



*American Writers*  
*A Collection of Literary Biographies*

**JAY PARINI**  
*Editor in Chief*

**SUPPLEMENT XVII**  
*Max Apple to Franz Wright*

**CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS**

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# GAY TALESE

(1932—)

## *Susan Butterworth*

GAY TALESE is a writer who is dedicated to the art and craft of nonfiction. He has made a significant contribution to the genre in American writing known as New Journalism, literary journalism, or creative nonfiction. He is respected for his thorough research and his artistic use of the techniques of fiction—especially setting, dialogue, and the use of varied and intimate points of view—in nonfiction writing. The threads of several recurrent themes and interests run through his work: an interest in the unknown and obscure and in failure; an ability to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary subject or to present the extraordinary subject from an unusual point of view; an interest in sportswriting and in Italian American subjects; a thread of intergenerational and father-son relationships; and of allowing a series of individual scenes and stories to illuminate larger themes.

Talese takes time with his subjects. His seductiveness as an interviewer is an important part of his gift. He is an easy man to like: well dressed, well mannered, respectful, sincerely interested, curious, and a good listener. He is easy to trust; people are willing to reveal their secrets and stories in response to his questions. He collects stories that are difficult to obtain, on hidden or risky subjects, the kind of stories that have been kept secret or fictionalized in the past. He is determined to use real names, to write accurate nonfiction, and to elevate nonfiction to a genre that is as respected as fiction. His genius is in taking so much time with his carefully gathered material and in knowing his subject so well that he writes from the inside out. Once he is thoroughly immersed in his subject he writes carefully, choosing the correct words for his precise, respectful tone and the correct transitions to weave together the threads of many stories coherently, artfully, without confusing the reader.

### *THE TAILOR'S SON*

Gay Talese, named for his Italian grandfather Gaetano, was born February 7, 1932, in Ocean City, New Jersey. His Italian American background and his upbringing in Ocean City would be lifelong influences on his writing as well as his character. His father, Joseph Talese, had emigrated from Calabria in southern Italy as a young man of seventeen in the early 1920s. Joseph had apprenticed as a tailor in his hometown while still a young child and later continued to learn his trade from a cousin in Paris before emigrating to the United States and opening a tailoring business in Ocean City. He married Catherine DiPaola, whose family was also from Maida, his native village in Calabria. The couple became established in Ocean City, a sober, correct, and conservative town on an island near Atlantic City. Catherine's dress boutique joined Joseph's tailoring and dry-cleaning business in their building on the main street of town. Talese and his sister, Marian, four years younger, grew up in the apartment above the business, helping in the shop.

In *Unto the Sons* (1992), his book about his father's immigration from Italy, Talese describes his childhood as a lonely one, the life of an outsider, a minority within a minority, a Catholic in a Protestant community, an Italian among Irish Catholics at his parochial school. His father was a foreigner, marked by his accent and his tailored suits. While he was a respected businessman in the community, his position was tenuous, especially during the years of World War II when the United States and Italy were at war. Talese has written movingly of his father's anguish as the United States dropped bombs on southern Italy, where his mother and brothers still lived.

Yet his family did not fit the image of the typical Italian American home either. His mother was not the stereotypical Italian mama presiding over a kitchen and large family. Rather she was a businesswoman, ahead of her time, preoccupied with the shop. The elder Taleses were compatible and close, rarely out of each other's sight. Talese has written that he sometimes felt like an outsider in the family as well, an intruder on the devotion of his parents for each other. Thus he grew up a quiet, shy boy, well dressed and polite but always with a sense of being an outsider, observing from the background.

Talese attributes much of his success as an interviewer to his upbringing in the store. His well-tailored, well-mannered parents were liked by their customers and treated them with respect. His mother became a confidante to the women who tried on dresses in her boutique. Observing her, he learned to listen, to ask the right questions, to wait for the story to emerge. He would always identify with and be interested in the outsider, the unnoticed, and look for the extraordinary story hidden beneath the ordinary surface. Many of the subjects of his later profiles and books would be Italian Americans, and themes of fathers and sons would appear throughout his work.

#### THE YOUNG SPORTSWRITER

Shy and curious, the young Talese blossomed as a sportswriter for the high school newspaper. His high school teams were rarely winners, so he learned to write about losing. Riding the team bus to games, he found that he could befriend the athletes, that they would trust him with their stories. Even in high school Talese found his voice writing about the obscure, the losers. The role of curious observer and sympathetic reporter agreed with him. Talese became the high school correspondent for his hometown weekly, the *Ocean City Sentinel-Ledger*, and for the daily *Atlantic City Press*.

A mediocre student, Talese was nevertheless determined to go to college rather than follow his father into the tailoring business. He graduated from high school in 1949 and was rejected from

a dozen colleges in the New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York area. Fortunately a customer of his father's was an alumnus of the University of Alabama and recommended Talese to the dean. Talese was accepted and enrolled at the University of Alabama. A northerner in a southern setting, Talese was still an outsider.

