



Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in the Seventies

James Wolcott

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"How lucky I was, arriving in New York just as everything was about to go to hell."

That would be in the autumn of 1972, when a very young and green James Wolcott arrived from Maryland, full of literary dreams, equipped with a letter of introduction from Norman Mailer, and having no idea what was about to hit him. Landing at a time of accelerating municipal squalor and, paradoxically, gathering cultural energy in all spheres as "Downtown" became a category of art and life unto itself, he embarked upon his sentimental education, seventies New York style.

This portrait of a critic as a young man is also a rollicking, acutely observant portrait of a legendary time and place. Wolcott was taken up by fabled film critic Pauline Kael as one of her "Paulettes" and witnessed the immensely vital film culture of the period. He became an early observer-participant in the nascent punk scene at CBGB, mixing with Patti Smith, Lester Bangs, and Tom Verlaine. As a *Village Voice* writer he got an eyeful of the literary scene when such giants as Mailer, Gore Vidal, and George Plimpton strode the earth, and writing really mattered.

A beguiling mixture of *Kafka Was the Rage* and *Please Kill Me*, this memoir is a sharp-eyed rendering, at once intimate and shrewdly distanced, of a fabled milieu captured just before it slips into myth. Mixing grit and glitter in just the right proportions, suffused with affection for the talented and sometimes half-crazed denizens of the scene, it will make readers long for a time when you really could get mugged around here.

Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in the Seventies Details

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christa says

It starts with a young James Wolcott riding a ref from Norman Mailer to the grunts of the Village Voice offices. One of those “I like how you write, if you’re ever in NYC, stop by X and ask for Y and he’ll hook you up” scenarios Wolcott took seriously enough to drop out of college, pack his bags and knock on the door. Of course, it took a few more knocks than he probably expected, but soon enough he was jamming out words with the likes of rock critic Robert Christgau on the receiving end of a fan-call from Pauline Kael who invites him into the coveted back row of interactive movie screenings with the master.

“Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in Seventies New York” by longtime writer for *Vanity Fair*, a freestyle riff, spends a lot of time at the table with Kael and her ghost will continue to pop up in tidbits of ancient lit gossip and the writing tips that ring in Wolcott’s head. Homeboy certainly knew when to pencil down one of her kicky lines when he heard it. In fact, he’s channeling her the first time he sees Patti Smith on the stage at CBGB and needs to go finger pads deep with a typewriter stat.

“One thing I learned from Pauline was that when something hits you that high and hard, you have to be able to travel wherever the point of impact takes you and be willing to go to the wall with your enthusiasm if need be, even if you look foolish or ‘carried away,’ because your first shot at writing about it may be the only chance to make people care. It’s better to be thumpingly wrong than a muffled drum with a measured beat.”

The next period in Wolcott’s life is the pornography to ballet transition and the latter sticks and he becomes a lifetime aficionado. The first time he goes, it’s a whim, a pick for his “cultural merit badge.” Eventually he becomes a subscriber who finds it not entirely unlike the punk scene he was accustomed to, with the way it challenged audiences. He eventually ends up married to a rock critic.

This book is equal parts dull and sexy, with his stream of conscious style sometimes turning into the list of names Wolcott wants to thank for his award. This includes his days at the Village Voice where the clunkiness of names atop names lends to the question: “Who are you writing this for, brah?” On the other hand Wolcott is a word-guy, no doubt, and he doesn’t squander one, writing sentences with so much meat. His scenes are colorful and his knowledge of pop culture is broad as it is deep.

I wouldn’t really call this story a memoir as much as I would a museum of 1970s New York City, one of my top picks for a time travel destination, and Wolcott as the curator who decided what to show us and why. He’s there, alright, standing in the corner observing and even participating. I’d imagine that years of writing about other people would make it hard to actually turn the pen on himself. He occasionally mentions private details -- a bit of a love triangle that involved an unnamed woman and Lester Bangs -- or that time his apartment was broken into. But there isn’t a lot of personal reflection and the toll of the Talking Heads on his emotional well-being. He surrounded himself with enough interesting people -- Kael, Smith -- and crossed circles with enough others -- Pete Hamill, Joan Didion, Bangs -- that there are plenty of nuggets for the 1970s NYC-inclined.

Janice says

I've been a slavish admirer of James Wolcott's unique voice since the late 70s, when I scraped up the bucks to subscribe to the Village Voice, where he was a regular contributor. It's a lot easier (and cheaper) to get a Wolcott fix these days, thanks mainly to his Vanity Fair column and blog, and, now, *Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in Seventies New York*, a hugely entertaining, satisfying, multi-day Wolcott binge.

