Books

From the Bronx to Battery

Bronx native Jerome Charyn’s new novel, *Johnny One-Eye*, captures the spirit of Manhattan in the ’70s — the 1770s, that is.

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He’s an archetypal figure in 20th-century urban American culture, and his story goes something like this: A highly sensitive boy, suffering from the intellectual privation and brutality of his tough immigrant neighborhood, escapes, with the help of movies and comic books, into his own wild imagination. Invariably, the boy grows up to be some kind of ingenious creative artist.

That’s been the fate of Jerome Charyn ’59CC, who emerged from the rough streets of the postwar Bronx — and from the darkness of the Loew’s Paradise on the Grand Concourse — to become a novelist of remarkable invention and versatility. He has written more than 30 books, ranging from memoir (*Bronx Boy)* to detective novels (Charyn’s brother, Harvey, was a homicide detective) to historical novels on such topics as the FDR White House (*The Franklin Scare*), Wild Bill Hickok (*Darlin’ Bill*), and Polish immigrants in New York (*Panna Maria*). In 2005, his novel *The Green Lantern: A Romance of Stalinist Russia*, about an acting troupe in Moscow that defies Soviet bans to perform *King Lear*, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Charyn has also authored a collection of essays on Ping-Pong called *Sizzling Chops and Devilish Spins* (he’s a tournament player), inked a short, impressionistic biography of Isaac Babel, and parlayed his childhood obsession with comic books into successful collaborations with illustrators on several *bandes dessinées*, or graphic novels.

In his new book, *Johnny One-Eye* (Norton, 2008), a picaresque tale of the American Revolution set in colonial Manhattan, Charyn digs deep into his Columbia roots. The book’s hero and narrator is a young, eye-patch-wearing spy named John Stocking, a former student at King’s College, which “sat like a citadel on our highest hill” before George Washington “shut it down and turned it into an army barracks.”

The novel, whose colorful pageant of players includes Washington, Benedict Arnold, and fellow King’s College habitué Alexander Hamilton, is dedicated to the late Columbia history professor James Shenton ’49CC, whom Charyn calls “an absolutely incredible teacher,” whose passionate lectures were “like hand grenades exploding in every class.” Charyn had Shenton for two semesters of Contempo rary Civilization. “He was very rigorous,” Charyn says, “but he allowed us the freedom of our own creativity, which was very important to me.”

That creative freedom is on full display in *Johnny One-Eye*, which is marked by exuberant language, pistol shots of comedy, lively characters, and a merry disregard for the banal depictions of literary realism. And in his detailed portrait of a Manhattan brimming with horses, harlots, pirates, redcoats, and grog houses, Charyn again proves himself a rigorous historian in his own right.

Charyn divides his time between New York and France, where he is Distin - guished Professor of Film Studies at the American University of Paris. His love for teaching also can be traced back to Columbia and Shenton.

“Writing obsessed my whole life, but I never considered it a profession,” Charyn says. “Jim Shenton made me feel that teaching college was the very best profession that one could have.”

Columbia is pleased to present the opening chapter of *Johnny One-Eye*.

Manhattan, April 1776

It was the very mask of war. General Sir William Howe, the British commander in chief, had disappeared with his armada of men and battleships. There was not a redcoat to be found in all the colonies, not even a drummer boy. And so there was a strange calm, a profound and disturbing silence instead of cannon fire.

George Washington had arrived in Manhattan but a few weeks ago on his white horse. Both rebels and Loyalists were in awe of the Continental Army’s commander in chief, who sat in his saddle with the insouciance of a king. He was the tallest man on our island, and seemed everywhere at once, inspecting the works near Fort George, crossing with his horse on the barge to Brooklyn so that he could inspect our works at Brooklyn Heights.

Every street of Manhattan had been turned into a ditch—our island was now an armed camp. Black stevedores dug beside militiamen. Women and children could not be found. We waited in a kind of fractured peace for the sound of a squall—the wind that would bring the British. General Howe could have but one objective: to drive Washington out of Manhattan, or better still, to break him and his army on the island itself and thus bring a quick death to the rebellion.

