



City of dreams Above, a Times Square T-shirt vendor catches the mood. Left, McInerney in happier times with Tom Hanks and Angelina Jolie

“I like being in New York better than anywhere else. I get a jolt just being on the sidewalk”

But beyond this, when stories began to emerge of life imitating art, of McInerney himself eschewing the ivory tower for a dissolute New York lifestyle of glamour, models, fashion and substance abuse, most of us, somewhere within ourselves, wanted to be him. It was the Eighties and New York was the place to party. McInerney was young, gifted, good-looking and rich – suddenly writing novels seemed, well, sexy again. He was given clothes by Armani and went to openings in stretch limos. Not since Norman Mailer in the Fifties had a writer seemed to be selling so many books and having such a good time.

“There was a time when I was just out all the time, and as a sort of figure in New York it was easier to get laid than when I was a

struggling graduate student,” McInerney told me when I first met him several years ago. “It was amazing – not only did I get much better looking the day I published my first novel, but models would come up to me and pass me their phone numbers.” There were even stories of groupies palming McInerney envelopes of cocaine in a desperate attempt to be part of his scene.

In the Eighties, McInerney was Mr New York and the bad-boy ambassador of Gotham City. He wrote about the city and the city wrote about him. New York was for him “the set of a movie that never wraps” and he was as brash, bold and self-satisfied as the town that adopted him. “I like being in New York better than anywhere else,” he once said. “The energy comes in from the city and my

pulse rate goes up. I get a jolt through my shoes just being on the sidewalk.”

You also sense, sitting across from him at lunch, discussing the effect the events of 11 September have had on New York and its once jaded inhabitants, that it is also a very passionate love affair, and one that feeds both his life and work. Although he spent a part of the Nineties living with his third wife, Helen Bransford, in rural Tennessee, he moved back to New York in 1997 and has stayed since. He has also returned to the city repeatedly in his books, first with *Story of My Life*, a late-Eighties New York picaresque party novel seen through the eyes of playful provocateur Alison Poole, in *Brightness Falls*, his epitaph to the end of a marriage, the greed decade and the Wall Street crash, and most recently in *Model Behaviour*, a comic novel set in the bankrupt worlds of celebrity, fashion and table dancing.

“I think I have this romantic belief in the infinite promise of the city, of the idea of self-invention and of some kind of glory around the next corner – or the one just beyond that. I get drawn back to it time and time again. I guess I’ve just decided that New York is a landscape to which my imagination responds.”



“I’ve never felt so useless. I wasn’t a skilled worker or a doctor – I couldn’t even cook”

3. STORY OF MY LIFE

Jay McInerney was born in Connecticut in 1955. Raised a Catholic, he had a straight, solidly middle-class upbringing that valued education and discipline. His background was privileged yet peripatetic; his father, an executive of the Bowater paper company, was transferred to a different office – in the US, Canada, Europe – almost every year. Jay attended 18 separate schools before college, his longest stay being at Oxshott in Surrey, where he lived, with his two younger brothers, between the ages of seven and nine.

This nomadic life made him forever the new boy, and he recognises it has left its mark. “I was always trying to ingratiate myself, trying to work my way in and become part of a group, and the trouble with that kind of formative experience is you actually don’t ever get over it,” he says. “Long after I should have felt that I belonged, that I was in rather than out, I continued to behave as if I didn’t and wasn’t, as if I was the guy at the back of class telling jokes and trying to impress everyone.”

It’s a candid admission that helps to explain much of his attitude and behaviour, both at the time and subsequently. He often survived by being cold, brattish, wilful and reckless. And he retreated to the safer, boundless world of books, deciding early on that writing was his calling, with Dylan Thomas becoming his first loose-living literary hero.

After studying philosophy and economics at university, he went on a Princeton scholarship to Japan, where he spent a few hours a week teaching and many more writing and partying. The time led to his second novel, *Ransom*, set mostly in the country, and, at 24, to his marriage to Eurasian model Linda Rossiter. She left him after just four months.

