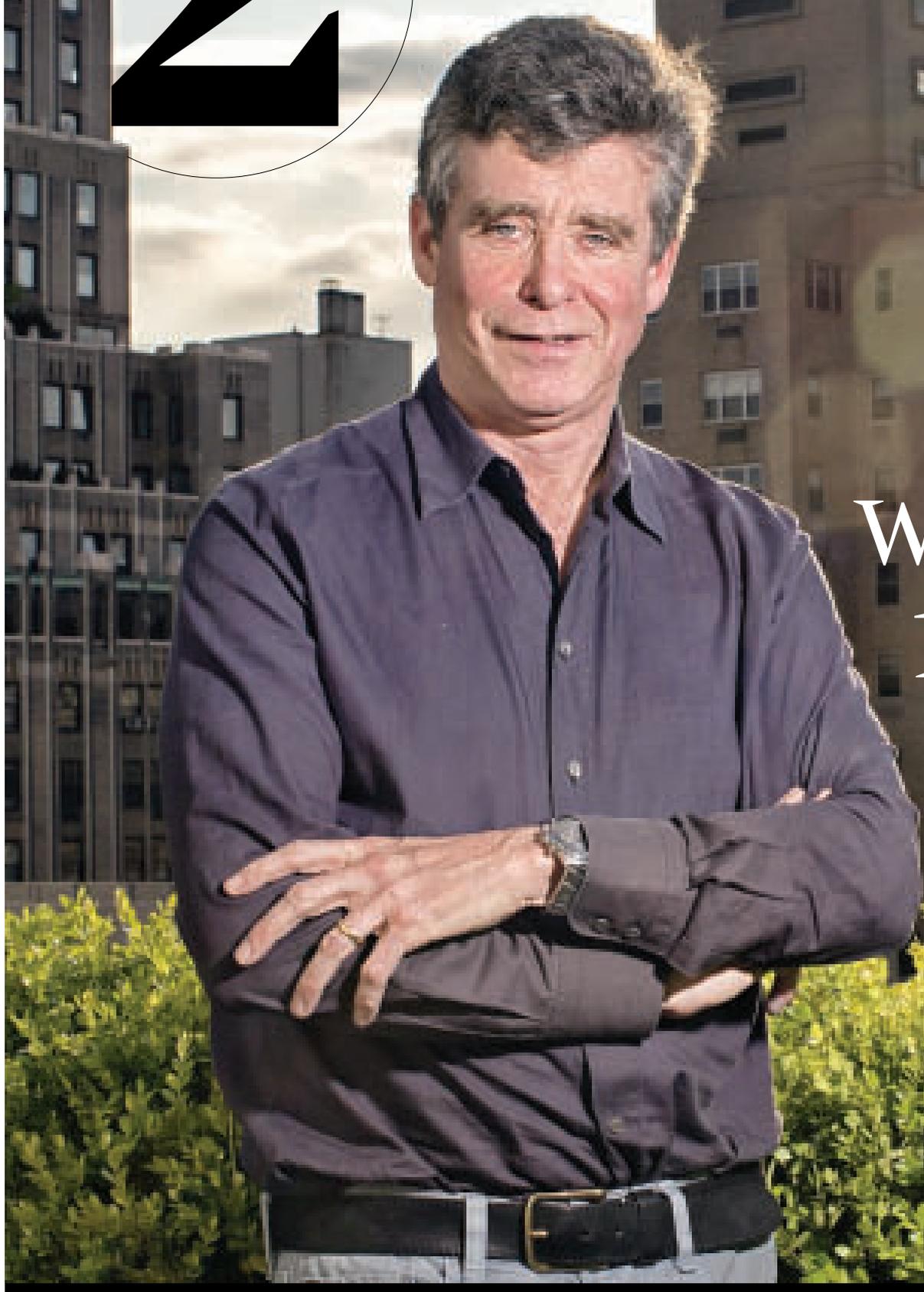


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# From white lines to fine wines

How Jay McInerney grew up

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FRONT COVER AND BELOW: TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, CHRISTOPHER LANE