The story itself would be interesting without much embellishment: His experiences as a too-young-to-know-better writer in the New York of the 1970's, his friends and acquaintances from the era (Pauline Kael, Patti Smith, Lester Bangs and so on), the scene at the Village Voice and CBGB's. And the details he flourishes to illustrate that time, that place, those people, are marvels. But, as with all of his writing, it's his phrases and sentences that really deliver the goods, a delight on every page. Some tidbits to whet your appetite:

Nat Hentoff's wife, who "had a sharpshooter mouth that could knock a tin can off your head from across the room."

New York landlords who weren't choosy about whom they rented to, "as long as you didn't give off a whiff of arson."

A woman seated on a bed and "looking up at me with lickey eyes, as if I were that night's barbecue special"

Lou Reed's "look of disgruntlement being the little parasol he carried wherever he went"

Tom Verlaine's "wincing with irritation only if I rattled on too fast as if the curtain had just been pulled off my parrot cage"

"[B]y that point porn had gone so viral that you could pick up its booty call in the prickling air just by walking around midtown without a hat."

I loved this book.

Jan Takehara says

The Strand bookstore should sell this book, Patti's Smith's *Just Kids* and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* in a slipcase as the New York in the 70s trilogy.

Aektare says

A memoir set in glittering and crime-infested 1970s New York, where an opinion-maker/trend-spotter takes a bow for having roamed the outer orbit of the circle-jerking Literati. Between forays into the punk, porn and ballet scenes, the author drops a phone book's worth of names and performs the all-important God's work of holding strong opinions on matters of relative insignificance.

Jay Levine says

Some parts very funny (porn in NYC), some parts cultural education (early punk scene in NYC), some parts boorish insider NYC literary culture gutter sniping

Lisa Mcelroy says

Wolcott writes delightful sentences that are cleverly and playfully descriptive. If he reworks his paragraphs over and over, it doesn't show and yet it's all so well crafted. The first section of this memoir covers his entry into the New York City writing scene during the 70s on a hope and a prayer provided by a Norman Mailer letter of recommendation. The journalist ghosts Village Voice past are thoughtfully mulled over, as is CBGB's then-blossoming music scene and a series of Wolcott's dank, low-rent apartments. It's like being there--you can almost smell it. His friend and screening partner Pauline Kael takes up the middle of the book and she's a hoot. So many acerbic, intelligent anecdotes are recounted that Wolcott must have been taking extensive notes at each of their social gatherings. The last section is not quite as compelling, but still interesting as it segues from the Times Square porn-movie scene to the ballet, where Wolcott found an intense and passionate subculture of dance aficionados. Recommended.

Robert Corbett says

This is not the definitive memoir of the 70s, but it really sets the context for a lot of what we think of as the 70s. It's not definitive, because Wolcott was diffident about the sex and drugs (oldest child in a very catholic and somewhat alcoholic family, so ...) back then or he makes it seem the case, but there are back stories here that you never heard before. But until Lou or Laurie write a book (too bad Acker won't be able to), this is pretty good if paired with Patti Smith's *Just Kids*. Speaking of Patti, especially interesting for me is the friendship with Patti Smith, including the revelation that her time out from the fall from the stage was not the end of her career. Everybody is gossiping about Kael right now, but his rendering is tender, but true and reveals that, yes, she was kinda of a badass. There is also porn and ballet, which I think verifies a point gently made here that what one is intellectual or analytic about in public now has gotten much more vulgar and more narrow. The bottom line, 'Twas very heaven to be young.

Radiantflux says

28th book of 2017.

This book reminds me a story a photographer once told me, when he showed his work to a famous photobook editor. Basically he was told, while his images were competent, but the sequence was too clean. There had to be some dirt. There had to be something a bit dangerous for the author to grab the viewer's interest.

This is a very safe account of the 1970s in NYC. NYC was not safe in the 1970s.

Two-stars for giving me some framework for some of the events and people of the era.

Miriam says

This was a book I was supposed to like, so that's probably why I didn't. Essentially *Just Kids* from a journalist's perspective (Patti Smith even has an extended cameo) it didn't have the same in-the-moment feel, something that has been consistently on my mind since I started seriously pursuing journalism.

