



Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York

By Luc Sante

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Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York By Luc Sante

Luc Sante's *Low Life* is a portrait of America's greatest city, the riotous and anarchic breeding ground of modernity. This is not the familiar saga of mansions, avenues, and robber barons, but the messy, turbulent, often murderous story of the city's slums; the teeming streets--scene of innumerable cons and crimes whose cramped and overcrowded housing is still a prominent feature of the cityscape.

Low Life voyages through Manhattan from four different directions. Part One examines the actual topography of Manhattan from 1840 to 1919; Part Two, the era's opportunities for vice and entertainment--theaters and saloons, opium and cocaine dens, gambling and prostitution; Part Three investigates the forces of law and order which did and didn't work to contain the illegalities; Part Four counterposes the city's tides of revolt and idealism against the city as it actually was.

Low Life provides an arresting and entertaining view of what New York was actually like in its salad days. But it's more than simply a book about New York. It's one of the most provocative books about urban life ever written--an evocation of the mythology of the quintessential modern metropolis, which has much to say not only about New York's past but about the present and future of all cities.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

There are very few classics in the field of pop culture--the academic stuff tends to be too dry and the fun stuff is too quickly dated. This book by Luc Sante is the exception--in fluid prose liberally sprinkled with astute metaphors, Sante tells the story of New York's Lower East Side, circa 1840-1920. The personal histories of criminals, prostitutes, losers, and swindlers bring to life the social and statistical history that the author has meticulously researched. Not limiting himself to the usual sources, Sante finds his history in old copies of *Police Gazette* as well as actual police, fire, and social service records. Above all, what really makes this book work is the writing, which brings to life a culture of the streets that continues to form a silent influence on our contemporary popular culture.

From Publishers Weekly

In his first book, freelance writer Sante tours the underside of Manhattan's underclass circa 1840-1919. Clarifying his territory, he notes that "New York is incarnated by Manhattan (the other boroughs . . . are merely adjuncts)." Sante's bad old days are populated with lethal saloon keepers, thieves, whores, gamblers, pseudo-reformers, Tammany Hall politics, crooked cops et al. Capital of the night is the Bowery, center of the "sporting life"; bohemia encompasses the likes of short story writer O. Henry, a one-time embezzler from Texas, plus ethnic enclaves (with the Jewish and Slavic bohemians singled out as the most argumentative). East Side, West Side, semi-rural uptown, wide-open downtown, 19th-century Manhattan is presented as the realm of danger and pleasure. "The city was like this a century ago, and it remains so in the present," maintains an author who sees his Manhattan as seamy, seedy and sinister.
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From Library Journal

The history of New York City (Manhattan Island) is rich and varied--a veritable gold mine for writers interested in exploring some of its darker passages. Sante, Lower East Side resident, became curious about the area's 19th-century tenement buildings and how their early inhabitants lived, traveled, and were entertained. The four sections of this fascinating and thought-provoking book cover the period 1840-1919, and are entitled "The Landscape" (streets and buildings); "Sporting Life" (theater, saloons, gambling, drugs, prostitution); "The Arm" (street gangs, police, and politics); and "Invisible City" (orphans, drifters, and "Bohemians"). New York's dark side is rooted in its past. Areas such as the Bowery owe their unsavory reputations to their colonial beginnings, and the often tawdry "pop culture" of today began with Manhattan's 19th-century underclass. This book is as lively and vivid as its subject matter. Highly recommended.
- Howard E. Miller, *Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Missouri Lib., St. Louis*
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Users Review

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Donn Chavez:

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