

BOOKS

WHAT ARE THEY READING?



1950s Manhattan and the man who chronicled it

Columnist told the tales of New York

By R.J. MARX
The Daily Astorian

A haircut from a head hunter?

Meyer Berger expresses New York City as well as any journalist I've read on the topic. And there are a lot of distinguished ones, from Walt Whitman to Jimmy Breslin, Pete Hamill and Tom Wolfe.

What I like best about Berger — bylined Meyer, called Mike — is his combination of high- and low-brow, society's upper edge and the people who stoked their furnaces. Berger presents spry and poetic characters and undomesticated scenes from the microcosm of mid-1950s Manhattan in "New York: A Great Reporter's Love Affair with a City," from Fordham University Press.

Berger, a grammar-school dropout who wrote the "About New York" column for The New York Times, bridged that gap.

"Berger brought to spotlight many of those New Yorkers who usually exist on the journalistic margins," Hamill writes in the introduction. "They have neither fame nor notoriety. They never hit game-winning home runs and do not murder their spouses. ... And they know things. Often, they know amazing things."

Berger, who earned a Purple Heart in World War II, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for his account of the murder of 13 people by a disturbed war veteran in Camden, New Jersey.

Eclectic characters

In this collection of columns from 1953 to 1959, Berger describes the city's civil service examiners who prepare tests for 2,132 different civil service jobs, mark their papers and grade them.

He tracks down the bus builders — Overseas Equipment Co. — who built buses shipped to Saudi Arabia to take pilgrims to Mecca. Each bus was a different color, Berger writes, except green, which, "it seems is sacred to Mohammed."

There were no marriage licenses in New York City

before 1908, Berger writes. Up to then, ministers, magistrates, sea captains, aldermen or "whoever" tied nuptial knots and sent a record to the Health Department.

Berger was the only New York City Yankee to chronicle the cemetery for Confederate soldiers in the borough of Queens, where 460 Southern Civil War dead were buried.

In his columns you can read of the between 600 and 800 Mohawk Indians who worked on bridges and skyscraper construction.

Berger writes of the tailor who dressed the Vanderbilts, and an animal called "the soft-eyed Panamanian oligo, kin to the kinkajou."

The last trolley car was hauled out of the city by highway trailer-truck Nov. 3, 1958, he reports.

Fires in mailboxes

Berger's columns consider fires in mailboxes and penetrate the secret society of orchid breeders in Manhattan.

We read about the "grim and fabulously wealthy real estate operator who kept his six sisters imprisoned in their mansion."

In later years, two of those sisters sometimes appeared in the neighborhood dressed in "black bombazine."

In one column, Berger joined 1,200 Scottish gentlemen at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel sitting down to "cock-a-leekie, to haggis and to salmon."

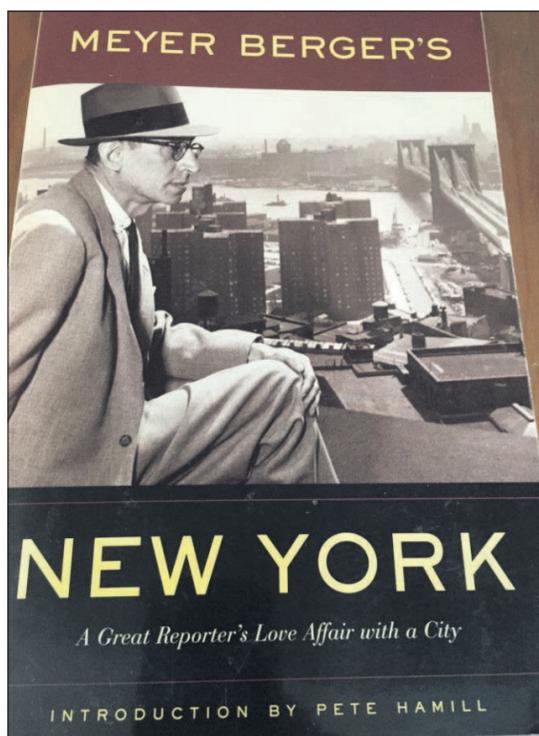
On April 20, 1955, he wrote about "grating anglers," treasure hunters who dangled rope and wire for coins underneath the sidewalks. "They're inclined, almost unanimously, to be on the misanthropic side," Berger comments.

Then there's Allan Leonard Rock, the ad man who maintained the archives of the hunter and trapper Pawnee Bill, of Pawnee Bill and the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show.

Joe A. Munang was a Dusun tribesman from British North Borneo who ran a little barbershop opposite St. John's Cathedral. "There's something odd about this because Joe is descended from North Borneo head hunters," Berger writes.

