Edward Rutherfurd on New York Strangely, I suspect it was Viking ancestors who drew me to New York.

For centuries my father’s family lived on Britain’s biggest tidal river, the Severn, on which there was a huge trade with the interior, and through the port of Bristol with America. In the nineteenth century they were in shipping from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and on the great rivers of Europe—the Rhine, the Danube, even the Russian River Dnieper. I myself was born beside a river—the Avon in Sarum. So when I first encountered New York’s great harbor and the Hudson River as a teenager, and came to understand their historic canal and railroad links to the vast spaces of the Midwest, I felt both the thrill of a new adventure, and a deep sense of homecoming.

I first considered writing New York in 1991. I’d been in the city for a decade, was married to an American wife and sending my children to New York schools. I was even on the board of a coop building. But I wasn’t sure how to organize such complex material, and for many years I put the project aside.

It was kind encouragement and old-fashioned editing from William Thomas at Doubleday that finally persuaded me to try again. And soon I was hooked.

New York’s gift to the storyteller is magnificent: Indian and Dutch beginnings; larger-than-life historical characters like Lord Cornbury, the transvestite British Governor, the socialite Mrs. Astor, and the titanic J.P. Morgan; huge events from the Revolutionary War and the Civil War—when New York threatened to secede from the Union—to the Crash of 29 and the tragedy of 9/11. But the ordinary people I discover in my research—African slaves, Irish laborers, society ladies and sweatshop workers—whose lives move me most, and who provide so many of my plots and characters.

My own personal experiences also helped. I descend from both Philadelphia Quakers and Carolina colonists whose families were separated by the Revolutionary War. That helped give me insight into the agony of Patriots who, until the British government denied their claims, had always, like Ben Franklin himself, thought of themselves as free-born
Englishmen. One of my closest friends since university is an Italian immigrant. Understanding the poverty and humiliations of her childhood helped me create the books Caruso family who came through Ellis Island and lived in Little Italy.

I also love discovering how things work. It was as fascinating to study the history of Wall Street banking—and how financial crises always repeat themselves!—as it was to learn how the Empire State Building was constructed.

But above all, what I love about New York is that people have always come there in search of freedom, and usually found it. I was lucky to be born beside Sarums Avon. But I'd like my New York children to scatter my ashes in the Hudson. --Edward Rutherfurd

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My Personal Review:
Edward Rutherfurd, whose sweeping historical epics introduced us to 10,000 years of ancient SARUM and thousands of years of LONDON, now turns his historical pen to that young upstart of the west --- New York City.

One of the greatest cities of the world, New York City saw its humble beginnings in a tiny Indian fishing village in the forests of Manhattan in the mid-1650s. The ancient cities of Europe and the Orient had flourished for thousands of years before the rustic trading center in New Amsterdam began to bustle with ships sailing across the Atlantic into its natural harbor.

In this history, the Master family, descended from the earliest traders, is followed through many generations and historical events in NEW YORK: THE NOVEL. They and their families are portrayed in this epic saga covering the great events that shaped our new nation. Rutherfurd explores the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the numerous stock market crashes, the racial divides that occurred as each new wave of ethnic immigrants swept ashore to start new lives in the promised land. We've read of these historical events in some of our country's greatest literature, but Rutherfurd's take on our history is seen through the eyes and experiences of New Yorkers, who were often not as closely involved as one might assume.

Many might be surprised to learn that in the 1760s and 1770s, New York's role in the American Revolution was neutral. New York at first abstained from signing the Declaration of Independence and stayed at arm's length from the war until British ships were almost in New York Harbor. We learn
that this is because the majority of influential New Yorkers were royalists who regarded the upstart revolutionaries of Boston and Philadelphia as rabble rousers who should at the very least be ignored, if not hanged for treason. The Revolutionary War was an annoyance to New Yorkers that interfered with trade and the booming commerce that would come to define the city.

The Civil War was also viewed from afar. The lucrative slave trade that sustained the trading routes of the Dutch West India Company --- and the many others that developed in the first 150 years --- was jeopardized by the threatening secession from the Union by the South. From its very beginnings, New York was about banking and making money. Unlike the industrial South and the growing inland cities, it did not manufacture goods; it marketed them. It did not grow crops; it traded them and invested the profits on Wall Street. If patriotism stirred the early New Yorker, it was about profit; it tended to leave the flag waving and fighting to the rest of the country. Street demonstrations in later years were more apt to be about suffrage, prohibition and social causes than about taking up arms in civil and international wars.

The early slave holders in the Master family gradually change to more progressive thinking, but are still torn --- even as slavery is abolished --- to holding to the old ways. The family encounters the forces of Tammany Hall, the Irish (and later, the Italian) mobs, the Jewish artists and craftsmen, and the Asian communities that gradually move in as other ethnic groups move out. New York evolves before our very eyes as some of the great landmarks rise, then fall to fire, dilapidation, or new development. Overhead railways change to subways, and narrow streets turn into freeways and parkways. The city crawls slowly northward, filling up as waves of ethnic groups move in behind other ethnic groups who want to move up or out. Anyone who has visited New York City in the last half century has watched this evolution as familiar buildings and landmarks vanish from the skyline, the most regrettable being the World Trade Center.

As the progeny of immigrants during different times in America's history, it is fascinating for me to read in such vivid detail about the times in which our ancestors lived. Rutherfurd is a master at bringing to life the people and streets of the times, not just the events. By happenstance, many of the eras he describes coincide with my own family history. To enjoy his almost cinematic description of New Amsterdam in the mid-1600s when my too-many-greats-to-be-listed grandfather was a clerk from Delft, Netherlands for the Dutch West India Company and then opened a bar on Beaver Street, which could have been the same tavern mentioned in the book, sent chills up my spine. A later branch on my family tree when my great-grandmother arrived from Ireland in 1860 coincided with the upheaval prior to the Civil War.
But no matter if you are Dutch, English, descendents of slaves, Italian, Asian, Jewish, German, or Nordic, there were so many important events that affected the people on the streets that one can't help but feel a bit of déjà vu if you are lucky enough to have had older relatives who reminisced about times past. And it's all there: the book starts with the Indians and traders in New Amsterdam and ends in 2009. Three hundred and seventy years is a mere blink of an eye in historical terms, but what a history it is.

--- Reviewed by Roz Shea

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