INTRODUCTION

MY LOVE FOR WALKING THE CITY can be traced back to a game my father played with me as a child, called “Last Stop.” On every available weekend, when I was between the ages of 9 and 14, my dad and I took the subway from our home on the Upper West Side to the last stop of the line and walked around for a couple of hours. When we ran out of new last stops on the various lines, we did the second, then third to last, and so on, always traveling to a new place. In this way, I learned to love and appreciate the city, one that I like to call “the world’s greatest outdoor museum.” I also developed a very close bond with my father, who gave me the greatest present a kid can have—the gift of time.

The island of Manhattan is a world-famous place. When people say, “I’ve visited New York City,” 90 percent of the time they are referring to the best-known of the city’s boroughs. And by a similar margin, they have spent most of their time exploring and experiencing this island’s major attractions and sites. Almost always, they’ve taken in a Broadway show. They’ve walked down Fifth Avenue and strolled through Lord & Taylor, Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Henri Bendel. In the Financial District, they toured the New York Stock Exchange. They rode to the top of the Empire State Building and viewed the gigantic Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, where they might also have seen a show put on by the Rockettes. And if they’ve seen other parts of Manhattan, they’ve usually done so by bus or a boat trip around the island. For food, they might have tried a Sabrett hot dog or a halal chicken and rice dish, both sold by street vendors; or an overstuffed pastrami sandwich at the Stage Door Deli in Midtown or Katz’s Deli on the Lower East Side, popping into Russ & Daughters as well while they’re in the neighborhood. They may also have indulged in lox, sable, or herring at Zabar’s on the Upper West Side. For upscale dining, perhaps they
visited one of the many options—“21” Club, Bouley, Jean-Georges, Sparks Steak House, Daniel, Le Bernardin, and Il Mulino.

There’s nothing wrong with a trip like that. After all, this is what has made the Big Apple so special. And when they return home, tourists want to tell their friends and family that they saw the sights that everyone has heard of and knows about. But is this all that’s worth seeing? What is there for those who want to explore the rest of Manhattan? For people who want to combine seeing the well-known with the unknown? Or for those who’ve seen the regular sights several times but want to see the city from a completely new perspective?

That’s why I have written this book—to reveal Manhattan in all its beauty, complexity, and mystery; to demonstrate to visitors that it has so much to offer beyond its most famous locations. This is true of every one of its many neighborhoods, from the northernmost to the southernmost areas, and from east to west across the island. Some of the points made here are true, in varying degrees, of other cities too, while other points are unique.

Take Marble Hill, for instance. To walk through its quaint curved streets and take in its many private, wood-framed homes with peaks or cupolas, is to get a firsthand view of what Manhattan looked like in the nineteenth century. It’s the borough’s northernmost section and seems so far away from the noise and high-octane activity that people think of when Manhattan is mentioned. Since the community is not on Manhattan Island itself, it’s logical to think it should be part of the Bronx. But that’s not the case, due to some very interesting historical and geographical changes.

Washington Heights is a hilly neighborhood consisting almost exclusively of apartment buildings constructed on rocky terrain, some of it exposed for six stories clearly visible to the naked eye. Here, I learn about former secretary of state Henry Kissinger’s teenage home, and in the area around Jumel Terrace, I discover old wooden houses in their more or less original incarnation. I’m also saddened to learn that the site of Malcolm X’s assassination, the
Audubon Ballroom, is not being cared for in the way it should be. This reminds me that I was waiting for a bus outside the ballroom at exactly the time it occurred. (Later in this book, I share the details of what I saw that day.)

Morningside Heights has two neighborhood institutions with great food—V & T Pizzeria and the Hungarian Pastry Shop. Frank Vela, one of V & T’s owners, has a fascinating tale about his life as an immigrant in the 1940s and his experiences with Giovanni Buitoni, the famous spaghetti manufacturer.

The point is that all of these communities have their own mini-histories, with stories and places that will entice and delight explorers of the island. But this is equally true of the Manhattan people come to see, its central core, which visitors feel certain they know. I myself wondered if there was anything new I could say about the better-known places. After all, this town offers many tours of all varieties (food tours, literary tours, etc.) and Manhattan is only twenty-two square miles. Moreover, as the sociologist and tour guide Jonathan Wynn points out in his wonderful book, The Tour Guide, Manhattan guides are very adept at pointing out the “odds and ends of urban life.” As it turned out, discovering new odds and ends wasn’t so hard.