Cigars for chimps

I laughed out loud reading about the "mostly retired businessmen from Park and Fifth



Submitted Photo

Meyer Berger's collection celebrates mid-20th century New York City.

avenues who keep Joe, the Central Park Zoo's chimpanzee, in cigars."

"They unselfishly give him their brand," Berger adds. "They rarely pass him a stinker."

And a newspaper writer might try, but he may never be able to write a lead like this one: "You come across some

odd collections, but you're not apt to match Miss Delphine Binger's collection of 500,000 chicken, turkey and goose wishbones — 20 years accumulation. She only has room for only a few thousand in her two-room flat at 145 West 96th Street. Her aunts and other kin store the rest for her in trunks."

'Captain Fantastic' a Swiss Family Robinson for today

Mortensen stars in film set in Washington state teepee

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

CANNES, France — In the film "Captain Fantastic," Viggo Mortensen plays one of the all-time great movie dads. In a teepee in remote Washington state, he's raising six children like a modern-day Swiss Family Robinson. The children, well-behaved and smart, are equally adept at skinning a deer and reading "The Brothers Karamazov" by the campfire. They pine after boning knives like most kid do iPhones.

For audiences at the Cannes Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival (where it first premiered before landing in France), "Captain Fantastic" has resonated as a movie for its time: a heartfelt and comic exploration about whether our hyper-digital, cacophonous lives have strayed from important things.

"It feels like one of those movies that has connected with something related to U.S. society right now," Mortensen said Wednesday while smoking a cigarette on a Cannes rooftop patio. "People get bewildered and think: 'I can't do that. I'm not going to skin a f---ing deer.' But there are other things you can do."

Off-the-grid

The film is the second directing feature for Matt



AP Photo/Joel Ryan

Actor Viggo Mortensen poses for portrait photographs for the film "Captain Fantastic" at the Cannes international film festival in France.

Ross, a veteran actor known to many as Gavin Belson on HBO's "Silicon Valley." In "Captain Fantastic," the idyll of the family's off-the-grid existence is challenged when their mother dies. A bus trip to her New Mexico parents (long critics of their lifestyle choices) confronts the kids with normal American life and teases out questions about their highly educated but socially removed upbringing. Should 8-year-olds really be climbing rock faces?

Ross acknowledges there are some autobiographical aspects to the tale. His mother, he says, was "a seeker" and he grew up partly in alternative living communities. ("They were hippie communes but they weren't really hippie communes because it was the '80s," he jokes.) He has lived in a teepee in the summer and does, like his fictional family, celebrate Noam Chomsky Day. ("He's my hero," he says.)

But the film, which opens in theaters July 8, mostly

came out of Ross's own parenting. He and his wife, who live in Berkeley, California, have a 13-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son.

"I had a lot of questions about being a father and a parent, and I wanted to contextualize it or dramatize it," says Ross. "And I was sort of butting up against our culture and who we are as a country."

Shot in Washington

Ross shot the Pacific Northwest half of the film in Washington, and had his cast

come out two weeks early to help build the family's home.

"There were many things on some scale I had to learn for this," says Mortensen. "I'm not that kind of parent. I don't have his way of reasoning. But I do connect to certain things and approve of other things. I was very happy to be in the woods."

It's the kind of preparation that Mortensen relishes. He lives his movies; the process for him is as much a part of it as the finished film. For "The Lord of the Rings," he slept

outside with his sword. For David Cronenberg's "Eastern Promises" (Mortensen's lone Oscar nomination), he briefly lived in Russia and suggested his character's extensive Russian mafia tattoos. On "Captain Fantastic," he built a garden.

"I like to bring objects, ideas. And I like to work with directors who aren't threatened by that. It's just my process and it helps me," says Mortensen, who also writes poetry, composes classical music and founded his own publishing company. "I just want to make the most of each moment we're filming, in terms of preparing it and doing it, but also as a human being. This is part of my life. It's not just a fiction."

Proudly liberal

At their photo call in Cannes, the group held up a Bernie Sanders T-shirt. But while "Captain Fantastic" is proudly liberal, its conclusion rests on compromise with the father's conservative in-laws.

Both Ross and Mortensen, though, are trouble by the country's direction. "That it's a country of immigrants has magically disappeared in some people's minds," Mortensen, who grew up in Argentina, upstate New York and Denmark, says, shaking his head.

But ultimately, Ross hopes "Captain Fantastic" preaches only tolerance, compassion and education.

"It's asking you to be present and not just on autopilot," says Ross. "I hope it has an impact. I hope it does."



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