Big Apple had rotten decade 1963-73


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By Glenn R. Altschuler

"Every day New York City is a more dangerous place to live than the day before," an ad for mayoral candidate John Lindsay proclaimed in 1965. Afraid to walk the streets or ride the subways, thousands and thousands of citizens were "prisoners in their own city."

Between 1963 and 1973, journalist and screenwriter T.J. English points out, murders in New York increased by 95 percent. Rapes were up 120 percent, robberies 82 percent, assaults 90 percent. In his new book, Mr. English "lifts the rock and sifts through the detritus" to examine the once-proud metropolis, wracked by racial conflict and police corruption, as it teetered on the brink.

"The Savage City" is spellbinding and suspenseful. Drawing on court transcripts, police records, and interviews, the author masterfully re-creates the urban underworld through the stories of three men:

George Whitmore Jr., a black teenager coerced into confessing to three horrific crimes; Bill Phillips, a cop on "the take," who turned state's evidence at the Knapp Commission hearings on police corruption; and Dhoruba bin Wahad, a "gangbanger" who became a Black Panther.

Although they never met, Mr. English demonstrates that their lives "cast a refracted glow on one another" and on a city "strewn with land mines and strafed with sniper fire."

Mr. English's account of Mr. Whitmore's ordeal -- plucked off the streets of Brooklyn, he was "thrust into a drama that would destroy his life" -- takes your breath away.

Arresting officers, he tells us, could easily have confirmed that on Aug. 28, 1963, the day "career girls" Janice Wyline and Emily Hoffert were murdered in Manhattan, Mr. Whitmore was watching the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on TV in New Jersey with several co-workers.

Instead, Detective Edward Bulger kept Whitmore incommunicado for 24 hours and browbeat a confession out of him. The "frame job," Mr. English writes, was "sanctioned, facilitated, and covered up" by policemen, judges, and prosecutors.

When the case unraveled, none of them accepted responsibility, was punished or even reprimanded. Worst of all, George Whitmore remained in jail for a decade.

The author's sympathy for his subjects and his decision to let them speak for themselves give the narrative immediacy and power. But on occasion, he seems too credulous.

The death of Bill Phillips' father, a retired cop, probably didn't contribute to the "bent" cop's decision to break "The Blue Wall of Silence."

Mr. Bin Wahad's assertion that "it was never the plan" to kill anyone when his faction burned down the Black Panther's office in Queens probably should not be taken at face value.

Valid or not, Mr. English suggests, Dhoruba's opinions were "hard earned." Even more hardearned, of course, was the freedom of George Whitmore. And, since the struggle for racial justice is far from over, "a weary people will take their moments of triumph wherever they can be found," the author points out.

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