Majoring in journalism, Talese became sports editor of the college weekly and campus correspondent for the *Birmingham Post-Herald*. His interest in the unusual subject began to appear in articles about the benchwarmers, the athlete whose play lost the game, the locker-room attendant. At the same time, young Talese was reading fiction, the works of John O'Hara and Irwin Shaw, and beginning to experiment with narrative technique and point of view in his journalism.

After graduation from the University of Alabama in 1953 Talese found a job at the *New York Times*, where he worked as a news assistant during the summer and fall of 1953. During the Korean conflict all male students at the University of Alabama were enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and Talese was commissioned in the army in 1954. He left the *Times* for Fort Knox and a tour of duty in Germany but returned to the *Times* after his military service as a reporter in the sports department.

Admiring the way a good fiction writer like O'Hara could weave together facts with the sensory details of the setting, dialogue, and imagery to give a feeling of immediacy and being present at the scene, Talese realized that he could meet the *New York Times's* demanding standards of accuracy as well as use the techniques of fiction to make each sports article an example of fine writing craft.

These strict standards of nonfiction combined with a fictional approach to the art and craft of writing would become Talese trademarks. While a sportswriter for the *Times* he showed the special interest in writing about boxers that would last throughout his career. Talese befriended the prizefighter Floyd Patterson, sometimes joining him in his hotel room after the fight, developing the in-depth relationship that would allow him

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to write more than thirty articles about Patterson for the *Times*.

The *New York Times* was a venerable institution, considered America's "paper of record," known for its strictly factual, complete, and well-balanced reporting. Reportorial standards were high, and several of the paper's older writers were considered the preeminent figures of the day in journalism and nonfiction writing. However, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the years that Talese was writing for the *Times*, print journalism was facing challenges from television. Americans were beginning to get their news and information from a medium even more ephemeral than the daily newspaper. Television was fast, first with the breaking news, and visual. Turner Catledge, managing editor of the *Times*, let it be known that he was looking for livelier, spicier writing. So in 1958 Talese was transferred from the sports desk to the news desk to be a part of this new emphasis on writing as well as reporting.

On June 10, 1959, Talese was married to Nan Ahearn, an editor at Random House. They had been dating for two years when she flew to Rome to join him after he had finished an assignment for the *New York Times Magazine* on the Via Veneto, where the director Federico Fellini was filming *La Dolce Vita*. Nan told her parents she was going to Rome to marry Talese, who was unaware that this was her intention. The convent-educated young editor contacted Talese's parents and arrived in Rome with his baptismal certificate and a plan to be married at the church of Trinità dei Monti. Talese agreed, and when they discovered that the marriage at Trinità dei Monti was impossible, they were married by an Italian magistrate in a civil ceremony in an ornate Roman municipal building. One of Talese's most admired authors, Irwin Shaw, to whom he had been introduced years earlier, was in Rome having a drink at the bar of the hotel where the young couple was drinking champagne on the eve of the ceremony. Shaw became the impromptu best man and gave the newlyweds a festive wedding party on the Via Veneto, attended by many involved in the filming of *La Dolce Vita*—a scene worthy of a Talese story, but this time he was a participant rather than an observer.

The couple moved into a brownstone on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where they still live, gradually acquiring more space in the building until they had the opportunity to buy it. The Taleses have two daughters, Pamela Frances, born in 1964, and Catherine Gay, born in 1967. After the birth of their second daughter they bought a second home near the beach and his parents in Ocean City. Throughout their two-career marriage Nan Talese has worked as an editor, eventually becoming a senior vice president at Doubleday and issuing books under her own imprint.

### THE ESQUIRE PROFILES

Talese rewrote his news articles up until minutes before each deadline, determined to get each word and transition right, with an eye to chronicling contemporary events as a record for future historians. He chafed under the restrictions of time and space as well as editorial constraints on style and material at the daily *Times*. He needed to write for a less perishable, ephemeral medium than a daily newspaper. In addition to his reporting for the *Times*, Talese began to freelance for the monthly *Esquire* magazine, which allowed him the opportunity to gather material over a period of time as well as freedom to write longer, more in-depth articles about riskier subjects. More space allowed him to develop more points of view, to use to better advantage the literary elements of setting, dialogue, and character development over time.

Writing for a monthly rather than a daily deadline, Talese was able to devote more time to research and interviewing. Talese is a listener, an observer, a practitioner of what he calls "the fine art of hanging out." He prefers to conduct his interviews face to face, without a tape recorder, certainly not over the telephone. He takes notes on small pieces of shirt cardboard that he keeps in his front pocket, but he is gathering visual details of the subject and the atmosphere even more than he is gathering his subject's words. He wants to see people in their environment. Talese gathers such an abundance of material that much of it never makes it into an article or book, but

this thoroughness gives him the ability to write about his subject from an intimate point of view. Talese tries to stay with his subject until he can understand what the subject is thinking and to return often enough to observe some significant change over time.

