard. People can write two books, and they're unpublished, and it's the third book that takes off. If I wanted to, I couldn't stop writing. It's who I am; I don't know what else to do. The only thing worse than writing is not writing. I don't know where the idea of the "romance of writing" came from. It didn't come from writers. I mean, they're reduced to having alcohol and drug problems! When people say to me, "When I retire I am going to become a writer," I say, "good luck!"

Missing person report  
(background) and poster  
for Judge Joseph Force  
Crater, 1930

Courtesy Peter Quinn

*The mysterious case of the disappearance of Judge Crater is one of the enduring unsolved mysteries in New York history. Quinn deals with this story fictionally in the second volume of his Fintan Dunne detective trilogy.*

following  
Alfred Mainzer, Times  
Square at Night, c. 1975  
Museum of the City of New York,  
F2011.33.134

*How do the constant changes in New York affect you as a writer?*

I think that if you live in New York long enough, you become part of history. It's such a changing city and that awakens your sense of storytelling. I remember years ago I used to take the bus down from Albany and walk through Times Square at the height of the drugs and the pornography. And I was walking through years later, and that was all gone. I said to myself, now it's all in my head. If you weren't here, it would be hard to reconstruct. Somebody 40 years from now is going to try to reconstruct it, and they might get it, and they might not.

*How do you think your fiction engages people with history who might not otherwise be interested in New York's past?*

Fiction individualizes history. When you read about the World War II where six million Jews are killed—what does that mean as an individual? The particularity of it and the uniqueness of it are what draw people in. Another thing about historical fiction that I always try to keep in mind is that it's so easy to presume everyone knew what was coming—that in 1936 everyone knew what Hitler was going to do. They didn't. So I think that in historical fiction you have to give characters possibilities. Somebody didn't know what was going to happen, or they didn't recognize something.

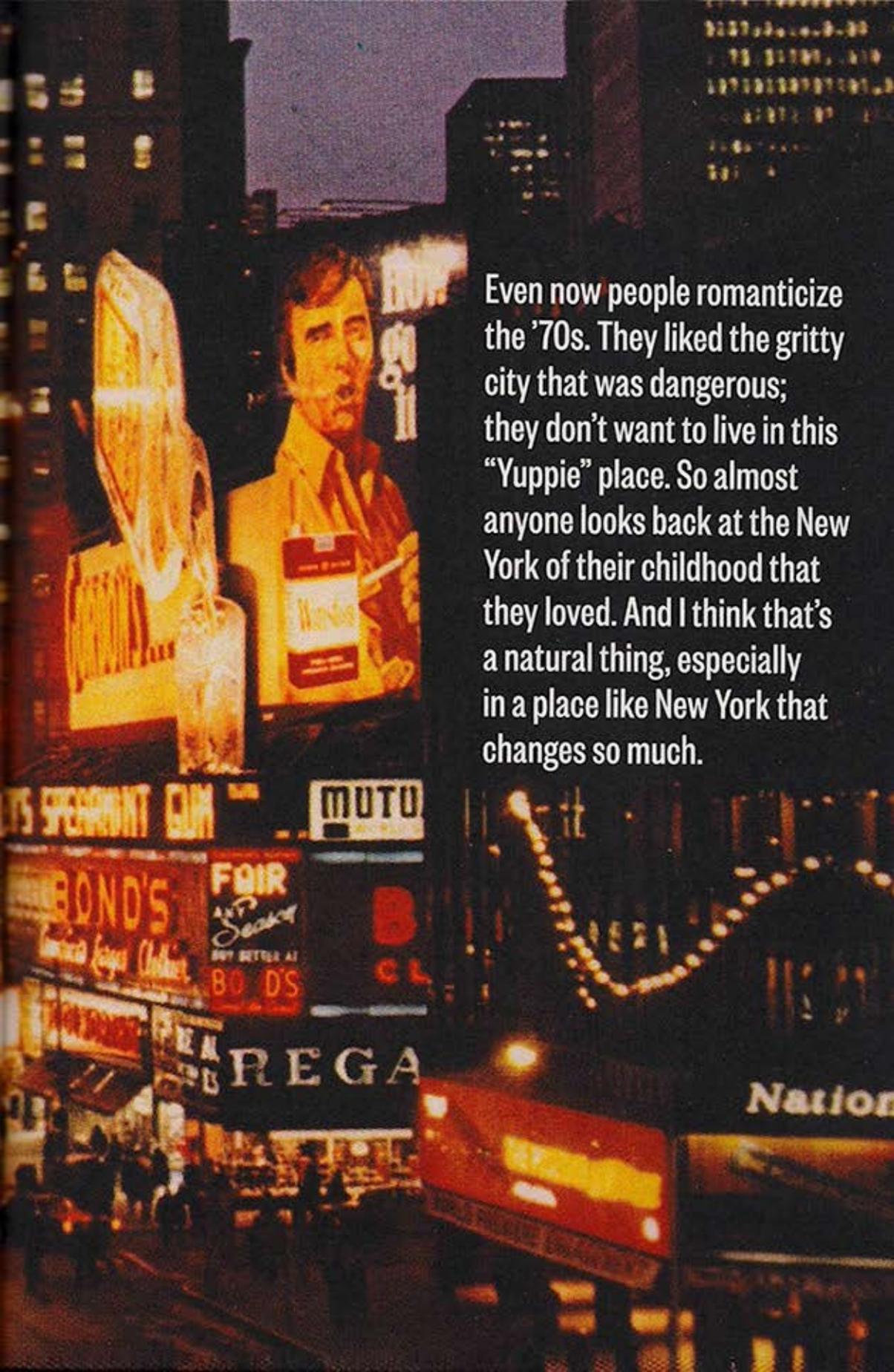
*Do you think local history can spark a greater curiosity in the past among young and old alike?*

