

Rutherford's new novel tells New York's story

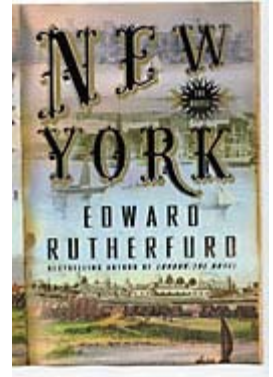
Written by Justin Reynolds

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To the Lenape Indians, it was *Manna Hata*. To the Dutch, New Amsterdam. To the English — and now to the world — New York City.

But how exactly did the relatively small island Peter Minuit purchased in 1626, for next to nothing, become one of the most — if not the most — powerful and influential cities mankind has ever seen?

In his seventh novel, *New York*, published by Doubleday last month, best-selling author Edward Rutherford — known for weaving together epic tales of historical fiction, as seen through the eyes of a number of families — traces the history of the city from 1664 to the present day. Mr. Rutherford explores the city's landscapes through the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, Ellis Island and World War II, among other things, ultimately climaxing with the attacks of September 11.



In the book, Mr. Rutherford follows families of different ethnicities through the centuries. While the families themselves are fictional, the events happening around them and the people associated with those events are indeed real.

"It has been necessary to invent very little in terms of historic events during the course of this narrative," Mr. Rutherford writes in his novel's preface. "Here and there, to maintain the narrative flow, there are a few simplifications of complex historical sequence or detail, but none, I believe, that misrepresent the general historic record."

When asked to describe his book, the author responded quite succinctly: "The book is about freedom."

For Mr. Rutherford, who's previously written about England, Ireland and Russia, *New York* — which debuted 14th on the New York Times Bestseller's List — is his first stab at America.

"My kids are born and bred New Yorkers," he said, "so the future of the family is there."

While the 445 years the novel covers is a considerable amount of time, Mr. Rutherford's previous novels have greatly eclipsed that span; for example, his first novel, *Sarum*, delves into 10,000 years of England's history. Mr. Rutherford, who was born in England and owns a home in Fairfield County, said for New York, the amount of research material available was tremendous compared to working on a prehistoric novel like *Sarum*. The difficulty was covering the 445 years in 860 pages.

"In the case of New York, the [written] record is absolutely huge. There's immensely detailed resources," he said. "I used primary sources and very, very good secondary sources." While tracing immigration, for example, Mr. Rutherford said he could look at ships' manifests to see the names and origins of actual families that arrived on Ellis Island.

Mr. Rutherford wrote his first synopsis of the book in 1991.

"I think I felt I needed more time [with the structuring of the novel]," he said. "I think the difficulty is, you have so many different communities, which are so diverse. How do you handle them? The wave of immigration flows coming in is very different. You have people arriving at the place in different points in history."

During the two-and-a-half total years it took him to put the book together — "very quick for a book that size" — Mr. Rutherford said he was exposed to many captivating historical tidbits.

"I was amused to discover a number of things," he said. "I was amazed by how corrupt the city was from the start of its history. A number of Dutch governors, and most, not all, of the British governors basically came here to rip the place off."

Then there's Tammany Hall and William "Boss" Tweed, he said.

"They made the British governors look like saints."

Another remarkable facet of New York's history, Mr. Rutherford said, was that up until 1775 and 1776, patriots thought themselves as British.

"These guys were saying, 'Why aren't we getting the rights we inherit as freeborn Englishmen?'" he said. "If King George had been wise, the capital of the British Empire might actually be New York now, not London."

Mr. Rutherford said he was also fascinated by how financial crises repeat themselves. He spoke about the dot-com bubble and the most recent financial meltdown.

"Similar crises have been going on since the early 1700s," he said. "The greatest bubble ever was the great South Sea Bubble, in London, of 1720."

Mr. Rutherford said the event he found particularly fascinating — and almost completely parallel to modern times — was J.P. Morgan's role in the aftermath of the Wall Street Panic of 1907.

"He came out of retirement and on his personal authority, was able to stop the panic," he said. "His personal authority, plus — note this — plus the U.S. government put in his hands, to do with as he wished, the then-staggering sum of \$30 million."

Mr. Rutherford said that after the panic, many people thought it was in the country's best interest to regulate Wall Street, as those who worked there were "suffused with greed."

"Banks soon persuaded the government that they should regulate themselves," he said.

The lesson in all this?

"If there's one thing I've learned in my books," Mr. Rutherford said, "it's that the only way we learn is if we remember some history."

New York is a novel of 31 chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter covers a specific moment in time. Naturally, weaving it all together, fluidly, is an arduous task.

"You have to get the architecture right, right from the original synopsis, which has to be pretty detailed, otherwise [the novel] would just fall apart," Mr. Rutherford said. "Try winging it, and you'll get in such trouble. It is like building a big building. It has to have shape, it has to have form, it has to have repeating themes. It has to be there in some sense as a whole when you start."

Why should people read his book?

"I hope it's a damn good story, and entertaining," he said. "I hope that they will be moved as I was moved, or I couldn't have written it."

For more information on Mr. Rutherford, visit his Web site: edwardrutherford.com.

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