



Down Broadway is a collection of short stories set in mid-century New York, reflecting the glamor, sophistication and high times of the postwar years.

Down Broadway

By Gerald F. Sweeney

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DOWN BROADWAY

New York Stories

Author of *The Columbiad*

GERALD F. SWEENEY

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Echoes of Orlando

It was about the time the Millennium clocked in.

My razor and I were sharing an apartment with Mary Jane on Bedford Street, a few doors down from where St. Vincent Millay lived when she came skating into town. MJ, an admirer of the poet, was creative herself, a fine actress when she was young; though lately she considered herself lucky to land a small part Off-Broadway. We shared a dusty apartment wallpapered with *Theater Arts* covers and piled up with scrapbooks of old productions and reviews, yellowed by age. Up front, a window overlooked the street where it was believed the revered neighborhood poet had sprinkled some of her magic onto the cement pavement.

MJ and I were confirmed Broadway babies. We were experts on how to wrap up a theater piece because we seldom saw the beginning of one, except on those happy occasions when we were “comped.” Normally, I would call the box office of a new play, pretending I was some rich man’s chauffeur, and inquire what time the play let out, then casually ask when intermission broke because my imaginary boss had little patience for bad productions and might make an early departure. Armed with the time of intermission, we would hustle uptown and mingle with crowds in the lobby and drift into the theater and find an orchestra seat for act two.

We had other scams too. When we were broke and hungry, we would dress up on weekends and visit any hotel in town and

enjoy somebody's wedding luncheon or attend a company's annual dinner party uninvited.

MJ was the best friend of the great love of my life, Sherry, another actress who showed promise but disappeared into the California sunset where she eventually resurfaced in a few minor films. She never should have left New York, not before she made her name here, and, as bitterly as I can say it, she should never have left me to waste her talent in Hollywood.

The two of them—Sherry and MJ— were the most important women in my life, along with Orlando, of course.

MJ's been my landlady since an operation laid me low eight years ago. I had managed to stay independent back when magazines flourished; my reputation secure while freelance writing money still flowed. But when I got sick and TV overwhelmed the publication field, MJ was the only one who would take me in. Like some of her other strays. I became a permanent guest. It was tough in the beginning, an economic squeeze, but things ran smoother once we began collecting Social Security. Even during MJ's years with Jack and then Ben, I stayed on.

Within her prewar, rent-controlled apartment, the walls of MJ's bedroom were as red as cranberries. Her king-size bed occupied a quarter of the room, allowing ample space for her overflowing desk with a rolodex that spun out Broadway's secrets and private numbers. I slept on an oversize pull-out in the living room which I often shared with itinerant actors and writers, some of whom settled in for an entire theatrical season.

On any night, there might be a couple visitors in residence. Once an entire quartet slept on the floor. That was because MJ functioned as a one-woman rescue service, the theater's mother hen.

A sunroom, overlooking the street, provided room to hang clothes, sit and complain about TV and listen to old musicals on an ancient hi-fi rig.

She'd say, "Jamie, don't you let them ever carry me out of here and park me in one of those actor co-ops on Forty-second Street. I couldn't bear it. Before you'd know it, I'd be ushering instead of up on stage."

"Let's swear a pact that we'll carry each other out of here in style."

"If we're lucky, maybe some old trouper will pop up someday with a pot of money and we'll be back on top and *Variety* will start calling again," she fantasized.

"Maybe we could even get our old table back at Sardi's. We'll revive the Fifties and swim in champagne one last time."

"Back when men were men. Gable and Brando and Bogart," I contributed.

MJ added, "Don't forget Garfield... Or Richard Burton, high jumping, flailing his arms, leaping through that window in *The Lady's Not for Burning*. Best entrance I ever saw! Soared in like Peter Pan without a harness."

“Broadway had some muscle back then. Lots of testosterone. Nowadays, masculinity is like some missing link,” I said.

“Give us back all those husky guys. In whatever form, provide us, Oh! Muse, our fairy godfather today, we pray.”