Some of the early *Esquire* articles, first collected as *The Overreachers* in 1965 and reissued as *Fame and Obscurity* (1970) and again in *The Gay Talese Reader* (2003), reveal the subjects and themes that would preoccupy Talese for the rest of his career as he followed his subjects, described them in ordinary situations, and talked to the people around them. In "The Loser," Talese writes intimately about the boxer Floyd Patterson, with whom he spent a great deal of time. The opening scene, set in an abandoned clubhouse, evokes a mood of melancholy, of past glory, of an athlete trying to rebuild his fading career. The reader is introduced to interior monologue, to Patterson's thoughts in response to the Talese curiosity.

In "Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-Aged Man," Talese follows the prizefighter Joe Louis at age fifty, another portrait of a sports figure past his prime. This piece, which appeared in *Esquire* in 1962, caused the writer Tom Wolfe to coin the term "New Journalism," meaning a form of nonfiction that creates a mood using techniques similar to short-story writing—scene setting, intimate detail, interior monologue—combined with accurate journalistic reporting. A profile of the stage director Joshua Logan illustrates Talese's use of scenes and of using serendipitously observed material. The article includes a revealing argument between Logan and his leading lady, which offers a different perspective and possibly more insight into his subject than a traditional interview. "The Ethnic of Frank Costello" reveals Talese's interest in Italian American subjects and in the attitudes of southern Italians toward the underworld.

Talese had come to New York City as a small-town boy from southern New Jersey. He approached city life with fresh eyes, and years later he wrote an essay called "When I Was Twenty-five." His sense of wonder and his wanderings around the city gave him material for many

articles and essays. "New York Is a City of Things Unnoticed," Talese's first essay for *Esquire* in 1960, became the opening chapter of his first book. *New York: A Serendipiter's Journey* (1961) is a short book illustrated with photographs, based on his keen sense of observation and his delight in everyday people and scenes, focusing on obscure neighborhoods and people, much of the material gathered while on assignment for the *Times*.

This same intense curiosity about the city, ability to find an unusual angle, and interest in unnoticed people led to Talese's next book, *The Bridge* (1964). He observed the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge between Brooklyn and Staten Island and the way it changed once isolated neighborhoods. He hung around the construction sites, observing, waiting, and getting to know people. His commitment to detailed, meticulous research and reporting is evident in this elegant slim volume, illustrated with photographs and drawings, which focuses on the lives of the steelworkers working on the bridge, the unnoticed, unchronicled "boomers." A photo of a steelworker hanging from the skeleton of the unfinished bridge is a haunting visual image for the book.

These two early books are rooted in Talese's sense of place, of setting. The New York Times Building on West Forty-third Street in Manhattan would be the stage from which the action of his first best-seller, *The Kingdom and the Power* (1969), would unfold.

#### BEST-SELLERS

In 1965 Talese left his job at the *New York Times* to concentrate on writing more in-depth magazine articles and to write longer, book-length nonfiction than he had previously attempted. The years at the *Times* would continue to influence Talese in his strict insistence on verifiable facts and the use of real names in his nonfiction, no matter how risky or intimate the subject. But leaving the newspaper gave him the time necessary for carrying out his research, for exploring his subjects in width and depth, and for crafting

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long works of well-researched, beautifully-written nonfiction.

His first long project was about what he knew best, the *New York Times*. Talese had previously written some articles about the *Times* for *Esquire* and felt that the subject was worthy of more in-depth treatment. Talese's genius for interviewing and observation served him well. The behind-the-scenes portrait of the workings of the institution is told as a series of stories about people, a series of interlocking profiles. With the voices and points of view of dozens of characters available as raw material, he was able to weave a tale of the venerable institution through the detailed stories of the men who worked and wrote there. In two and a half years of interviews Talese was able to learn what the paper's publishers and editors and reporters felt and thought as events unfolded.

*The Kingdom and the Power* is Talese's first intergenerational saga, depicting the Ochs/Sulzberger dynasty that controls the family-run newspaper. The book centers around a time of change in an institution that had been stable and conservative for more than half a century, changes that coincided with the time that Talese worked for the paper, and ends with the upheavals of 1968 at the newspaper and in the country, the passing of the old order into the new. The book's revelations are groundbreaking, revealing an alliance between the government and the media and raising questions of objectivity. The detailed motivations of individuals at the *New York Times* suggest some larger implications about how public opinion is shaped. Events as reported by the *Times*, with its reputation for thorough and strictly factual reporting, were widely regarded as truth by the public. Talese suggests that there is no objective truth in journalism; rather, the choices made by reporters and editors influence the way people think.

Not only is the material dense and detailed, but the care taken with the writing is evident. Each word is precise; the commentary is clear, lucid, and intelligent, with layers of information carefully and artfully arranged. The result is crisp and three-dimensional-constructed, like sculpture or architecture. The book's setting, the New York

Times Building, ties together the dozens of characters in one place. Talese's intimate point of view, his instinct for material, his attention to style, and his incisive commentary on power and politics was an immediate success. *The Kingdom and the Power* was a surprise hit with the public, a national best-seller, and the first of a wave of nonfiction books about journalism and the media.

