

DEEP READ

NEW YORK CITY IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

Through the eyes of L. A. Chandlar

New York City in the last two decades of the twentieth century was a city teetering on the edge of greatness and complete defeat. The art and music world was skyrocketing, but so too was crime, drugs and the AIDS epidemic. Just when the early 1990s couldn't get any worse, with the highest crime and homicide numbers of all time, and everything pointed to New York's absolute collapse ... it didn't. In this Deep Read, *New Yorker* and author L. A. Chandlar shows us what New York City is made of and how art and culture has healed the city time and time again.

'Art has this other-worldly capacity to bring transformation and light – and when art is brought to public spaces for all to enjoy, its magic is experienced en masse, which can bring rehumanisation.'

I write experiential historical fiction, immersing readers in a particular time and letting them become friends with the characters. One of the themes I consistently focus on in my writing is beauty out of adversity. My *Art Deco Mystery* series takes place in the 1930s, telling the story of the lively and innovative spirit of the era that is often overshadowed by the Great Depression. Another period of New York's history I'm fascinated with is the 1980s and 1990s. New York in this period was on the brink of disaster; however, it was the art and culture of the time, I believe, that helped the growth and redemption of the city and the healing that followed.

New York City, throughout its long history, has always been thriving, loud and vivacious. Having lived in the city for almost twenty years, it's become my home and I am endlessly thrilled with its vitality and spontaneity. Over the decades, there have been times when the city came to the brink of disaster. When the infamous stock market crash of 1929 hit, by many reports, it was a day when the city went eerily silent. The sirens, the street chatter on every block, and the

endless hammer blows and riveters from the massive city construction sites all stopped abruptly. It was like the city died that day, and it would take the builders and a firm love of the arts to resurrect it once again. The city has seen many almost ends where it seemed like it might collapse and then it just doesn't. The resilience and the beauty that came out of those times of desperation moved me, and that spirit is what compelled me to begin writing.

I saw New York City in one of these defining moments. I was supposed to be relocating to New York on 9/11, but of course that didn't happen. I did, however, move just two weeks later. I saw firsthand how the city thrived in the face of adversity. That infamous day was at the cusp of the end of one century and the beginning of the next. It was a bookend of the two previous decades, which all came into play to create a place where beauty had the capacity to shine – even when the city was in pain.

New York City has always dealt with change and upheaval in every era, but the 1980s and 1990s were a fascinating time where New York went right to the edge of irrevocable decrepitude. The two

decades began with bankruptcy from the decade before. As Jess Nussbaum wrote in his article for *The New Yorker*, 16 October 2015:

On October 16, 1975, New York City was deep in crisis. At 4 pm the next day, four hundred and fifty-three million dollars of the city's debts would come due, but there were only thirty-four million dollars on hand. If New York couldn't pay those debts, the city would officially become bankrupt.¹

After intense meetings by city, state and national officials and then a refusal by President Gerald Ford to give any sort of bail out to the city of New York despite dire ramifications worldwide, the teachers union made a landmark decision to make up the city's shortfall with their pension funds to avert the immediate crisis. Ford's absolute refusal to help, sparking the damning headline that came out the following day by *New York's Daily News*: 'Ford to City: Drop Dead', ended up galvanizing city leaders to make significant changes and tough choices that saved the city.

You take this era of tough choices and near bankruptcy, then the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and finally cap it off with the Y2K bug (a computer flaw that may have caused problems when processing dates beyond 31 December 1999), and then 9/11. The spirit of New York is not only capable of creating beauty out of ashes, but it longs to do so, through art, music and culture.

Many of the beautiful parts of current day New York had a very gritty beginning, almost forgotten now. 1980 began at an incredibly low point with the city falling into bankruptcy in the 1970s. Crime was escalating, with 250 felonies per week on the subway alone, and the murder rate peaked in 1990 at 2,245. With fiscal troubles, the police force was dwindling and while criminality increased, the city was unable to keep up with general maintenance. The parks were left to become barren wastelands and graffiti marked almost every wall, building and especially the subways, adding to the overall climate of corruption and disrepair.