“Hoping they won’t look like our brutish landlord.”

We spent a lot of time reminiscing about the old days and about Sherry.

We were a lively trio back then, in the years when New York took away the title of cultural capital from Paris, the years of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and DeKooning and both New York Schools—the one for abstract painting and the other for poets like Ashbery and Frank O’Hara. They had all been occasional friends at the nightly parties. We were on top of the heap back then, parading through Manhattan like the lords and ladies of Broadway. Sitting around the Stage Deli, stirring up a cultural revolution that led the country into the modernist world, dragging poor North Dakota and the hinterlands with us. Back when Balanchine reimagined dance and Barber healed us with his music.

New York in the Fifties was special and we thrived then, inhaled it and not even the whirling-dervish Sixties could ever surpass it.

MJ and I kept wishing the modern gods would shake some of that stardust our way. Bring back those times. But it’s not

going to be Sherry who returns to shine her light again. She's long gone.

MJ often said, "We might have made something of ourselves, maybe even run our own theater"—which was always her dream—"if Sherry had stayed, if you hadn't fallen for Orlando Mowbrey."

She could always ruin my day by bringing up Orlando. Sherry and I were lovers living on and off together after I came home from the Korean War. We had our breakdowns and fights but we were as much in love when she left as when she flew into my arms after my first short story got accepted by the *Atlantic*.

It was Orlando who spoiled that dream. Sherry and I supported her when she first arrived, with her big ambition to act and her goddess likeness. She lived with us in our Bank Street apartment while she went through her opening assault on marquee living. We got her into the N.Y. School of Drama and even into Kazan's acting class. Orlando was almost too perfect, one of the special ones who had it all. Everyone recognized her genius. Her spiritual presence was as palpable as being in the room with a saint. Robust with soft lit skin, she was the loveliest woman any of us had ever seen, and like everybody else with a half a soul, I fell in love with her too.

I raged after her, compulsively, destroying my carefully assembled life. Hit by a tornado of feelings, I just gave myself over to her. There were hideous consequences when our flame

was doused with buckets of jealousy and double dealing that drenched our romance in a flood of accusations.

For penance, I now keep MJ's apartment functioning. She goes out each day and tries to hold on to her career. Meanwhile I do the shopping and most of the cooking between long sessions on my laptop. I'm still writing every day, trying to recapture the tones and scenes that kept me in clover all those years when I sat and waited for Sherry's return.

One night when I was on my knees scrubbing the utility room, cleaning up dust balls around the hot water heater and washer/dryer, the doorbell rang. A frightened young man stood in the hallway with an overnight bag and I knew that I wasn't going to be sleeping on the pull-out alone. Unless I could convince him to unfold the army cot. A nice kid, he was in town to talk to some people about stage designs and MJ had invited him home. That was how we lived.

I asked Junior if he wanted to draw a couple beers down at Chumley's but he begged off saying he was tired. I ventured out alone around ten to my favorite local and found a few of the remnants of our old crowd, tired looking and a little cranky but still reaching for the brass ring. My best buddy since the Sixties was Max Johnson, the Lord of Small Talk, once the handsomest redhead on Broadway, a matinee hero when I first met him. John Kelp was there too, the Prince of Fey. He was a friend who was going to be the best since O'Neil until he got tied up in producing plays instead of writing them. There was another kid sitting at the bar, some English major probably, we knighted him the Duke of Word-Pro, who came in to sop up a little

Bohemian gravy. He was jabbering on about his thesis, trying to prove that Millay was our Virginia Wolff.

The rest of us got to talking about Orlando back when she swept in and conquered Times Square by the force of her talent and energy.

“Girl was such a whirlwind. Came along and turned on her lights and dazzled New York. Broadway blinked and ate her up.”

“One big season and then she was gone,” said Max, once in love with her himself.

“Athletic as an Olympic star. Taught us all karate. Said she wanted to take up kick boxing.”