Midtown Manhattan, for example, which includes many famous places, like Carnegie Hall, the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, Times Square, the New York Public Library, and the Theater District, has lots of other places worth seeing. Take the Alwyn Court, an elegant apartment building. Even the majority of New Yorkers have never noticed or even seen it. Nearly every inch of its exterior is encrusted with fire-breathing salamanders, flowers, urns, statues, dragons. No description of this building, either inside or out, can do it justice. It must be seen to be appreciated. There’s also a building on W. 58th Street that, when viewed a certain way, gives the distinct impression that half of it is falling down. The Diamond District on 47th Street is a familiar place for visitors, but it’s the conversation with a businesswoman there that provides insight into its inner workings.
Greenwich Village is often thought of as a center for entertainment. Every evening as well as all day on weekends, MacDougal and 3rd Streets are filled with throngs of people looking for a good time. But the Village also has a darker, lurid side. How many people know the story of 18 W. 11th Street, where five Weathermen terrorists built a bomb factory in the basement? Three were killed in an explosion there, leaving only two Weathermen to face the music for what they had plotted to do. And what about the “House of Death,” at 14 W. 10th Street, where attorney Joel Steinberg beat his six-year-old daughter to death in one of the city’s most notorious murder cases? And that’s not the only reason for this townhouse’s name. Shortly after telling of the ghosts she saw there, a resident, Jan Bryant Bartell, died under mysterious circumstances. She and several others swore they had seen Mark Twain wandering the premises attired in a white suit.

The neighborhood is also home to the Central Bar, where Irish and British expats hoot, holler, and curse as they watch home soccer games on “the telly.” For chess set collectors and players, the Chess Forum on Thompson Street is a must. To me, it was special because as a college student I had the honor of losing to Bobby Fischer, an anecdote recounted in this book.

Every neighborhood has its special location that, over time, becomes embedded in the collective memory of those who have been there. At “Rock” Plaza it’s the Christmas tree, and Bleecker Street is where it’s at in the Village. And in the Wall Street area it’s the bull sculpture on Broadway, while in Times Square, the bright-red glass stairs at the TKTS booth on 47th Street is a major attraction. People often need an image to capture what they’ve experienced, but there’s much more to these neighborhoods. To truly understand the history of the Financial District it’s necessary to connect with the people who live and work there. One of them would be Paul Quinn, the owner of Jim Brady’s saloon and restaurant over at 75 Maiden Lane. He’ll tell you how they moved the bar of the world-famous Stork Club, now defunct, to his premises. But more than that, this
insightful raconteur will explain what the area was like before and after 9/11; how deserted it became and how and, even more importantly, why thousands of young families now live here.

All this is just a tiny sampling of what this book presents. But it isn’t limited to a description of the relatively unknown bricks and mortar of the city’s jewels and treasures, fascinating as they may be. A city cannot be understood purely in terms of its colorful history or fascinating architecture. Its heart and soul are the people who inhabit it. They are literally the repository of its essence, and this book presents the most interesting conversations I was fortunate enough to have had with some of the hundreds of people I met in my journey through its many streets. What they say is what makes the city come alive to the reader.

In Inwood, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan, I meet Sabas, an eighty-two-year-old man who lives in a cave. Most people would think of him as a homeless man, but he really isn’t. The cave is his home, and by choice. I say to him: “Well, you have a million-dollar view of the forest from here.” His answer is exquisite: “I do. I do. I see the leaves falling. I see them come down like ballet dancers. Each one is turning and twisting and bending, caressing the air. It’s a loving situation. And no two fall in the same way, so I’m overwhelmed. I’m overwhelmed.” I ask if I can give him anything. His response says it all: “Why would you have to give me anything? I have everything I need. And I have my Korean War veteran’s pension. It’s not much, but it’s enough. The creator takes care of me because I obey his natural laws.”

In Washington Heights, I meet Theo, a young Greek American, who owns Jumbo Pizza and Coffee Shop. This place lives up to its name, serving up the largest slices of pizza I’ve ever seen. He’s following in his father’s path, one that epitomizes the ambition of immigrants in this city. Nearby, the journey takes place in reverse. The Brotherhood/Sister Sol at 143rd Street takes Harlem kids to other parts of the world. As Nando Rodriguez, a coordinator, tells me: “We recently took a group of kids to Brazil. In this country we think of...”
slavery as a US thing. But now they learn it existed in Brazil too.”
Organizations like this enrich and change lives in these poorer parts
of the city. For the children who go, the experience is something they
are likely to remember for the rest of their lives.

