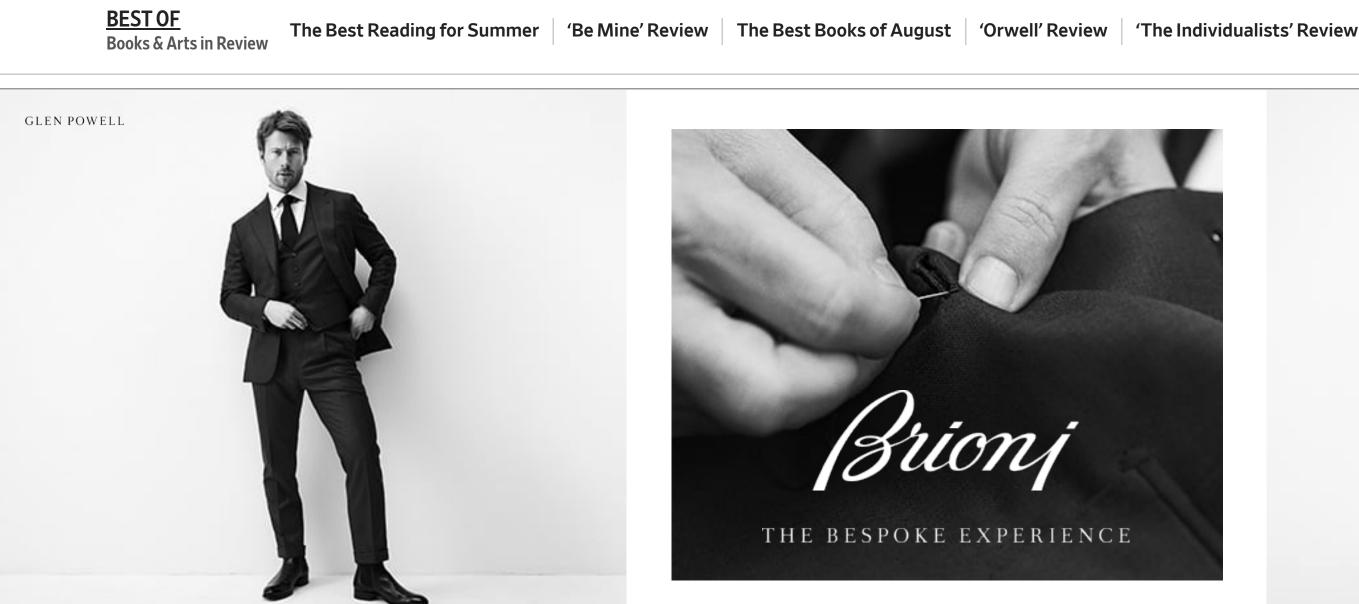
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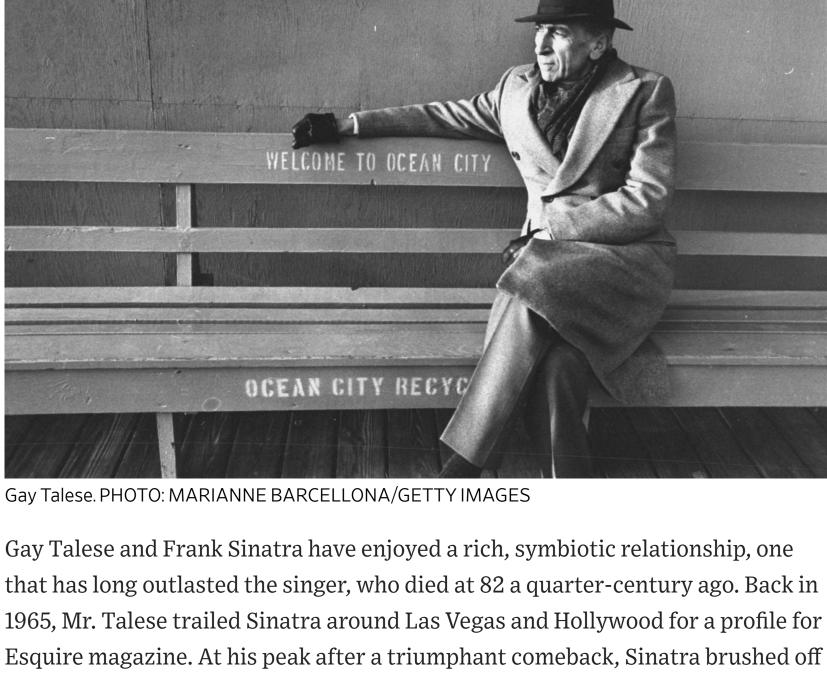




the Others

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 Gift unlocked article **Listen** (6 min)



articles from the golden age of the slicks—and an enduring testament to

Sinatra's talent and fame.

