

Gay Talese

Frank Sinatra Has a Cold. The New York Times. Nan Talese.

Words Chris May Portraits Janette Beckman

It is, declared the editors of Esquire in its 70th anniversary issue, the “Best Story Esquire Ever Published”. It ran in April 1966, it is titled “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold”, it is 15,000 words of perfectly crafted observational reportage, and if you read it, you are in for a treat.

“Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” was written by Gay Talese. It is one of many masterly stories he has written, along with a dozen or so books. He is one of the great talents of modern American literature. But Talese’s reputation, unlike that of his friend and contemporary Tom Wolfe, is niche. Wolfe now mostly writes novels, for which he is widely feted. Talese strictly writes non-fiction, which is taken less seriously in the salons and sanctums of New York’s literary world.

Talese is an Italian-American literary outlier who grew up in a “lower-middle-class family of shopkeepers” in suburban New Jersey. He writes “stories about real people”: actors, athletes, singers, boxers, baseball players, newspaper workers, mafiosi, swingers, masseuses, families, construction workers and beyond. He prefers to write about everyday people rather than celebrities, and tends to find losers more interesting than winners. He learned his craft on student and local newspapers, became a reporter on the

New York Times in 1956, wrote his first *Esquire* feature in 1960 and had his first book published a year later. He quit the New York Times in 1965 and has written books and magazine features ever since.

Talese lives in an elegant townhouse on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. He dresses immaculately, like the tailor’s son he is. His wife of 55 years, Nan Talese, is a respected veteran of the New York publishing world. Talese does not fit the stereotypical image of an outsider, but the idea runs through his life and he says he feels like one still. Quality of prose aside, it is what gives his writing its edge.

Talese grew up in a Catholic family in the mainly Protestant resort town of Ocean City. His sense of separation grew more acute in his pre-teens, when the US was at war with Italy and his father had family serving in Mussolini’s army. Later, when Talese became a non-fiction writer, he ran up against a literary establishment which then, as now, venerated the novel as the supreme expression of authorial achievement. His third bestseller, *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, an immersive exploration of the sex lives of 1970s Americans, pushed him beyond the margins of polite society for most of the 1980s. And Talese’s approach to his work, which includes extended periods

hanging out observing a subject – from necessity with Frank Sinatra, by choice at other times – has produced further degrees of detachment and objectivity.

He was born in 1932 to Joseph and Catherine Talese. Joseph was a tailor from Calabria in southern Italy who had immigrated to the United States in 1922 and become a US citizen in 1928. Catherine was a dress-boutique owner from New York’s Little Italy.

Unlike many writers, Talese’s childhood did not involve books. “My father had one book I know he read,” he says. “It was an English translation of the French writer Guy de Maupassant, a collection of short stories. I don’t know why he got Guy de Maupassant in particular, but it was in English and he must have been learning to speak and read English with such books as this.

“As a child, I never had books read to me, like most people have mothers reading to them at their bedside, *Winnie the Pooh* or whatever. I never had any of that. I didn’t read even in high school. When I went to parochial school I was miserable. I hated it. I grew up without any skill in any course they taught me. The things you got judged for – arithmetic, geography, chemistry – none of that could I do well. Even English. >





With his artist daughter Pamela, 1992

“So as a young boy, my assimilation into larger society didn’t come through reading, which is how most intelligent people learn. They read about experiences beyond their own purview, they learn a lot from reading. I learned a lot by watching and listening.”

Much of the watching and listening happened in his parents’ shops. “The two things I had going for me,” Talese says, “were that my father was a tailor and my mother had a dress shop, and the outside world came into the stores. As an eavesdropping kid not much taller than the counter, I would watch these different worlds, with different people coming in and out, rather as if it were a theatre. It’s an ever-changing programme – new characters walk in and out, issues arise, conversations are overheard. It was a very rich experience. And it had to do with personal connections; it wasn’t far removed from the world of Somerset Maugham or Graham Greene or Ernest Hemingway. We got the stories first-hand, as my mother talked to the women in the boutique and my father was measuring men in the fitting room. So my background is verbal.”

