

Brooklynite Serves up 'Street Smarts'

By ROBERT COHEN

"Whatever gave you the *chutzpah* to think you had something to say about New York?" Author Saul Miller says many people asked him this question after the publication of *New York City Street Smarts*, and part of the pleasure of reading it, for a native New Yorker, is taking up these same cudgels. It would be unseemly for a 12-year New Yorker like Miller (he's lived in Brooklyn for the last 8½ years) not to have opinions about everything — and it would be equally out of character for a New York reader not to challenge those opinions.

Billed as "an untraditional guidebook," *Street Smarts* attempts, in the author's words, to give its readers an idea of "what it would be like to live, work and play" in New York — and, in particular, to "capture the feel of its neighborhoods." It does both fairly well, and might be a good gift for a newcomer or temporary visitor — perhaps in addition to or in lieu of a personal escort around town. It's also a good browse for a New Yorker who knows his or her own neighborhood but doesn't know other parts of the city well.

The best thing about the book is Miller's chatty, breezy tone and consistent vein of wry, pleasantly barbed humor. His book frequently fulfills the promise of its title and delivers all sorts of "inside" stuff, from an illustrated guide to reading the *New York Times* on the subway (my father taught me, but most non-natives just don't seem to get the hang of it) to the charming compendium of New York usages and locutions in the glossary. The author is enough of a local to know that when a Brooklyn or Queens resident says, "I'm going to New York," s/he means they're going into Manhattan — a usage that might well bewilder a newcomer.

Recent History, Not Old Facts

There are informative discussions of recent local politics — usually Manhattan-centered, like the never-ending Westway saga — on the eminently sensible assumption that it is recent history, rather than interesting facts about the Dutch settlement, that will help a stranger understand, interpret and cope with what he or she observes and encounters in New York. In "The Facts of City Life" (Part One of Two) *Street Smarts* offers sensible

discussions of crime, housing, schools, subways and the cost of living here — all laced with a New Yorker's typically perverse humor — plus chapters on restaurants, the arts, and other leisure-time activities. There are useful guides to where to find good movie and theater listings, and provocative comments about the relationships said to hold at one time or another between allegiance to a given New York professional ball club — especially in the Dodgers/Giants/Yankees era — and the rooster's politics.

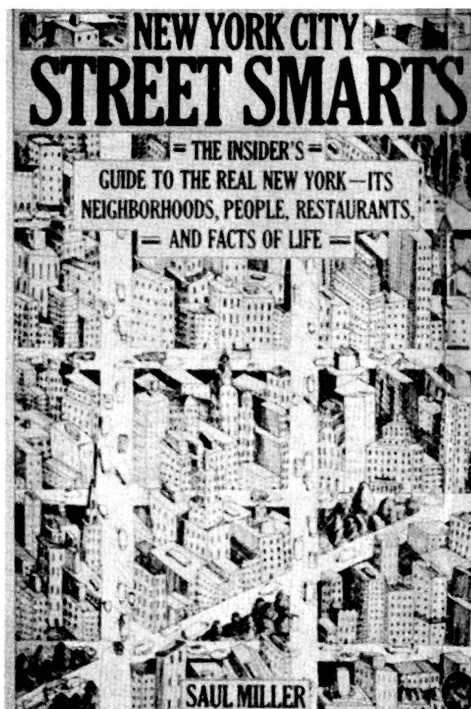
These sections on our cultural life and amenities, however, also reflect some of *Street Smarts*'s worst omissions. For a book that purports to give readers "something New Yorkers take years to acquire: savvy," its treatment of the media is astonishingly shallow. There's a fine discussion of newspapers, but virtually none of magazines, and almost no mention of local writers, whom New Yorkers read. I wish the author had introduced his readers to a distinctively New York character like Jimmy Breslin, or a quintessentially street-smart New York writer like Pete Hamill. (He's cited — in the uninspired, unintelligent and thoroughly unuseful index — only in connection with his having lived with Shirley MacLaine for a while in Park Slope.)

Even more surprisingly, there's virtually not a single reference to television and radio: to Who's Who in local TV news, or the variety (and limitations) or radio programming in New York. The chapter entitled "Newspapers" should have been called "Media," and should have been much larger.

There are other deficiencies in the book's cultural coverage: no reference, for example, to the city's rich variety of live folk music and folk dancing, or to bicyclists' and hikers' tour groups. There's virtually nothing about the city's religious life — a reflection, I think, of the author's largely unacknowledged political and life-style biases. And the author shouldn't constantly talk of "we" New Yorkers doing, liking, or thinking anything: our diversity is one of our greatest strengths.

Inspired By His Favorite Restaurant

Aside from such matters of tone, though, the discussion in Part Two of the neighborhoods of New York — all of Manhattan's, from the financial district to Inwood, and a



"New York City Street Smarts," published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$9.95, soft-cover. Available at the Community Book Store on Seventh Avenue.

sampling of those in the outer boroughs — is generally pleasant and informative. Best are the introductory descriptions of each neighborhood — the one-page precis

of Murray Hill is as piquant a summary as one could ask for — and the off-the-tourist-beaten-path recommendations. The author's suggestions of places to eat in the various neighborhoods strike me as consistently judicious, and he knows many of the *unobvious* places (though not the good restaurant-style diners in the outer boroughs.) This is perhaps not surprising, since we learn in the second sentence of the book that the Miller's reason for writing *Street Smarts* was to share his favorite restaurant with readers. (The restaurant, Stella's in Coney Island, was destroyed in a fire soon after he started his research.)

Inevitably, I feel that the author slighted Brooklyn — though most guidebooks wouldn't have done as well as he did by us. (My home borough of Queens received fewer than one-third of the pages given to Brooklyn, though the selection of what to cover there seems to me excellent.) The reader is taken on a quick tour, as it were, through Brooklyn Heights, the Slope, Crown Heights, the Prospect Park South section of Flatbush, and Brighton Beach. (The paragraph on Brighton Beach Avenue made me positively hungry for deli food, dairy food, fish; even vegetables.) The author missed a chance to enlighten his readers, I think, by not including the Borough Park section, which reflects both an interesting ethnic mix and an interestingly changing neighborhood; such a discussion would also have introduced readers to the Sunday-is-shopping-day lifestyle evident on Thirteenth Avenue.

Necessarily, the selection of places worth mentioning is bound to seem, and be, somewhat arbitrary. The inclusion of the Flatbush mansions on Buckingham and Albemarle roads is an inspired choice — but the omission of any mention of Ocean Parkway seems indefensible.

Miller is himself not a native Brooklynite, and his own story is intriguing. His grandparents lived in Bensonhurst, and he considers himself "perhaps the only example of someone who grew up in Connecticut and spent summers in Brooklyn." Miller is now a freelance writer and full-time father (his next book will be about fathering) living with his wife, Alice, and his "verbally precocious" 3½-year-old son in Carroll Gardens.

His book is like a good opening volley in a Park Slope bar — and it's fun arguing with him, learning from him — and occasionally telling him he's full of it.