In 1979, he moved to New York and worked briefly and disastrously as a fact checker at *The New Yorker*; it would provide much of the background material for *Bright Lights*. He also met his literary mentor, novelist Raymond Carver, who read some of McInerney’s short stories and encouraged him to study creative writing with him at Syracuse University. It was here that he met his second wife, Merry Redmond, a philosophy postgraduate.

His second marriage was in some ways a victim of the runaway success of McInerney’s debut novel. Moving back to New York, the couple became increasingly estranged as

Jay began to exploit and pursue the rewards of his newfound fame. “After a while, I couldn’t stand the parties any longer,” she once said. “There was something sort of sad for me watching Jay run into the bathroom with a couple of girls.”

In 1987, McInerney left Redmond for Marla Hanson, a model whose career had ended violently after she was slashed in the face with a knife during a street attack. Redmond attempted suicide and spent some time in a psychiatric hospital – the bill was paid by McInerney.

Four years later, Hanson left him. Shortly after, McInerney started dating jewellery designer Helen Bransford; three weeks later, they were married. Seven years his senior, 43-year-old Bransford was a “Southern belle”, the daughter of a grand old-money family from Nashville. The couple abandoned New York for a country ranch in Tennessee, where they planned to have children. When Bransford was unable to conceive, the solution was worthy of one of McInerney’s wildest flights of fancy: Helen found a friend, a country and western singer called Jesse, who was willing to donate eggs, and a surrogate mother, a local waitress whom she paid \$15,000. Using Jay’s sperm, in 1995 the trio created twins, Maisie and John Barrett McInerney III, who were born three months prematurely, weighing one-and-a-half pounds, but survived. A third died in the womb. Bransford then wrote an account of the saga for *US Vogue*.

Two years later, she wrote *Welcome to Your Facelift*, a book about her cosmetic surgery. In it she established a link, a “trigger event”, between her experiences and their genesis: McInerney returning from interviewing Julia Roberts to remark, among other things, “I told her all about you. Well, everything but your age.”

Growing dissatisfied with country life, McInerney began to spend more and more time back in their apartment in Manhattan. In 2000, they separated. He moved downtown and resumed his New York lifestyle, albeit more modestly.

At one point earlier this year, he was linked to model Irina Panteva, but it didn’t last. What is it with McInerney and models?

“What is it with any male heterosexual and beautiful women?” he replies with his boyish laugh. “Am I in any way unusual in having a certain physiological response?”

ALL IN A JAY’S WORK



BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY (1985)

The brilliant, million-selling debut. Fresh, fast-paced and affecting, it defined a generation. Lots of drugs, parties, and twenty-something angst. Made into a terrible film, with Michael J Fox tragically miscast as the hero.



RANSOM (1986)

The difficult second novel. Set in Japan, this is the story of an alienated American and his search for the answers. Plenty of karate, mystical promise and young, rootless expats. Nice twist in the tale, but far from successful.



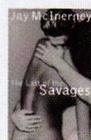
STORY OF MY LIFE (1988)

A kind of female *Bright Lights*, narrated by strung-out postmodern party girl Alison Poole, who gets lost in a vortex of sex, drugs and designer clothes. She is aimless and acerbic, yet energetically and comically engaging.



BRIGHTNESS FALLS (1992)

An Eighties morality tale that explores the conflicts between marriage, friendship, commerce and success. A kind of *Bonfire of the Vanities* with funnier lines and a bigger heart. Perhaps McInerney’s best book.



THE LAST OF THE SAVAGES (1996)

A sweeping study, set in the South, which grapples with Big Themes of racism, history, sexuality and status. Good on cultural change and the nature of male friendship, but over-ambitious and largely unconvincing.



MODEL BEHAVIOUR (1998)

McInerney’s return to the demi-monde of modern Manhattan. The story of a failing magazine celebrity profile writer and his doomed relationship with his supermodel girlfriend. Smart, stylish, well-observed, but a step back.