Talese’s parents may not have introduced him to the world of books, but he credits them with several of the qualities that have informed his life

as a writer. From observing his mother converse with her customers, he learned never to interrupt or prompt a person he was interviewing, so getting them to reveal more about themselves.

From his father, Talese learnt “to write like a tailor – careful, methodical, with a sense of design before I start.

‘I INDULGED MY CURIOSITY ABOUT PEOPLE BY INTERVIEWING THEM’

I pay attention to craft and it comes out of my father’s tailor shop. Measuring the suit properly, making it fit, having it put together in a way that holds up. These are lessons I translated from the tailoring room to my manuscripts or magazine pieces. I looked on my father as a master craftsman; that’s what I’ve aspired to be.”

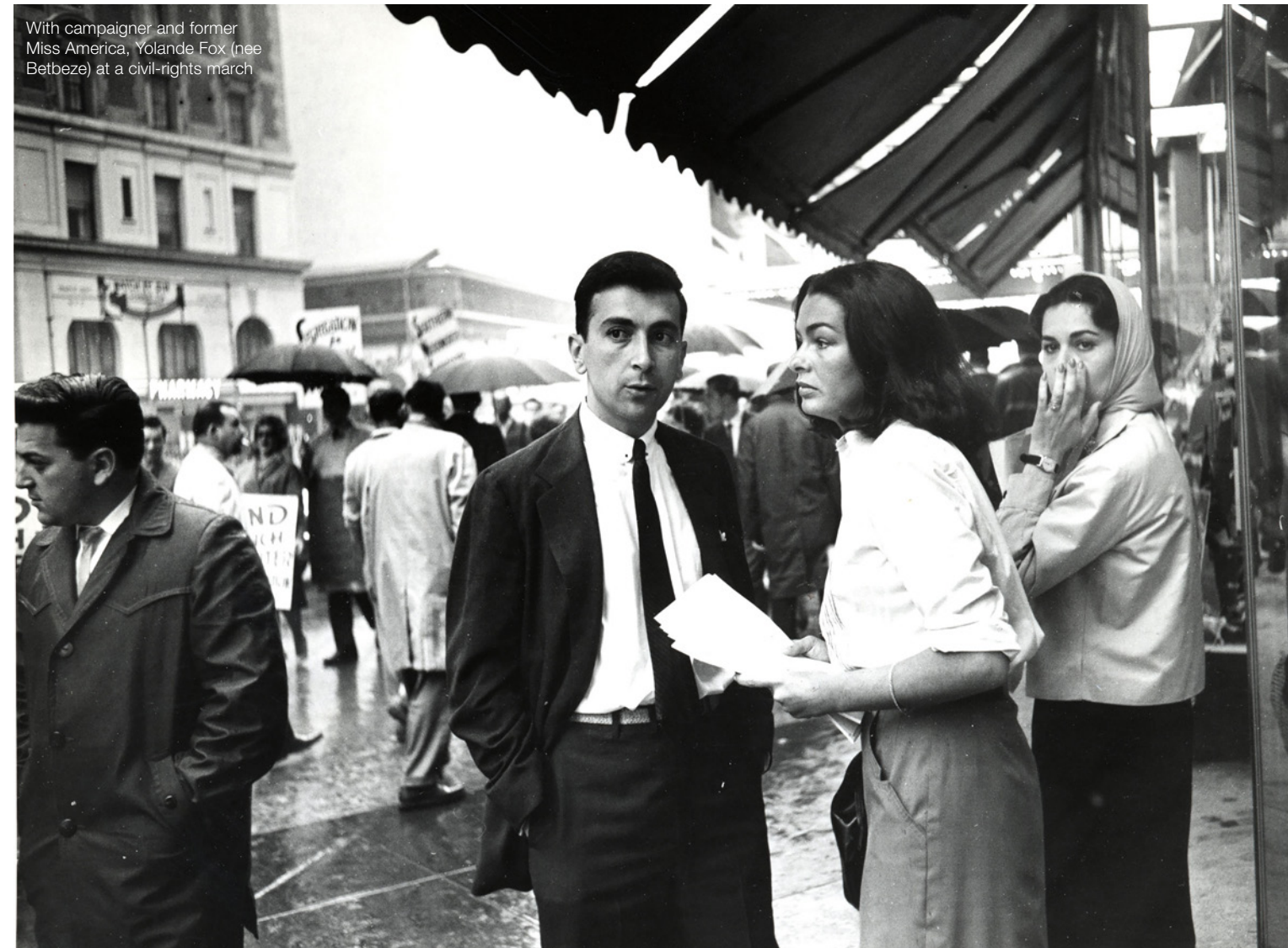
Talese’s sartorialism began with his father, too. “I always had to wear good

clothes and look good from when I was a kid,” he says. “I would wear clothes my father had made because it would bestow disgrace on him in this small town where he had a tailor’s shop if his only son was going to school not dressed well. So I got into the habit young. I didn’t do well at school. But in terms of sartorial splendour, from being a toddler almost, I really carried that through. It was the Italian idea of ‘la bella figura’.

“Later, I was conscious that journalists should dress well. Because you’re trying to get your foot in the door. You’re like a salesman. You have to sell people on the idea that you’re worth talking to, and you have to look the part. So I dressed well out of respect for the story and the people I was interviewing.”

Through his father, Talese also came across newspapers. “I began reading the New York Times as a schoolboy,” he says, “only because my father read the foreign pages avidly every morning for the war news. He was worried about the Allied invasion up through Sicily and Calabria, because it was like a personal, family issue. It was complex, because on the one hand my father was very much an American citizen, but also he had a great sentimental affiliation with his background and his family who were on the wrong side of the war.”

With campaigner and former Miss America, Yolande Fox (nee Betbeze) at a civil-rights march



Talese discovered his gift for writing by chance. One summer day in 1947, he helped his high-school baseball coach by volunteering to send the match report to the local Ocean City Sentinel-Ledger. Instead of simply phoning the scores through, as was the norm, Talese typed them out and added contextual detail. Soon he was invited to write a weekly column. By the time he left Ocean City in 1949 to study journalism at the University of Alabama, Talese had written 300 pieces for the paper.

“I indulged my curiosity about people by interviewing them,” he says. “Some of them were athletes, some were smart kids. I wasn’t either. I wasn’t an

athlete. I wasn’t a smart kid. But I wrote about sports and I wrote about student activities, people who were president of the class or who won an award for piano-playing or whatever. So I was an outsider but I was also involved as a writer, a chronicler, an eavesdropping observer.

“I haven’t changed the way I go about stories. I think the quality, or lack of quality, about what makes me different or distinguished, or lacking, is consistent from age 15 to age 82. I work the same way. I hang out, I observe, I look people in the eye. And the writing doesn’t come easy. On a good day, I write maybe one paragraph – I hardly ever remember writing a full page that held

up. And I can’t think of a single thing I’ve ever written that didn’t give me grief. But as someone said before me, I enjoy having written.”

Rather unexpectedly, as an Italian-American, Talese felt less an outsider at university in the deep south than he had up in Ocean City. “Alabama was one of the sectors of the United States vilified for being on the wrong side in the civil war,” he says. “I found identity in that. Because the Italians were vilified during the second world war. Italian-Americans were seen as associated with two things – the mafia, who were in the newspapers all the time, and the fascists of Mussolini. In the post office in Ocean City, there >

were large posters of Hitler, Hideki Tōjō and Mussolini. Every time I went to mail a letter for my mother or father, I’d see Mussolini there, a fat Mussolini with big jowls, and squirmy little Tōjō and Hitler, and these were the enemy. And I thought, Jesus, one of these guys is in our family. The fat guy is dominating my father’s homeland. But they didn’t know Italians in Alabama.

“I loved it. And the people in Alabama, they had a charm about them, they would say hello to you, they would look you in the eye. In Ocean City, it was more grim and rigid. The Protestants were very rigid.

“I learned a lot about writing at Alabama. My exemplars were not non-fiction writers. There were few good non-fiction writers that I knew of when I was young. I loved the fiction writers, especially the short-story writers. F Scott Fitzgerald’s *Winter Dreams*, about a caddy who becomes a success in business, was my all-time favourite. I tried to capture in my articles the spirit of that Fitzgerald story and stories by other writers of fiction I admired – such as Carson McCullers’ *The Jockey* and Irwin Shaw’s *The Eighty-Yard Run* and John O’Hara, who wrote a wonderful short story set in the New York Racquet and Tennis Club.

“So I wrote stories about real people, using their real names, everything on the record. I also began to write about people who lose more often than people who win, because how people deal with failure is usually more interesting than how they deal with success. And I wrote about ordinary people more often than celebrities. Most celebrities you write about are pretty stupid people. If you want to be a celebrity writer it’s a very bad career move. Really, they’re pretty stupid people. Famous but stupid.”

After leaving Alabama, Talese joined the New York Times as a copyboy, left in 1954 for two years’ obligatory military service, and then returned as a reporter. After a decade with the paper he quit in 1965 to pursue magazine writing.

“In 1963, there was a big newspaper strike in New York,” he says. “During those three months I learned what it’s like not to have a daily deadline. I went to London for *Esquire* to interview Peter O’Toole, who’d recently done *Lawrence of Arabia*. O’Toole said, ‘I can’t talk to



Reporting for the New York Times at City Hall, New York, 1964
Photograph Jill Krementz

you here, let’s go to Ireland.’ So I went to Ireland and I had six weeks alone with him. I wasn’t with him all the time but I was with him a lot. Like I say, I usually avoid celebrities but I found O’Toole intellectually fascinating. Anyway, I got spoilt and I thought, ‘Jesus, this is great, I don’t have to write 800 words every fucking day and then they chop out 200 of them.’”

In 1965, Talese told *Esquire* editor Harold Hayes that he wanted to get out of daily journalism. “Hayes said, ‘I’ll give you a one-year contract for the same money as you’re getting at the paper,’” says Talese. “He said, ‘You’ll only have to write six articles and you can choose three and I’ll choose three.’ It wasn’t much money but it was enough to live on, and I had a wife who was an editor – I still have the same wife and she’s still an editor – so we had a little income.

“What I wanted was to write about the media, though nobody was calling it that then. But I thought the newspaper people I knew from the New York Times had good stories. The copy readers, copy editors, executives, floor sweepers, window washers, cafeteria workers – all these people were stories. And I thought, most people think the front page is the

paper. But that’s not the paper, the paper is the people inside the building. So I thought, I’m going to write about them, because nobody’s ever written about them. So I told Hayes I want to write about this strange guy who writes the obituaries, Mr Bad News, and Hayes said, ‘OK, you can write about him.’

“Then I said, ‘I want to write about the managing editor.’ Hayes said, ‘No, no, no, you can’t write about him yet, I want you to do Frank Sinatra.’ I said, ‘Oh, Sinatra, he’s overdone, who wants to do Sinatra? There’s been 12 articles this year on Sinatra.’ But Hayes said no: ‘It’s a cover story – I guarantee you the front cover,’ he said. ‘It’s easy, it will only take a week, you go out to California, Sinatra will meet you out there, you get the interview, you come back and then you can do your managing editor guy.’

“Well, you know what happened. I went out there and nothing Hayes said was going to happen happened. I hung out for weeks, but Sinatra doesn’t want to see me, he’s worried about the mafia, he’s worried about his cold, and they wanted to see the article before it was published. All this was a deal-breaker. That turned out to be a disaster but it also turned out to be one of the pieces

I’m best known for. I did it by observing and also by being accustomed to writing about minor characters, such as the people in Sinatra’s entourage.”

Talese followed his Sinatra story with one about another Italian-American, the retired baseball star Joe DiMaggio. “That was my idea,” he says. “DiMaggio was more my kind of Italian than Sinatra, in the sense that he was a brooding, lost artist who was past his prime. He was difficult to deal with, too. After I did DiMaggio, Hayes let me do the managing editor. And that made me think, there’s a book here. So at the end of the contract, I didn’t sign with *Esquire* for a second year. I said, I want to see if I can get an advance and do a book about the New York Times. That was *The Kingdom and the Power*, which came out in 1969. It took me four years to do that book. It was my first bestseller.”

Written more or less concurrently with *The Kingdom and the Power* was Talese’s next book, *Honor Thy Father*, the story of the New York crime family led by Joseph Bonanno. The central figure was Bonanno’s son, Salvatore “Bill” Bonanno. As was his normal practice, Talese’s research required him to spend a lot of time observing his subject and his associates. Did he ever feel he was putting his personal safety at risk hanging out with these people?

“Sometimes,” says Talese. “One time, the Bonannos were in a war with another crime family, who tried to shoot Bill Bonanno in Brooklyn. They missed him. I knew Bill very well by this point and the day after, he comes to my house in Manhattan, unannounced, and rings the bell. His bodyguards are outside keeping watch. He came in and he said, listen, I want you to do me a favour. I said, what’s that, Bill? He said, they tried to kill me last night and there’s nothing in the newspaper about it today because the cops are siding with the rival gang. He said, I want something in the paper. I said, is there any evidence they tried to shoot you? He said, yes, there’s bullet holes all over the goddamn street. He said, the police precinct there wants me to be killed and they’re still out to kill me now. He said, can you get something in the paper? I said, sure. I called an editor at the New York Times, Arthur Gill. I said, Arthur, I heard there was a



shooting in Troutman Street last night, bullet holes all over the sidewalk and the buildings, because some mafia gang opposing the Bonanno family tried to knock off the son, Bill Bonanno, but the police are keeping it quiet. He said, how did you get this information? I said, I got it from really good sources. Bill Bonanno is sitting there listening to this. So they checked it out and next day, big story. What that meant was the other

‘MOST CELEBRITIES YOU WRITE ABOUT ARE PRETTY STUPID’

mafia guys, now that there was all this publicity, had to back off, and that took the pressure off Bill Bonanno. So he used me and I used him.

“And I thought during this episode, here’s this guy, he came into my house, and people were probably following him – there aren’t secrets for very long in that secret society – and you never know. I mean, John Kennedy thought it was a happy, sunny day in Dallas and it’s the

day he got shot. You never know when you’re in danger.”

Honor Thy Father was Talese’s first serious money-spinner and it enabled him to buy his house. “I bought it on the mafia book for \$175,000,” he says. “But in New York in 1971, the market was down. For the first time in my life I had money that year. I had made money from *The Kingdom and the Power*. But the mafia book was a few million bucks.” How much is the house worth today? “Maybe seven, eight, nine million.”

Talese earned even more on his next book, 1980’s *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, around \$4.5m, including the film rights. But it cost him, too. Research involved not only hanging out with swingers, pornographers and all manner of sexual adventurers, but also joining in some of their activities, which Talese did enthusiastically enough. As he later said, “You don’t hang out at an orgy dressed for dinner.” For a while, he even managed a Manhattan massage parlour. To a man – and, particularly, to a woman – reviewers were hostile. Worse, many of Talese’s fellow writers turned on him. He was called a pervert, a slimeball and a traitor to Nan (who stood by him). Talese spent much of the 1980s far away from Manhattan, in Italy, researching his next book, 1992’s *Unto the Sons*, the story of his family and its roots and experiences as Italian-Americans.

Does Talese think the Manhattan literary world has now forgiven him for *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*? >

“I think so,” says Talese. “So much time has passed. I got terrible reviews from everybody. I mean, I’ve got terrible reviews for other things, it wasn’t a unique experience. What really bothered me was when the writers turned on me. I was a member of [freedom-of-speech organisation] PEN International, I was slated to be the next president. But after *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, they withdrew my name. These were writers! What about freedom of expression? Not all of them were against me. Kurt Vonnegut was for me, but for women writers, the feminist writers, I was the devil incarnate. Also I was the father of two young girls. They weren’t quite teenagers then and their classmates are repeating to them what their mother and father probably are telling them at the dinner table about this disgusting pervert Gay Talese. But now I’m 82, the book is considered a little classic. And when you think of the great writers – not that I’m including myself – DH Lawrence, for instance, when he wrote *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Jesus, he got even more crap than I did.”

