

'Bartleby and Me' Review: Sinatra and the Others

Gay Talese started out writing about 'nobodies'—bus drivers, mannequin designers—then produced one of the most famous magazine profiles ever written.

By Edward Kosner Sept. 21, 2023 at 6:05 pm ET



Gay Talese. PHOTO: MARIANNE BARCELONA/GETTY IMAGES

Gay Talese and Frank Sinatra have enjoyed a rich, symbiotic relationship, one that has long outlasted the singer, who died at 82 a quarter-century ago.

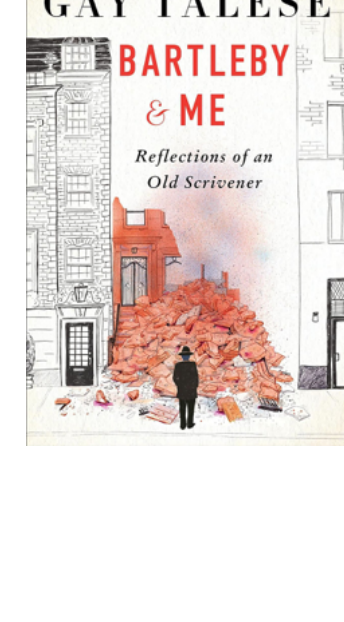
Along with Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and others, Mr. Talese has been acclaimed as a virtuoso of the novelistic New Journalism.

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Bartleby and Me: Reflections of an Old Scrivener

By Gay Talese Mariner Books

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Mr. Talese takes his inspiration—from his title—from "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Herman Melville's 1853 short story about an inconsequential law clerk.

His first published piece, carried without a byline on the Times's editorial page, was about a "nobody"

who operated the illuminated ribbon sign that announced the latest news around a lower floor of the old Times Tower in Times Square—a Bartleby for the age of Ike.

Thankfully for magazine journalism, Mr. Talese eventually overcame his original preoccupation, but before he did so he chronicled alley cats, bus drivers, ferry-boat captains, dress-mannequin designers, even those who pushed the three-wheeled rolling chairs along Atlantic City's boardwalk.

In 1965 Mr. Talese left the paper to join Esquire, then in its glory days under the brilliant editor Harold Hayes.

Bartleby's murmurous response to the world was "I prefer not to," while Sinatra famously belted out "I did it my way."

Fully a third of "Bartleby and Me" is a reconstruction of Mr. Talese's frustrated pursuit of Sinatra—from his first glimpse of his lonely subject nursing a Jack Daniel's at the bar of the Hollywood hangout The Daisy.

The 14,000-word cover story ran in the April 1966 issue, was later published as a short book and, on the 70th anniversary of Esquire, was voted by its editors and staff the best piece ever to run in the magazine.

Compared with his Sinatra saga, the author races through his accounts of some of his other celebrated books, including his Mafia chronicle, "Honor Thy Father" (1971); his exploration of the sexual revolution, "Thy Neighbor's Wife" (1980); and his own Italian family's story, "Unto the Sons" (1992).

It was "Thy Neighbor's Wife" that for a while made the writer notorious. To research the book, Mr. Talese lurked in massage parlors, managed two of them and spent three months at a free-love nudist colony for couples outside Santa Monica, Calif.

The author ends the book with a previously unpublished piece about Nicholas Bartha, the 66-year-old internist who blew up his 19th-century Neo-Grecian townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side in July 2006—with himself in it.

Over seven decades, from apprentice journalist to master of the form, Gay Talese can take pride that he did it his way.

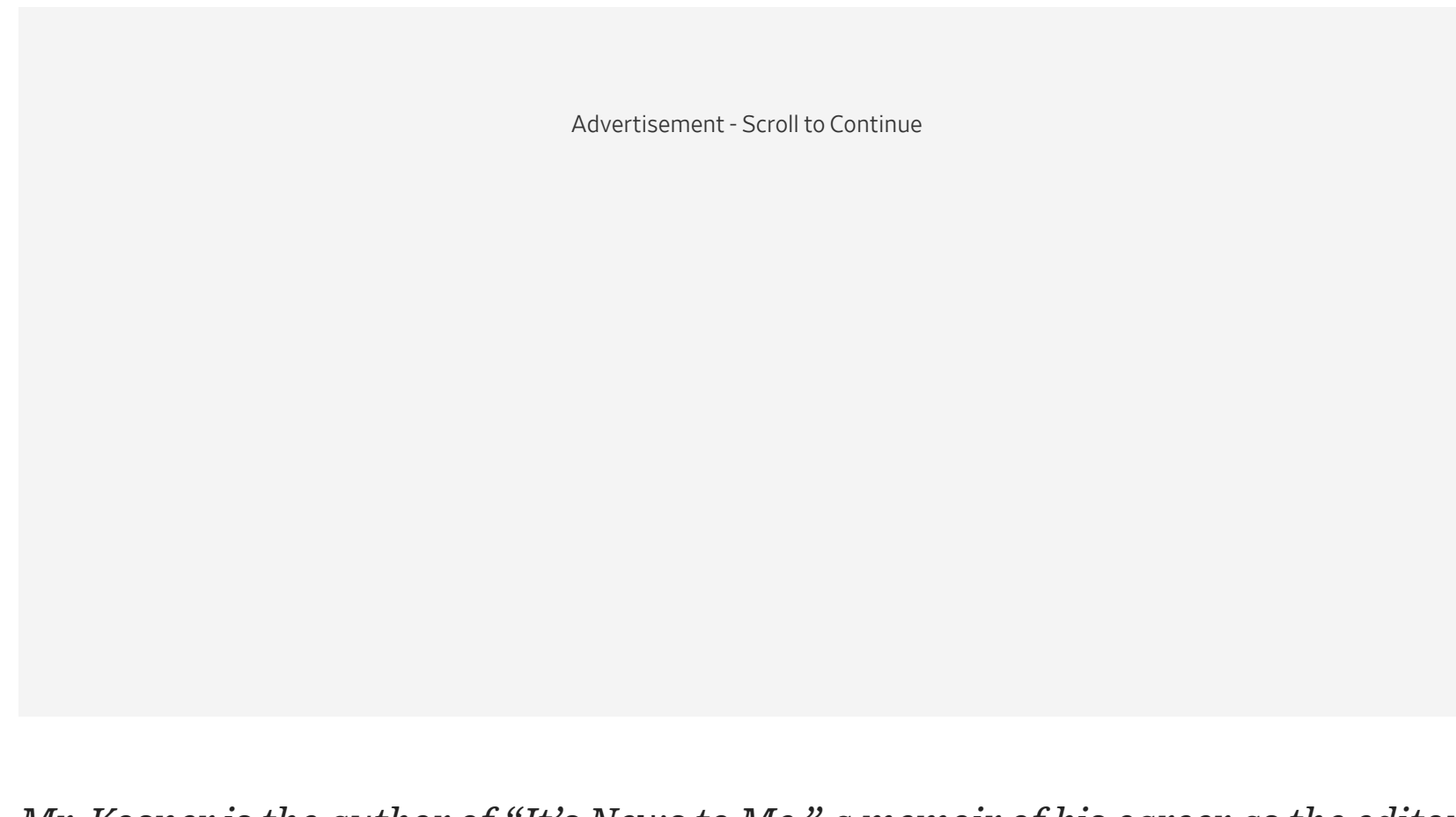
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Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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