HOW IT ENDED (2000)

Ten sardonic short stories, most written many years ago, that explore dark undercurrents and fragmented lives through a great cast of characters. Uneven, but good on wised-up urban excess.

All published by Bloomsbury, except *Bright Lights, Big City*, which is published by Penguin



Gone, but not forgotten

Jay McInerney at the corner of 6th Avenue and W13 Street: "This was one of the famous views of New York. From here, this street and these buildings offered the classic framing of the Twin Towers"

"The people who came here and did this in some way agree with me about New York being the centre of the world"

Just a few weeks before I see him, there is a juicy story in the New York gossip columns about his current love life. Writing a sexy email to Indian girlfriend Gitu Ramani (an ex-model), McInerney managed to send it instead to his other paramour, South African film executive Jeanine Pepler. The women got in touch with each other and set Jay up by each phoning him with the other listening in on an extension. To both, in turn, he pledged exclusive love and allegiance. "At least no one can accuse me of being a smooth operator," he is reported to have said.

4. ENOUGH ROPE

The problem with the interesting life and entertaining times of Jay McInerney is that they have often obscured his work. In fact, to his many critics and detractors they have become one and the same – to the detriment

of both. Too often, it is argued, the writer has been in the news for reasons that undermine and confuse the perception and literary merit of his novels. It feeds the idea that McInerney is overrated and over-exposed, that he is a shallow, self-aggrandising Zeitgeist who has been consumed by his own flame.

In some ways, this is a function of the prevailing obsession with celebrity – and McInerney remains a committed player in New York society – and with a very puritanical view of the role of the novelist. Some observers plainly do not approve of writers becoming too visible, rich, glamorous or sexually successful; for them the hermetic life is the appropriate model. As Norman Mailer, a friend and supporter of McInerney's for many years, once commented: "My feeling is that young writers really have two choices: one is the ivory tower and the other is the

media field." McInerney has resolutely and unashamedly chosen a public role, and sometimes a very rock'n'roll one at that. It has led to a certain resentment.

"I think at times I behaved heedlessly and a little self-importantly, and I think I had a certain exuberance that sometimes came across as arrogance," he confesses. "I've done a lot of stupid things that have helped to perpetuate and amplify that perception, and I certainly take responsibility for providing my enemies with ample ammunition. In fact sometimes, you know, I've Federal Expressed it to them."

McInerney knows the price and ambivalence of his own celebrity, that he has been a protagonist in its making, that he has courted and collaborated in his fame. He is aware that as a satirist he can appear too close to his subject matter, that he has been guilty of doing too much of what Hazlitt referred to as "writing to the moment". As one critic remarked: "If you write about gloss too much it will come off on your hands."

But mostly it has not stopped him doing it; he likes to be actively involved in city life and, I think, in a childlike way, he finds it hard to say no. Perhaps, like most of us, he simply needs the attention and approval. Certainly his experiences have fed and fuelled his work. "I'm the kind of writer who has to make a laboratory out of myself to get the desired result," he once said. "I don't want to keep blowing up the test tubes, but I do want an explosion."

But it is also true that he has often been greeted with hostility in the press, and has been wilfully misrepresented. In conversation, he responds to an impressive range of subjects, from fine wine to pop culture, and is thoughtful and learned about literature. It is often overlooked that his writing has always attempted to examine the serious issues beneath the superficial, that its strength lies in vigorous prose and wisecracked dialogue, in sharp characterisation, razor-edged humour, mordant observations on failed relationships and ambitions, and in the hubris of modern city life. Jay McInerney may not have fulfilled the promise of *Bright Lights*, and he is no Irving, Roth, Bellow or DeLillo, but he is not as bad a novelist as some of his press cuttings might have you believe.

"OK, I learned the hard way and I made a lot of mistakes, but none of them ➔ 250

were fatal and terribly harmful to anyone else. The person I hurt the worst was myself. And I think I was pushed into hanging myself at every possible opportunity. I've often thought that if I write an autobiography, I'll call it *Enough Rope*."

