

# Novel captures New York's 400 years in 900 pages

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By Nick Zieminski

NEW YORK (Reuters) - A large, protected harbor and a river route to the north made the tip of Manhattan an attractive spot for a Dutch settlement some 400 years ago.

The settlement -- soon British and eventually American -- grew into a global center of commerce and the arts, boasting some of the world's tallest buildings and richest people, and coming to symbolize the New World for the millions who came later.

That history provides the strands for a lavishly detailed fiction, "New York: The Novel," which covers four centuries in 900 pages and took three years to research and write.

Author Edward Rutherfurd follows several families from colonial times to the present, but anchors the tale on one clan, the Masters. Common themes, relationships and objects unite a long story into a coherent whole.

Rutherfurd, a specialist in multi-generational family sagas -- a genre he says was invented by James Michener -- had previously covered two millennia of history in "London," "Dublin," and "Russka."

He spoke with Reuters about New York, his favorite city haunts and writing very big books:

Q: A theme that unites the four centuries is money and trade. Is that something that you think defines New York City?

A: "All my books have an undertow. The thing is meant to be entertaining and full of information, but there has to be, to keep me going, some guts in there. What this book is about is freedom. That's what New York is about. Everybody's come to America, from the Pilgrims onwards, in search of freedom (whether) religious, economic, political or personal."

Q: When writing about a famous subject, to what extent do you have to play to expectations?

A: "You have to hit certain marks, but you try to come in diagonally, with a little bit of a surprise. Obvious ones are 9/11, the building of the Empire State Building. With the Great Crash of 1929, what I did is talk more about the Panic of 1907, which I find very dramatic when J.P. Morgan saved the markets.

"Wall Street pretends to be one thing, but it's really about placing bets. (After 1907) everybody talked about regulation, and it all fell apart again and gave us '29. And guess what, do recent events seem to be about a lack of regulation? There's this repetition in history that is fascinating and a little depressing."

Q: Throughout the book, you foreshadow September 11th, which then dominates the final section. What was your aim?

A: "The climax had to be the mass falling of 9/11. You could have the book end on tragedy, and to me that's not what New York is about.

"The tragedy of 9/11 is there, but it was immensely important to me that, on the one hand, the tragedy should be set in a grander historical context, and secondly there had to be an epilogue. One doesn't need to belabor the thing. The tragedy is a multiple of tiny personal tragedies, and yet the catharsis is, as in a war, in trying to step slightly back and see it in a larger context.

"I try to make it echo back to an intimate story at the start of the book. In the epilogue, I try to convey a sense of hope and celebration that's still in the city. "

Q: As you walk through Manhattan now, are there favorite haunts that remind you of its history?

A: "I love to walk in Central Park. I will frequently walk 40, 50 blocks, up Park and down Fifth. I love to go to the Village, but wish I played chess better. I love water. It was great fun going out in a little launch to Ellis Island, bumping around the harbor. I love seeing cities like St. Petersburg and New York from the water. I love big rivers. When they scatter my ashes, the Hudson would do fine. I'd like to go up the river a bit. Take me up to Poughkeepsie."

Q: To clear up a lingering question, is Edward Rutherfurd a nom-de-plume?

A: "It is a writing name. My Rutherfurd ancestors kept on marrying each other, so there was about 150 years of in-breeding. My genetic makeup has far more Rutherfurd than anything else. But my father's family name, an old English name, is extremely difficult for people. In the U.S., people assume my name was Winthrop. It is Wintle."

