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## HOW NEW YORK BREAKS YOUR HEART BY BILL HAYES

By Holly Black, March 25, 2018



“A fabulous cacophony of different cultures and personalities.” Bill Hayes’s ode to the Big Apple is nothing short of mesmerizing.”

“First, it lets you fall in love with it.” Bill Hayes explains, in the opening pages of his visual love letter to New York, the city he calls home. It is a fitting beginning for a book that seeks to embody NYC’s utterly intoxicating essence, which is achieved, of course, by chronicling the people that live there. He snaps the tourists, the natives, the workers and the lovers; the elderly, the kids, the millennials and the middle-aged. He presents black-and-white images of neighbours chatting on stoops and sun-drenched shots of flamboyant trendsetters glistening in the summer heat. It is a fabulous cacophony of different cultures and personalities that comfortably mimics the overwhelming energy found throughout the metropolis.

On first glance, each single-shot page seems decidedly disparate, as Hayes uses monochrome and polychrome palettes, a variety of aspect ratios, and shuns obvious thematic groupings. But as you leaf through, covert visual cues reveal themselves. For instance, a grey image of a young woman sitting while resting her foot on a bench is reflected in the

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ostentatious stride of an old man in a red suit. Similarly, the sickly-sweet colours that surround an attendant in a cigarettes-and-confectionary booth are replicated in two pastel-dyed pooches, cuddled by their owners. My personal favourite is a battle of the bouffant. On the left, a glamorous elderly woman in a leopard print coat sports a gravity-defying ginger chignon, while on the right, a hot pant-wearing blonde grins beneath her artfully teased peroxide job, complete with monumental extensions.

These outlandish individuals are supplemented by more mundane, but equally compelling, scenes. Hayes travels up and down recognisable Manhattan avenues, subway stops and more than a handful of park benches, and while most subjects pose, a few are caught in a candid moment as they have coffee with friends, light a cigarette, or check their phone. These frozen moments all have their own allure; brimming with countless imagined stories.

“Can I take your picture?” You sometimes ask. And more often than not, they say yes.” Hayes continues in his sparse, beautifully poetic interjections. It is no surprise that he is also a writer, and gained critical acclaim for his memoir *Insomniac City*, which recalled his time with his late partner Oliver Sacks and their shared obsession with this urban environment. In this volume, Hayes chooses his words precisely and carefully, tinting every inscribed page with a delicate pink wash. It is an unusual flourish, but one that suits the overarching romantic and subtly sorrowful, narrative. It reminds me of scented writing paper or the tissue you might use to wrap a gift destined for your significant other.

This understated blush also finds its way into one particular photograph, which bears the book’s title. It depicts an unremarkable brickwork building equipped with a classic New York fire escape. Unlike every other image, there is no sign of human life, save for an elegant tulle ballgown, hung over the railing. The careful manner in which it is suspended suggests that the absent owner must be preparing for an imminent, glamorous engagement and most likely hasn’t the space to safely hang her garment indoors. The scene is flooded with cinematic allusion: *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *West Side Story* and *An Affair to Remember* all spring to mind. In this single shot Hayes manages to evoke the unique personality of this city, one that is often cruel and full of drudgery, but always offers the promise of something unexpectedly beautiful, just around the corner.