Talese was working on several projects simultaneously at this time and was beginning to be financially successful. He was able to buy, and later to beautifully restore, the brownstone on the Upper East Side where he and his family had been renting, with the money he began to make with the success of *The Kingdom and the Power*.

In the late 1960s, while researching and writing *The Kingdom and the Power*, he was also shadowing the underworld figure Salvatore (Bill) Bonanno for a book about the inner life of a Mafia crime family. At the same time, he continued to write profiles for *Esquire*. A second collection of short works was published as *Fame and Obscurity: Portraits by Gay Talese* (1970). While several of the profiles contained in the earlier collection were reprinted, along with the short works *New York: A Serendipiter's Journey* and *The Bridge*, the new collection contained the profiles "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," a portrait of the famous singer from an unusual and original point of view, and "The Silent Season of a Hero," a portrait of Joe DiMaggio in his later years, which are among Talese's best writing.

Typical of Talese's work, both of these profiles are written as a series of scenes. "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" opens in a club in Beverly Hills and describes the fifty-year-old Sinatra on a bad day: the singer has a cold. Talese was not able to interview the celebrity, so he interviewed the people around him and observed Sinatra's behavior in several situations in Beverly Hills, Las Vegas, and New York. The resulting profile presents Sinatra from a singular point of view, as a father, a son, and a friend as well as a demanding, sometimes petulant and quarrelsome entertainer.

"The Silent Season of a Hero" depicts the retired Yankees baseball player Joe DiMaggio as a man who is determined to protect his private life and the memory of his former wife Marilyn

Monroe. The opening of the essay is set at DiMaggio's Restaurant in San Francisco, and subsequent scenes describe the great hitter and those around him on the golf course, at Mickey Mantle Day in Yankee Stadium, and at spring training in Florida. The Sicilian background of both DiMaggio and Sinatra is mentioned as an influence on their personalities. "The Silent Season of a Hero" was later anthologized in the 1999 volume *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

In the author's note at the beginning of *Fame and Obscurity*, Talese discusses his work as New Journalism, defending the form, asserting that while it reads like fiction it should be strictly based on reliable reportage, which demands an imaginative approach and observation over time, leading to insights into the subject's mind. Talese was aware that the success of his method depended on his skill as an interviewer. This depth and insight cannot be as fully accomplished in magazine writing, he notes, as in an extended work of nonfiction like his recent *The Kingdom and the Power* or his upcoming book on three generations of an Italian American family, *Honor Thy Father* (1971), because it takes more time and space: both *The Kingdom and the Power* and *Honor Thy Father* are over five hundred pages long.

Taking time with his subject became another Talese trademark. After leaving the *Times*, Talese was able to spend months, even years, with his subjects. He spent much time in the mid-1960s into the 1970s living in hotels, traveling, and researching in California—in Beverly Hills for the Sinatra profile, San Francisco for the DiMaggio piece, living with the Bonanno family in San Jose researching *Honor Thy Father*, and later spending two months at the Sandstone commune in Topanga Canyon researching *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1980).

*Honor Thy Father*, Talese's book about the Bonanno crime family, took over five years to research and write. As a reporter for the *Times* in 1965 Talese first saw Bill Bonanno at a federal courthouse in Manhattan where he was testifying about the disappearance of his father, Joe Bonanno, head of one of the New York crime

families. His curiosity was aroused. Bill Bonanno was a young Italian American man like himself but one who had followed a different path. Talese's own father had resented the Mafia stereotype which tainted respectable Italian American citizens like himself. Now Talese would explore the forbidden subject.

Talese became friendly and intimate with Bill Bonanno, spending time with him in New York, having dinner with both wives and sets of children present, and spending much of one winter and spring at the Bonanno home in San Jose, California, with Bill's wife, children, bodyguards, and associates. Talese traveled to Sicily to visit the Bonanno family village. Scenes and settings took shape. He approached his story of a Mafia family's rise and fall as an intergenerational history and ultimately described the fall and exile of the Bonanno family as the weakening of ethnic traditions.

*Honor Thy Father* is framed by scenes that depict the once powerful Bonanno family in retreat and decline. The book opens with head of the family, Joseph Bonanno, being abducted at gunpoint by a rival crime boss, and the family in hiding. The final words of the book are "Salvatore Bonanno has surrendered," as Bill gives himself up to a federal marshal. *Honor Thy Father* is about the exile of the Bonannos to Tucson and San Jose and about the intimate life of the family in the larger context of the Sicilian culture that fostered organized crime.

Gaining the trust of the subject in this case meant gaining the trust of the entire family: Bill Bonanno's wife, sister, children, and bodyguards. Talese spent years shadowing the Bonannos, following their fortunes when Bill was in hiding or in jail, observing changes over time, until he knew his subject from the inside out. Talese learned what it was like to think and feel as Bill Bonanno. What is it like to spend most of your adult life in hiding or in jail? What is it like to be the wife or the child of a criminal? His ability to gain the trust of Bill Bonanno and his household is a testament to his skill as an interviewer, and the choice of exploring organized crime from such an intimate perspective represents his riskiest and most dramatic subject up to that time. Yet

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Talese's tone is not sensational; rather, it is understated and respectful. The focus is on the cultural aspects of Mafia life and the effects of the organized-crime lifestyle on Bill Bonanno's psyche and on his family.