“Remember, she played one of those pants roles. You would have sworn she was one of the guys. Played the same year Grace Kelly was in *Country Girl*. Made Her Majesty look like a cheerleader.”

“Atkinson loved her. Said she’d have a great career once she put on a skirt.”

“One big season. Then she ups and disappears. A gorgeous broad.”

“What happened to her?” asked the kid. “Where’s she now?”

“Bumped around out west. Went big sky on us. Toughened up in the mountains. Heard she lived rough in a cabin chopping wood. Even started skiing the backcountry.”

“It’s said some guy turned up in Ashland one summer in the Eighties saying his name was Orlando Mowbrey and played a couple he-man roles in the summer productions.”

“She taught me how to swim at the Twenty-third street Y,” John, the playwright, said. “That’s where she worked out.”

“Remembered how hard she hugged you, way before hugging got to be a ritual.”

“Felt like you were in the grip of an Amazon.”

“She even smelled like Irish Spring.”

“She was tough as a day-old bagel. Could have arm-wrestled any of us.”

“So, when did men get so wimpy?” the kid asked.

“When they first started using hair dryers,” said Max.

The talk was good enough that I sailed right by my three pint limit. I was a little slower climbing the stairs to the apartment than usual. I went in and was sorry to see that the young designer occupied the other half of the pull-out. There was even someone asleep on the cot in the corner. It was full house again in the shelter.

I immediately fell off and was dreaming of the night that Sherry and MJ, both stunning blondes, escorted me down the orchestra aisle to see Carol Channing in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. We were back on top of our game. Glamorous, sexy, New York at its best. I was trying to get back there, cruising past the Sixties to the time when streets were safe, before

Vietnam, and the assassinations—back to the time when America was still America and we were the saviors of the planet. Before all the dope. A time when people didn't always lie to one another.

Next to me, the kid was shaking me out of my dream.

“What?”

“The guy in the cot wants to say something.”

“Damn. Let me sleep,” I growled.

“He's insisting.”

“What is it, man?”

A deep, husky voice came across the room, an echo from the past.

“Jamie, its Orlando Mowbrey. I'm back.”

The Porcelain Tub

There is a corner near the front window of P.X. O'Hara's saloon reserved for regulars, many of whom have patronized the establishment since Prohibition, one or two from before. Their drinking area faces onto Third Avenue, recently cleared of the old "El," the wide street now visible with an unobstructed view through a huge pane of glass. The window allows passersby to observe the jovial group of neighborhood friends exchanging laughter and passing along the trivia of metropolitan life. Identified by their Irish descent, their Celtic thick bodies were remnants of an East Side neighborhood that was located hard by the falling jowls of the Yorkville Germans. Among the drinking crowd were the likes of John O'Casey, an electrician and welder; Seamus Sheridan, a plumber from Cork; Peter Gregory, a carpenter whose family emigrated from Fermanagh—tradesmen who daily dealt with the wiring and plumbing misconnections of modern urban life. A few times a year, one might even find a Dominican Brother among the congregation. All leading much different lives than the majority of fashionable patrons standing three deep along the main bar.

John remarked, "I never saw so many fellas wearing skinny ties since the High Requiem Mass of the Great Muldoon. I had to raise the wattage of the lights in the church for that one to satisfy the television people."

Observing the crowd, Peter Gregory, the woodworker, said, "If their lapels get any more narrow, they'll look like they're wearing vests instead of jackets."

It was a phenomenon of these postwar years that the advertising crowd had discovered this gritty drinking parlor that offered generous beers and burgers. The Brooks Brother crowd had taken over the old pub. One could also spy this year's debutantes slumming here on a Friday or Saturday night, sometimes in their long gowns. There was no animosity between the old-timers and the young execs; they existed in harmonious fellowship. The regulars were happy to see frail old P.X. enjoy the extra revenue that popularity provided, and the smart set thought the Irish flock gave the place an authentic flavor.