I got too lazy to finish up this review (found that I wasn't really thinking about this book after the fact), but here are some quotes I highlighted while reading:

“It was the best use of an adverb since Hemingway’s ‘magnanimously’ ” in *A Moveable Feast*. I had been invited to CBGB’s finale but decided not to go on the afternoon of the show, telling myself I was on deadline (I was, I always am), that it was too much of a mob scene, all that. But I also think it was because I was afraid of how happy I might be to see everyone again after so many years, a coward when it came to unembarrassed joy and affection. I might have gone on a hugging spree, which is not how we did things back then.” (169)

“I would pound on the wall, they would pound back, and really that’s what being a New Yorker was about then.” (188)

About Manhattan (movie) “When the film came out in 1979, the montage appeared to soar with nostalgia for the present, the sense that (to quote the Carly Simon lyric) “these are the good old days.” (221)

“Journalist critics such as myself were, are, and forever will be, routingly disparaged as parasites, sore losers, serial slashers, Texas tower snipers, and eunuchs at the orgy (what orgy? Where is this orgy we seem to have missed?), which would hurt our feelings, if we brutes had any” (235)

Katie Wudel says

I so much wanted to love this book. For 100 pages or so, I did. I confess, I'm a hopeless sucker for New York stories, having lived one myself. People think New Yorkers are vain for talking about themselves all the time; all books these days, it seems, are about NYC. But it is such a strange thing to live here, to try to "make it" here, and I was instantly charmed by James' story of first moving to New York and truly finding some sort of "in" at the Village Voice--back when that really mattered. But over the course of the book, we move away from James' personal story, and into something that's half-criticism/half-name-dropping, and although I love Patti Smith and the Talking Heads, I longed for something more real. I enjoyed the book more at the end, and the bits about the ballet reminded me of my favorite grad school professor, Cooley Windsor, but ultimately, I would have rather had a real memoir, rather than a story-about-CBGB's that skimmed over surfaces and didn't seem to reveal the truth of anything. At times an amazing book; mostly lackluster. I'm sort of bummed.

Michelle says

Read the bits about Pauline Kael, skip the rest. The most unessential memoir since Little Golden Books edition of the Henry Winkler bio.

Michael Backus says

It's not surprising that the most effective sections in James Wolcott's memoir of the 70s are on Pauline Kael and the beginnings of CBGBs, almost all the attention the book got when it was released was in relation to the recent Kael biography. It's easy to appreciate Wolcott's intelligence and his way with a phrase, his constantly inventive and generally witty similes when they're grounded in a specific narrative, with characters we feel we know (Kael, Patti Smith, Lenny Kaye, Richard Hell, John Cale, David Byrne and Tina Weymouth, Tom Verlaine, Lester Bangs), the insights and stories well chosen to give us a sense of what it was like to be an insider in the creation of mythic cultural tropes (CBGB as the birthplace of the burgeoning American punk scene, Kael as film guru).

But there's also an awful lot of padding in this book, whole sections in which Wolcott goes on (and on) in his elaborate, often funny, just as often frustrating style, sending out great waves of obfuscating prose in the service of... something; it's not always clear what. It comes as no surprise late in the book when he owns up to a grudging admiration for John Leonard, a critic whose everything-including-the-kitchen-sink style was surely an inspiration for Wolcott's. So we get a bizarre interlude about porn in the 70s which seems to be Wolcott's coming out as a porn addict, but it's so aestheticized and buried under layers of clever, allusive prose, it's impossible to decipher or even much care what he's going on about.

His obsession with ballet comes off a bit better, though there's such an air of abashment over it (Look at me; yes, goddammit, I love ballet and I don't care what the rest of you spittle-covered punk rockers think), it grows tiresome; like a guest at a party trying to convince you of the magnificence (say) of a particular music video by going into over-elaborate detail about every aspect.

There are other pleasures here as well, including Wolcott's early years at the Village Voice and all the various characters moving in and out of his sight-lines, people like Ellen Willis (who he eviscerates both as a human being and an intellect), Robert Christgau (Willis' boyfriend for a time, he comes off less poorly mostly because he seems such a vivid character, doing group editing from home in nothing but the briefest of underwear briefs, or sometimes completely in the buff, once prompting Lester Bangs to ponder why a specific writer gets Christgau in a speedo while he is forced to bear the man in the full monty) and later Bangs, who seems sad, insecure and terminally, almost inevitably doomed.

It's towards the end of an unfocused riff on literary criticism (where he ponders what his life might've been like as a book critic and informs us of some 70s books he liked and a couple he did not) that he begins to regain his bearings, first delving into Kael's 1979 foray to Hollywood and then moving on to the fall-out from Renata Adler's infamous takedown of Kael's collection of reviews, *When the Lights Go Down*, in *The New York Review of Books* ("...jarringly, piece by piece, line by line, and without interruption, worthless.") This return to the world of Kael feels like a drink of cool, clear water, back to actual characters and focused prose, and less stylized Anthony Lane noodling in search of a subject.