Bartleby and Me: Reflections of an Old

Scrivener

By Gay Talese

Mariner Books

320 pages

age of Ike.

bestseller.

Along with Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and others, Mr. Talese has been acclaimed as a virtuoso of the novelistic New Journalism. Now 91, he has published a short and charming second memoir, "Bartleby and Me: Reflections of an Old Scrivener." Once again, Sinatra takes center stage. But there's more, especially the author's take on the kind of journalism he's practiced for seven decades, starting as a copy boy at the New York Times in 1953. Mr. Talese takes his inspiration—and **GRAB A COPY** his title—from "Bartleby, the

Scrivener," Herman Melville's 1853

law clerk. "Growing up in a small

1940s, I dreamed of someday

short story about an inconsequential

town on the Jersey Shore in the late

working for a great newspaper," Mr.

the writer's pleas for an interview, but Mr. Talese produced a piece anyway. The

result, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," became one of the most celebrated magazine

Talese writes. "But I did not We may earn a commission necessarily want to write news....I when you buy products wanted to specialize in writing about through the links on our nobodies." **BUY BOOK** 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

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-

Louisville Courier-Journal—he returned to the Times as a sports writer. (As a

college correspondent for the Times in the late '50s, I sometimes squatted at an

wheeled rolling chairs along Atlantic City's boardwalk. After two years of

military service at Fort Knox—during which he contributed pieces to the

empty desk near his in the uncrowded sports department.)

GAY TALESE

BARTLEBY

In 1965 Mr. Talese left the paper to join Esquire, then in its glory days under the brilliant editor Harold Hayes. The young writer promptly sold Hayes on a profile of figures at the Times, both obscure and heralded, starting with Alden Whitman. Whitman had revolutionized obituaries at the paper by conducting long premortem interviews with Harry Truman, Pablo Picasso and other luminaries. The lauded "Mr. Bad News" piece helped lay the groundwork for "The Kingdom and the Power," Mr. Talese's 1969 book about the Times—his first

Bartleby's murmurous response to the world was "I prefer not to," while Sinatra

famously belted out "I did it my way." Still, the young Talese was drawn to him.

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, to watching him pick a

session after an earlier one was aborted because the crooner had the sniffles.

old lady who totes around his hairpieces, and his daughter Nancy. Mr. Talese

Sinatra genially blows off Mr. Talese's requests to talk, so the writer interviews

Sinatra's entourage, including his sort-of-look-alike stand-in, as well as the little

fight with a young writer because Sinatra didn't like his boots, and at a recording

even describes how he took his Sinatra notes on cut-down laundered-shirt cardboards. 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). He concedes that his

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. Although he'd cleared his reporting scheme with his wife, his

first memoir, "A Writer's Life" (2006), "attracted few readers."

marriage was strained when, as Mr. Talese recounts, New York magazine published "An Evening in the Nude With Gay Talese" describing his cavorting at one of the rub shops. 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. The

Over seven decades, from apprentice journalist to master of the form, Gay Talese

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meticulously reported account—including a fascinating social history of the

property at 34 E. 62nd St.—shows that Mr. Talese has lost none of his artistry.

can take pride that he did it his way.

What to Read Next

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor

SHOW CONVERSATION (8) V

of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the September 22, 2023, print edition as 'Sinatra and The Others'.

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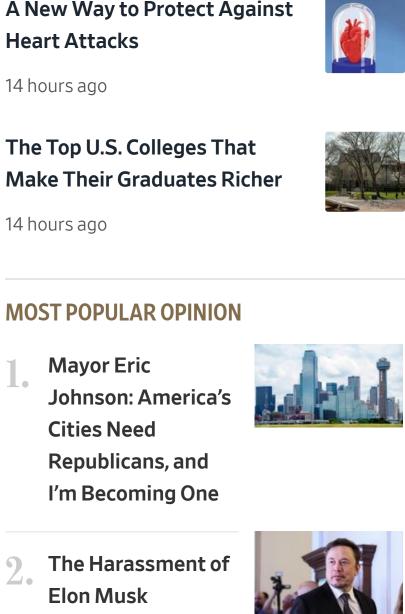
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