By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

You have to be slightly crazy to get to know New York City by walking along all of its streets, William Helmreich acknowledges. But, he claims, no other method permits an up close and personal examination of everyday life in the Big Apple.

In "The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City" Helmreich, a professor of sociology at the City College of New York and a native New Yorker, draws on his four-year sojourn through the five boroughs to reveal the dynamism and diversity of the city. He introduces readers to little-known spaces and places, including the Chinese Scholars Garden in Snug Harbor, part of Staten Island's Botanical Gardens; a shrine to the Titanic in Hunters Point, Queens; and "Steve's Place," on Eighty-Fifth Street in Brooklyn, which displays statues and photographs that illustrate the borough's history. And Helmreich recreates his encounters with a colorful cast of characters, ranging from former mayor David Dinkins to Tuvia Tatik, an ultra-orthodox Jew, who is the beloved dean of discipline (dubbed "Mr. T") at the predominantly Hispanic, African American and Muslim Middle School 22 in the South Bronx.

Helmreich's ethnographic approach – direct observation – is better suited to documenting "the range of possibilities and permutations" in New York than to drawing substantive conclusions about the city. Helmreich is not sure, for example, how much gentrification displaces the poor and seems content with the unsurprising conclusion that it is a complex process with many neighborhoods falling "somewhere along the continuum." Similarly, he claims that the city facilitates contact among diverse individuals, but that inter-ethnic relationships are "uneven and sometimes situationally defined." And he isn't quite able to back up his assertion that New York is not only a collection of separate communities but a "unified whole," encompassing residents of all five boroughs who are bound together by an idea, "embodied in a space and a state of mind that is far larger than themselves."

Helmreich concludes that New York City, which teetered on the brink of bankruptcy in the 1970s, is "a resounding success story." As developers create new preserves for the privileged, he predicts, it may well cater primarily to the
middle and upper classes, forcing immigrants to move elsewhere. Although he does not examine New York's precarious budget, Helmreich cautions, with good reason, that it will require "luck and skill" for the city to maintain its standing. Given New York's dependence on the financial services industry, another economic meltdown, of course, would be disastrous. And so might an uptick in violent crime, which declined precipitously under mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. For now, however, New York remains one of the greatest cities in the world, a place that everybody knows, wants to know, or loves to hate.

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