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Postcard from Brooklyn

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Brooklyn was just the name of a girl in my Manhattan school. I never came to Brooklyn unless we went to Bay Ridge to eat in Briones. Bay Ridge is the setting of *Saturday Night Fever* (Stayin' alive, stayin' alive...). Briones is where I discovered carbonara and Caesar's salad and where, in hushed reference to a small dining room at the rear, I first heard the word Mafia.

New York City is not just Manhattan. The Big Apple has five boroughs. Brooklyn was always the borough that was far cooler than Queens, closer than Staten Island, safer than the Bronx, and like them all, second-class to THE city, the isle of Manhattan.

But Brooklyn's important. If it hadn't been annexed to New York City in 1898, it would now be the fifth largest city in the United States, population-wise. There's also the statistic that says that one out of ten (or is it six?) Americans can trace their roots back to it. Revolutionary War skirmishes were fought in Brooklyn Heights. Incidentally, Brooklyn may not be Manhattan, but the Brooklyn Heights promenade offers, hands down, the best available view of downtown Manhattan.

During the time that my family frequented Briones, in the early 70s, Brooklyn was getting trendy, or getting trendy again. With Manhattan getting so expensive, young people were reclaiming the lovely townhouses, mostly brownstones, that prosperous Italian and Jewish families had built at the turn of the century. Brooklyn Heights was first to "re-gentrify." Since gentrification smacks of Jane Austen, I prefer to say "yuppify."

But yuppies were not alone in raising or re-raising the status of Brooklyn. Artists found cheap lofts in Williamsburg and writers flocked to Park Slope. Park Slope is home to many many contemporary writers including Jonathan Franzen, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Paul Auster, to mention only those I've read. Any Paul Auster fan has in their imagination walked their dog in Prospect Park. Any Paul Auster fan knows that Brooklyn is hip, and that it's hick not to know it.

As a matter of fact, writers always abounded in Brooklyn. Norman Mailer was brought up in Brooklyn. So was Henry Miller. Joseph Heller was born and raised in Brooklyn.

Or Brooklyn inspired writers. Walt Whitman wrote of the Brooklyn waterfront in his classic poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* is set in Flatbush, just off Prospect Park. Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* is also set in Brooklyn. The bridge is, of course, the Brooklyn Bridge, the oldest and most gorgeous of New York bridges.

Not to mention movies like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and *She's Gotta Have It*.

Finally, Prospect Park may not be Central Park but it was designed by the same Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux who did the latter. And the Brooklyn Museum (located off Prospect Park) may not be the Metropolitan Museum of Art (located off Central Park) but it dared to show shocking contemporary works from London's Saatchi Gallery, defying Mayor Giuliani. Brooklyn's naughty, Brooklyn's cool.

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