Book review: "At the Strangers’ Gate: Arrivals in New York" by Adam Gopnik

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Sep 10, 2017

‘AT THE STRANGERS’ GATE: ARRIVALS IN NEW YORK’

By Adam Gopnik

Alfred A. Knopf, $26.95

Young writers, Adam Gopnik suggests, think that style and energy will get them published and recognized. But as he has aged, Gopnik declares, he has come to understand that writers are made by “sentences and circumstances.” Writers encounter their subjects on the run; they must be exact and at the same time wild in capturing “common objects” and “making sentences match scenes.”

For more than 30 years, as a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine and the author of “Angels and Ages: A Short Book About Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life and Paris to the Moon,” Gopnik has made the most of sentences and circumstances. With “At the Strangers’ Gate: Arrivals in New York,”
he has done so again.

The book consists of stories about love and work in Manhattan, where Gopnik and his wife moved (from Canada) in 1980. Gopnik draws on his “circumstances” — a tenant at a tiny apartment on the Upper East Side and a rat-infested SoHo loft; how he lost the pants of his first expensive suit; jobs as a clerk at the Frick, a speaker at the Museum of Modern Art, and a fashion copy editor at Gentlemen’s Quarterly; friendships with Richard Avedon, Robert Hughes and Jeff Koons; and sexual intercourse with his wife — to reflect, wittily and wisely, on city life in the ’80s, and on his signature subjects: food, fashion, publishing and art.

“At the Strangers’ Gate” is awash in aphorisms. Gopnik deftly deploys them to provide readers with fresh perspectives on familiar topics.

• In the 21st century, he writes, twenty-somethings “live on higher floors, but have lower ceilings.”

• On social media, “the path from obscurity to ubiquity is instantaneous,” until you realize that it’s not all that different from anonymity because “everybody is speaking at once.”

• In the ’80s, Gopnik claims, magazines were vehicles of fantasy aimed at a social class just beneath the cohort they purported to represent: playboys did not purchase Playboy; 12-year-olds read Seventeen magazine.

• Charm, Gopnik indicates, “is simply courtesy offered spontaneously, the gracious thing offered as if it were the obvious one.”

• And, more somberly, “epitaphs are not chiseled; they speak less of the permanence the epitaph aspires to than of the full stop, the ending, it superintends.”

Tough, at times gratuitously, on his famous friends, Gopnik is also self-reflective. Even editors who are grown-ups, he writes, are children when they write: “I know.” As he asserts that the capacity to charm of Richard Avedon “was inseparable from his need to dominate and control,” Gopnik acknowledges that his own willingness to charm “was inseparable from my need to have stories to tell, people to inhabit my life who could become characters within my writing.” And that when he published an essay about Avedon, “he owned him a little,” just as by choosing him, the great photographer “owned a part of me.”

“Proof of life is what we traffic in as writers,” Gopnik claims, “before we traffic in ideas or even emotions.” “At the Strangers’ Gate” offers abundant proof of that proof.

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