# ‘Cocaine gave me subject matter — so it wasn’t wasted’

He has a reputation as a hard-drinking, hedonistic party boy, but these days, Jay McInerney tells **Tim Teeman**, he is happy to be home by 11pm

I wish I could report that this interview was conducted in a seamy boîte, Jay McInerney and I slurring our whiskey sours, folded into some banquette with a New York socialite sprawled in a cocaine-drizzled heap beside us. But *Bright Lights, Big City*, McInerney’s novel cataloguing such excess was published 28 years ago. Since then he has written many other novels featuring crisis-beset monied Manhattanites, though the ghost of *Bright Lights* hangs heavy. His critics

dismiss him as superficial; McInerney thinks he has been punished “for not suffering in some garret”. His debut novel made him one of a literary “brat pack” — with Bret Easton Ellis and Tama Janowitz, also famous for writing about twentysomethings behaving badly — but today McInerney, 57, waxes not of “Bolivian marching powder” but wine. His latest collection, *The Juice: Vinous Veritas*, originally written as columns for *The Wall Street Journal*, celebrates burgundies (his obsession) and why pinot grigio should be taken

seriously. McInerney is “pleased to be home by 11 these days”, while “the biggest nightmare of my life so far”, endured over the past year, has been a debilitating illness suffered by his twin teenage children.

We meet in the penthouse apartment near Greenwich Village that he shares with his fourth wife, Anne Hearst, granddaughter of the newspaper tycoon William Randolph (family fortune estimated at £2.15bn), which has pricey Eighties art on the walls and a wraparound terrace offering views of One World Trade Centre (also known as the Freedom Tower), the soaring replacement for the twin towers, which McInerney saw destroyed when he was living in another apartment in 2001.

“It was not the best time,” he recalls. “I was hitting drink and drugs hard. I was having a breakdown. My marriage (to his third wife Helen Bransford, with whom he has 17-year-old twins, Maisie and John Barrett McInerney III) had ended. It was a midlife crisis.”

Jocular and warm, McInerney is slim, nervy (he twists to-and-fro on a rotating chair) and handsome in an ex-sybaritic, craggy way. He first read about wine in Hemingway and Evelyn Waugh, perceiving it an “important accessory of a sophisticated life”. Growing up in Connecticut, then

around the world (his father was a sales executive) his parents were “cocktail people” who, with friends, would get “hammered on stingers and old-fashioned. I’d go upstairs and find people who shouldn’t be screwing each other in my bed or someone would fall into the piano. This was the *Mad Men* era. They were very badly behaved.”

The family were moving “all the time” and McInerney was “always unsettled. It’s one reason I turned to reading and writing: I had so much time on my own. I often misbehaved to get attention and show I wasn’t a pussy.” In his teenage years he did “a lot of pot, then drank through college. I didn’t excel in either area.”

He wanted to be the lead guitarist in a rock band “but it didn’t seem something well-educated young men did”. Instead, McInerney got a fact-checking job at *The New Yorker* and began snorting cocaine. The first time was in 1980. He and his friend Gary Fisketjon, who would publish *Bright Lights*, were en route to a concert when a friend introduced them to it. “Everybody has their drug, cocaine was mine. It made me feel smart, horny and it postponed the need for sleep indefinitely — all of which seemed great. You might have sounded a blithering idiot, but you felt smart. I couldn’t understand why you would take drugs that made you stupid: Quaaludes, barbiturates, pot. Why would you want to be slow, sluggish, sleepy? On cocaine you wanted to have sex, tell someone about this amazing sentence you’d just written.”

