

Mr. Claro -- Modern Nonfiction

Reading Selection by Gay Talese

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

(to Fame and Obscurity)

MOST OF THE selections in this book are representative of a form of reporting often referred to as the "New Journalism," the "New Nonfiction," or "Parajournalism," the latter a derogatory description coined by the late critic, Dwight MacDonald, who was somewhat suspicious of the form, feeling, as a few other critics did, that its practitioners compromised the facts in the interest of more dramatic reporting.

I do not agree. The New Journalism, though often reading like fiction, is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form. The New Journalism allows, demands in fact, a more imaginative approach to reporting, and it permits the writer to inject himself into the narrative if he wishes, as many writers do, or to assume the role of a detached observer, as other writers do, including myself.

I try to follow my subjects unobtrusively while observing them in revealing situations, noting their reactions and the reactions of others to them. I attempt to absorb the whole scene, the dialogue and mood, the tension, drama, conflict, and then I usually write it from the point of view of the subject, sometimes revealing what these individuals are thinking during those moments that I am describing. This latter insight depends, of course, on the full cooperation of the subject, but if the writer enjoys the confidence and trust of his subjects it is possible, through interviews, by asking the right question at the right time, to learn and to report what goes on within other people's minds.

I did this extensively in my last four books, including *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, which, published in 1980, describes the private sexual lives and changing moral values of several American couples in the "liberated" era before AIDS. And my reportorial interest in intimacy had carried me in 1990 beyond my usual role as a "detached observer" and saw me invading my own privacy, and that of my foreign born forebears, in my recently published *Unto the Sons*.

But in rereading *Unto the Sons* now, in 1992, I've noticed that it contains numerous observations, and even sentences, that first saw print back in the 1960s when I was involved with this book you now hold, *Fame and Obscurity*. And while *Fame and Obscurity* does not achieve all of what I suggest is possible in creative nonfiction, it certainly does mark a shift from the "old" journalism that I had practiced at *The New York Times* in the 1950s to the freer, more challenging approach to reporting that *Esquire* magazine permitted and encouraged under the editorship of the late Harold Hayes.

I first began writing for Esquire in 1960, leading with an essay on obscurity in New York, a series of vignettes on the unnoticed people, the odd facts and bizarre events that had caught my fancy during my travels around town as a newspaperman. After Esquire published the essay, I enlarged upon it to produce an illustrated book that Harper & Row published in 1961 entitled *New York-A Serendipiter's Journey*. The text from this book is reprinted as Part I of this edition of *Fame and Obscurity*, and it now represents to me my youthful view of New York, energized by a mixture of wonderment and awe, and it also reminds me of how destructive the city can become, how it promises so much more than it fulfills, and how right E. B. White was when he wrote many years ago: "No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky." There is also in this writing some early signs of my interest in using the techniques of fiction, an aspiration on my part to somehow bring to reportage the tone that Irwin Shaw and John O'Hara had brought to the short story.

In Part II of *Fame and Obscurity*, a section called "The Bridge," my writing is more focused as I concentrated month after month on a single group of extraordinary men who began working in New York in 1961 on the construction of the great Verrazano-Narrows bridge between Staten Island and Brooklyn. Between 1961 and 1964 I spent all the time I could at the bridge site, not only hanging out in the workers' shacks on both sides of the Hudson River but often donning a hardhat and mingling with the men on the steel beams and cables that stretched nearly six hundred feet above the sea. Several of these sure-footed bridge workers were American Indians from the Caughnawaga reservation near Montreal, and occasionally I accompanied them home for weekend visits, finding the motor trips back and forth, steered by whiskey drinking drivers, to be far more fearful than my high altitude walks along the narrow beams of the bridge on the windiest of days. I shall never forget the occasions when I saw our vehicle swerve off the highway and sideswipe rows of redwood trees and, once, a leaping, fender-bending deer.

Such excursions ended for me in 1964 with the publication of Harper & Row's illustrated volume of *The Bridge*, the text of which appears in this edition of *Fame and Obscurity* exactly as it was written originally; and thus some of the language herein is not "politically correct" according to the parlance of the 1990s: I've not turned my Indians into "Native Americans," nor tampered with my male characters who whistled at pretty "girls" rather than "young women," nor have I changed any financial figures even when my definition of "affluence" now signifies the poverty level.

