

When They Were Read All Over: Breslin and Beyond

'Jimmy Breslin: Essential Writings' and 'The Freaks Came Out to Write' celebrate the irreverent voices that once dominated New York City journalism.



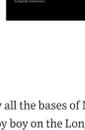
Jimmy Breslin campaigning for the New York City mayoralty in 1969. NEAL BOENZI/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

By Edward Kosner Feb. 21, 2024 at 2:51 pm ET

There are some moments in journalism so resonant in retrospect that, decades later, you can still recall experiencing them.

There's that October afternoon in New York in 1955 when the first issue of a weird new tabloid called the Village Voice turned up in the lobby of my college hall. One of its founders was the pugnacious novelist Norman Mailer, who soon began contributing odd pieces called "Quickly—a Column for Slow Readers."

GRAB A COPY Jimmy Breslin: Essential Writings By Jimmy Breslin Library of America 734 pages



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Breslin's "It's a good drinkin' beer" outer-borough baritone and the Voice's "just us radicals" chorus were compelling presences in those raucous days, more than a half-century ago, when print journalism still set the tone.

Breslin touched nearly all the bases of New York newspapering. Starting in the 1940s as a teenage copy boy on the Long Island Press, he was a columnist for the Herald Tribune, New York Post, Daily News, Journal-American and Newsday.

In his columns and longer pieces, Breslin's method was classic and compelling: He would find someone—central or peripheral—involved in the story and then tell it through that figure.

In another piece, it's "Mrs. Big Mama Nunziata," of 51 President St. in Brooklyn, N.Y. She's the 77-year-old matriarch of a family with seven children, 28 grandchildren and 22 great-grandchildren—who happens to be the grandmother of the mobsters Joey, Larry and Albert Gallo.

When Juan Perez, an 11-year-old Brooklyn boy living in an overheated tenement, ventured into the polar bears' cage in the Prospect Park Zoo for a dip in their pool—and was eaten alive by the bears—Breslin wrote: "Perhaps somebody should stop just for a paragraph here this morning and mention the fact that there are many children being eaten alive by this bear of a city, New York in the 1980s."

His approach was the same in coverage of the biggest political story of his lifetime—the 1970s Watergate scandal that took Richard Nixon to the brink of impeachment before he resigned in tears.

Breslin loved old-school politicians, and his portrait of O'Neill is both sophisticated and affectionate, especially the scene where O'Neill takes over the crowded tap room of a Cape Cod inn and serenades his wife, Milly, with "Apple Blossom Time," the song played at their wedding 33 years before.

For all the Irish blarney, Breslin's 144-page retelling of the Watergate saga brings the old story to life with its fresh glimpses of the players—especially the chief investigator, John Doar, as he lays out hundreds of index cards on tables in his secure headquarters to find patterns of guilty connection among the principal suspects.

The notorious New York criminals of the era are here, too. In the home of one of Son of Sam's victims, Breslin takes the letter that the crazed serial killer wrote to him and reads it to the girl's father. When Bernhard Goetz—who shot four black youths on the subway and argued it was in self-defense—seeks to politicize his case, Breslin suggests he go all the way and run for mayor.

Breslin had no bleeding heart for criminals, and he detested crooked and brutal cops. One of his best columns is about a black youth wrongly suspected in a drug bust, who was handcuffed in a Queens station house and tortured with an electric cattle prod by two of New York's finest.

For all his affection for traditional pols, Breslin's B.S.-detector was infallible. A favorite target was Hugh Carey, the New York governor, who merited a classic Breslin nickname. When Carey made a taxpayer-funded grand tour of Southeast Asia, Breslin wrote: "Other states have governors who slobber around state fairs and supermarket openings. Our governor . . . is different. Our governor is Society Carey. . . . The object of the trip is to let Society Carey see the Orient, which he never has, and to let the Orient see Society Carey, which it never has." The name stuck.

And he could be prescient. A 1990 column, written during one of Donald Trump's financial squeezes, confidently predicted that the brash builder, "no matter what kind of a crash he experiences now, will come back as sure as you are reading this."

GRAB A COPY The Freaks Came Out to Write: The Definitive History of the Village Voice, the Radical Paper That Changed American Culture



BUY BOOK

Despite its legacy as the prototype for what became known as the alternate press in America, it's fair to wonder whether the Village Voice merits enshrinement in a 500-plus-page brick of an oral history, but here it is—"The Freaks Came Out to Write: The Definitive History of the Village Voice, the Radical Paper That Changed American Culture."

Many of the names—among them, the writers Wayne Barrett, Richard Goldstein, Nat Hentoff, Michael Musto, Jack Newfield and Mary Perot Nichols; and the cartoonists Jules Feiffer and Stan Mack—will be familiar to faithful readers of the Voice, which evanesced into a website, then disappeared in 2018 before reappearing in 2021 as a quarterly. Scores of other voices are heard as well, and the chorus evokes what now feels like the quaint bohemian radicalism of the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

The cavalcade of chief editors—16 of them, plus numerous "interims" in 45 years—who tried to herd the cats are all listed, as are the carousel of owners, including the founders, Ed Fancher, Dan Wolf and Mailer; the posh politician Carter Burden; Clay Felker, who co-created New York magazine; Rupert Murdoch; and Leonard Stern, who made his fortune in pet food.

It's all here—the hissy-fits between the film critic Andrew Sarris and his colleague James Wolcott; Jerry Tallmer's creation of the Obie theater awards; the staff revolt when the popular editor Marianne Partridge was replaced by the New York Timesman David Schneiderman; fistfights in the messy office, AIDS, gay politics and homophobia—and the decline of the paper as it ultimately passed to the owners of New Times and others who gutted it.

The spirit of the Voice is aptly captured by the pop columnist Richard Goldstein describing the sneering press critic Alexander Cockburn: "He was a certified upper-class British communist. Like a hard-core commie. But he was a wonderful writer."

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

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