In a Harlem restaurant, a waiter tells me about his background:
“My mother is Gabonese and French, and my father is Polish and
Chinese. I guess I’m just an American.” These multicultural families
are on the rise, especially in New York City but nationally too. I
also learn about them from students in my classes at City College.
On the Upper West Side I come across Jacob’s Pickles. Sounds like
a pickle joint, but it’s much more. It has sour cukes, kosher cukes,
pickled carrots, and many other dishes and a wide selection of beers
and biscuit dishes. I chat with the proprietor, who tells me why he
opened this eatery: “I always loved pickles. It was my passion. That
and beer. I see pickles, beer, and biscuits as the ultimate comfort
food.” His comment reflects a very New York thing—the right to
take your ultimate fantasy, put it out there, and see who will buy into
it. It can be a place loaded with pinball machines that you can play
and pay for by the hour or by the game. It can be a shop where you
choose from many varieties of mayonnaise mixed with items you
never thought would be a good mix. The pickle idea seems to be a
winner, judging from the number of customers there.

Then there are people whose game seems to be a bit more out of
touch with the masses. Yet they too survive, albeit with a smaller cus-
tomer base. Take Jack Seidenberg, owner of an antiques emporium in
Greenwich Village which, with its absolutely stunning merchandise,
looks like a museum. Alas, he has few customers these days.

“How’s business?” I ask him.

“Well, I make a living. My father started this business in 1940.
It’s in my blood. But with everybody shopping virtually and rents
going up, more and more stores are vacant. So it’s a struggle.”

“And yet, you’re happy.”

“You know, I have people who come in here and wake me up
from my lethargy. They say to me: ‘You must have such a wonderful
life, being surrounded by all these beautiful works of art.’ And I’m thinking about the next sale, but they set me right, and stop me in my tracks, stop me from thinking despairing thoughts.” Jack’s dilemma is one faced by thousands of small-business owners. They are conflicted by the love they have for their work or the fact that this is simply what they know how to do and by the realization that it may all end badly.

New Yorkers are what makes this city what it is. Often, they rise to the occasion. Others do not, but they are at least passive identifiers. And this raises an interesting question. Is there something that binds Manhattanites together? I think so, and it starts with an acute consciousness of place. They know that they live and work in one of the most renowned places on the planet. About 80 percent of Manhattanites work in their home borough, which means their relationship with the city is all-encompassing, in a 24/7 way. It’s one of the factors that unites them in terms of what they see, do, and think about.

Clearly a wealthy resident of Park Avenue and 86th Street experiences Manhattan differently than someone from Park Avenue and 118th Street. The former may dine in a fancy restaurant while the latter works in the kitchen. But the point is that New Yorkers at every level interact with each other almost daily. The cabbie or Uber driver talks politics or shares personal information with his or her passenger. People from different walks of life wait on line to get into a Knicks game and a conversation happens. As a result, everyone learns about the lives of others. Some learn more because they are interested and willing to share information and stories. Others, a bit suspicious or simply introverted, gain less, but almost everyone’s horizons are broadened in varying degrees over time. This creates a shared identity, one that’s far more common in a crowded and diverse city.

But what accounts for that sense of commonality? First and foremost, there is an awareness of a common history, some of it bad, some of it good. A perfect case in point is what happened in
Manhattan on 9/11. Just as people did nationally when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, one of the most frequent questions New Yorkers ask each other is “Where were you when 9/11 happened?” This creates a bond of shared tragedy that, in effect, breaks the ice among people looking for a way to do so. A second choice may be where people were during the days when the “Son of Sam” terrorized the city. There’s also a positive way to engage: “Do you remember going to Coney Island?” “Remember how the Mets almost won the World Series?”

A second factor has to do with daily topics of conversation that are relevant to all New Yorkers. This includes the subways, safety, the weather, or thoughts about the police or the mayor—loaded but still avidly discussed subjects, even among strangers. If people are in agreement on these subjects, that’s fine, though less interesting. If they’re not, it’s at least an area of shared experience. Since my method in this book was to approach total strangers and encourage them to talk to me, these and other similar topics were of crucial importance, and they worked for me as they do for other Manhattan dwellers.

No matter where they live in Manhattan, many people are proud to tell others that they reside in this internationally known borough. Someone who lives in a public housing project on the Lower East Side is still the resident of a borough with great cachet. I grew up in a modest neighborhood in Manhattan, not Riverside Drive or Central Park West, but between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues, above 96th Street. But when, as an adult, I told people that I was raised in Manhattan I could see they were impressed. As for those who live in the finest areas of the borough—the Upper East Side, Sutton Place, Chelsea—they know they’re at the top. It is the dream of many a suburbanite from Long Island or New Jersey to retire and live “in the city.”