5. HOW IT ENDED

McInerney's immediate problem, however, is somewhat more acute. For the past few years he has been working on a novel, largely satirical, dealing broadly with themes of parenthood, family and marriage as seen through the lives of six main characters in New York from the mid-Nineties to the present. The events of 11 September have not only ruptured the narrative, they have rendered its backdrop obsolete.

"I think the New York that I've been writing about for all these years has in some way ceased to exist – it's almost as if when the towers came down, a certain New York disappeared forever," he says. "Our underlying faith in the solidity of the landscape, and of all the little transactions of the social contract, have now come into question. Suddenly, the very urban ideal, the concentration of this mass of humanity, and the verticality of our architecture make us tremendously vulnerable. I can't imagine feeling the same way about the city again."

As much as American reality always outstrips the imagination (as Ian McEwan has written), it is not overstating the case to assert that McInerney's work has often contained an inherent critique of the prevailing culture in America and hinted at its potential downfall. In *Brightness Falls*, for example, Corrine, a stockbroker who acts as the conscience of the novel (and who, coincidentally, volunteers to work at a downtown soup kitchen) is held to possess the following portents: "Lately it seemed to her that the horsemen of the apocalypse were saddling up, that something was coming to rip huge holes in the gaudy stage sets of Ronald McDonald Reaganland."

In his new, unfinished novel, the first chapter ends with a lone Pakistani terrorist attacking a glitzy benefit party in a Planet Hollywood-type café in Manhattan. It is full of New York and Hollywood high society and the bomb kills a number of people. In the novel, it is framed as an implicit attack on the global hegemony of American popular culture and economic power.

"I often imagined a course of events that would precipitate the end of the mindless prosperity of the Nineties," says McInerney. "Like Corrine, I felt that New York was almost too good to be true, that, alongside the boundless narcissism and optimism of some of my characters, there was a kind of anxiety about what the price would be, about

when the check was coming and how bad it was going to be. Not that I would pretend prescience for a minute. I was just a novelist trying to come up with a dramatic and unlikely idea for the end of the party. My imagination was clearly so far behind what eventually transpired."

It is true, however, that the novel was to mark a departure for McInerney. Having seen the break-up of his own marriage with Helen Bransford, gone through a self-confessed slow-burning mid-life crisis, and suffered throughout 1999 and 2000 with writer's block (the only new work we have seen since *Model Behaviour* in 1998 is a collection of mostly previously published short stories titled, appropriately enough, *How It Ended*), Jay was ripe for change. He was ready to embrace a new sensibility as a writer. Once referred to by some of his friends as "Peter Pan", at the age of 46 he was finally ready, perhaps, to grow up and take himself more seriously.

"This catastrophe will have an enduring impact. Post-war American prosperity, peace and blissful isolation was too good to be true. And now that is over."

"I guess I'd been struggling towards some new sense of identity as a writer, away from the signature manner of my youth," he says. "When I was a young man I wrote as a young man, and I wrote with a young man's innocence, energy, even foolishness. But that work has been evolving. Becoming a father changed me as much as anything."

For McInerney at least, the horrors of 11 September have accelerated that process. "I know that sooner or later I'll go back to some of those premieres and cocktail parties, but my taste for writing about frivolous prelapsarian things had pretty much gone already, to tell you the truth. I'm so over the idea of the latest whatever at the moment."

6. MODEL BEHAVIOUR

On my last day in New York with McInerney, we head back down to Bowling Green Park to deliver some food to the soup kitchen. Jay is back in casual gear, dressed in old Nike trainers, jeans and a Barbour-style coat, and he has persuaded a friend, an Italian restaurant owner in the West Village, to supply 50 pasta meals to the kitchen for lunch. We wait

at the tent to enlist a police or army driver to help pick up the food and escort us back.

Eventually, though, we are taken down there by one of the original organisers of the kitchen, a dynamic and determined union carpenter and nightclub manager named Bruce Grulikshes. Bruce has been working at Ground Zero since soon after the attacks, driving down to the site from his apartment in Brooklyn. For the next four days he worked alongside the fire fighters and rescue teams, passing along buckets of debris, sometimes even digging at the rubble with his hands. When he needed to rest he slept in his jeep.