Talese's tolerant and nonjudgmental approach to underworld crime figures as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances was not always appreciated by the critics, although it does reflect the underlying consciousness of many Sicilians and southern Italians. In a culture where centuries of hostile invaders made many laws for their own convenience, there was no social stigma attached to breaking the law. In spite of such criticism, *Honor Thy Father* was another popular best-seller. The respectful tone, intimate details of family life, and carefully written scenes reveal more about the Mafia than any previous nonfiction. Talese cared about his subjects, and they trusted him enough to break the Mafia "code of silence." Talese was able to establish trust funds for the education of his daughters, and for the education of Bill Bonanno's four children, with the proceeds from the book.

Now with two full-length nonfiction best-sellers behind him, Talese was offered a contract and advance from Doubleday for his next book. The subject of *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1980), the American sexual revolution, would be broader and even riskier and more controversial than the underworld he revealed in *Honor Thy Father*. The trust required to allow his subjects to break the code of silence surrounding sexuality and to allow him to use their real names and describe their deepest sexual fantasies in print challenged his persuasiveness as an interviewer. Talese continued to be adamant about his standards of nonfiction. If a subject asked that his real name not be used, Talese did not wish to talk to him. Always, while his writing style was novelistic his research standards were strictly reportorial and factual.

While researching *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, Talese managed two massage parlors in New York City and lived at the free-love commune Sandstone, which would become the stage on which the tale unfolds. He conducted hundreds of interviews and researched such diverse stories as the life of

Hugh Hefner and origins of *Playboy* magazine, the background and history of censorship and sex laws in the United States, and the lives of nude models and a couple, the Bullaros, who became involved in free love and open marriage.

The way was not always smooth, and the book took years to complete. At first Talese had planned to focus on the story of a college-educated masseuse and one of her clients. The couple fell in love, married, and then declined to allow Talese to use their story. After being exceedingly candid about their sexual experiences and involvement in Sandstone, the Bullaros changed their minds about being part of the book. Their story was pivotal; they were the "everyman" thread of the book, the typical American couple who became part of the sexual revolution. Talese flew to Los Angeles and convinced them that their story was honest and important, one that needed to be told. Their particular and intimate story, in Talese's hands, is connected to a universal theme, a larger significance. His handling of sensitive material is so accurate, nonjudgmental, and respectful that none of his subjects have ever been angry with him for what he has published.

Talese has said that he enjoys research and reporting but finds the writing a slow and difficult task. Years of research yield a vast amount of material, of which perhaps only 20 percent will be used in the subsequent book. Years of gathering material and hours behind the typewriter may leave him without a word of his book written, not yet sure of how to begin, how to organize the material, or how to offer new insights. Weaving the threads of many stories together in a clear and seamless manner is a challenge to the writer's craft, one that takes as much time as Talese's careful research. The description in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* is graphic, but never crude. Talese's talent is for the precise word. Even the most intimate details are presented with his characteristic factual and formal tone.

Talese was attacked, sometimes personally, for the subject matter of *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and for his research methods, his participation in the world of massage parlors and the life of the nudist free-love retreat at Sandstone. His transpar-



ency, his relentless openness about his reporting methods, sources, and experiences, had repercussions for his family. His wife felt that her privacy had been invaded to an intolerable extent. His marriage was strained, as were the social sensibilities of his parents in conservative Ocean City. This was a book that people covered in brown paper when they carried it on the train. It was, however, another extraordinary best-seller, earning millions of dollars in sales and movie rights.

Deeply interested in the radical changes in attitude toward sexuality in the 1960s, he wrote the book partly in reaction to his strict and sexually repressive upbringing in the conservative town of Ocean City, where the nuns at his parochial school had counseled their students to sleep with their arms crossed, hands on shoulders, to discourage masturbation. In the final chapter of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, Talese abandons the voice of the invisible narrator for the first time and writes about himself in the third person. In the closing scene, set in a nudist colony close to Ocean City, he is nude on the beach, showing himself to the anchored yachts belonging to the voyeurs of his hometown.

His immigrant father had worked hard for acceptance in the community, becoming president of the Rotary Club, a golfer, a member of the country club. Now the son had openly challenged the conventional standards of morality. His book was criticized by the local Ocean City newspaper, and his father was slighted on the golf course. Talese offered to sell his summer home in Ocean City to save his parents further embarrassment. Having revealed himself, the quiet, well-behaved boy confronted his own conservative, repressive past. The stage was set for his next book.

There is a gap of over ten years between *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and his next full-length work. Wanting to return to an Italian American subject, Talese considered revisiting Frank Sinatra or Joe DiMaggio as subjects. Struggling with a direction for a new book, he invested some time researching Lee Iacocca and the Chrysler Corporation before deciding to write a more autobiographical book, a book that would include himself as a character.