In the larger context, New Yorkers have multiple, overlapping identities. First, we have the neighborhood, be it the Upper West Side, Gramercy Park, Hamilton Heights, or Clinton. Second, there’s the borough, whichever one the person lives in. And then we have
New York City, any and every part of it. These categories are used in many ways—to impress, to identify with, to make a comment about why they are who they are. In this last case, New Yorkers are apt to see themselves in the way that they think others see them: brash, smart-alecky, edgy; aggressive but also cool, hip trend-setters. And these are just some of the ways they describe themselves. Sometimes they use what they know to be stereotypes as a way of setting themselves apart, as in “I’m not your typical New Yorker.”

The neighborhoods often intersect or overlap in very interesting ways. Many Manhattan residents have chosen to live somewhere because they can get to their place of work, also in Manhattan, more quickly. Thus residents of Washington Heights, now called Hudson Heights to improve the value of the real estate (it just sounds better), select it because the A train is a quick ride to Midtown or the Financial District. Others live in Harlem because it’s close to Columbia University, where they work. A woman living all the way up near 96th Street and Park Avenue feels violated because she can see from her apartment one of the world’s tallest apartment buildings all the way down on 57th Street, and she doesn’t like the way it looks. A man from Manhattanville works as a security guard in a Midtown museum. All day long he interacts with people who are regular museum visitors. Few of them come from his neighborhood. Observing them broadens his horizons. A social worker from the West Village travels to a low-income neighborhood in Marble Hill, where she engages on an intimate level with poor residents living in a public housing project. In short, Manhattanites know there are many different “Manhattans,” but they are all part of one geographically connected and incredibly complex borough.

In essence, the great equalizer in Manhattan is accessibility. People think of the tremendous cultural jewels of Manhattan, like the theater, opera, concerts, sports events—not to mention its fine restaurants and expensive jewelry and clothing stores—as beyond the reach of all but the wealthy and upper-middle class. But it’s not true. They don’t need a substantial bank account to buy a low-end
item at Tiffany’s, where a chain in sterling silver sells for $50, and other items are available for under $200. They can eat in Il Mulino and select carefully from the menu offerings. They can stand on the cancellation line to get discounted tickets for a Broadway show. They can go to the same Knicks game that Spike Lee attends; they just can’t afford to sit in the box seats, unless, of course, they know an employee at the Garden. Even a reservation at Rao’s, one of the city’s hardest restaurants to gain entry to, is achievable, that is, if they’re cousins of the Puerto Rican chef who works there. And they can certainly visit the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. In fact, some of the best things—relaxing or jogging in Central Park, various concerts everywhere—are free. The only difference is they can’t do it on a regular basis.

Still, the warm glow from that occasional pleasure can last for years in the form of “Yes, we ate at Nobu [or Marea] and it was great.” They can reminisce about that great rock concert they went to, or that dress they bought at Saks Fifth Avenue. In short, it isn’t necessarily about how often you do something but simply the fact that you did it. They even have an economic edge over one category—the tourists. They don’t have to pay airfare to get here, nor do they have to find a hotel because they’re here already. The ability, however infrequently, to do all these things makes them feel that they too are real New Yorkers. People who live in the rest of the country can’t do them so easily.

And what of Manhattan’s future? It certainly looks bright, what with 65 million tourists a year visiting the city, most of them focusing on Manhattan. So long as the crime rate remains low, it will remain that way. Yet, it does have some unique problems. One is that commercial and residential interests compete intensely with each other for the limited space that’s available. The city must find creative solutions that balance these critical needs. Another issue is affordable housing. In order for the hundreds of thousands of people employed in the service industries that keep the city functioning to get to work, they must live within a reasonable commute.
Fortunately, the nearness of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and even Staten Island reduce the urgency of this issue. But the rest of the city is rapidly gentrifying as well, and the day of reckoning when hard decisions must be made is not far off. In New York City the number of homeless people continues to rise despite the city’s continuing efforts to address the problem. Mass transit is yet another problem, one that grows more urgent as more and more people pour into its aging and deteriorating stations and trains. Band-Aid solutions won’t work here, but major repairs and construction take time, effort, and planning that will inconvenience millions.

Despite issues of this sort, Manhattan has both survived and thrived. Its people and leaders have always had a can-do, no-nonsense attitude that problems can and must be dealt with and solved. The classic example of recent times has been the response to 9/11, but other examples abound. For instance, in 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio wanted the city to retain control of the schools. When it became clear that part of the solution required making a deal with the charter schools, which he disliked, he gritted his teeth and came to an agreement. Also in 2017, he compromised when he realized that the railroads into the city required extensive repairs. Janette Sadik-Khan, the sometimes controversial commissioner of transportation under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, was widely respected as an innovative commissioner who knew what she wanted and got it done quickly.