Richie Narvaez, native New Yorker and author of the book *Hipster Death Rattle*, states:

This decline was reflected in movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The Warriors*, *Escape from New York*, and *The Exterminator*. At the same time, the city's anger, tension, and frustration became a crucible for new art and new takes on art. So you get the artists like [Jean-Michel] Basquiat making the scene, you get a lot of wild performance art (Mondo New York, 1988). You get the rise of hip-hop and socially conscious rap music (for example, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five).²

The subway system in the 1980s was and still is a hot topic of artistic debate. Street art was on the rise and the subways were the main canvases. However, art had been mixed in with gang logos, trash and crime. The subway system was so crime-ridden, and laden with layers of ugly graffiti and trash, that the city came to a point where they almost shut it down. The Lexington Avenue train was

commonly known at the 'Muggers' Express'. The city tried a few methods to save the system, including cleaning and painting the carriages weekly, but this only gave taggers a clean slate. They tried fencing in the carriages not in use, but people still found a way to sneak in. The city finally found a foolproof method to keep the carriages clean: they took advantage of New Yorkers' extreme annoyance to all things impedimentary. If a train carriage was found to have been tagged while in use, the subway employees would pull it out of service, even if it was in the midst of rush hour. As a New Yorker myself, I am left speechless at the genius of this plan. I cannot even fathom the riot-worthy angst that would have plagued the subway riders at that inconvenience.

When the city finally found a method that worked to keep the trains graffiti-free, I think it possibly accelerated the greatness of street art. Often, there's an assumption that limitation inhibits creativity. However, T.S. Eliot was known to have said, 'When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl'. One of the major obstacles with graffiti art was its link to vandalism and crime. However, artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Futura 2000 opened the art form to critical acclaim. Once the trains were no longer accessible to be painted with graffiti, other avenues had to be discovered to continue the art form.

Art has this other-worldly capacity to bring transformation and light – and when art is brought to public spaces for all to enjoy, its magic is experienced en masse, which can bring rehumanisation. A great example of this is Bryant Park, one of my favourite places in New York. Located between Grand Central Station and Times Square, tucked in behind the main branch of the New York Public Library, the park is an absolute haven of art and colourful respites that tantalise all the senses, all year long. The wide lawn is a gathering place for movies in the summertime, plus live author events, mini Broadway performances, live piano playing and even juggling lessons. An old

carousel evoking images of Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* spins on the south side with its tinkling music adding its own magic to the scene. Right next to it is an area where people can play family games together at little tables. The Southwest Cafe features an outdoor seating area with sparkling lights and porch swings for all-weather get-togethers and, in the cooler months, features fire pits to roast marshmallows and chestnuts under the stars. In late October, the Winter Village is set up for ice-skating, hundreds of art booths to shop, eateries and a large Christmas tree.

However, it wasn't this way in the 1980s. Fifty years previously, an elevated train had been erected along Sixth Avenue on the west side of the park, which put the park in shadow. An effort to protect the space was made by installing iron fences and hedges surrounding the park area. The effort backfired, making it a secretive haven for illicit behavior. By the 1990s, sex workers, drug dealers and the homeless were so prevalent, the park was given the nickname 'Needle Park'. A full renovation was completed in 1992, taking down all the hedges along the perimeter and filling it with art and light. Now, on any given day, you'll see hundreds of people enjoying the park, soaking up the beauty.

In the 1980s, Central Park was also a refuge for drugs and gang activity. The Great Lawn, which is now a lush, verdant place for thousands to picnic and play ball, was a barren field of worn-out scrub grass, garbage and graffiti. The park had fallen into disrepair. Crime was high and it was well known that it was a dangerous place to avoid, where possible. When the 840-acre park opened in 1878, it was considered one of the greatest achievements in urban landscaping. It would eventually become known as this again but, in the 1980s, graffiti marked most monuments and walls, broken sidewalks and walkways pockmarked the terrain, and the trees and grass bore the marks of neglect. The gathering places that were once full of bright green grass and trees became dusty and dry with overuse and trash was more common than wildlife.

In 1980, the Central Park Conservancy began a massive and

gradual overhaul that would bring life back to the park, led by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers as founding administrator first and then longest-serving president. With that renewal, crime began to lessen and art began its reign. At any given moment within the park, you could now hear the strains of violins being practised or jazz bands playing at certain high-traffic walkways, where all ages and cultures gather to enjoy the music. The summer *Shakespeare in the Park* series is so well attended that it's near impossible to go without waiting in line for several hours.

The lampposts lining the winding walkways seem to be right out of Narnia. In 1936, the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts opened. The 1930s' Mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia, felt strongly that art could be a pathway for the healing and redemption of New York during the Depression. The school introduced scores of composers, actors, dancers, lyricists and musicians, who changed the world. It was no different during the 1980s and 1990s, with the school nurturing the careers of creatives

joyful dancing in the New York streets brought hope and the fun of art, music and dance.

