

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Doug Holder
Chelsea Hotel

It was the kind of winter day you may remember from your childhood, before things became so heated. Bone chilling winds whipped my face making my cheeks look like they were reddened from deep embarrassment. On this morning I was to meet author Ed Hamilton at the Grey Dog Café in the Chelsea section of Manhattan to talk about the glory days of the famed Chelsea Hotel in New York City. Hamilton, 53, a longtime resident of the hotel, and author of the book *Legends of the Chelsea Hotel*, had an interesting tale to tell about this bohemian flophouse.



The Chelsea Hotel on 23rd St. in the Chelsea section of Manhattan has a unique history. Built in 1883 it originally was a residential hotel that housed the stars of the theatrical world. But over the years it was also the home for an eclectic group of literary, visual and musical artists of all stripes. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas stayed at the hotel and was taken to St. Vincent's Hospital in the Village where he died from the result of drinking himself to death mostly at the famed White Horse Tavern, near the environs of the Chelsea. William Burroughs reportedly wrote *Naked Lunch* at the Chelsea, and Kerouac is rumored to have had a fling with Gore Vidal in one of the rooms, and some believed he completed *On the Road* there. Arthur Miller hung his hat there in his pre and post Marilyn periods, as well as noted Punker and Poet Patti Smith and the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. (As recounted in Smith's acclaimed memoir *Just Kids*). And of course Sid Vicious and Nancy met their infamous end in a gone-to-seed room in the Hotel.

For many years the hotel was run benevolently (more or less) by Stanley Bard. Since 1957 Bard had made the Chelsea a welcoming refuge of sorts for young artists to make a go of it in the big city. He provided rooms at a reasonable rate for aspiring artists, and was often forgiving if they came up short with the rent. He sometimes took payment in the form of a painting or labor. But Bard was pushed out. Now with gentrification, condo conversion, astronomical real estate prices, the days of the Chelsea Hotel and others of its ilk are certainly numbered. With Bard's removal the Chelsea is undergoing renovation and all the artwork that gave the building its unique flavor has vanished. Many of the permanent residents have been evicted. Hamilton told me a total of 58 have been forced out. Sixty residential apartments are left. Hamilton said: "I was in court for five years, but I finally won the right to stay because I have a Rent Stabilized apartment." Indeed, Hamilton, who has been at the Chelsea since 1995, is the last of the breed who came to this hotel and lived the life of a bohemian writer, in a room lined with books, and a bathroom down the hall. He and his wife have lived outside "The broad lawns and narrow minds of the suburbs," as Hemmingway once wrote.

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According to Hamilton the building was bought for 80 million dollars by a Moroccan family headed by real estate mogul Joseph Chetrit. Hamilton said: "It is a huge conglomerate that bought the Sears Tower in Chicago and other far flung interests...the Chelsea is only a mere speck of dust in the whole perspective of things." It seems that many of the tenants who were not evicted were bought out for well below the market rate. Hamilton does not want sell, and certainly not for a price that will not allow him to stay in Manhattan. Hamilton said he tried to enlist famed punker and poet Patti Smith, the author the awarding-memoir set in the Chelsea *Just Kids*, but she ignored him. Finally she came out of the closet, but according to Hamilton, decidedly on the management's side. She agreed to do a concert for the tenants that was supposed to introduce them to the wonderful new world of the Chelsea Hotel under Chetrit. Hamilton feels she was working for the management, in spite of the common knowledge of the evictions and the destruction of the interior of the hotel. When the tenants threatened a book burning, in addition to the media deluge spurred on from Hamilton's Chelsea Hotel blog, Smith reneged.

Hamilton and his girlfriend Debbie Martin came to the Chelsea after Hamilton's stint at the University of Maryland, where Hamilton was teaching philosophy and working on his doctorate. But Hamilton did not really like the academic life. He was a product of the suburbs, and he was horrified to think he would wind up in a conventional lifestyle near some strip mall. Hamilton and Martin always knew about the Chelsea and its rich history, and they were determined to come to New York City to live there. According to Stanley Bard to gain entrance into the Chelsea was harder than getting into an Ivy League college, but the duo got in through a sublet. Since then, with the help of Martin, Hamilton started the Chelsea Hotel Blog, and penned the book *Legends of the Chelsea Hotel*....

Hamilton made a point in his book to write not only about the famous folks who lived there but the unsung holy fools as well. Hamilton said: "The everyday folks who lived in the Chelsea brought this weird energy to the place. I think this contributed to the creativity of the Chelsea. I am sure some of the great works conceived here as well as the obscure were fired by the sparks in the atmosphere." Hamilton told me that many artists, even after it was long apparent that they didn't have the talent or luck to make it on a big scale, stayed on. Most folks after achieving some sort of success moved out. For the ones that stay it can be a negative experience... a reminder of what they are not.

I asked Hamilton about some of the long term residents who are still pursuing their passion. One lady Bettina G. has been in the hotel for many decades. She is a visual artist, and a young artist who lived in the Chelsea, Sam Bennett, produced a documentary about her. According to a newspaper account she had her paintings stacked to the ceiling, and she was partially living in the hallway. Gerald Busby a current resident and a protégé of Virgil Thompson had early success (He wrote the film score for Robert Altman's *3 Women*), then went into obscurity and now has been rediscovered.

Since I always have had an interest in the poet Charles Bukowski, I asked him if the Buk ever spent time at the Chelsea. Hamilton thought Bukowski spent one night or so there—and the poet mentioned the ho-

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tel in a poem and short story he wrote. Hamilton then went on to tell me that Harry Smith, the noted archivist, ethnomusicologist, experimental filmmaker, also known for his Anthology of American Folk Music, was a resident as well. He died at the Chelsea in 1993.

I remember in the late 70's when I came to Boston I lived in a number of rooming houses in Boston and Cambridge. One, the Irving Inn in Cambridge, advertised itself for Lean Pocket Transients. The other was on Newbury Street in the Back Bay of Boston. Many young people and not a few artists were able to get a reasonably priced room in the city to pursue their art or passion. When I came to the city there were a number of these places. Now they have seemed to have disappeared. Hamilton said this is true of New York as well. Rent Stabilization is vehemently opposed by the current city administration, and tenants can't stand up to the moneyed interests they are in conflict with.

Hamilton, continues to write fiction, his first love, and has had his work in online and print journals such as Penduline and Omphalos. Some of his fiction is loosely autobiographical and at times deals with his life growing up Catholic, and all the repressive baggage that comes with it. Although Hamilton's Legends of the Chelsea continues to sell and sell well; he is having trouble finding an agent for his fiction.

Hamilton has hopes for his fiction as well as for the last outpost of bohemia, the Chelsea Hotel. He thinks the chances that he and his partner will remain in the Chelsea are slim. But hope springs eternal...and he still holds a candle in the encroaching darkness. Hamilton is a creature of the city—he needs to breathe the asphalt, blink back at the blinking neon, and pursue that ephemeral light that the artist seeks. And the city, this Naked City—New York City, that has a million stories, is the one that will keep the pilot light of his creative life burning.