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FALLING IN LOVE IN NEW YORK CITY

By Amelia Abraham, February 9, 2018



Read a copy of Bill Hayes' heart-breaking memoir, *Insomniac City*, and you'll likely find yourself crying into the pages. The book starts and closes with the passing of Hayes' two lovers: Steve, the long-term boyfriend he lived with in San Francisco, and Oliver Sacks, the world-renowned neurologist and author. Between the tragedy, Hayes finds snippets of beauty, writing vignettes that capture the mundanity of a domestic relationship and taking photographic portraits of the everyday characters he meets in New York.

From his apartment in Greenwich Village, Hayes tells us about his evolution as a writer and street photographer. On the walls hang prints from his next book, a collection photos, aptly titled *How New York Breaks Your Heart*.

What came first, photography or writing?

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I've been writing since I was in high school, but after I moved to San Francisco and came out, those years were dominated by new relationships. When I settled down with Steve in the late 80s it was suddenly now or never. I started working on personal essays, the form of writers I admired like Joan Didion. It felt like a short enough form that I could complete something before work and send it off – in those days by snail mail! Photography came into my life later. When I moved to New York, I immediately became interested in taking photographs of people. I think that interest in people is one I shared with Oliver; we're both storytellers.

You say Joan Didion influenced your writing. Who influenced your photography?

Street photographers and portrait photographers like Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Peter Hujar. I was always going out into New York, picking a neighbourhood maybe that I didn't know, and would see an interesting face or come across a scene. I remember in Washington Heights in 2009, I was walking in the neighbourhood and saw these women braiding each other's hair. They were so forthcoming, it was almost surprising. But I always ask first, that's very important. If they say, "No", I say, "OK, thank you", and move on. It feels like I've lost so many great pictures that way, but it's worth it to respect their privacy.

Have you tried street photography in other cities? How do they compare?

I have. I wrote *Insomniac City* in Rome, because I had a fellowship. I go to London a bit. Paris. It's harder in all those cities for a handful of reasons: I'm a tourist, it's not my city, so there's a bit of reticence. In Italy, I don't speak Italian very well. And the hardest place – and I hate to say this – is London. For the same reasons I get here in New York but to a much greater degree. People are suspicious. They feel like their privacy is invaded. "Where's this picture going to end up?" Now I have more of an answer, but early on I'd say, "I'm not really sure, I take these pictures for myself."

What makes the perfect picture?

Sometimes the best picture is the first, sometimes the 18th. Now I'm a lot faster – I've done it so much, I have a better sense of what to look out for, when the chemistry is right. There's a fine line in my portraits between posing and capturing the natural expression.

Your early books were about science. How did *Insomniac City* come about?

I got a Guggenheim grant to write a book on the history of exercise. Tacked onto my contract with was another book: "A New York memoir." I thought, "Maybe someday I will." Skip forward to 2015 and Oliver got diagnosed with cancer. I put writing aside to enjoy that year with him, but shortly after his death my editor said, "Do you think you could write about this, about him, New York?" I thought I probably could, but I didn't know how. I found my way by doing something less conventional: this combination of essays, journal entries, vignettes and photography.

Was writing about your pain cathartic?

It wasn't cathartic in that it's not as if I finished the book and felt completely at peace about my losses. But I felt satisfaction in creating something beautiful.

Oliver also wrote a memoir about your relationship before he died – why?

He was asked throughout his public career about his private life, and he just wasn't comfortable talking about it, about being gay. His focus was squarely on his practice, on writing. When we met, he was 75, had accomplished a lot, but not experienced a romantic relationship. Whatever brought us together, it was finally the right time. The autobiography is called *On The Move*. The irony is that he got this cancer diagnosis right after finishing it, so while he might have imagined that his coming out would be a big story, instead there was naturally more an outpouring of love for Dr Sacks who we were going to lose.

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What has the reception to *Insomniac City* been like?

It's taken me by surprise. I got a dozen messages a day, from India, Portugal, Australia, and a range of people – I might have guessed a lot of gay men would relate to it, but it's also widowers, people who relate to the story of grief. And, of course, fellow New Yorkers.

What do New Yorkers say?

Most love it, but others don't see New York the way I do! I write about the subways with a very positive, romantic feeling. I just thought that they were hilarious and I had sweet encounters. People say, "I love your book, but the subways are packed, make me late to work, and people are rude!" The subways have really deteriorated over the last 10 years, it's true. In that way I think *Insomniac City* is a time capsule of New York, but it's also a time capsule for my life. I was 48 when I moved here, but like a young person, new to the city. I think people relate to that feeling.