To write this book, I re-walked most of Manhattan, which I had systematically gone through when I walked it for *The New York Nobody Knows*. In doing so, I wore out two pairs of Rockport shoes. I didn’t walk every block as I had done before, but I covered most of them, traversing 721 miles as measured by my pedometer. Simply walking 51st Street from west to east is about 2.5 miles, so the miles add up very quickly. Portions of some avenues or streets were sometimes revisited if subsequent information about them made it necessary. As opposed to, say, Brooklyn or Queens, which have many larger and more spacious areas, Manhattan is very dense everywhere,
both in area and in terms of population, so the blocks tend to have much more to see on them. This requires walking more slowly and looking very carefully at everything.

It took me eleven months to complete this project. Manhattan is a compact borough, and with parking at a premium, I relied almost exclusively on mass transit, which worked out very well. I began my walks at 230th Street and systematically walked every neighborhood, from that northernmost part to the southern tip of the island at State and South Streets. I walked the streets in the daytime and at night; during the week and on weekends; in the heat, which in 2016 was really bad at times, and in the cold, which wasn’t bad at all that mild winter.

Even in the few years since my first book on this topic appeared, many changes have occurred—new buildings, restaurants, community gardens, bike paths, and so on. Because of both this and my desire to write a genuinely new book, almost everything in it is new material. The approach was also different, and this played an even bigger role in why so much of the material is new. The focus and structure of the book was to create a walking guide that allows the reader to cover every single neighborhood. This means that there must be a certain number of pages on every community, regardless of how interesting—or uninteresting—it may seem at first. That forces the writer to work hard to uncover new material. What surprised me was that every area is interesting. Sometimes I just had to look at things more closely and be more creative.

Some of the places described here may no longer be there when you take your walks. The city is always changing. But no doubt, there will be new places to explore of equal or even greater interest. Most of the borough is safe, but for the few areas that aren’t, the appendix has useful tips on how to walk them. To find specific places and people, consult the index.

There’s a street map for each community, and you can walk it in any order you’d like, searching out whatever moves you. I don’t know where walkers will begin their walks or what they will or will
not want to see. Therefore, you can start and end anywhere, and the letters are not a guide to the order in which you should see places. To cover every area, it was necessary to be selective about what was chosen for discussion. But what I picked is also meant to whet your appetite, to entice you into wandering these streets on your own, where you’re likely to make new discoveries.

Post offices, community district leaders, police precincts, and local schools often differ on the precise boundaries of neighborhoods, as do experts who have carefully studied the city. In drawing these maps, I relied primarily on my own walks and personal knowledge and, for corroboration, on Kenneth Jackson’s *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, plus some entries in Wikipedia, mostly as a fallback. A small portion of the historical material in the book was also corroborated by Jackson’s book and Wikipedia. Most of it, however, comes from my knowledge of the subject gained from forty years of teaching the New York City course at City College and CUNY Graduate Center. The best discussion regarding boundaries appears in a 2012 *New York Times* article.4

There are two critical ways in which this guidebook differs from the typical one. First is *its focus on impromptu conversations* with people from every walk of life. These people breathe life and energy into the material. By listening to what they had to say, I gained a much deeper understanding of what Manhattan is all about—its complexity, the joys and struggles of its inhabitants, the challenges its residents face, and what helps them get through life. This enhances the reader’s and/or walker’s ability to see life as the people who live there do.

Sometimes I told people I was writing a book and at other times I simply engaged them in conversation. Whenever I recorded what was being said on my iPhone, I informed people of that. No one objected, as I explained that what they were saying was very important in terms of understanding the city. New Yorkers are actually a very friendly, if sometimes gruff, lot and are often pretty chatty.
once they get going. I attended community events, concerts, and
parties; hung out in parks; stood on street corners; frequented bars
and restaurants; and did all the things necessary to appreciate the
pulse and heart of this wonderful place.

The second major distinction between this and most other guide-
books is its focus on the unknown parts of the city. Clearly, they aren't
completely unknown, but they are unknown to most people who
live or visit here. I deliberately ignored the sites that appear in other
guidebooks. It's not that these places aren't critical in making the
city what it is. They are, but they've already been covered. The goal
here was to discover new, hidden aspects of Manhattan. Hopefully,
readers will find the effort to have been worthwhile.

And now, we begin our journey.