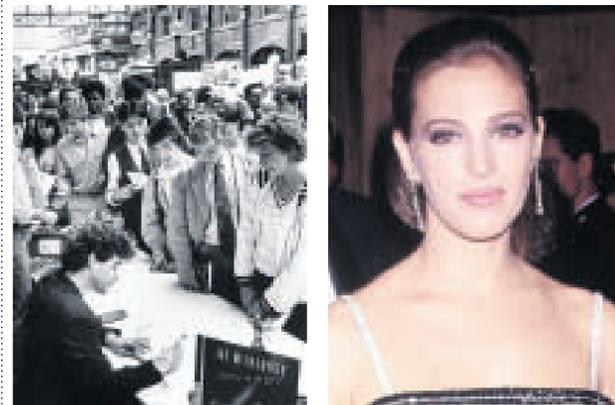
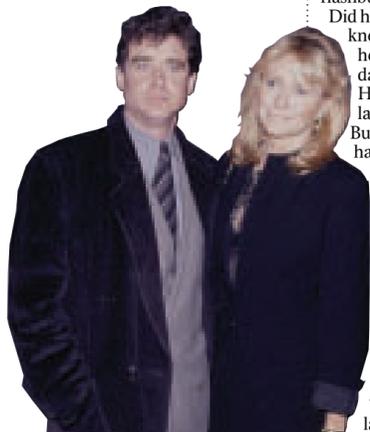
He once met Truman Capote, “who claimed cocaine was wonderful for writing. It’s clear when you read his later work that isn’t the case. Intoxication and creation are frequent fellow travellers, but I don’t think many people have written better on any drug or stimulant. The good thing about cocaine is it gave me subject matter for my first novel. It certainly wasn’t wasted.”

As for sudden fame: “Anyone who publishes a book has that fantasy. It was fun but it generated immense amounts of shit, an ocean of resentment.” One critic recently accused him of being a literary poser with no talent. “They’re still railing on that. It’s never pleasant to read nasty things but I would rather have the success I’ve enjoyed. Maybe if I’d gone into rehab, or confessed regrets, that would’ve helped. Being an unrepentant sinner is not universally appreciated in the land of the free and home of the brave.”

The criticism never made him doubt himself, “as if being photographed coming out of nightclubs made me inauthentic, although Norman Mailer once told me, ‘Be careful of those flashbulbs, they can bleach your soul!’” Did his ego become inflated? “No, I knew I wasn’t Tolstoy.” When did he stop doing cocaine? “Three days ago,” McInerney says sharply. He still does it? “Not really. The last time was a couple of years ago. But never say never: it could happen anytime.” He laughs.

“I haven’t been in that milieu for a while.” Does he take any drugs? “No, unless you count alcohol and sleeping pills. Watching people do cocaine in public can be unattractive, I’ve seen it too much.” Was it ever out of control? “For short periods of time. I never went to rehab. After a rotten night I’d never want to go near it again.” So, no Narcotics Anonymous? “No, it’s for pussies,” McInerney laughs. “That’s rude, sorry. Some

Jay McInerney in his penthouse apartment near Greenwich Village. Below: With his third wife, Helen Bransford; and, right, with Anne Hearst, his fourth wife



Top: the film of *Bright Lights, Big City*, released in 1988; left, McInerney at a book-signing in London in 1988; former girlfriend, the model Marla Hanson

## “I’m a romantic, you have to be to marry four times. It’s the cynics who never get married

people genuinely have drug and alcohol problems. I’m lucky I didn’t get to that point. Cocaine was just what we did at the time. It’s not part of my life now, I’d rather drink a good bottle of wine. Only the puritans and moralists decided I couldn’t be a ‘serious writer’ because I wrote about subjects they deemed inappropriate to literature and didn’t live monastically.”

He still goes out: he’s a habitué of the Boom Boom Room, the club at the Standard Hotel, drinks fine wine at swanky restaurants and stays up all night, mostly at friends’ houses. “But I don’t fall down in the street. I’m a happy drinker, not a blackout drinker.” Having children has been calming. “They reacted against my example and are very straight, well-behaved. They don’t want to dwell on that part of my past, neither are they keen to repeat it.”

Cocaine was “3 per cent of my life”, McInerney says. What was the other 97? “Literature, marriage, travel and wine,” he says. Ah, the marriages: first to Linda Rossiter, a model, in 1979, then writer Merry Raymond in 1983 (who was hospitalised at a psychiatric facility, McInerney paid the bills). He lived with Marla Hanson, another model, for four years. “I bought her an engagement ring, but it was volatile. We were always fighting and making up. Fortunately

she ran off and had a fling with Emilio Estevez.” He married his third wife, Bransford, in 1992. They had the twins by a surrogate in 1994 (McInerney is the biological father), divorced in 2000 and remain close. Another longtime girlfriend preceded marriage to Hearst in 2006.