White-haired Patrick Xavier himself was positioned at the kitchen end of the long bar, near the dining room entrance, sitting on a stool, hovering over the ancient brass register. Quiet to the point of silence, he was the only employee without a long, white apron. Eighty-year old P.X. worked three hours each weekday at his post minding the luncheon cashflow. On Saturday afternoons, he preferred to stand with his old friends by the window, remembering past times.

Behind the bar, a garden of multi-colored bottles sprouted along with two photographs, one of the assassinated young president, John Kennedy, and the other of the martyred Sinn Fein leader, Michael Collins—icons of the holy wars of a suffering people. Commanding the floorboards that ran behind the bar between the window and P.X.'s register was the owner's partner, a cheerful Patrick Jr, the chief bartender, accompanied by his son. It was Pat Junior and his heir who served the thirsty, and also swept up the cash and mopped the excess beer, being

sure to nourish their clansmen at the further end, stopping frequently to pick up the latest gossip and sometimes topping off their drinks.

Pat Junior said, “Do you see the kid with the thick glasses halfway down the bar? He asks me, ‘How come some of the Irish have an “O” before their name and some don’t? Like O’Connor and plain Connor?’ And I told him that back in the old country when the family finally got the pigs out from under the thatched roof at the bottom of the house and into the yard, they could add “O” to their name.”

The regulars chuckled.

A voice from behind Pat asked, “Barkeep, could you draw me a Rheingold?”

Pat turned and replied, “Son, we don’t sell German beer here. It’s Guinness Stout, Bass Ale or the door.”

P.X.’s saloon had a rhythm of its own. There was the lunch crowd, the after-work martini set, then the beef-eating dinner brigade. All that routine changed on the weekend when the bar and dining room hummed from noon until midnight and long after. Evenings near the space by the front window, and all day Saturday, the flow of neighborhood conversation was superintended by Tommy Ryan, the acknowledged unofficial mayor of the East Side, the arbiter of the area’s family, business and moral disputes, a regular at P.X.’s since the speakeasy Twenties. He would appear each evening at seven with his stories and badgering. Around him stood six or eight fellow parishioners, all ears.

When Tommy was in residence the conversation often turned to the great Muldoon, his arch-nemesis, now departed.

“There was a harp if ever you saw one,” mocked Tommy. “Spoke in a brogue you could cut and him born and raised in Brooklyn. Never saw an inch of Ireland until he ran for City Council.”

Seamus Sheridan said, “He was so Irish, he thought he had faeries in his garden.”

Tommy said, “More likely in his derby.”

“Muldoon swore the little people danced around his bed on his wedding night. He always had a soft spot for those little peckers.”

John O’Casey said, “Muldoon loved St Patrick’s Day, fancied up in his top hat standing next to the Mayor on the reviewing stand. Then later at the dance, he’d appear in his plaid skirt and him with no drawers on, twirling around the floor doing a reel, kilt flying.”

“Showing off his manhood,” Tommy added with a loud laugh.

“When he was here, he liked to wiggle his thing in the gents.”

“A small stream into a big pond,” Tommy said, excusing himself for a pee.

It was true. The main urinal in the men’s room was gigantic. Aside from a few smaller gathering units, there stood an

immense, six-foot high tub from the floor up, a wide and deep receptacle that offered a sure shot for participating patrons. The facility was the talk of the place, a holdover from earlier times; sufficiently infamous that women were sometimes invited to take a peek at the monstrous unit. Tommy Ryan himself, five foot five, found himself nearly enclosed by the big thing when draining his excesses. An enamel walk-in that nearly engulfed him.

Back came Tommy to take up his post as chieftain of the clan whose headquarters were here at P.X.'s.

P.X. O'Hara's continued to enjoy its late-in-life popularity. It became the scene of fashion photo shoots with slim-waisted models posing with stout waiters, handsome males in fancy new duds with the great urinal sometimes in the far background. Advertising award dinners were held here, and there was even a scene from a movie filmed in the main room. The reputation of the place increased as the Sixties careened along, while the level of patron's anger rose with the war, riots, drugs and crime. In those years delicate women were not permitted to walk home alone.

