

NEW YORK'S MELTDOWN - FORGETTING THE LESSONS OF '77

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Abstract

[Jonathan Mahler] focuses his blackout tale on the devastation visited upon Bushwick, the Brooklyn neighborhood that was practically destroyed in a matter of hours. He does a perfectly fine job, but never conveys the trauma inflicted on the vast majority of residents in Bushwick and throughout the city, who were neither looting nor suffering the economic consequences of the looting. Mahler does an amusing job of turning the murderous spree of the serial killer known as Son of Sam into a tabloid joke - a frenzy manufactured in large measure by this newspaper, then newly under the management of Rupert Murdoch. But that, too, offers a distorted perspective. The terror felt in all corners of the city because of the Son of Sam's .44 caliber shootings was entirely real, entirely spontaneous and horribly crippling. It was the result not of tabloid manipulation but of years of bad policing and a sense among most New Yorkers that there was nobody protecting them and their children. "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning" also tells the tale of the 1977 New York Yankees. As he recounts the crazed conduct of Yankees manager Billy Martin, the offensive braggadocio of slugger Reggie Jackson and the ill-tempered irritability of the rest of the team, Mahler really is able to capture the New York meltdown in miniature. It doesn't even particularly seem to matter that the Yankees won the World Series that year. You just feel full of wonder that they all made it through alive.

Full text

WHEN the word "meltdown" first came into common usage, it was meant to describe the nightmare possibility of an explosion inside a nuclear-power plant. The term proved wonderfully and sadly resonant in the late 1970s not just because of the near-meltdown at Three Mile Island, but because it seemed an apt description for the condition of the country.

It would be nearly impossible for an American born in 1980 to understand just how lousy things were going in America in the 1970s - how everything seemed to be melting down here.

Inflation was eating up the working man's dollar. Crazy tax brackets were impoverishing the middle class. Across the country, criminals were winning the daily battle against cops and creating an unprecedented atmosphere of menace.

The American meltdown was most evident right here in New York City, and never more so than during the summer months of 1977 - when a blackout led to \$250 million in looting damage in just a few hours, a serial killer stalked the streets and a possibly psychotic manager ruled the baseball roost in The Bronx.

The journalist Jonathan Mahler tells the story of that rare and horrendous moment in time in his new work of popular history, "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning."

Mahler's terrifically entertaining book is a portrait of a city out of control in almost every respect - from the depressing conduct of its depressed police force to the absurd maneuverings of its increasingly unimportant ward bosses, from the barbaric yawping of notorious political harpy Bella Abzug to the preposterous shenanigans inside the clubhouse of the New York Yankees.

Mahler maintains a cheerful, almost giddy tone, as though what happened here in 1977 was a black comedy, an urban slapstick in which New York City functioned almost like a self-destructing Rube Goldberg machine.

That makes his book a fun read. But there's a problem with Mahler's tone. Certainly, any year in which the major cultural development is the opening of a disco (Studio 54) deserves considerable mockery. But there really wasn't anything remotely amusing about being a New York City resident in 1977.

Take it from me. I was 16 at the time, and I spent part of the night of the blackout standing with a baseball bat in front of my apartment building along with other tenants as we heard, in the darkness, the sounds of hundreds of people ravaging all the stores in the buildings across Broadway. Every now and then a car would drive by and illuminate the mob, which looked like a human swarm, like an army of ants attacking a piece of bread.

It was a sound and a sight I can't even begin to describe accurately and hope never to see or hear again.

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Mahler does an amusing job of turning the murderous spree of the serial killer known as Son of Sam into a tabloid joke - a frenzy manufactured in large measure by this newspaper, then newly under the management of Rupert Murdoch. But that, too, offers a distorted perspective. The terror felt in all corners of the city because of the Son of Sam's .44 caliber shootings was entirely real, entirely spontaneous and horribly crippling. It was the result not of tabloid manipulation but of years of bad policing and a sense among most New Yorkers that there was nobody protecting them and their children.

That sense was well-founded. Earlier in the decade, my own Upper West Side neighborhood went into panic mode when a monster who came to be known as "Charlie Chop-Off" mutilated the bodies of four little boys - stabbing them and taking their penises as trophies.

The police formed a squad to try to locate the killer, but he remained at large for two years. Then, one day in 1974, Charlie Chop-Off bungled a killing. A kid got away. It wasn't the cops, but rather ordinary citizens, who cornered a fleeing psychopath named Erno Soto. Soto confessed to the crimes and was sent to a mental institution. But he was never charged with them - in part because the only surviving victim could not pick him out of a lineup.

By 1977, policing had become an almost invisible task in this town. You were lucky even to catch a glimpse of a cop, because they stayed in their cruisers and responded to 911 calls or were back at the station filling out paperwork. Everybody had a story about reporting a burglary or a mugging and being told wearily that there was nothing the police could do about it.

You can't understand the fear engendered by Son of Sam unless you understand the pervasiveness of the fear that settled over the city in the late 1960s. It was like a fog that never dissipates.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning" also tells the tale of the 1977 New York Yankees. As he recounts the crazed conduct of Yankees manager Billy Martin, the offensive braggadocio of slugger Reggie Jackson and the ill-tempered irritability of the rest of the team, Mahler really is able to capture the New York meltdown in miniature. It doesn't even particularly seem to matter that the Yankees won the World Series that year. You just feel full of wonder that they all made it through alive.

Come to think of it, that's how we all felt here in New York when 1977 finally limped to its well-deserved close. We survived the meltdown, and began to rebuild.

Berkowitz: Terror he spread was no joke.

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