“I’m a romantic, you have to be to marry four times,” McInerney says. “It’s the cynics who never get married. Love is the eternal quest: almost everyone wants to love and be loved.” Is his womanising over? Is he monogamous? “One of the nicest things about getting older is that you listen to your higher self. I’m very happily married. There’s been a lot of exaggeration about my womanising. If I had done as much as people think, I wouldn’t be on such good terms with my exes. I would hate to be cut off from someone who I thought enough of to love.” Is this his final marriage? “Yes, definitely, four is enough. Hemingway had four. Mailer had seven — he overdid it.”

Why did McInerney become sensible? “In one’s twenties and thirties the road of excess seems to lead to the palace of wisdom. I imagined I would die young like my heroes, but once you’ve crossed the threshold of sensible behaviour for the 537th time, Dylan Thomas and Fitzgerald don’t seem that

romantic. The whole point of my career is that I didn’t die in my 40s.” The myth of the womanising, drug-snorting party boy has stuck; “even though I have been leading a relatively normal life for many years. It’s tedious.” His last books, particularly the two (soon to become three) focusing on the relationship of an upscale couple, the Calloways, have been about marriage, fidelity, careers, New York post 9/11, children. In the next, which he is writing, the couple “struggle with: is marriage for keeps?” Ageing is “terrible in one way, coming closer to the end is frightening, though I don’t feel old”. He mulls mortality “all the time, especially lying in bed at 3am. But if I died today I wouldn’t think it was a wasted life. I’ve lived more than most novelists.”

McInerney may write an autobiography “if I can remember anything and if anyone’s interested”. He’s working on a film script for his short story collection, *How It Ended*. Of his muse, he thinks Manhattan has become “too gentrified, there was a certain buzz in the air when you worried about getting mugged. Now it’s an enclave of wealth and privilege.” He’s not poor: his latest favourite restaurants are the Breslin, Momofuku, The Spotted Pig and Il Posto Accanto, a Lower East Side venue “frequented by junkies and chefs”.

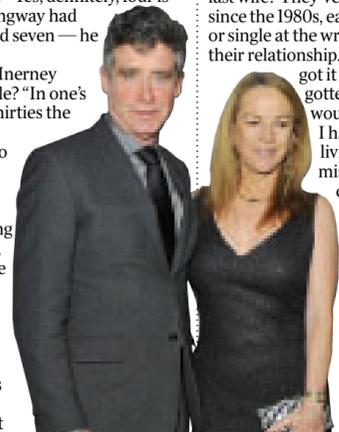
The “biggest struggle” of McInerney’s life has been Maisie and John’s contracting Lyme disease, a tick-borne bacterial infection. “It’s been really rough,” he says. The children developed neurological and rheumatological ailments and misdiagnoses occurred. Now they’re on the right antibiotics, “they’re on an upswing. So yes, I have this life with lots of hedonism and adventure, but over the last year I have been dealing with my children’s illness. They should be healthy and carefree and they haven’t been. When you have kids you can only be as happy as your least happy child.”

Therapy has been “very helpful”, particularly when McInerney had his breakdown more than a decade ago. “A lot of the time, it’s bullshit. When you catch yourself lying to your therapist, you know it’s a waste of money.”

He has “sometimes” considered suicide, “then immediately thought no; once you have kids it ceases to be an option. Depression runs in my family, but I’ve never fallen into a black hole so long I couldn’t imagine getting out of it.” McInerney works out, though won’t have plastic surgery. “Please. Any man who does that, with the possible exception of actors, are silly asses.”

Why is he so sure Anne will be his last wife? They’ve known each other since the 1980s, each of them married or single at the wrong moments until their relationship. “Maybe I’ve finally got it right,” he says. “If I’d gotten with her in 1986 I would have screwed it up. I had a lot of learning, living and mistake-making to do. I can’t make the same mistakes over and over again. I’m not that stupid.”

Suddenly he must go: the evening is here and McInerney, naturally, has a car waiting. **The Juice: Vinous Veritas (Bloomsbury, £14.99)**



McInerney with his fourth wife, Anne Hearst