*Unto the Sons* (1992), his most complex work, would take five years to research and five more to write. Talese would depart for the first time from strict reportorial writing. He writes about his boyhood in the first person, entering the realm of memoir, including more interior, reflective writing than in any previous work.

*Unto the Sons* begins where *Thy Neighbor's Wife* leaves off, on the beach in Ocean City. *Unto the Sons* is his father's story, the story of life in southern Italy, immigration to America, and integration into the life of Ocean City. The book spans two continents and hundreds of years of history but is centered in his parents' shop in Ocean City and framed with his father's conflicting loyalties as an Italian American during the invasion of Italy in 1944. The larger history of southern Italy is entwined with the intergenerational story of Talese's family, always returning to the shop in Ocean City and to Joseph's struggle for assimilation.

His most novelistic work, *Unto the Sons* contains some beautiful descriptive writing. Talese traveled to Italy and Paris while researching the book and was fortunate to have the diary of his father's cousin, a tailor in Paris, as a source. Thanks to Talese's trademark fictional techniques of scene setting and exploration of characters, and to his weaving together of the various threads of the story with careful transitions, the reader is able to clearly understand the complicated history of southern Italy and the causes and motivation for the major wave of Italian immigration in the early twentieth century.

With *Unto the Sons*, Talese set himself the most difficult and complex writing task of his career. The subject was vaster and the time needed for research was greater than any project he had undertaken so far. Much of the research had to be done in Italy, and at the same time the writing task, combining elements of novelistic, reportorial, and first-person memoir styles, was an artistic and technical challenge. To understand the immigrant, the reader needs to understand where he has come from. As Talese clarifies history, he also clarifies cultural traits. The book achieves a universal significance beyond the memoir, moving from the intimate first-person

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voice of the opening—a particular family history—to the dramatic final scene, where Talese writes the ending of his story in the third person, shedding light on the larger Italian American experience.

Talese has noted that silence is a habit with southern Italians. The code of silence applies not only to the underworld but also to the past. With *Unto the Sons*, Talese broke another barrier of silence. But the book came at a cost. Writing about his own past was technically and psychologically difficult, and always a perfectionist, he demanded a higher level of writing from himself.

Sometimes called “the Italian Roots,” *Unto the Sons* was highly acclaimed when it was published in 1992 and became Talese’s fourth best-seller. Once again he had conceived and successfully completed a book that was pioneering in its subject matter as well as superbly crafted. Sections of the book, including the moving first and last chapters, have been anthologized in collections of Italian-American writing and as fine examples of American autobiography.

Joseph Talese died in 1993, having lived to see the completion and publication of *Unto the Sons*. The elder Taleses had been married and lived in Ocean City for over sixty years. Talese would continue to divide his time between New York and Ocean City, even to the point of having duplicate offices and sets of clothes in his two homes. With or without his wife and daughters, Talese would regularly commute to Ocean City to visit his mother and take her to restaurants and casinos for the rest of her life.

### A WRITER’S LIFE

*Unto the Sons* was conceived as the first book in a three-volume series. In 1992 Talese signed a contract with a six-figure advance from Knopf for the sequel, which would be due in 1995. The sequel would be the writer’s own story, the story of the immigrant’s son growing up as an outsider in mid- and late-twentieth-century America. The manuscripts for both *Unto the Sons* and *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* had been delivered to the publisher four or five years late, partly due to his long research process and partly due to his

complex subject matter and demanding standards for his writing. He had struggled with beginning *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* and struggled with moving through *Unto the Sons*. Although he is a disciplined worker while writing, his daily output is small, as he slowly assembles each sentence and paragraph until it meets his standards for good prose. His new book project presented the extra difficulty of requiring him to write about himself as the main character, a task that was contrary to the journalistic instincts of the former *New York Times* reporter.

In 1993 Talese accepted an assignment as a contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine. He hoped that the shorter deadlines at the weekly periodical would give him the satisfaction of completing articles such as those he had written for *Esquire* in earlier years. Reflecting his interest in American sexuality and in risky and unusual subjects, he spent six months in 1993–1994 pursuing a story about the notorious Bobbitt case, in which a wife had cut off her husband’s penis. Once written, however, the story was rejected by *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown. Magazine publishing had changed since the 1960s. Talese found that he had less freedom in choosing his subjects and also that production costs had limited the space available for the lengthy in-depth articles that he preferred to write.

A piece entitled “*Ali in Havana*,” which appeared in *Esquire* in 1996, was the only long new piece by Gay Talese to appear in the period of more than ten years between *Unto the Sons* and its sequel. This essay, which was selected for the anthology *The Best American Essays 1997*, skillfully exemplifies some of the qualities that by this time had become identified with Talese’s work. Talese returns to writing about sports from an unusual angle. The subject, Muhammad Ali, is a former champion prizefighter, fifty-four years old, retired for fifteen years, and suffering from Parkinson’s disease. The opening establishes the setting, Havana, Cuba; the first scene is a negotiation for black market Cuban cigars. Talese describes the people around Ali and then moves to the central scene, a meeting between Fidel Castro and Ali. The conversation is rather

strained. The writing is understated; the extraordinary situation is presented by focusing on the ordinariness of the two celebrated, aging men.