One Saturday at P.X.'s, when the afternoon was half gone and no sign of Tommy Ryan, his friends began to wonder about his whereabouts. It was an unusual occurrence for the district leader to be absent. Not pontificating at his normal soapbox by the big pane window.

“Maybe himself’s come down with the pip,” suggested John O’Casey, the welder. “He’s been looking a little peaked lately.”

Seamus the plumber added, “There was some hubbub around his house this morning, my missus tells me.”

Late in the afternoon, Pat Junior came down the boards with a sad face, “I have terrible news,” he said. “Word’s just come by phone that our Tommy passed away around noon.”

Such terrible information brought a dozen or more regulars to the pub and great amounts of beverage were consumed in his name. Many elbows rose to toast the deceased. Stories of Tommy’s heroic feats, his even-handed jurisdiction over his declining Irish neighborhood, his many generous deeds and First War accomplishments were retold through the long night where there was much coming and going among his long-time admirers. What could they do? How could they recognize his legacy, they wondered?

“First thing we need to do is to open a fund for the widow,” came one suggestion. Moments later cash accumulated on the bar.

“We’ll ask the Brothers to school the grandchildren for free, or maybe we could get up scholarships for them.”

“Does anyone know if his mortgage has been paid off?”

“We’ll get the Hibernians to turn out their bagpipes and drums for the service.”

“Maybe P.X. would allow us to put Tommy’s derby and cane in a display case along the back wall.”

They brooded for hours about the proper honorific. Their drinking increased and their plans became more imaginative. Until finally, one guy suggested, “Maybe we could bury him in the great tub in the men’s room.”

Preposterous! But sufficiently novel that the idea captured the attention of the tipsy crowd.

“It would hold him ever close to his bosom buddies, that’s for sure.”

“He would certainly feel close to all our attachments.”

The suggestion was tested with Patrick Junior, who at first was loath to do away with one of the saloon’s principal attractions, but on second thought, he saw the merit of the memorial. He cleared the idea with his sleepy father by phone and soon there were visitations to the john by the tradesmen to figure out how the mechanics of a wrecking crew could pull the tub down from the wall once the Saturday night crowd dispersed.

After closing time, half-inebriated plumbers, carpenters, workmen, the entire Irish contingent labored long into the wee hours unhooking the white whale from its moorings and rearranging its pipes. When they pulled the beast down from the wall and laid it lengthwise on the floor with all its supports, John O’Casey remarked on its size, an immense bathtub.

P.X's, as all good saloons should, remained closed on Sunday. The crew reassembled after mass and refurbished the great tub, welding on handles, constructing a wooden lid, adding rollers and shining up the insides. By late in the day, they were prepared to deliver the porcelain coffin to the morticians on Second Avenue.

Tommy looked cozy in his final nest at the funeral parlor during the open casket viewing, an event that brought hundreds of onlookers to pay their respects. The tub gleamed; Tommy snug, with plenty of room for flowers. And velvet trimmings. The talented working crew had even been careful to disguise the drain.

On the day of the Requiem, marching in behind the bagpipes, eight robust rousters from Pier 57 were needed to carry the heavy tub down the aisle of an overflowing St. Vincent Ferrer Holy Roman Catholic Church where mourners gathered for Tommy's sendoff. There were even a few striped ties from the ad community among the prayerful. Tributes from many notables memorialized his deeds, but none as poignant as the oration of Patrick Xavier O'Hara. He stumbled as he ascended the altar step, leaning against the rail, standing shaking, a piece of paper rattling in his hand. He had come to honor his long-term friend. Few had ever heard the quiet man utter more than a few words.

P.X. began, "A friend is one willing to save your life, and that's what Tommy Ryan did for me one long ago fall day on the battlefields in France during the Great War. He would never speak of it, of course, being humble and all, but one bloody day

in the Meuse-Argonne, he stood up in a hail of firepower to protect me and hold our ground against the Hun. His deed caused an unbroken bond of friendship that's lasted until this sad day when we finally part, having spent our lives in the old neighborhood celebrating the glories of our Irish heritage, Share we did, raising a glass or two along the way."

