
**DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION**

Gay Talese in the office of his Upper East Side town house.

**BOOKS**

# blockbuster

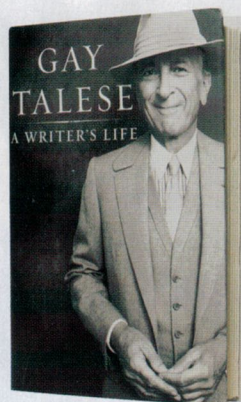
How tennis, martinis, and a Xerox machine helped the master reporter turn procrastination into perfection.

**S**ome 20 years ago, the best-selling writer Gay Talese found himself in the waiting room of a renowned Upper East Side Freudian. Talese had been taking a decade or more to finish his books, and he was here to find out why. The door opened: Out walked Al Pacino, and in strolled Talese. After several dozen appointments, the grandfatherly psychiatrist believed he'd isolated the problem: Gay Talese, he'd decided, was "a perfectionist."

"That's a problem?" Talese remembers saying in disbelief. Perhaps a female would be better able to find and set the broken bone. I can be very

private with a woman, Talese thought. Two lady shrinks and a ripped-up Prozac prescription later, Talese decided he was making himself crazy with this stuff. "I have a way of working," he said. "And it's not going to change."

One day, it would make a decent subject for a book: Thirteen years aborning, **A Writer's Life** has finally been delivered to its publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. It's a book about vacillation. It's a book about what Talese frankly calls his "time-wasting opportunities." It's a book about the writer's woven-tapestry takes on this subject or that, tales that had never quite made



the jump from Talese's file cabinets, a book about not writing a book that manages to entertain anyway.

The proprietors of a jinxed restaurant space; the racially roiled citizenry of Selma, Alabama; the soccer player who lost the Women's World Cup final for China; John and Lorena Bobbitt—all unburden themselves in the pages of *A Writer's Life* to this son of a Calabria-born tailor, who, in that familiar suit and tie and waistcoat, has always looked like a prosperous railroad man. Never in his life has Talese put on a pair of blue jeans, not as a young sportswriter for *The New York Times* in the fifties or as a star at *Esquire* in the sixties, where he specialized in charming stories out of the hard-to-get. Smart clothes hand-stitched by his Cristiani cousins in Paris helped him make the sale.

"Frank Sinatra was no fun. Joe DiMaggio was no fun. Muhammad Ali, that was work," he remembers. But Peter O'Toole taught him something: how it never hurt to order a shot of recklessness. In 1963, *books* >72

O'Toole was shocked to hear that Talese and Nan, his wife, didn't want children. "Man, you worry too much," the genial Irish reprobate counseled. "Why don't you just do it?"

"I saw a person of such accomplishment, of rare intellect, who was married, who had children," says Talese, "and who was as free as any person I'd ever been with. I'd been with him drinking in bars, and I'd seen him with chambermaids in Dublin." Talese soon had two daughters. "You don't have to have all the answers," Talese says. "You can work it out later."

Having grown up in a house side-swiped by disappointment, Talese was always fascinated by failure. His perfectionist father's tailoring business was slowly destroyed by the mass-produced suit. It was Talese's elegantly turned-out mother who really made the money, at her clothing boutique, the Talese Towne Shop. She could size people up, ask the right questions. She was the taller influence on his life. He is careful to point out that she died worth several million, even though the shop was in his birthplace of Ocean City, New Jersey, a resort that came to life for just three months of the year.

Talese seems fairly relieved that he is one of life's winners. First came 1969's best-seller *The Kingdom and the Power*, a history of *The New York Times*, and then, two years later,

"August 1, 2000: I have struggled for months."  
"August 26, 2005: Book finished!"

*Honor Thy Father*, his million-dollar Bonanno-crime-family bonanza. *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was 1980's meditation on contemporary sexual mores, whose movie sale alone fetched \$2.5 million, a record at the time. In 1992, Talese traced his old-country roots in *Unto the Sons*, and there was a respectable showing, too.

In a way, Talese lives over the shop, just as his parents once did: He didn't so much move into his East Sixty-first Street town house as gradually ensnare it, renting apartments as they became available and buying the building once and for all in 1971 with Nan, a publisher with her own Doubleday imprint. In daylight hours, Talese sequesters himself like a Shaolin monk in the tropical-temperature basement office he converted from a wine cellar. There is no phone, but there are distractions of his own manufacture: the fabled "works in progress" files, boxes filigreed with intricate decoupage. (Talese would appear to play the photocopier like a Steinway and handle scissors with the deftness of Matisse.) On a Styrofoam wall, secured by dressmaker pins, are dispatches to himself in alarmingly various fonts that read like

an Arctic explorer's diary of tragedy and rescue. "August 1, 2000: I have struggled for months. . . ." "September 28, 2002: GT, where are you going?" And finally, on August 26, 2005: "Book finished!"

Talese feared he might succumb to a stroke before wrapping *A Writer's Life*, though he is obviously whippet-fit, still slipping out for tennis games in the middle of the afternoon. For Talese, the thought of a debilitating incident was like a riding crop, urging him to go faster, break the tape.

At the end of a long day of vacillating, photocopying, maybe expelling a few painstakingly composed pages, Talese looks forward to a martini and a half at Elaine's, the storied cantina where the city's writers emerge from their solitary confinement and where Talese was just now calling for the check. Owning a restaurant had been a childhood fantasy.

"Restaurants are joyous places. People are escaping cooking, people are escaping the office, people are seducing people, people are consummating deals," says Talese, who grabbed his Borsalino hat and with a toss of a theatrically long cashmere scarf vanished into the night. Where was GT going? Home, but after that was anyone's guess.—PHOEBE EATON

## BOOKS

## lost diamond

He was a feisty bad-ball hitter and a crusading humanitarian. A new biography looks at the myth and mettle of Roberto Clemente.

## HEROIC STANCE

Clemente stares down the opposition, c. 1970.

he Roberto Clemente most Americans knew in his time was a skilled bad-ball hitter with a powerful throwing arm who, for much of his career, had something of a reputation for sullenness, hypochondria, and showboating. Because he was a black, Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican and played for the Pirates in *books* >78