Part III of *Fame and Obscurity* concentrates on the dreams and fading aspirations of several people quite familiar with the erratic beam of the spotlight-such individuals as the singer Frank Sinatra, the baseball legend Joe DiMaggio, the ex-champ Floyd Patterson, the actor Peter O'Toole, the cover girls of *Vogue*, the literary figure George Plimpton and what one agent called Plimpton's New York "East Side Gang"-these and several other subjects in Part III are presented in a style of writing that comes close to achieving my favorite short-story writers' enviable and seemingly effortless grace in technique.

An early example of this is the profile I did for Esquire in 1962 on the retired but unretiring prizefighter, Joe Louis; the piece begins with the fifty-year-old Louis, fatigued after three frolicsome days and nights in New York with some admiring women, arriving home at the Los Angeles airport, where he was met by his third wife, an attorney-it is a scene with a quarrelsome exchange, and dialogue that might well have been inspired by the husband-wife street scene in Irwin Shaw's story *Girls in Their Summer Dresses*.

In my profile of director Joshua Logan ("The Soft Psyche of Joshua Logan"), I was in the theatre one afternoon watching Logan rehearse his play when, suddenly, he and his star, Claudia McNeil, got into an argument that not only was more dramatic than the play itself, but revealed something of the character of Logan and Ms. McNeil in ways that I could never have done had I approached the subject from the more conventional form of reporting.

While researching the Frank Sinatra profile ("Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"), I discovered that the subject's cooperation-or lack of it-did not matter so long as the writer could get a view, even a distant view, of his subject. Sinatra was uncooperative during my stay in Los Angeles. I had arrived at a bad time for him, he being upset by a head cold among other irritants, and I was not able to get the interview that I had been promised earlier. Nevertheless I was able to observe him during the six weeks I spent on research, watching him at recording sessions, on a movie set, at the gambling tables in Las Vegas, and I saw his changing moods, his irritation and suspicion when he possibly thought that I was getting too close, his pleasure and courtesy and charm when he was able to relax among those whom he trusted. I gained more by watching him, overhearing him, and observing the reactions of those around him than if I had actually been able to sit down and talk to him.

Joe DiMaggio ("The Silent Season of a Hero") was an even more reluctant subject when I began the research on him in 1965 in San Francisco. I had met DiMaggio six months before in New York, at which time he indicated that he would cooperate on the article.

But his attitude was radically different after I had appeared outside his restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. And yet the tense and chilly reception that I received initially provided me with an interesting opening scene in which I was not only a witness but a participant being ejected from the premises by DiMaggio himself. The fact that I was able to become reacquainted with DiMaggio a few days later was the result of a request that I had made through one of DiMaggio's friends and golfing partners that I be allowed to follow their foursome through one eighteen-hole round. During the golfing session, DiMaggio, who hates to lose golf balls, lost three of them. I found them. After that, DiMaggio's attitude toward me improved noticeably; I was invited to other golf matches and to join him in the evening with his other friends at Reno's bar in San Francisco, where much of my work was done.

Except for some minor word changes, such as restoring the colorful profanity of Peter O'Toole that Esquire's editors had toned down, I have not updated any of these selections in this book. They stand simply as a collection of my earlier work; although, as I stated earlier, there is a connection between these works and what would follow in my better-known books. The pieces on Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra, and the one on the mobster Frank Costello ("The Ethnics of Frank Costello") contain themes that are enlarged upon in my book on the Mafia- Honor Thy Father-and the material is also developed in a very different and personal way in my aforementioned recent work *Unto the Sons*, recently released by Ivy in paperback. The final profile in *Fame and Obscurity* ("Mr. Bad News") described the life of an obscure journalist that I had known from my days in the Times' cityroom, a journalist who specialized in writing obituaries. I wrote about him in *Esquire*, the first time I described a newspaper colleague to a national readership; and I followed four years later, in 1969, with a gallery of such colleagues in a book about *The New York Times* that became my first bestseller, *The Kingdom and the Power*. *Thy Neighbor's Wife* derived from my curiosity about the "evil thoughts" and sexual sins to which my parochial school nuns and the parish priest referred obsessively throughout my boyhood, a boyhood I revisited in *Unto the Sons*.

And so it goes. The obsessions of a writer surface and re-emerge in an unpredictable spiral; the techniques evolve, but the fantasies linger.

-Gay Talese August 1992