In 1978, New York was almost dealt a lethal blow when a team of builders wanted to demolish Grand Central Station. The station desperately needed an overhaul, but to tear it down was unthinkable. At the time New York didn't have constructed historical landmark laws and it took Jackie Onassis, widow to John F. Kennedy, raising the concern with the Supreme Court in 1978 to save it. Then the entire building but, most



Philharmonic in the Park and a multitude of other events make Central Park a living, breathing organism of creative endeavours. Painters and illustrators set up in grassy areas to use their skills to recreate, with their own prowess, the beautiful surroundings. Even in the dead of winter, one of my most treasured things to do is to go sledding on Cedar Hill in the late evening. When there's a snowstorm, we take our sleds to the Great Hill where the glittering buildings surround the park like sparkling giants.

in a wide range of fields including actors Jennifer Aniston and Al Pacino, dancer Desmond Richardson, singer and actor Ben Vereen, and fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. In the 1980s, the film and television series *Fame* was made about the school and the theme song for the movie was a constant backdrop in any household during this time. The film and series presented young, up-and-coming artists striving to become the best in their field in the face of the grit and reality of everyday life. The scenes with

notably, the Main Concourse was refreshed and renovated to its original glory. The ceiling had been a dark, smutty grey and was cleaned to its original vibrant mint green, with the painted constellations and their pinpoint lights from a 1945 mural revealed. There remains a small rectangle of dark grey in a corner to show what it had looked like previously. The dingy colour was from decades of tobacco build-up from smokers walking through and their millions upon millions of cigarettes.

The 1980s also brought in new sexual freedom and expression, but along with it came cocaine and the AIDS epidemic. Within that tumultuous time, the city was rife with music and art. Despite the music recording industry leaving the city, which was a primary factor of the bankruptcy in the 1970s, New York has always had a soul for music. In the 1980s and 1990s, the punk rock scene was thriving at the music venue CBGB, the nightclub Knitting Factory and the iconic Danceteria, known for launching Madonna's career. This was the golden

iconic when thinking of the 1980s, than disco and the movie *Saturday Night Fever* starring John Travolta. Though the movie came out in 1977, it depicted not just the dance, but the world of disco that gained momentum through the 80s. Disco was very important for non-mainstream groups including the Black, Latinx and queer communities in the 1980s, providing an outlet and a community that shared in and escaped from some of the inequalities of the mainstream world.

New York has always enjoyed many literary circles, uptown and downtown.

Bright Lights, Big City, and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Caryn James from the *New York Times Magazine*, talks about the change in literary circles from intellectual salons, where tight knit groups clutched their bourbon as they debated Hemingway, to a more rigorous and high society kind of feel in 1987:

In New York today young authors live in a swifter-than-sound atmosphere, full of energy, hype and distractions. The change reflects new realities in the city and in the publishing industry: higher rents and tougher urban living combined with pressure to bring out a book of fiction before the first blush of youth has passed.⁴

Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* gives a wonderful, if partially exaggerated, description of the time where aspiring and accomplished artists struggle with the pull of city life, a deep need to be trendy, and the wiles of gallery life and clubs where celebrities mix and mingle all while carving out time to write.

The 1990s had its own wildly coloured, fantastically unique persona, beginning the decade even worse than the ones prior but ending on a completely unexpected high note. 1990 had the highest crime record of all time. In 1991, the Crown Heights riot in Brooklyn between the Black and Jewish communities began when two Black children were hit by a station wagon in a motorcade for a prominent Jewish rabbi. In 1993, a truck bomb exploded in the parking garage of the north tower in the World Trade Centre killing six people. It was also the time of oversized pants, DKNY sweaters and rollerblades. *Seinfeld* and *Friends* ruled television and, quite honestly, other than the fabulous girls' apartment in *Friends*, everything those two shows depict about New York City is absolutely accurate. Even the fights over getting a phone number with the 212 area code.

Despite the highest crime of all time, the 1990s began a beautification emphasis to bring safety and family-friendly aspects to the streets. Times Square, in particular, was rezoned, making it illegal to have strip clubs and XXX bookstores in that central location.

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age of New York clubbing. The book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*, by Tim Lawrence, recalls the era as 'a ferociously inventive period characterized by its creativity, intensity and hybridity'.³ It was not about watching something, but being part of something. It joined music, art, performance art, entrepreneurs, DJs, street artists, film and video all together to experience something unique and vivacious at places such as the Roxy and the Mudd Club. There is nothing more

Today, at all levels of literary beginnings and ultimate success, there are groups full of people like-minded in their work and drive for creativity. In the 1980s, the literary cliques had a small-town feel during the day and by night attended gallery openings, clubs and perhaps went out to dinner with the likes of celebrities such as Andy Warhol, well known for attending literary affairs. The era launched influential works, such as Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Jay McInerney's

In a deal with Disney, the city worked a plan to bring big corporations into Times Square, such as ESPN, Virgin Records and MTV Studios. The New York City Police Department focused on a plan that would address small crimes; for example, jumping the subway turnstiles, graffiti and aggressive squeegee-wielding window washers. It worked, and the city's crime levels dropped even more than the national average and Times Square drew tourists and businesses, making it a colourful mecca of industry.