"You don't want to know what I found and what I saw," he tells us, glassy-eyed, as we drive along the East River. Exhausted and emotional, he is a frontline personification of the effect the attack of "nine-eleven-zero-one" has had on the city and its inhabitants. "I've seen bodies, but mostly I've seen body parts. You can't really know what it's like till you've witnessed it. People are traumatised just seeing it on TV, but it's the people working down there with all that horror that I feel for. No one is being saved from that site and from those buildings – Ground Zero is a cemetery. And I've seen enough death to last five lifetimes."

It turns out that Bruce recognises Jay and that their paths crossed, many years ago, when Bruce was running some of Manhattan's hipper nightclubs. In the context of their current encounter, the acquaintance is acknowledged sheepishly, and with a touch of embarrassed guilt. Instead of talking about the past, they discuss the effect going into Ground Zero has had on the soup kitchen volunteers.

"The people I've taken in there are changed by the reality of what they've seen," Bruce says, unequivocally. "They go in almost spunky, but they come out very quiet, very reflective. Still, I admire them for doing something, you know, for getting involved. It's better than just sitting there feeling helpless and hopeless."

After the food has been delivered and Jay has set up his next shift, we ride uptown on the subway. On the way, I realise that Bruce's comments help to explain McInerney's involvement at the soup kitchen. Easy as it is to imagine his more vocal critics dismissing his actions as naive and vulgarly self-publicising – especially when they are recorded (by him) in *The Guardian* and now in this magazine – having spent these days with him, I have to say that I found his motives honourable. While he was working, he was mostly quiet and industrious; there was no false sincerity.

McInerney has always been a restless participant in – rather than spectator of – New York and its recent history, and you sense that he has taken this tragedy ► 255

very personally, that he and his home have in some way been violated. In contrast to the super-slick New Yorker that I met three years ago in London, McInerney is distracted, detached and unfocused – “I’m a bit frazzled”, he confesses. But you also sense his real anger and feeling of impotence at this unprecedented event. “I’ve never felt so useless, and never been so unhappy about the vocation I had chosen and my lack of other skills as I did after 11 September,” he says, chuckling. “I couldn’t weld, I wasn’t a skilled worker or a doctor – I couldn’t even cook and send down supplies. Suddenly it seemed that to be a fireman or policeman was the far more noble thing.”

Emerging back at Union Square, we are ourselves a little numbed and deferential in front of Bruce’s energy and commitment; it was like spending time with a battle-scarred war hero. “I don’t feel like eating some fancy organic vegetables after that,” says Jay. “Let’s go and eat burgers.”

We retire to another of his long-standing neighbourhood favourites, the Old Town Bar and Restaurant, where inevitably our conversation returns to the impact of the attacks on Manhattan. “It’s strange, because these events have almost reconfirmed my love affair with New York,” he says, as we

sit among the Guinness signs and maps of Ireland. “I feel that as a chronicler of one’s times and generation I always had the sense that this city was where the culture was being forged and shaped more than any other place I could identify. And I’m afraid to say this, but if anything, the events of 11 September confirm that, in a terrible way, it is no accident that these planes hit New York. The people who came here and did this in some way agree with me about New York being the centre of the world.”

But does he think, now that the centre of the world is no longer invincible, that there will be any lasting change? “Maybe I’m overestimating the attention span of the American people, and maybe I’m being optimistic, because I don’t think we’re all going to start loving each other or that Americans are going to suddenly adopt, for example, an enlightened and noble foreign policy, but I think this catastrophe will have an enduring impact.

“This is a wake-up call. New York, I expect, is going to go into a relative decline, but to me that’s always been part of the story and one that I want to see if I can understand. But post-war American prosperity, peace and blissful isolation was too good to be true. And now that is over. My view, and everything else, has been forever altered.” 📍