I think that's absolutely true, and I think one place it can begin with is family history. Maybe there could be a school project where all kids would be learning the context that their families came out of—that there's a whole series of events that brought you to where you are. There's a kind of uber-history up here, and then there's the particularity of this history down here.



Alfred Mainzer,  
Times Square, c. 1975  
Postcard

Museum of the City of New York,  
F2011.33.134



Even now people romanticize the '70s. They liked the gritty city that was dangerous; they don't want to live in this "Yuppie" place. So almost anyone looks back at the New York of their childhood that they loved. And I think that's a natural thing, especially in a place like New York that changes so much.

New York has always been a commercial city, and I think that's part of the reason for this disinterest in the past. I always thought the city seal should be "let's make a deal." It is not a national capital. It's just about making a buck. And that's got advantages and disadvantages. One of the things about America is that people came here to escape history. There was a sense that what was important was the future; that's the American orientation. And I don't think it's all bad. You look at societies like Ireland, where there are thousand-year-old grievances, and they're still working them out. But I don't think a country can go anywhere unless it has its past. In every country you have to simplify and sanitize a version of the past because that's important to national identity, and then the real history is digging under that. You can do that in local history and family history.

*You say you've enjoyed a lifelong love affair with New York City. If you had been born and raised in another city, do you think your focus would have been on that city? Or is New York unique in its appeal to you?*

I'm a total chauvinist when it comes to New York. I think it's unique among world cities. Paris is a French city, London is an English city, but what's New York? In some ways it's not part of America, and in some ways it's the soul of America. It occupies this little ledge between Europe and this vast continent outside it. And I just think it has a unique energy that other places don't have because of its diversity. In New York, you go down to Little Italy and now it's Chinese, and you go out to Queens and there's this unbelievable mix of people. Where it used to be Italian, Irish, and Jewish, now it's East Asian and Pakistani. One of the miracles of New York that we take for granted is the coexistence that goes on here.

I think nobody has ever come to New York who hasn't been changed by it. It doesn't leave people alone. Some people it elevates; other people it humiliates. I'm an American, and I'm proud of that, but in a sense, my homeland is New York. It's where I come, and I look at the sky, and I smell the air, and I say, this is home. This has been my family's home since 1847. When nobody else wanted us, New York took us in. And I feel that it's my obligation as a New Yorker to keep this place open.

*How would you respond to those people who don't like New York?*  
New York isn't for everybody. Some people are threatened by what I find enticing, and I would feel threatened by what some people find enticing. In open spaces, I get nervous. I see farmhouses at night with lights on and it makes me feel depressed. I want noise, and I want to be able to walk to a

**But what's  
New York?  
In some ways  
it's not part of  
America, and  
in some ways  
it's the soul of  
America.**

restaurant. I love the crowds. When I was at Time Warner I just loved to take the subway and look at the diversity of faces, beautiful faces in all colors. And I liked to hear the different languages. When I lived in Park Slope, I took the D train to the Time building. And I remember going over the Manhattan Bridge, and I looked around and there were Hassidim and Haitians, and I was so impressed because about 50% had prayer books. They were from different cultures, praying: the subway as a kind of universal church—not your usual image. I thought, it's good to be in a car where half the people are praying; I don't think it's going to go off the rails!

*You have observed that the New York you write about is largely gone, and that you and other New Yorkers are hopeless romantics in longing for what is past. Could you elaborate?*

Well, if you talk to people who grew up in New York, they're always talking about the old neighborhood, or what the city was like. Even now people romanticize the 70s. They liked the gritty city that was dangerous; they don't want to live in this "Yuppie" place. So almost anyone looks back at the New York of their childhood that they loved. And I think that's a natural thing, especially in a place like New York that changes so much.

