

PHOTOGRAPHY



**New York:
Portrait
of a City**
by Reuel
Golden
Taschen
HK\$560
★★★★☆
Samantha
Leese

There are many who have captured New York's essence in words. Mark Twain called the city "a splendid desert" while F. Scott Fitzgerald, in *The Great Gatsby*, spoke of its "wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world". Maxim Gorky saluted a "haughty pride". Le Corbusier named it a "beautiful catastrophe". And E.B. White, in *Stuart Little*, noted, "People in New York like to push each other".

Taschen's coffee-table book, *New York: Portrait of a City*, captures the metropolis' essence in 500 photographs from the mid-19th century to the present day, many of which have not been published before. While the collection doesn't exactly undermine those previous verbal elegies, Reuel Golden's thoughtful selection, along with Taschen's trademark high-quality production, prove that a picture is often worth a thousand words.

Twain might have written all he liked about the place where "the stranger is lonely in the midst of a million of his race", but nothing evokes that paradox like a 1902 photograph of the holding pens at Ellis Island, where immigrants to America were vetted before arrival on Manhattan's shores.

Fitzgerald's "wild promise" comes to life in an enigmatic shot of a flapper girl in the mid-1920s, legs curled around a lamp post and a dare in her smile, hanging up a poster for a carnival in the Village.

White's simple remark is given depth in the faces of countless New

Yorkers who seem hurried, determined or hostile.

You come away from looking through *New York* with the same sense that you have after watching a great film. By the end of its 600 pages, you have laughed out loud, felt outrage, pity and awe, cheered and welled up more than once. It's all here – New York's gritty, glittering history, chronicled by more than 150 known and unknown photographers, whose extraordinary images were sourced from dozens of archives and private collections.

The book is divided into five chapters, representing the following periods of New York City's history: 1850-1913, 1914-1945, 1946-1965, 1966-1987 and 1988-today. Each section has an insightful and readable preface. If Golden is not a born-and-bred New Yorker, he does a fine job of playing one in his essays, which are infused with love, nostalgia and a dash of cynicism. He has chosen well the quotes from books, films, shows and songs that are woven through the pages.

The last chapter, *Tragedy to Triumph*, opens with a comment that the period is "inevitably dominated by 9/11". It might be said that from any contemporary viewpoint, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, dominate the city's entire history. So the most arresting image in this collection shows people running from a blast of debris caused by the collapsing south tower, as the gruesome cloud surges through the buildings behind them. Taken with a disposable camera, it recalls the horror of that awful morning, of everything that followed and follows still.

"New York is still here," its mayor Rudy Giuliani said at the end of 2001. "We have undergone tremendous losses, and we're going to grieve for them horribly, but New York is going to be here tomorrow morning, and it's going to be here forever."

Thanks to Taschen for reminding us of that.