The rebels’ hopes hinged on this very man, the farmer-soldier from Virginia. And the only time he ever appeared without his horse was when he visited Holy Ground, a street of brothels so named because of its proximity to St. Paul’s Chapel; hence its whores were known as nuns. The commander in chief was not a whoremonger. But he did have a secret vice—he loved to gamble. He would come to Holy Ground and its most celebrated brothel, the Queen’s Yard, when he was mortally tired and could not sleep. He would play vingt-et-un—Manhattan blackjack—a game that might have been born at this brothel. He would lose his britches every third or fourth night, but the nuns who presided over vingt-et-un always returned his coins and his britches to the commander in chief. And since he never sat at the table with a single

bodyguard, the nuns themselves would often drive him back to headquarters, a little north of Holy Ground.

Where shall I begin my unremarkable life?

My hands were bound with hangman's rope. A rifle dug into my ribs. My accomplices were slobbering at my side, a pair of yobs from Westchester who didn't comprehend the ways of York Island. "It's him," they said, pointing to me with their snouts, since their hands were tied as tight as mine.

"It's him, Your Worship. He's the Divil. He made us do it."

"'Tis true," said the second scoundrel. "We're innocent as lambs, Your Worthy. He hissed evil things in our ears. Offered us pieces of silver to poison your soup. We're cooks, I swear we are. Attached to your rebel army."

The first scoundrel corrected him. "Don't say rebel, Charles. Say the Continentals. He's their king . . . and commander."

He was a giant, this commander and king, with reddish hair and a long nose. I liked him, truly liked him. The lord of all the rebels was an erstwhile land surveyor from Virginia, not a professional soldier and assassin, like King George's generals. He had far more power than any monarch, even with a piddling army that could not stand in for-mation or fight in an open field. His pigtail was tied with a piece of fine silk. He was a gentleman with a farmer's rough hands.

"Please don't hang us, Your Worship," begged the scoundrels, slobbering again. They were stinking Cowboys who worried the hills of Westchester and shouldn't have come to our waterfront. I'd paid them handsomely, but they were counting on more. They would have slaughtered me and disappeared with my purse once the poison had taken hold and the general sat with his young aides, all of them puking out their guts.

"George Washington, bless that name!" the first yob said.

"I'll repent, Your Worship, I will. Save us, Sir George," said the second.

The general was no longer looking at these yobs. His bodyguards blindfolded them with their own neckcloths and took them out to the gibbet, an ordinary hanging tree. He dismissed his aides and sat down at his portable writing desk with a glass of Madeira and a piece of mutton. But his youngest aide wouldn't leave.

"Excellency, what about him? He's a desperate character," meaning your humble servant. "He might be hiding a knife somewhere on his person…or under his patch.I don't believe in that impertinent eye patch."

And then the young aide flicked his riding crop perilously close to my one good eye. He was hot to blind me. "Shall I undress his eye, sir?"

The general wouldn't answer him. He must have been sick with fatigue. I've seen it before, in soldiers and clergymen who have a bit of the colic and bad teeth. Grudgingly, with murder in his own grim gray eyes—murder for me—the young man left. And now the giant and I were alone. He got up from his desk (it could barely contain his knees) and cut my cords with a scalping knife. He'd been an Indian fighter long before he was a general, and some chief might have rewarded him with such a knife out of fear and trembling.

"What's your name, boy?"

"You heard those lads. I'm the Divil." I had to rub my hands, because they'd gone to sleep. "And John Stocking some of the time, Sir John to my friends, or Professor John."

"How old are you, Professor?"

"Seventeen, Your Excellency, seventeen years and eleven days."

"And you go around poisoning people's soup."

I had to be twice as clever as this rebel king. I didn't want him to guess my grand design. The poison was but a mix of magnesia and castor oil—a powerful purge. It couldn't have killed a flea.

"Well?" he asked, impatient to rid himself of me.

"A ruse, sir. I knew it wouldn't work. I was hoping it would get me into your camp . . . for a tête-à-tête."

