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The City in Pictures, and in Lists

By SAM ROBERTS

Two collections of New York photographs, one a selection from a magazine's vast archives and the other a study of the city in the wee hours, might make great holiday gifts for fans of New York and its past.

"Only in New York: Photographs From Look Magazine" (Monacelli Press, \$50), by Donald Albrecht and Thomas Mellins, coincides with an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. Culled from 200,000 images of the city taken from 1938 to 1961, the book's evocative black-and-white photographs recall a nearly forgotten era.

"Look magazine had a long love affair with New York City," the authors write, and its photographs consistently delivered this message: "New York was both a big city, unlike any other in the nation, and a small town, where everyday life progressed much as it did elsewhere."

Those two visions are vividly conveyed in photographs from the city's neighborhoods, night-spots and waterfront. Individual portraits of a wide range of New Yorkers are also included.

By contrast, Christopher Thomas's mystical **"New York Sleeps"** (Prestel, \$49.95) captures the city eerily devoid of people and invites viewers to conduct their own version of "Where's Waldo?" and search for even one New Yorker. His glorious photographs of abandoned piers, deserted subway stations, diners awaiting their first customers and Union Square freshly dusted by snow were taken in morning's first gleaming before most of the city awakened. They, too, are on exhibition this month at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan.

"We sense Thomas searching the streets and architecture of New York for some evidence or code to help him decipher what this civilization is about," Bob Shamis, a photographer and curator, writes in an accompanying essay.

Mr. Shamis adds, "The result



FROM "NEW YORK SLEEPS"

AT REST A 2001 photograph of Katz's Delicatessen in Manhattan, by Christopher Thomas.

is the depiction of a city with the appearance of the present and the feel of a city from a past that has not yet occurred."

If the 2009 mayoral election was, in part, a referendum on Michael R. Bloomberg's stewardship of the city's public school system, the evidence available to New York voters was ambiguous. Beth Fertig, a reporter for WNYC public radio, weighs in with more grist in **"Why cant U teach me 2 read? Three Students and a Mayor Put Our Schools to the Test"** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27).

Ms. Fertig focuses on three students who managed to get through high school without learning to read. They are extreme examples, but if, as some experts estimate, even 5 percent of youngsters have learning problems this severe, they could represent tens of thousands of students in New York's

public school system alone.

Her book is most compelling when she explores the wrenching personal impact of illiteracy on the three former students, for whom Advocates for Children, a nonprofit group, won private "compensatory" tutoring at government expense after they had been the victims of educational neglect.

While these cases are among the most problematic, they help illustrate the challenges of deciding which standards to impose, how best to teach, how to get more good teachers and how to relevantly measure success individually and systemically.

Ms. Fertig's overall verdict on the mayor and his schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein (whose father, we learn, was a high school dropout who became a postman): "Based on statistics, 2009 was a good year for the New York City public schools."

But this conclusion comes

with caveats. The real benchmark, Ms. Fertig writes, will be when fewer students drop out and more graduate.

Who can resist a book that's promoted by its publisher as good bathroom reading? You can't help but be diverted by **"The Ultimate Book of New York Lists: Everything You Need to Know About the Greatest City on Earth"** (Skyhorse, \$12.95), by Bert Randolph Sugar with C. N. Richardson.

The cover borrows The New Yorker's typeface, but the contents are less profound and probably more fun, if occasionally frustrating. The highly subjective Top 10 compilations include greatest New York jazz songs ("Take the A Train" is No. 1), basketball players (Michael Jordan), mayors (Fiorello H. La Guardia) and mob hits (arranged chronologically, perhaps so as not to offend any gangsters).