



Manhattan, When I Was Young

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An autobiographical account of a female writer in the 1950s. Fresh out of college, Cantwell arrived in Greenwich Village and shared an apartment with a friend. Despite all the flair of metropolitan life, experiences with high-style department stores, exclusive little shops, theaters, parties, restaurant outings, and even a romance and marriage, she became increasingly depressed. Her close ties to a lovingly encouraging father were broken by his early death. She details the passage of years by describing the flats, houses, and apartments she lived in and the jobs lost and gained in her career pursuit, including at a fashion magazine. Despite Cantwell's lifelong involvement with psychoanalysis, her account is enlivened with the glamour of little black dresses, Steuben glassware, ethnic neighborhoods, and the whole ambiance of the city, presenting anew the eternal charm of the Big Apple for the young -- and especially in that 1950s world Cantwell inhabits, that of magazine and book publishing and fashion and the middle-class bohemia of downtown New York at a golden moment in time.

Manhattan, When I Was Young Details

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From Reader Review *Manhattan, When I Was Young* for online ebook

christa says

A funny thing happened when I was reading Mary Cantwell's "Manhattan, When I Was Young," a memoir built around the places the writer lived in New York City during the 1950s and 60s. I first decided I wanted to write about all of the places where I have lived in Duluth -- and then quickly realized that No I Do Not Want That At All. Which made me wonder: How did she do it without going all Demi Moore-pink bedroom-window open shivering in the corner-Aquanet party with Rob Lowe? Writing about your life with all it's puckers and pouts is tricky business, something that has escaped me until this memoir.

She starts in Greenwich Village with a college friend in a space that walks out into a garden and sometimes they sleep with the door open. Cantwell has moved to the city to be near her boyfriend, who will later become her husband, a lapsed Jewish man she refers to as B. The recent college graduate begins what will be a long career -- with a bit of a hiatus -- in the fashion magazine industry. Once they get married, Cantwell and B move to an apartment in nowheresville with the adult luxury of walk-in closets. They windows faced an air shaft and when it snowed, it looked like the flakes were blowing upward. Here she learns to drink, diddle and entertain. It's also where the migraines begin and the cure prescribed to her is a psychiatrist. The couple eventually moves back to Greenwich Village, where Cantwell -- who enjoys the neighborhood and finds luxury in a certain amount of seediness -- feels most at home. They travel to France. She moves from Mademoiselle to Vogue.

At 21 Perry Street they get access to a shared garden and have interesting neighbors and an interesting collection of hipster-literati friends. Cantwell gets pregnant, even though she's been told by a doctor she's too thin and anemic to even consider it. Unbeknownst to her, she's taking a daily dose of birth control pills -- which she chucks when she realizes what's going on. The rest of the world blurs behind her as she prepares to have the baby. And afterward she slides into a debilitating depression, goes back to work, gets pregnant again. Her story ends at 44 Jane Street, near nothing. It's a big old place where it comes to light that B is banging his secretary and everything crashes down. It's also where she is living when she begins a long career writing for the New York Times.

This story is lovely and name-droppy and matter-of-fact and sometimes looks like the underbelly of a scab. Cantwell writes with an awareness that this isn't portrait with a filter thick as a fabric softener. There is grit and there are some major issues with self-assuredness and a hop skip jump from daddy to daddy-like husband. There is sadness and hurt. And maybe, as she's writing, she's still feeling the drag from some of this. She never refers to her ex-husband, a prominent literary agent, by name.

She makes the process of unraveling her life and respooling it into a memoir look easy and kind of fun. It's only when I considered my own life in an old carriage house in East Duluth, tossing a small dish of hot butter at my then-roommate's head, that I realized I have no desire to revisit the different addresses of my life. There are details that I like -- here and there. A place in the West End where I could skateboard in the back door and through two rooms to the front window with its view of water. A place in the Central Hillside had rose-decorated stained glass window. We had a super cool two-bedroom apartment in the East Hillside next door to a middle-aged man who tanned in the back yard with a tiger striped bikini swimsuit not on, but balled up around his twig and berries.

Anyway, I loved this book.