He laughed. He didn’t have a tooth I could find, but some device that served as teeth. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t hang you?”

“I could lend you a dozen. I’m attached to Sir William in a tinkering sort of way.” Sir William Howe had sailed out of Boston with the entire British fleet and fell off the face of the earth. No one could find him, not George Washington, not King George.

“Tinkerer, are you soldier or civilian?”

“Both. I’m a secret agent.”

The general offered me some Madeira in a cup that wasn’t entirely clean. “You’re blunt enough, I’ll give you that. Lost you an eye in Sir William’s service?”

“No, sir. I lost it while I was with General Arnold in Quebec.” Benedict Arnold had tried to steal Quebec from the British by scampering across the wilderness of Maine. That wilderness was uncrossable to anyone but a madman or a brilliant soldier. And Arnold was both.

But the giant didn’t believe I’d been with Arnold. His face filled with fury. He began to scold me like a father to a wayward son. “Rude little boy, didst thou trek with Arnold across the wild lands?”

And I answered him with all the Divil’s wile. “Arnold doth not have much of a hand. I had to write his letters and read his dispatches…as a confidential secretary. He was but a colonel then. I would parry with my sword and read to him from the Holy Book. I was foolish and wanton. We were in the midst of war, and whilst I prattled, a redcoat stole up and stabbed me in the eye.”

“Hang me, boy, if I haven’t heard about a one-eyed parson over at the King’s College.” King’s sat like a citadel on our highest hill. I’d been a student there before I joined up with Arnold. The college was a rookery for Loyalists until Washington shut it down and turned it into an army barracks.

“I am not a parson, sir. I am the caretaker at King’s. No one else is around. We haven’t a single scholar. The president ran away to London and abandoned us to our misery.”

“And from your perch in the bell tower you signal to the British fleet, I fancy.”

“The fleet is gone. But I have infiltrated your secret service to the last man,” says I, fibbing like a drunken brigadier.

“I can sing every name.”

“I have no such service,” he said, his pale blue eyes narrowing to merciless points. I’d offended the giant, talked about his precious secret service. And I knew I’d have to play him in gentle fashion.

“Excellency, can you not recall? We have met before…at King’s. Ere three years ago. You brought your stepson up from Virginia to have a little taste of the college. ’Tis a pity he didn’t last very long. I was fond of young Jack.”

Jack Custis was no scholar. He gambled, kept spiders in his closet, bullied some of the other lads, but he had a strange fondness for me. I was useful to Jack. I fed him Aristotle, tho’ he cared not a fig about philosophy. He eloped after a month or two of classes, bequeathing his soiled neckcloths and shirts to me. He never spoke of the woman he meant to marry. She might have been a tart or a rich widow, like his mum. But I couldn’t forget the giant who accompanied him to King’s, his stepfather in long white stockings and a cocked hat, a ribbon in his red hair. He remained with me as the giant who looked after Jack, manly and tender with him, whilst I ate my heart out wishing I had such a giant as my dear old dad.

“Stocking,” he said, “I can recall every other man and boy I met at the college, not you.”

“That’s because I was in the president’s black book. I had to live in the shadows, like some dark thing. But I did kiss your hand, sir, I swear. I asked your blessing…as an orphan at the mercy of the college. And you the father of my only friend.”

His ruddy face softened a bit. “I will not hang you, boy.”

“Sir, ’t would give me much pleasure to kiss your hand again.”

He had a very long hand. The joints were gigantic, and his knuckles as large and various as the gold crowns on the gates at King’s. I kissed Georgey’s hand. It was like brushing against a porcupine with its quills removed, harmless and scratchy. I was immortal at that moment, an angler playing with his worms.

Washington’s young aide returned, led me into the officers’ mess without so much as a look at me. And that’s when I realized who was the angler and who was the

worm. The two yobs hadn’t been brought out to the gibbet tree in their blindfolds. They weren’t blindfolded at all. They sat with the officers, grease on their lips, chewing mutton and leering at your unfortunate friend.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >