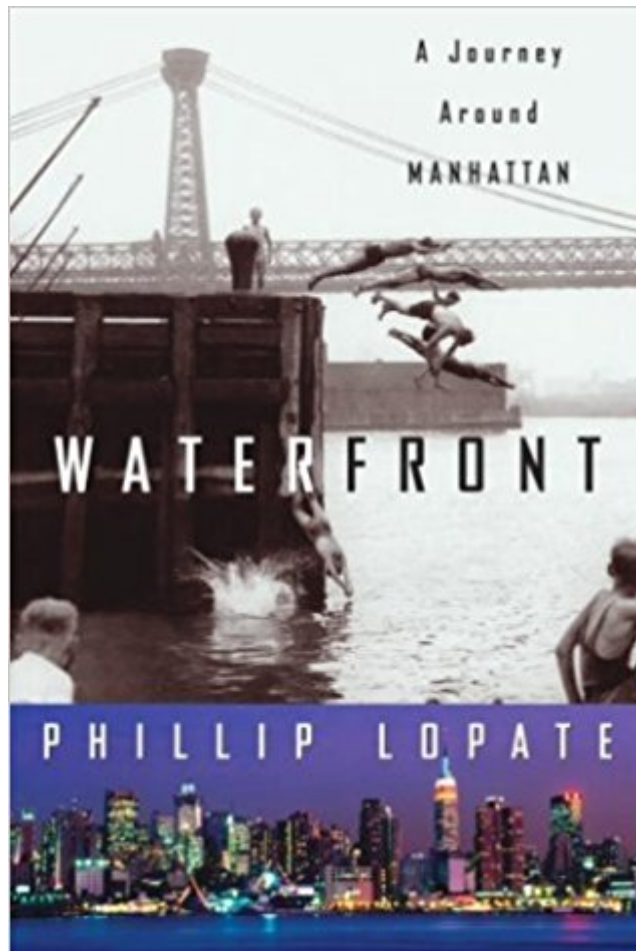




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# Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan (Crown Journeys)



## Synopsis

Fusing history, lore, politics, culture, and on-site adventures, esteemed essayist and author Phillip Lopate takes us on an exuberant, affectionate, and eye-opening excursion around Manhattan's shoreline. *Waterfront* captures the ever-changing character of New York in the best way possible: on a series of exploratory walks conducted by one of the city's most engaging and knowledgeable guides. Starting at the Battery and moving at a leisurely pace along the banks of the Hudson and East Rivers, Lopate describes the infrastructures, public spaces, and landmarks he encounters, along with fascinating insights into how they came to be. Unpeeling layers of myth and history, he reveals the economic, ecological, and political concerns that influenced the city's development, reporting on everything from the building of the Brooklyn Bridge to the latest projects dotting the shorelines. New York's waterfront has undergone a three-stage revaluation—from the world's largest port to an abandoned, seedy no-man's land to a highly desirable zone of parks and upscale retail and residential properties—each metamorphosis only incompletely shedding earlier associations. Physically, no area of New York City has changed as dramatically as the shoreline, thanks to natural processes and the use of landfill, dredging, and other interventions. Everywhere Phillip Lopate walked on the waterfront, he saw the present as a layered accumulation of older narratives. He set about his task by trying to read the city like a text. One textual layer is the past, going back to the Lenape Indians, Captain Kidd, and Melville's sailors; another is the present—whatever or whoever was popping up in his view at the moment; a third layer contains the constructed environment, the architecture or piers or parks currently along the shore; another layer still is his personal history, the memories recalled by visiting certain spots; yet another consists of the city's incredibly rich cultural record—the literature, films, and artwork that threw a reflecting light on the matter at hand; and finally, there is the invisible or imagined layer—what he thinks should be on the waterfront but is not. *Waterfront* is studded with short diversions where Lopate expounds on some of the greater issues, characters, and sites of Manhattan's shoreline. Be it a revisionist examination of Robert Moses, the effect of shipworms on the city's piers and foundations, the battle over Westway, the dream of public housing, the legacy of Joseph Mitchell, a wonderful passage about the longshoremen and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, or the meaning of the World Trade Center, Lopate punctuates this marvelous journey with the sights and sounds and words of a world like no other. A rich and impressive work by an undisputed master stylist, *Waterfront* takes its rightful place next to other literary classics of New York, such as E. B. White's *Here Is New York* and Joseph Mitchell's *Up in the Old Hotel*. It is an

unparalleled look at New York's landscape and history and an irresistible invitation to meander along its outermost edges.

## Book Information

Series: Crown Journeys

Hardcover: 432 pages

Publisher: Crown; 1 edition (February 24, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0609605054

ISBN-13: 978-0609605059

Product Dimensions: 6.6 x 1.3 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 16 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #325,550 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 in Books > Travel > United States > New York > New York City #254 in Books > Travel > United States > Northeast > Mid Atlantic #1168 in Books > Travel > Travel Writing

## Customer Reviews

Unlike other great cities, as eminent essayist and New York devotee Lopate (Getting Personal) observes, "Manhattan is almost pathologically averse to letting you wander to the river's edge and get close enough to touch the water." In this loose circumnavigation, first up the West Side from the Battery to Washington Heights and then up the East Side from South Street Seaport to Highbridge Park, he takes the reader up close on an information-packed journey; dipping, as the particular location suggests, into memoir, history, current events, marine biology, city planning, literature, architecture, interviews, biography, films, ecology and more. Anyone who relishes the company of Whitman, Melville, both Cranes, even Sara Teasdale, among many other celebrants of the New York waterfront, will particularly enjoy the vicarious sojourn. The trek includes Chelsea Piers and the U.N., Gracie Mansion and the Brooklyn Bridge, Captain Kidd and the Gulf filling station on East 23rd Street. "Sewage and salsa," Lopate invokes in describing Riverbank State Park, and that mix of the problematic and the delightful pervades his account, "saturated with history," of the waterfront's metamorphosis from "a working port, to an abandoned, seedy no-man's-land, to a highly desirable zone of parks plus upscale retail/residential." This is a demanding book; formidable in some of its detail, complex in its broad approach. Tourists will find it enriching but only borderline useful. Its ideal reader, a New Yorker who cares as deeply as

Lopate does about the waterfront as "the key to New York's destiny," will find it compelling as well as entertaining. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**\*Starred Review\*** A native New Yorker, avid walker, and impeccable stylist, Lopate, whose last book, *Getting Personal* [BKL N 15 03], showcases his signature essays, now presents his breakout book, an illuminating exploration of Manhattan's strangely neglected waterfront. As ardent a researcher as he is an intrepid wanderer, Lopate seamlessly blends witty and candid accounts of his ramblings along the bedraggled edge of this great metropolis with the fruits of his deep reading to create a fascinating narrative that encompasses historical, literary, cultural, aesthetic, and environmental perspectives. By citing sources as diverse as Melville and *On the Waterfront*, Lopate celebrates the old "rough-and-ready" waterfront with its spiny perpendicular piers radiating out into the Hudson River like bones from a fish's spine and the "raffish" dockworkers from the days before containerized shipping put an end to Manhattan's maritime vitality. He reconnoiters the entire West Side waterfront from the Battery to Washington Heights, encountering both serene beauty and outright blight, while along the East River he sneaks into the deteriorating interior of the Brooklyn Bridge and ventures out to a deserted island. Dispensing a bounty of curious facts and acute observations, Lopate explicates the interconnectivity of nature and culture, politics and public works, and offers excellent suggestions for reviving Manhattan's moribund waterfront. Step one is to make people care, a feat this compelling travelogue performs to perfection. Donna Seaman  
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Picked this up from my school's library to do some research initially and couldn't put it down. Who knew something so informative could also be so enjoyable? I grew up in NJ, but have spent a decent amount of time in New York City. This opened my eyes to a lot of different things and places that I never knew even existed. I loved it so much I ended up buying my own copy. Definitely worth it in my eyes.