Wolcott mostly holds his tongue here, though clearly he's appalled by Adler's attack, instead concentrating

on the debris field, which included Kael's confidence over her own writing (she complains that Adler is trying to make her overly self-conscious) and a galling realization that there had to have been an awful lot of explicit and implicit approval of Adler's attack up and down the New York cultural scene, including many of her colleagues at the *New Yorker*. We acutely feel Wolcott and Kael's sense of betrayal, but it also sets up a nagging question that hangs over the end of the book. The Pauline Kael Wolcott shows us is smart, vain, imperious, intellectually open and curious, sharp-witted, generous, occasionally vicious (and usually sorry about it later) but at her core a lovely human being; he simply shows us no part of her that might elicit the kind of reaction he details where even William Shawn, the *New Yorker* editor at the time, is suspected of having given his tacit approval to Adler's piece.

It is on this low that Wolcott and Kael stumble out of the 70s together. The two of them were in a cab on the night of Dec. 8, 1980 when they heard from the driver that John Lennon had been shot outside the Dakota, and coupled with Kael's recent estrangement from Woody Allen (over her blistering attack on *Stardust Memories*) and the continued fallout from the Adler piece, Wolcott announces that his 70s are over. He ends the book on some half-hearted Christmas light imagery ("The Christmas lights in midtown looked incongruous, an irony we could have done without."), a tepid finish to a book that could've been a lot sharper – more personal and emotionally involving, less glib – than it is.

Ettalouise says

James Wolcott's *Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in Seventies New York* is the quintessential personal history. Wolcott introduces himself to New York, a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed college dropout with but a duffel bag of clothes and a recommendation letter from Norman Mailer for a job at the *Village Voice*. At the *Voice*, he gets a lukewarm response, but that does not discourage him. After coming in almost every day for several weeks, he gets the position of part-time receptionist.

Pauline Kael is the mascot of the book's turning point. She brings him forth into the world of movie criticism. From this point, Wolcott traipses his way through darkened movie theaters, the scummy yet hallowed walls of CBGB's and the clean perfection of ballet performances.

This book is a test in pace. The beginning is slow, almost painful in its molasses-thick description of his pre-Pauline life. Once Pauline, in all her glory, arrives in his life, all spunk and "let-me-be-honest-with-you"s, the pace quickens without losing the in-depth description and long, winding sentences that are indicative of Wolcott's style.

This book overall is satisfying. It is perfect for those who are interested in the history of a decade and those who would just like an amazing story of great success based on chance.

Jonathan says

I really loved this book. James Wolcott has that rare ability - like his friend and mentor Pauline Kael - to absolutely nail, and get to the essence of, whatever it is that he is describing. I've read many accounts of Lou Reed's truculence and general sourness but never understood properly until reading Wolcott's description of Reed's behaviour at CBGBs in contrast to David Byrne's open hearted and playful outlook. Byrne's response to a being swung around the dancefloor by an over enthusiastic fan was met with a cheerful "woah". Wolcott tries to imagine what would have happened if someone had tried this with Reed: "he would have crumbled

into mummy dust". This tells me more about Byrne and Reed that has stuck in my mind more than anything else in the decades I've been reading about both men. The book is packed with brilliant memorable portraits like this, Wolcott makes most other writers look like amateurs.

Wolcott's style is very dense, almost prose poetry, and is a lot to absorb so it's a good one to dip into. Well worth owning. I read this a few weeks ago so it's not as fresh in my mind as it was but it's a beloved book and I'm looking forward to rereading it.

Tosh says

I'm in that New York City reading mood, and this one didn't really hit the spot for me. I feel like the book should either have been longer or more detailed incidents to be reported. The punk rock section is not the best part of the book and it should have been. He was there at the height of the New York music explosion, yet I have read better accounts by others regarding this local earth shifting moment in our culture.

What is good is description of 1970's Village Voice life, with its editors and fellow writers. In fact he writes quite passionately about fellow writers like Lester Bangs and Pauline Kael. Perhaps the whole book should have been that as its subject matter, than say 1970's New York. Also his description of St Marks Place life is good as well - but still there is an element here that is missing. Perhaps due to his large interest from TV to Punk Rock to ballet - it doesn't jell together in this book.

On a side note he writes a little bit on Television's Tom Verlaine, and like other works he's mention in, he comes off as a phantom in his own narrative. Verlaine is either the coolest (in all senses of that word) man on the block or a total mystery to everyone.