Working with Barbara Lounsberry, a professor of English and journalism at the University of Northern Iowa, Talese coedited an anthology of nonfiction, a college text called *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality* (1996). His introduction, titled "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," is something of a manifesto of his beginnings and his writing philosophy. Selections from his own work appear in the anthology, illustrating the elements of writing literary nonfiction. The section on reporting includes a chapter of *The Bridge*; the profile of Floyd Patterson called "The Loser" illustrates the technique of writing interior monologue; and the final chapter of *Unto the Sons* appears as an illustration of the principle that a larger, universal significance needs to be present in personal memoir writing. Talese's methods and ideas have become part of the accepted pedagogy of nonfiction writing.

A collection of Talese's shorter works had not appeared since 1970. Thirty years later he was the successful and well-known author of four best-sellers and a model for writers of literary nonfiction. A new collection, *The Gay Talese Reader: Portraits & Encounters* (2003), included several of the previously collected and now classic profiles along with some newer material: "Ali in Havana," "Origins of a Nonfiction Writer," and the selection from *Unto the Sons* called "The Brave Tailors of Maida," which had earlier appeared in *Esquire* and then in the anthology *Best American Essays 1989*.

The long-awaited sequel to *Unto the Sons* was finished in 2005 and appeared as *A Writer's Life* (2006). Talese's most autobiographical work, *A Writer's Life* is a book about craft; its structure is the story of his struggle to write the book. He reveals his methods while tying together several stories to which he has committed hours and years of research but which have not come to fruition as books. Once again the structure is complex, as he weaves his background and his methods into his stories. Each story reveals something about his writing process as well as

something about Talese's collection of interests and obsessions.

Talese's writing career began with sports, and in the opening scene of *A Writer's Life* we find the writer at home, struggling with his book and watching sports on television. During a slow-moving Yankees game he changes the channel to the final game of the 1999 women's World Cup soccer tournament. The scoreless game between the United States and China moves into the deciding penalty-kick stage, and one of the Chinese women, Liu Ying, misses her all-important kick. China loses the game and the title. The sports-writer in him is awakened. Here is a loser whose story he cannot get out of his mind, and soon he is on an airplane flying to China in pursuit of Liu Ying's story. The tale of his extraordinary persistence in tracking down this young woman and her story is one of the threads of his revealing book.

Another thread—the most autobiographical in the book—is a memoir of his experiences in Alabama. From a discussion of his college years he moves to his coverage of the civil rights demonstrations in Selma, which he reported for the *New York Times* in 1965, and his return twenty-five years later on freelance assignment for the same paper to cover the silver anniversary of the event. He approaches the political event as the story of individuals both black and white: sheriffs, politicians, and lawyers, reflecting his interest in people and his skills as an interviewer. Again his gift for gaining entry into private lives and his interest in the ordinary, personal angle is evident as he focuses a story about twenty-five years of change in race relations on an interracial wedding in Selma to which he manages to obtain an invitation.

A third thread is the story of John and Lorena Bobbitt. In 1993 Lorena Bobbitt cut off her husband's penis while he slept, claiming that he had committed "marital sexual abuse." Talese flew to Manassas, Virginia, to observe the court hearings and trials and interview dozens of people involved with the Bobbitts and the case. Reminiscent of his approach in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, he re-creates and describes the sensational event graphically but carefully and respectfully. He becomes intimately acquainted with John

Bobbitt, an ordinary man, an inarticulate ex-marine.

In an interview with the journalist and editor Robert Boynton, Talese later described the level of trust he had received from John Bobbitt. In an extraordinary scene retold in Boynton's book *The New New Journalism*, Bobbitt and his urologist watch a pornographic movie in Talese's hotel room in order to test the function of Bobbitt's reattached penis. Talese staged the scene of the female urologist holding the erect penis and talking about its blood flow, seeing himself as the director of a visual story. Talese's purpose in including the detailed account of his pursuit of the Bobbitt story is not only to illustrate his commitment to research and his ability to obtain his subject's trust, but also to illustrate that his interest in failure extends even to his own failure, as this story in which he has invested so much time is rejected by his editor at *The New Yorker*.

And Talese writes about restaurants. He tells the reader that he loves restaurants, has loved them since childhood in Ocean City. He and his family have always relaxed in restaurants. His father became more communicative and animated away from the store; his beautiful, well-dressed mother enjoyed being seen in restaurants. Talese enjoys interviewing in restaurants. He gets away from the solitary work of writing in restaurants. He has more than once contemplated writing a restaurant story. A book idea that Talese spent years researching but never got into print is the story he calls "The Building," about a building on East Sixty-third Street that houses a series of restaurants that fail. Completing the circle back to his first book and "New York Is a City of Things Unnoticed," this story had been in the back of his mind for years. He considered the building as the setting for the stalled sequel to *Unto the Sons*, the book that is years behind schedule, the book that he is now struggling to write.

And writing is a struggle, he tells us in *A Writer's Life*. Every morning while he is writing, he arrives at his desk at 8 A.M. and works for four hours, breaks for lunch and an afternoon walk, and returns to his desk for another four hours. A disciplined worker, he has duplicate

desks and workrooms at his homes in New York and New Jersey, where he is surrounded by panels of Styrofoam on which he pins his notes and organizes his intricate constructs of interlocking stories. In spite of experimenting with computer word processing, his most serious writing is done in pencil on yellow lined pads, word by word, sentence by sentence, lingering over each sentence until it is as perfect as he can make it. It is a tedious, slow, demanding process.

*A Writer's Life* ends where it began: with Liu Ying, the Chinese soccer player. Talese leaves a note for his wife and flies to Beijing, where he persists for five months until he finally is able to interview the soccer player and her mother. The book is rambling and circular but fascinating and worthwhile for its stories as well as what it reveals about Talese's methods and craft. *A Writer's Life* illustrates the fact that Talese is a perfectionist who is not willing to publish anything that doesn't meet his standards and who has experienced failure as well as success. *A Writer's Life* was completed in 2005, ten years after the original publisher's due date. Catherine Talese, the writer's mother, who had inspired his dedication to interviewing, died on August 11, 2005, at age ninety-eight, days after the completion of the manuscript.

*Unto the Sons* and *A Writer's Life* are the first two books in a planned three-book autobiographical series. In his mid-seventies, Talese is vigorous and youthful, and pursuing ideas for his next book. He has spoken of following each of these long and complex books with a shorter book about the groundskeepers at Yankee Stadium, which would be consistent with his interests in sports, New York, and telling the stories of the unknown and obscure. But, he says, he doesn't find this subject risky enough. Instead he is organizing material for a book tentatively called *A Writer's Marriage*. Would this be sufficiently interesting to the reader, worth expending the necessary time, worth revealing such personal material? Considering the amount of time he and his wife have spent apart pursuing their two visible and successful careers in their nearly fifty years of marriage, and especially in view of his highly publicized and criticized

research method for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, surely this subject will be of more than passing interest to Talese's readers.

#### THE ART OF NONFICTION

Gay Talese has specialized in widening the subject matter of nonfiction, in breaking ground, in exposing to the air of books in print subjects traditionally hidden. He has written in *The Kingdom and the Power* about what goes on behind the scenes in American media; he has penetrated the Mafia code of silence in *Honor Thy Father*; broken the silence surrounding sexual behavior in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, given voice to the reticent Italian-American writer in *Unto the Sons*, and exposed a writer's struggles in *A Writer's Life*. *A Writer's Marriage* would break the code of silence once more.

In writing about his own marriage Talese would be exploring in reportorial nonfiction an intimate subject that has traditionally been the material of either fiction or confessional memoir writing. This is exactly what he has sought to do: to develop a genre of nonfiction that is intimate and personal without being confessional, a genre that has no appropriate label on the shelves of bookstores. Talese is a teller of stories, true stories with real names, not a writer of memoir.

Talese has been hailed a founder of New Journalism, defined as reportorially based, narrative-driven long-form nonfiction. His immersion-research technique, spending months and years observing and living with (and as one of) his subjects broke ground for a new generation of journalists, anthropologists, and academics who would immerse themselves in the worlds of their subjects in order to write from the inside out. Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1997), Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), and Michael Lewis' *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (2003) are examples of an increasingly popular trend in nonfiction writing for narration from an insider's point of view. Gay Talese's devotion to research and experiments with point of view in nonfiction have influenced the rise of nonfiction as a genre.

Talese's work goes beyond using the techniques of fiction to explore nonfiction subjects in depth. His purpose is to use intimate detail, language, and form to raise nonfiction to the level of art equally deserving of the respect given to fiction or poetry. He is a reporter who is reaching for art and respect for his genre, who combines extraordinary journalistic reporting with the mood and intimacy of fiction, who strives to present reality in a way that is factual, multifaceted, evocative, and beautiful. Talese is a storyteller, but a teller of stories that are true and accurate and completely nonfictional. Unlike *The Kingdom and the Power*, *Honor Thy Father*, and *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, Talese's last two books do not have an index. Why? Because there are no indexes in fiction. In fiction the reader is invited to read the entire story, not to reference unconnected facts. Talese's tales are complex. He moves around in time, from past to present and back again. The connections are essential. A creative arrangement of the material, careful organization, and clear transitions are as fundamental to the craft as the tone and mood of scenes, the intimate moments and interior monologues of characters, and the impeccable accumulation of background material. Talese proves the point that nonfiction as literary work is as beautiful, precise, and demanding a craft as fiction. Formerly the realm of fiction, detailed and intimate stories about ordinary people in extraordinary situations, or extraordinary people in ordinary situations, become in Gay Talese's hands a vital literary nonfiction, the literature of reality.

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