Theo Chen says

This book is one of the most heartfelt, touching books I've read in a long time. Mary Cartwell has a magical way with words in which you not only see the places she is writing about, the emotion of her language makes the feeling of places so clear. She writes about her struggles, of her anxiety, and self doubt, and manages to round it out with sparkling wit. The book ends on a hopeful note - one that expresses warmth and gratitude for life.

Daniel Sevitt says

I don't remember what led me to this, but it was a perfect fit for the reading window I had today. It's a little self-indulgent, but deliciously name-droppy. There's some fine, therapy-earned insights into her failing relationship with her husband, but I was less interested in the build-up to divorce than I was in the gorgeous descriptions of Greenwich Village in the 50s and 60s and the insider view of the magazine business back then.

Kathleen says

Mary Cantwell continues to enchant me with her stately manner of writing. I am unable to stop thinking of her, her dignified presence in the magazine world of NYC, her rare life in the budding elegance of the West Village, her stylish friends and parties, her great cooking, and her sad internal life always questioning every decision she ever made. The tales of her navigating a comely marriage, childbirth, psychiatry, working outside of the home, are so honestly portrayed as to almost make the reader a voyeur. I am moved to research every person, author, recipe she mentions. Her times in Paris are the stuff of a novel between the fashion, the meals, and the companions there as well. Above all, though, is the writing...pure...style without stylistics. I am about to start her third memory-book where she will speak of her years on the NYTimes editorial board. It is the last book she wrote before her death at an age too young. I am so sorry, already, to not have her in my life.

Bibliophile says

Low key memoir that paints a vivid picture of 1950's Manhattan. With few words Cantwell conveys the state of her mind and marriage perfectly clearly. I'll bet anything Matt Weiner read this cover to cover, furiously taking notes.

Michele says

Thoroughly likeable memoir of 2-ish decades in the life of a not quite likeable woman (who became more likeable towards the end), and a delicious remembrance of a particular time & place in 20th century New

York in the literary set. It was absolutely everything a memoir should be.

Cheryl Crotty says

I loved this book from page one. I didn't just read it, I was there with her. Her language was beautiful. Anyone who loves Manhattan will love this book. Those that have not been to Manhattan will want to go. A beautiful, real life, captured between these pages.

Rhonda Cutler says

For women of my generation, Mary Cantwell was a role model. Career woman (and one with a glamorous women's magazine career at that), mother, sophisticated Manhattanite, world traveler, gourmet cook. She seemed to do it all so effortlessly. The reality, we learn from this memoir (one of three she penned and the one that covers her early adulthood) was plagued by recurrent bouts of clinical depression, guilt regarding her mothering abilities, sexual frigidity, and unresolved grief over her adored father's passing. Cantwell is honest about all this, and honest about how her own shortcomings led to the dissolution of her marriage.

What keeps this book from being a relentlessly depressing read, is that, at the same time, it is a valentine to Manhattan. Not the homogenized Manhattan of today, but the authentically gritty and colorful Manhattan of the 50's and 60's. Throughout this time, Cantwell lived mainly in the village, and identifies the various phases of her life through where she and her family lived - Perry Street, Jane Street, the meatpacking district (which was really just that back then). And what a vivid picture she paints of them all, and of the friends and neighbors who figured prominently in each phase. Her descriptions of her colleagues at Mademoiselle and, later, Vogue, are often side splitting, and yet, you just know, spot on. I loved how she described the process of writing the fawning celebrity profiles that figure so prominently in Vogue, i.e. the imperative of 3 adjectives - such as talented, smart and funny. Also about how decidedly unglamorous many of the women were who turned out these slick fashion magazines.

I enjoyed this book so that I read it in just a few sittings. I would have given it 5 stars, except for the fact there are some, frustratingly, dropped narrative threads. For example, after the birth of her first child, Cantwell is clearly suffering from postpartum psychosis - plagued with suicidal and homicidal thoughts. Yet, we are told nothing about her road to recovery. She's sick and then she's better. Likewise for a few other pivotal phases in her life.