This is a very thought-provoking book, but with a kind of sweetness that only Lopate can do. His voice is unmistakable as is his love for New York. It's still rare to find this kind of intellectual openness in most writers.

As a transplanted native New Yorker, this is my favorite book about NYC. It is the NYC that few

non-New Yorkers know and that appears to be fast disappearing in the land of million dollar condos. I found this while searching for information on the lower east side, where I grew up, and found a wonderful, engaging, and for me nostalgic visit to some of the old neighborhoods that built the city. It is rich with anecdote (who knew I was from the same neighborhood as Jimmy Durante, albeit some 50 years apart) and descriptions of both the cultural and political landscapes that described a transformative New York and its melting pot of neighborhoods and people.

As Lopate says, even though Manhattan is an island, its waterfront is under-utilized and, as a result, little-known -- even by native NYers. His wonderful book explores the mysteries and hidden treasures that surround our "island" and makes for a fascinating read. Although the book is about the waterfront it really is about SO MUCH MORE -- such as the infighting that surrounded the failed Westway project or the sociology of the former Fulton Fish Market (now relocated to The Bronx) or the architecture of Battery Park City. New Yorkers and wannabe-New Yorkers will love this book because it reveals more fascinating city lore. It's more fun than any Circle Line Cruise.

The author makes a key point that every major city celebrates their waterfron while New York turns inward. Unlike London, Dublin, Rome and Stockholm, New Yorkers hide from their origins. The waterfront becomes the land dominated by commuter highways, rotting docks, and landfills. Despite the negatives, the history disclosed here is rich making the book enjoyable, worthwhile and offers the hope that some of these blighted areas may become future recreation.

I wanted to like this. No, I wanted to love it. But I didn't, and I know why I never previously finished this book. This time, I was determined. I found his excurses really broke up the flow of his narrative, such as it was, and he really needed a better editor. There was just too much detail and too much stream of consciousness information. That said, I was heartened by the fact that he bailed on the Saunter about the same time as I did the first time. This book paints itself as a look at NYC's waterfront's history, but it's so dated that it isn't reflective of the current NYC waterfront. He began his journey not long after 9/11 and finished even the epilogue before NYC lost the bid for the 2012 Olympics. A lot of the west side greenway has been developed as has a chunk of the east side, and I'd love him to do this walk again to see if his opinion has changed. If he did, I'd like fewer excurses. The Robert Moses information - especially as it relates to LoMEX and Highbridge Park - is relevant, but a lot of the rest, especially re: the projects and North Brother Island's bird watching really belonged in another book. While his west side walk was cohesive and flowed, his east side walks

were choppy and changed direction. There's so much to be said for the East River shipping and early port history, but he only touched on that briefly when talking about the conversion of the old law tenements into the first housing projects. If you're looking for a book on Manhattan explorations, Pete Hammil's [book:Downtown: My Manhattan|891487] is much better.

This is a decidedly uneven book, and coming from such a talented writer it really seems a bit tossed off. There are the moments that make the book really worth reading, such as his elegiac descriptions of Manhattan's beauty, and notes on how our ruined industrial landscapes are so powerfully heartbreaking. Lovely. He is best at his descriptions of how the waterfront is tied deeply into the urbanity of all Manhattan. And while it's somewhat fruitless to wax nostalgic about the bustle of the port since it will never return to a working port city again, Lopate is wonderful on why it is powerfully tempting to do so. The book has its uneven moments, as the discussion of Westway is so flat and tedious you are amazed that any editor would have left it in the book. And Lopate sometimes does seem a little obtuse in what he passes by - what kind of grump would call the aircraft carrier Intrepid "maritime junk"? But he has accomplished a decidedly dubious achievement in writing perhaps the most self-absorbed, navel gazing recounting of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center that I've ever seen in print. In his brief three page discussion, he manages to use the words "I" "me" and "myself" exactly 102 times, quite an accomplishment. Incredibly he says that he walked in from Brooklyn to be closer to it but couldn't because of the ashes, and he was "envying everyone who had actually witnessed the buildings on fire and collapsing." Having been down there that morning I find this simply cretinous.

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