*You grew up in Parkchester, didn't you?*

Yes, in the Bronx. The neighborhood has changed ethnically. I had this unbelievable experience in a cab about 10 years ago at Christmas. I was coming up to Grand Central with my wife and two kids. They sat in the back, and I sat up front with the driver. And I said, where are you from, and he said Ghana, and I said where do you live now, and he said the Bronx. I said, I grew up in the Bronx, where do you live? And he said, Parkchester. I said, where in Parkchester, and he said, One Met Oval, which is where I grew up. And then I said, what apartment, and he said, 4C, which is the apartment I grew up in. My family had lived in that apartment for 40 years. Now somebody else has come from another country and he's here to be somebody he couldn't be in Ghana, driving a cab and living where I lived.

*You recently completed your Detective Fintan Dunne trilogy.*

*How were you inspired to create that character?*

I had fun creating Dunne because he is a composite of a lot of people I grew up with. They were very tough, sarcastic, suspicious, and decent. You were an idiot until proven otherwise—that was the presumption in the Bronx. And you had to be tough (I wasn't) and skeptical of everything, and sometimes cynical. But to me, that was a New York attitude.

*Is your next book a work of fiction?*

I don't like to talk about books that I am writing, but I can say that it's a novel. I love to work in the New York Public Library; I go there two days a week. It makes me feel smart. And I was sitting there—and this is the first time it ever happened—and I just had an idea for a book. It takes place 40 years ago. I didn't have to do any research because it's out of the world that I knew. It might be the worst thing I ever wrote and it might not be published, but I'm at the point where that doesn't matter. I have to get the story out; it seized me; it's interesting to me. A reader can tell.



The elder Peter Quinn at the dedication of the new Saint Raymond's Grammar School, Bronx, 1951.

Courtesy Peter Quinn

*Shown here speaking before the dedication assembly, the author's father graduated from the original Saint Raymond's in 1918. His son Peter graduated from the new school in 1961 and studied art with the same teacher.*

*Historian Barbara Tuchman observed in her book about writing, Practicing History, that one of the hardest things for her to do was to stop researching and start writing, because research is so fascinating. I gather you would agree?*

I had the exact same experience with *Banished Children*. I was in the newspaper division of the public library, which used to be on Eleventh Avenue, and it was summertime. My wife, Kathy, and the kids were away and I was going there every night to read newspapers and magazines. The air conditioning was off and it was nine o'clock and they were closing, and I said to myself, "I could do this for the rest of my life, or I can write."

*How do you view movies based on historical fiction as a source of history?*

That's a question I've never really thought about. Every novelist's great dream is that the book be made into a movie, but most novelists hate the movies that are made out of their novels, with very few exceptions. I actually think that you

can get much more history from movies such as screwball comedies, or film noir, where you get a detective story, than from deliberately historical films. I love to watch the background and see the city as it was in a movie such as *Ball of Fire* with Barbara Stanwyck. In *North by Northwest*, the train goes through Hastings with Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, and you see the factory there.

*Do you review the work of other writers?*

I do a lot of book reviewing for *Commonweal*, and I never review books I don't like. Reviewers can eviscerate people very carefully but I think writers have a duty to be kind to other writers. Anybody who is writing something is really putting themselves out there, and we should be finding what's worthwhile in what they've done. I got to know William Kennedy in Albany. He used the phrase, "renewing your vulnerability" in reference to writing. It meant a lot to me. He said that with every book you write (and he's won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award) you're putting yourself out there, and people are going to judge it, and you don't have any control over what they do. And if you're not ready to get stomped on, find another occupation. I remember one review of *Banished Children* that said that it's essentially a novel about nature versus nurture. It never crossed my mind! I've always thought that the First Amendment should include, as well as freedom of speech, a provision that books can only be reviewed by the people who wrote them. Who else knows the book better than the writer?

*I'd like to give you a chance to frame the last question. What would you like to ask yourself?*

I think I would ask myself, does writing get any easier? And I would say the answer is absolutely no. I start every book with the thought that I'm not going to be able to write this. And people say, well, you have this talent. But I always feel that you don't know if it's there anymore. It's such a wispy, undefinable thing that you're always afraid of losing it. You can't materialize it; it's either inside you or it isn't, and it will be there or it won't. So that I think what a writer has to learn is the uncertainty of the whole process. Some things get easier in life, but I don't think novel writing does. This will be my fifth novel and I am starting at ground zero again. It has never become easy for me, and I really haven't learned any shortcuts. Beyond sitting down and brooding on my book, I don't know.