"There's no way to properly bid a friend farewell," said P.X. "Only the chance to love him."

With that, Patrick fell over dead.

A great commotion rose among the congregation. Howls of pain could be heard. The wailing ran up and down the church wall. There was weeping upon weeping. Shouts of grief. Irish agony. Medical men, nurses, policemen rushed forward but nothing could be done to save Patrick. Part of the crowd, unhinged, dispersed. Others lingered. An ambulance arrived, siren blaring. The medics took their time examining P.X. and filling out paperwork. The crowd began to leave and even the bagpipers bundled up their instruments. As the EMT personnel were getting ready to wheel P.X. out on a stretcher, it was then that John O'Casey turned to Seamus Sheridan and asked, "Do you think there's room enough in the tub for the 'bote of 'dem?"

Gerald F. Sweeney

Novels in *The Columbiad* Series

The Columbiad follows four generations of the Mahoney family as they struggle, revel, lose and triumph through the 20th Century. The seven novels are all stand-alone books.

Eagles Rising – Book 1

“As if a wise historian rearranged some of our preconceived platitudes”

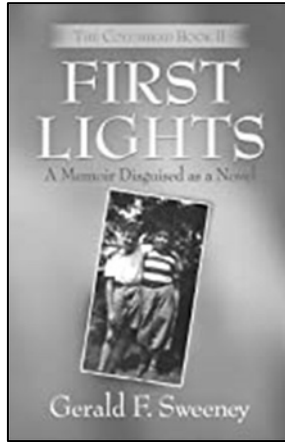


The Mahoney family evolves from rural Iowa to a stormy life in Chicago, where it becomes an unwitting participant in the city’s labor, gangster and racial wars. This is the story of Martin Mahoney and his son, John-Arthur, a soldier in WWI haunted by an accident of his youth. This Chicago neighborhood novel involves the son’s moxie girlfriend, plus John-Arthur’s nemesis from the Prairie venue Gang and an extraordinary friend who happens to be a Wizard.

Available at www.booklocker.com

***First Lights* – Book 2**

“He writes well and some of his recollections really sing.”



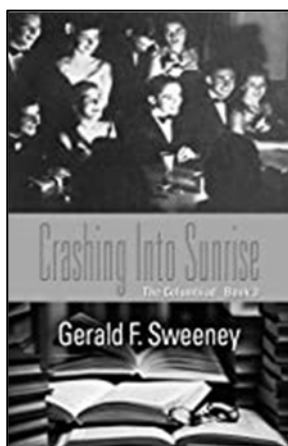
The novel follows John-Arthur’s son, Jim, from his frightening childhood in Chicago through his hormonal epiphany during his adolescence on Long Island. This is a portrait of a maverick boy who survives the restrictive religious, social and economic mores of the late 30’s and early 40’s when the War comes along to light up a kid’s imagination. It’s the story too of a young boy battling to reconcile his inner spiritual feelings with the requirements and enticements of the real world—what preteen age is really like for a boy.

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Gerald F. Sweeney

Crashing into Sunrise – Book 3

“His command of the language and ability to translate nostalgia and the zeitgeist of an era into an intellectual reality for readers of all ages makes his work substantial and a worthwhile endeavor.”

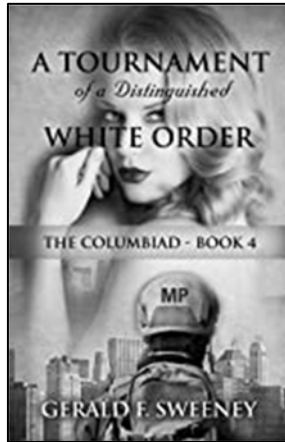


Do you remember one of those raucous and rowdy kids from high school who was about to experience the rude awakening of adulthood? That was Jim Mahoney after MHS. How he messed up as a teenager and what happens to his unfinished personality when he discovers the force and power of ideas in college is the theme of the book. Plus the adventures of his Long Island buddies and the numerous girls who shine along their path. It's the tale of one individual's intellectual upheaval.