As Talese puts it, he has been “ripped apart” by critics at times, but he has been, by and large, extraordinarily successful, critically and financially. Yet a feeling of belonging as always eluded him.

“As an Italian-American I feel like an outsider. We are not lettered people in the United States. We have one distinguished novelist who doesn’t write about Italians, Don DeLillo. Then we have a lot of people who make money off the mafia. All the Italian-American actors in Hollywood, they do *The Sopranos* or *The Godfather* or *Casino* or *Goodfellas*. Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, however distinguished they are, they also made their money from organised crime, from depicting anti-social or criminally-inclined people. The great Italian-American actors are known, not for playing Shylock, as Al Pacino has done successfully, but for being Don Corleone’s son in *The Godfather*. Robert De Niro is mostly known for being in movies that if not purely mafia, are anti-social. Italian-American popularity, or notoriety, is in its third generation with the mafia. Even if the mafia is old and worn out and pretty much off the main page now, it started in the 1920s, so we have a long history.

“Italian-Americans are not part of the world of letters, not part of the literary tea party. Even in journalism. I’m one of the few people who even got a high-level job in journalism. It’s because Italian-Americans never had any experience with writing. Their traditions were singing and being loud and dramatic, which they could convert into acting. But as for the quiet solitude of reading or writing, the Italians are not a solitary people. They’re village people. And most of the people who came to the United States, whether they’re Don DeLillo, Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, or even Madonna for Christ’s sake – if they’re Italian, they’re not from Rome or Milan or Florence, they’re from Naples and Sicily and the places in between. People like my family. They came from villages of antiquity,

‘I TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN NON-FICTION AND I NEVER WANTED TO WRITE A NOVEL’

where nothing much had happened for three or four hundred years. They’re really places almost out of the dark ages. There was no Renaissance down there. You look at the place, really it’s a Greek culture. Tony Bennett, one of my great friends, he can sing but he can’t write. It’s really a strange thing. I’ve made a living. I’ve never done anything else that gave me any income except writing in English.”

Talese has described non-fiction writers as “second-class citizens, the Ellis Island of literature. We just can’t quite get in. And yes, it pisses me off.” Why does he think non-fiction has been so undervalued?

“Because of the status conferred upon the form by the gentlemen of letters who run the academies. I take great pride in

non-fiction and I never wanted to write a novel. I could have written novels. I actually wrote a short fiction story once that got published – the first and last I ever wrote – and the magazine wanted more of the same. But to hell with it, I wanted to do something different. There are so many good fiction writers and so few good non-fiction writers.

“But the literary world thinks the novel is the ultimate form. Take the late Susan Sontag, for example. She had to be referred to as a novelist, but she never wrote a novel you can remember. She was an essayist. But no, no, she couldn’t be called an essayist, that wasn’t good enough. She had to be called a novelist. Michel de Montaigne was an essayist, but not Susan Sontag. We recently had a writer, Peter Matthiessen – he got awards for non-fiction, he wrote about nature and travel, and won many awards for that. But he had a few novels that no one ever heard about and he called himself a novelist. They want to be novelists who occasionally slum it in the world of non-fiction. Well, fuck them, I say.”

Right now, Talese is working on a book about his marriage. It will be titled *A Non-Fiction Marriage* and is part of an autobiographical trilogy that began with *Unto the Sons* and continued with *A Writer’s Life* in 2006. He is keeping the subject matter under wraps, however. He aims to finish it this year and publish in 2015. “It is an extremely secret book,” he says. “Something very dramatic, that I can’t speak about on the record now. It’s about a real person, and I’m working on it full-time. It’s around the subject of voyeurism, the history of voyeurism. Not sexual voyeurism, voyeurism in the sense of intrusion upon privacy, extreme measures. Getting a view of private life. I’ve always been interested in private life. *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* was about private life. I can’t be more specific because I want the book to be a surprise.” ■

A 50th anniversary edition of Gay Talese’s second book, The Bridge (1964), will be published by Bloomsbury in October 2014
bloomsbury.com
randomhouse.com

