

Manhattan has always been the universe of the Masters

By Brigitte Weeks
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NEW YORK

The Novel

By Edward Rutherfurd

Doubleday. 862 pp. \$30

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Readers who pick up "New York: The Novel" should be warned not to turn the pages asking, "Is it true?" Did Mohawk Indians really put together the steel framework for the Empire State Building back in 1929? Was there actually a famous Civil War photographer called Theodore Keller? Yes, for the Native American steelworkers, "sitting calmly on the girders as they were swung up to dizzying heights in the sky." No, for the photographer, although he somewhat resembles Mathew Brady and gives Rutherfurd the opportunity to describe the Civil War with a close-up lens. But analyzing the veracity of every incident will spoil the fun, and what makes this novel so entertaining is the riotous,

multilayered portrait of a whole metropolis. Rutherfurd offers the reader a chance to watch a rural outcrop grow into one of the world's greatest cities in a mere 350 years. He delivers magnificently on the challenge; it is hard to imagine any other writer combining such astonishing depth of research with the imagination and ingenuity to hold it all together.

Enormous Brueghellike portraits are Rutherfurd's specialty. His first novel, "Sarum," centered on the ancient circle of Stonehenge and was a surprise bestseller in 1987. His second novel, "Russka," spanned 1,800 years from Tartars to Bolsheviks. His novels are always comfortably long, stuffed with detail and held together by families descending through the centuries. His basic technique is to whip together the lives of representative fictional clans with a backdrop of facts into a smooth narrative.

This saga begins in New Amsterdam, an outpost of Dutch settlers, in 1664. Those

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first Europeans push the original Indian tribe, the Manates, off the island inland, leaving "Manhattan," the corruption of the Indian name Manna hata, as their only legacy. "New Amsterdam" morphs into "New York," as the Dutch in their turn are overrun by the British and the restored monarch, Charles II, turns his transatlantic territories over to his brother, the Duke of York.

The novel's founding father is Thomas Master, the estranged son of an English family of Puritan settlers from Boston. He has an illegitimate Native American daughter and runs his household with the help of African slaves. His slave Quash is well treated and encapsulates the less brutal side of slavery, but Quash's son, Hudson, is rented out to a vicious sea captain. Hudson manages to escape, and hundreds of pages later we encounter one of his descendants tending bar in Five Points, the poverty-stricken neighborhood behind City Hall now known as the Bowery.

As the Master clan grows and thrives, passing entrepreneurial drive from generation to generation, the reader must pay attention because, with centuries to cover, Rutherford must skip whole decades. In 1901 the Masters step aside for a few chapters to make room for the Caruso family, fresh from Italy. Their lives bring into focus the struggles of the New York immigrant population, expanding daily in the early years of the 20th century. They

manage to get their "crazy" Uncle Luigi past the vigilant officials on Ellis Island and settle into tenement living. Five-year-old Salvatore Caruso grows up to become a bricklayer, working on the Empire State Building, earning a princely \$15 a day.

Successive generations of Masters make good marriages, raise families and earn lots of money. They also lose it again in the 1907 and 1929 gyrations of the stock market. Rutherford captures the panic and the losses in powerful scenes that uncannily mirror today's headlines. "The market wasn't just falling, it was in headlong panic," thinks William Master, the head of the current generation of Masters, as he watches his fortune disappear. He stands in the street and sees "a fellow come out of the Exchange and burst into tears. An old broker he knew passed him and remarked, with a shake of the head: 'Ain't

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seen anything like this since the crash of 1907.' "

Rutherford does not avoid conflict and violence among the less affluent city residents. There are the draft riots of 1863 with scenes of angry workers attacking an orphanage for black children (sadly not fiction); a Caruso daughter works as a seamstress locked in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory that burned down in 1911. As we move into the 21st century, the horrors of Sept. 11, 2001, are anticipated and painfully inevitable.

In the summer of 2009, Gorham Masters ponders why this city means so much to him. After a stroll through the Strawberry Fields garden in Central Park, he muses about the future and the Freedom Tower being constructed at the site of the Sept. 11 attack. "Two words: the one an invitation, the other an ideal, an adventure, a necessity. 'Imagine' said the garden. 'Freedom' said the tower. Imagine freedom. That was the spirit, the message of this city he loved."

Page by page, detail by detail, Rutherford has magically captured this spirit. His readers, even if they have never set foot on the island of Manhattan, will understand this crowded and multicultural city better than many who have spent their lives on Fifth Avenue, Broadway or Wall Street.

Weeks is a former editor of Book World.

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