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A Tournament of a Distinguished White Order – Book 4

“He knows about the intellectual zest of the 1950’s and beyond. And he knows about love, great love and the all-consuming inferno that comes with it.”



Tournament follows the complicated love duel between a creative Army Private and a sensuous young actress, a pair energized and troubled by a romance set during the “forgotten” Korean War. Jim Mahoney learns how to soldier while Fawn Evans battles for a career on the New York stage. A writer, Jim is transitioning from college to GI Joe while Fawn is spreading her wings from social butterfly to serious actor during Broadway’s Golden Age.

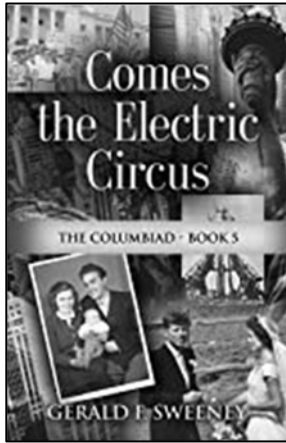
The ambiguities and heartbreaks of Mid-Century America are revealed.

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Comes the Electric Circus - Book 5

“He is also masterful at capturing the zeitgeist of an era, sprinkling in just the right measure of the names, places and political climates that composed American society at any given time, and this is no less true in Comes the Electric Circus.”

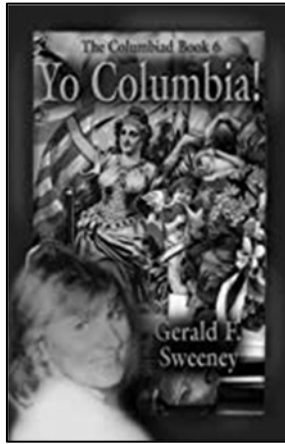


This is a novel that reflects the tumultuous changes from the traditional 1950's to the mind-blowing 1960's. The story of the romance between two young Manhattanites, at a time when New York became the world's capital of finance and arts, captures the evolution of their love in the midst of the radical developments in the social and intellectual shifts that re-shaped America.

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***Yo Columbia!* – Book 6**

“If you enjoy novels that expound upon art and culture as the characters maneuver the landscapes of the heart, this Volume 6 of The Columbiad is for you.”



Set in Manhattan’s fast-paced publishing world of the 80’s, *Yo Columbia!* is the tale of a courtship of an interracial couple that celebrates their union in high urban style. Galloping through the artistic and cultural world of New York enflames their love story. Motivated by a Wizard of the airways, the pair sets out to find the lost opera of Scott Joplin. And discover one of the women who inspired American artists to portray their country’s symbol, Columbia.

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Gerald F. Sweeney

Wizard Ho! – Book 7

“His work reveals a first rate, professional talent with a glorious gift for making his characters so real they stick in the reader’s mind. That’s not easy to do and is a joy when it happens. Highly recommended.”



The search for the meaning of the 20th Century concludes with the effort to resurrect Columbia. A merry band of creative New Yorkers from the Chelsea neighborhood spends the 1990’s seeking a Wizard and his sidekick, Ripple, who operate a clandestine radio station. The station is the embattled voice of the 20th Century, intent on identifying the American soul and the ideal woman of our bountiful nation—Columbia, our national symbol. Jim Mahoney and Columbia Ruth Morisong inspire and lead a parade of artists to find these radio mavericks. Searching through the upheaval of Manhattan, this crew defines the urban personality at the end of the century.

Available at www.booklocker.com



Down Broadway is a collection of short stories set in mid-century New York, reflecting the glamor, sophistication and high times of the postwar years.

Down Broadway

By Gerald F. Sweeney

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