However, nothing says the 1990s quite like the punk rock scene that stemmed from the rebellious squatters of that era. Ash Thayer's novel, *Kill City*, takes an insider's view of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. A severe housing crisis left around 30,000 homeless; the wait for low-income housing was approximately ten years. Former President Jimmy Carter's federally funded housing plans allowed abandoned buildings to be claimed, once they were brought up to code, by anyone willing to put in the money and work. So squatters moved in and habituated several buildings, such as Dos Blockos on East Ninth Street and Thirteenth Street Squat, forming their own communities of families, singles, anyone needing a home and bold enough to squat. The punk world was all about the freedom of non-conformity. As Thayer says:

We dyed our hair crazy colours, and cut or shaved it in dishevelled and nonsensical ways. If there was any sense of competition, it was about who could say fuck you the loudest with their appearance ... God, it felt so good to stop trying to fit in. The punk community taught me that I could take the pain and rage I felt and do something productive with it, involving social activism, music, and artistic expression.⁵

The art scene in 1990s was incredibly influential in how we see, understand and appreciate art today. Like the punk scene, the art world questioned, pushed the limits, and rebelled. Art that was shocking then opened doors to what we might commonly accept now. New York gallery owner Mary Boone, named 'The New

Queen of the Art Scene' in the 1980s, talked about the shift in the 90s: 'Value in everything is being questioned', she said. 'The psychology in the 80s was excess; in the 90s, it's about conservation.'⁶

Nothing said shocking as much as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987, from his *Bodies of Work* series. Even though he was expressing aspects of his own faith and trying to address the way the crucifix had turned into a piece of fashion – an accessory – rather than its association with the death of a man, the Catholic League and Christian community was outraged, later destroying his work.

In the musical theatre world, ticket prices were rising and attendance was decreasing. In the 90s, however, it was the era of *Rent*, *Rag Time*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Disney opened up even more doors for spectacular musical theatre: *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* forever raised expectations with their larger-than-life costuming and stage planning. *Rent*, a rock musical about a group of young artists in New York dealing with the realities of HIV/AIDS started Off Broadway, but ended up winning a Tony Award. The shows tackled grittier topics and worked to appeal to a youthful audience; they ushered in a new era by resurrecting Broadway into something fresh.

In publishing, the 1990s saw literary works such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, to name a few. The literary clubs began taking a slight decline moving towards what would become, in the 2000s, a time of coffee house writing circles, more than bars. Especially once the smoking ban hit in 2003, it effectively curtailed cigarette smoking while writing in public indoor spaces, which many older writers felt was a consummate part of the communal writing process, and attendance began to dwindle.

So much of the renewal of the city was taken on by grassroots efforts by people who decided to bring on change and make a difference. The climate of both the 1980s and 1990s was grit mixed with hope and it was the art that created the way ahead. Art has a way of bringing people together and forging a path ahead,

especially in time of crisis or difficulty. New York has always been like many small towns linked together to make one large city, the city that doesn't sleep.

One of the most striking things about New York is not the glitz and glamour of each decade, but how the neighbourhoods create community. It is that way now just as much as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. New York is a walking city where you are alongside people constantly, where you know the names of the cashiers at the deli and the dry cleaners. In the neighbourhood I live in, with the elementary school close by, instead of long car lines dropping off children, the whole neighbourhood seems to walk to school together every morning. Many streets are quite timeless. If you changed the cars and the fashion, you'd never know which era you might be in. The possibility for spontaneous beauty is remarkable. I once had a meeting with an editor in a part of Harlem that I hadn't been to before. I arrived early and right across the street was the gorgeous Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The autumn leaves were at peak colour and all around the cathedral is a little park and walkway with fascinating sculptures. I spent the next fifteen minutes in wonder, joyfully taking in the magic of the moment. It's important to understand that aspect when you try to understand New York at a given time. There are big culturally influencing trends and moments, but that river of energy that makes you want to just jump in and be part of it, is at the root of what makes New York remarkable. It's all about the people. It's all about the art.

L.A. CHANDLAR IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK BESTSELLING *ART DECO MYSTERY SERIES* PUBLISHED BY KENSINGTON PUBLISHING.

(previous) A mural by subway artists Part One and Joey on a subway car in New York City. Photo: Evan Harrington / Alamy Stock Photo, 5 November, 1984