Darkness on the Edge of Town
Jay McInerney chronicles the end of the roaring eighties.

Brightness Falls
By Jay McInerney '86
Sad things happen to rather nice, decent people in Brightness Falls, the fourth novel by Jay McInerney, a 1986 graduate of SU's creative writing program. Set in New York in the months before and after the October 1987 stock market crash, the novel follows the lives of several characters through financial and emotional cataclysms and into a radically altered morning after.

The central couple is Russell and Corrine Callaway—he a promising book editor at a fine old publishing house, she a stockbroker. Both are 30ish preppies. Her family fortune is no more, but, writes McInerney, "Socially acute observers could read in Corrine's manner the secret code of American pedigree." From modest Midwestern roots, "Russell believed in his own secret aristocracy, a refinement of soul and taste that he knew he must keep to himself, which much later he would almost forget to believe in."

Together since college and still in love, they are conscious of their class prerogatives, smart, principled, and coping as best they can with big city life. Corrine volunteers at a soup kitchen; Russell is into wine.

Wonderful secondary characters orbit around the Calloways: doomed young writer Jeff Pierce; guileful editor Washington Lee; crass leveraged-buyout king Bernard Melman; spurious man-of-letters Victor Propp; vampish investment banker Trina Cox; hissy gossip columnist Juan Baptiste. Taking on the whole of Manhattan, the novel comprises uptown Wasps, downtown demimondaines, homeless junkies. But unlike Tom Wolfe's Bonfire of the Vanities, to which Brightness Falls bears some comparison, McInerney's characters feel more like real people than caricatures.

McInerney sets his cast in motion in a vividly rendered era of conspicuous consumption, instant gratification, new money, and social decay. He charts his characters' status with anthropological precision, annotating the restaurants, stores, brand names, and pastimes favored by the urban bourgeoisie.

With Wall Street booming, plenty of money is available to buy and gut established companies. "The electronic buzz of fast money hummed beneath the wired streets, affecting all the inhabitants, making some of them crazy with lust and ambition, others angrily impoverished, and making the comfortable majority feel poorer."

Finding his star waning at work, Russell plans a hostile takeover of the publishing house—a scheme fraught with moral, ethical, and financial pitfalls.

His moral compass suddenly oscillating from literature to money, Russell puts initial qualms aside to dive headlong into a new world. "He liked the idiom of the financial world, the evocative techno-poetry of the arcane slang. Sophisticated instruments. Mezzanine financing. Takeover vehicles . . . Lately it seemed almost as interesting as the more familiar dialect of lit crit."

Wheeling and dealing shake the once solid Callaway marriage. Corrine, suspecting Russell plans to leave her behind in his climb to the top, edges toward anorexia. Russell finds himself resenting the marriage, and although he has remained faithful, he wavers in the face of a seductive onslaught by Trina Cox, engineer of the hostile takeover.

Most of the book is comic in tone, crowded with clever throwaway lines and funny set pieces. But McInerney also analyzes the responsibilities and burdens of relationships in flux: When do you intervene with a friend sinking into heroin addiction? How do you reassure a spouse that nothing has changed when everything has?

Brightness falls in more ways than one as forces beyond their control deliver McInerney's characters startling blows more or less simultaneously with the stock market hemor-
rhage. Lives are forever altered, absolutes questioned, innocence lost as the survivors are left to begin again in a chaotic world. 

*Brightness Falls* could be viewed as a grown-up sequel to McInerney’s celebrated first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, published in 1984 when he was 29 years old. The novel, which sold 700,000 copies and was made into a movie, popularized fiction chronicling the excesses of young fashionable urbanites. *Brightness Falls* is part of another trend, one that satirizes the decline of a decade and the values that corrupted it.

—GEORGE LOWEY

OTHER ALUMNI BOOKS:

The Boston Red Sox: Memories and Memorabilia of New England’s Team

The Bronx Bombers: Memories and Memorabilia of the New York Yankees

By Bruce Chadwick ’69 and David M. Spindel


A departure from team histories and statistic-filled anthologies, these first volumes in a series on major league baseball deal specifically with team memorabilia and collectibles. Using a scrapbook approach, these colorful books include everything from old photos, score cards, buttons, and jerseys, to reminiscences from former players.

Rookie Dad: Adventures in Fatherhood

By Rick Epstein ’73

183 pp. Hyperion Press. $17.95.

The father of three young daughters captures the joys, trials, and hilarity of being a first-time dad. Epstein, author of the nationally syndicated column “Dad’s Eye View,” chronicles what he lost and gained in the transition from carefree bachelor to young husband to full-time father.

The Cooter Farm

By Matthew Jones G’80

305 pp. Hyperion Press. $23.95.

A failing dairy farm in upstate New York is the setting for this first novel, a

blackly humorous tale in the rural gothic tradition. Narrated by 10-year-old Ollie Cooter, the book centers on his uncles, Hooter and Looter, who are keeping their senile father’s farm afloat; his father, Scooter, a purveyor of bull semen; and his 13-year-old aunt, Mary Jean. *Kirkus Reviews* described the novel as reminiscent of Carolyn Chute’s *The Bean’s of Egypt, Maine.*

Public Landing Revisited

By Robert Phillips ’60


Set in a fictional East coast community of the fifties and sixties, this volume of short stories explores small-town American life. A professional scissor sharpener watches his business disappear with the advent of stainless steel. A classical pianist’s eccentric grandmother sets up a disastrous audition for Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour. From town gatherings to childhood love, Phillips creates a poignant view of Americana.

The Persistence of Racism in America

By Thomas Powell G’61, G’64


This new work provides a historical and sociological explanation of how racism gained momentum after slavery was abolished and explains patterns of beliefs, attitudes, and values that have supported racist views in America. Powell documents that racism in America began as a justification for slavery, yet quickly became inextricably bound with a deeply rooted and uniquely American sense of individualism.

Benedict Canyon

By Laura Van Womer ’78


A fascinating exploration of the contradictions between public images and private lives, *Benedict Canyon* tells of a famous actress and a brilliant editor whose lives are transformed when they work together to produce a best-selling book. Set against the frantic worlds of Los Angeles television and New York publishing, the book provides an insider’s glimpse into these seemingly glamorous fields.

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