

“There’s a combination of anarchy and tolerance, which makes it wonderful”

New York, the cityscape of so many films (*On the Waterfront*, *Manhattan*, *Tootsie*), the backdrop to so many musicals (*On the Town*, *West Side Story*, *The Producers*), the inspiration for so many songs – long before we set foot in “the city that never sleeps”, each of us has our own idea of what the Big Apple is like. The reality, these days at least, is much less intimidating than much of the fiction. But however much we may fall in love with it, the semi-detached suburban Mr and Ms Joneses among us find it hard to imagine actually growing up there.

Adam Gopnik, now an award-winning writer for the *New Yorker*, first visited the city from Philadelphia as a toddler. His parents, “art-loving Penn students”, wanted to go to the new Guggenheim Museum on its opening day: “my mother had hand-sewn a suit of mustard-coloured velvet for me and a matching dress for my sister, and we stood in line outside the corkscrew building,” he writes in *Through the Children’s Gate: A Home in New York*. The family walked down Fifth Avenue, “ate at a restaurant that served a thrilling, exotic mix of blintzes and insults” and, as he watched the skyline light up from his aunt’s apartment on

to write about New York life as I’d written about Paris. Manners is what I like to write about. Continental and domestic manners... in addition to all the critical stuff. I was doing that and 9/11 happened and that changed the emotional tenor of life and manners here, so I felt an obligation to write about that, about the way the experience of the tragedy, and also the fear, coloured the life of the city. You could experience it either as an injury or as imagery.” Gopnik, who was the first to write about the home-made “missing” posters, which went up across the city, continues to be outraged at the way the attack has been manipulated for political ends. “The job of leadership is to say ‘be not afraid’, and they were saying ‘be as afraid as you can’. I think that was an unforgivable abnegation of leadership.” Ultimately, he ventures, it was the children who taught everyone how to live again. “Kids can’t live in fear; they live for the moment. So, ultimately, they were the antidote to our own fears.”

The series of vignettes and *aperçus* ranges far wider than 9/11 and draws you in. There is, inevitably, a chapter on that most New York of subjects – the analyst. “It *was* a waste of money,” Gopnik agrees of the five years he spent unburdening himself weekly to “a German Jew... commanding, humourless”.

# A New York state of mind

Adam Gopnik’s ambition was to write for the *New Yorker*, a blessed job that has allowed him to chronicle the manners and mores of the city. Liz Thomson met him

Adam Gopnik: found a place in New York

Riverside Drive, young Adam “found the idea of New York so wonderful that I could only imagine it as some other place”. Ever since, it existed as “a map to be learned and a place to aspire to”. Returning as a student with his girlfriend, the couple, both born in Montreal, decided “we had to get there” – and get there they did, he an aspiring writer, she an aspiring filmmaker.

“Everyone in New York can find a place to live,” reflects Gopnik, who, even as a child, loved James Thurber’s celebrated *Thurber Carnival*, and who posted innumerable articles under the door of the *New Yorker*’s fabled West 43rd Street offices before being hired in 1986, originally to write *Talk of the Town* just as the legendary William Shawn was handing over the editorial reins to Robert Gottlieb. “There’s a combination of anarchy and tolerance, which makes New York wonderful.” By way of off-beat example, he cites the feral parakeets who have long made themselves at home atop the warm power poles of Flatbush, Brooklyn. “In Paris, they would have been in violation of some fundamental Gallic principle and someone would have found a way to eradicate them.”

For the last five years of the 20th century, Gopnik decamped with his family to Paris, an arrangement with which his then-editor Tina Brown was amenable. “When Luke was born, I very much wanted to go to Paris before he got too old... I was sort of writing *Talk of the Town* from another town, potted anthropologies about French life and about encountering a different culture. Occasionally, he crossed the Channel and sent a despatch from London, reporting, for example, on “the crazy piety” of the days following Diana’s death.

He returned from the city of light in 2000. “The editors were happy for me to come back and write what I wanted to write about; I was blessed,” Gopnik continues. “I knew I wanted

The Gopniks were considering whether to have children and Adam was concerned about fatherhood. “He said that a child would make many amusing mistakes in language and those mistakes would be useful in a social setting! I meant it to be a little ironic in the book because of course it’s *all just so*.” The good doctor’s other piece of advice, given in their last session, as the patient was about to leave for Paris, was that “life has many worthwhile aspects”. Gopnik sighs. “It was unquestionably fatuous wisdom to be dispensing but it *is* true. Life *does* have many worthwhile aspects – not all necessarily meaningful or beautiful, but aspects that are worthwhile.” So, ultimately, the couch experience was “exactly the necessary thing for me at the necessary moment.” Analysis, well done, he concluded, “isn’t so much a way of explaining your subject but a way of draining the drama out of your subject’s engagement with life, so that you realise you’ve created a self-mythology which is your own. Life is much more quotidian, much more mundane... Nobody cares, basically.”

In any event, Gopnik became a father and Luke now has a sister, Olivia, who has an imaginary friend, Charlie Ravioli. “What makes him distinctly a *New Yorker* is that he’s always too busy to play, so she always gets the answering machine. He has to run – that’s what she hears from people around her.” New York, Gopnik concludes, “is an entirely different childhood, but if you’re a child it’s a completely normal childhood.” Central Park is your back yard and you can, indeed, enter through the Children’s Gate, which is at 76th Street and Fifth Avenue.

*Through the Children’s Gate: A Home in New York and Paris to the Moon: A Family in France* are both published by Quercus on 10 January, price £7.99