Still, I would recommend this book to all Manhattan lovers, aspiring writers, and appreciators of strong, vivid writing. The book was written in 1995, but so much of what she says about her contemporary Manhattan continues to ring true.

Lea Gallardo says

I picked this up because I thought it would be about Manhattan (think Hamill and Downtown) but it wasn't. It was a personal memoir of agonizing one's way through life and a series of homes in the 1960 and 60s Greenwich village.

Amanda says

A beautiful, lyrical ode to being young in New York. Cantwell is an amazing writer and I often found myself rereading certain sentences and paragraphs because they were so wonderfully and movingly worded. You get a very honest look into the constraints of being an intelligent, ambitious woman in the 1960s here. The author also covers her mental illnesses, but does so in a rather removed, glossed-over way. That said, she sort of grated on me at times...the woe-is-me-upper-middle-class-woman's tale always annoys me after a while, and sometimes I found her a tad grating (especially so when she laments about all the expensive stuff she couldn't afford for her apartments--it was very, "and here with have a rustic little chair, imagine the horror of someone of my breeding owning that!"). Another thing that got to me was how Cantwell acted like Greenwich Village was the epicenter of chic bohemian coolness, only worth leaving for a jaunt to Paris. But whatever, most New Yorkers (including me some years ago) are this way. I realize I'm being a little harsh--this book almost reads like a poem in prose form, so definitely consider reading it if you love New York or memoirs.

Sian Lile-Pastore says

This was delightful and yet has a darkness to it reminiscent of *The Bell Jar*. It's a memoir of life in New York in the late 50s and early 60s when if you were a college educated woman you could practically walk into a job at *Vogue*. It's about working on magazines, and also about a (pretty dysfunctional) marriage and having children and being a working mother. It's also about books and authors - about being excited when you notice that your grocery delivery is sat next to djuna barnes', about going to Europe and visiting Alice B.Toklas and listening to her anecdotes about Gertrude Stein:

"When T.S.Eliot said to Gertrude, 'And from whom, Miss Stein, did you learn your habit of splitting infinitives?' Gertrude said 'I learned it from Henry James.'"

and, of course you *had* to go to Europe:

"Because if you did not go, you would be haunted all your life by not having run the bulls at Pamplona while you still had the legs to o it. You would not have the demitasse cups you could trot out after dinner saying "We bought these in Venice before Muffie was born."

It's a little bit Mary McCarthy and a little bit *Mad Men*, but better, because it's true and it's honest and it's written with charm and with a sort of nostalgia and romance.

Rachel Smalter Hall says

I think some people like this book because of its romantic, dreamy portrayal of New York professional life in the 1960s, and on that point it certainly delivers. But in the beginning, I found Mary Cantwell to be both delusional and horribly self-involved, and I decided not to like *Manhattan, when I Was Young*. But I kept reading, and eventually began to see this memoir as something else.

Cantwell's greatest strength here is her honesty; her willingness to put herself forth as a struggling human rather than a chipper American housewife. The greatest trauma of her life seems to have been the rift between her romantic ideals about wife-and-motherhood, versus the reality of struggling to balance her magazine career with a fulfilling domestic life. She writes openly about her marital problems, as well as plummeting into a deep depression after giving birth to her first daughter -- a rare quality, I think, in works of nonfiction about women from this era. With courage, Cantwell airs all of her personal demons, and I think it's a fascinating look into the private struggles of a rich white American woman, circa 1960.

Holly Haze says

I've been reading more memoirs of late, but this one didn't grab me. It wasn't memorable. It didn't stand out. The only redeeming attribute in this book was her incredible vocabulary and verbiage. I actually enjoyed reading her words. Other than that, it was difficult to care about anything that went on in this story.

MrsJaneSunshine says

Outstanding. I was completely engrossed. A captivating, a rare glimpse into mid-20th century Manhattan, a golden age when it was a magical, fairytale of a place to be.

Lorri Steinbacher says

This is exactly the kind of book I love to read: NYC back when you could afford to live there, when you could have a perfectly acceptable party with a cheap bottle of wine and a dish of olives, when women were just starting to come into their own, sometimes painfully so. Cantwell's description of her New York is vivid and brings the era to life.
