



A Writer's Life

Gay Talese

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The inner workings of a writer's life, the interplay between experience and writing, are brilliantly recounted by a master of the art. Gay Talese now focuses on his own life—the zeal for the truth, the narrative edge, the sometimes startling precision, that won accolades for his journalism and best-sellerdom and acclaim for his revelatory books about *The New York Times* (*The Kingdom and the Power*), the Mafia (*Honor Thy Father*), the sex industry (*Thy Neighbor's Wife*), and, focusing on his own family, the American immigrant experience (*Unto the Sons*).

How has Talese found his subjects? What has stimulated, blocked, or inspired his writing? Here are his amateur beginnings on his college newspaper; his professional climb at *The New York Times*; his desire to write on a larger canvas, which led him to magazine writing at *Esquire* and then to books. We see his involvement with issues of race from his student days in the Deep South to a recent interracial wedding in Selma, Alabama, where he once covered the fierce struggle for civil rights. Here are his reflections on the changing American sexual mores he has written about over the last fifty years, and a striking look at the lives—and their meaning—of Lorena and John Bobbitt. He takes us behind the scenes of his legendary profile of Frank Sinatra, his writings about Joe DiMaggio and heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, and his interview with the head of a Mafia family.

But he is at his most poignant in talking about the ordinary men and women whose stories led to his most memorable work. In remarkable fashion, he traces the history of a single restaurant location in New York, creating an ethnic mosaic of one restaurateur after the other whose dreams were dashed while a successor's were born. And as he delves into the life of a young female Chinese soccer player, we see his consuming interest in the world in its latest manifestation.

In these and other recollections and stories, Talese gives us a fascinating picture of both the serendipity and meticulousness involved in getting a story. He makes clear that every one of us represents a good one, if a writer has the curiosity to know it, the diligence to pursue it, and the desire to get it right.

Candid, humorous, deeply impassioned—a dazzling book about the nature of writing in one man's life, and of writing itself.

A Writer's Life Details

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From Reader Review A Writer's Life for online ebook

Samantha Mozart says

About writing -- and not writing when you think you should be writing -- the essence of most writers, in my experience. Gay Talese engages the reader, describing in intriguing detail the many personalities he has met and profiled in his writing career, his research and how he goes about it all. This book is hard to put down. I recommend it for any writer, or even if you're not a writer. My reading this book feels as if Mr. Talese comes and sits down next to me, leans in and says, "Let me tell you what happened," and we sit and chat over wine and hors d'oeuvres for the next few hours, even long into the night.

Manik Sukoco says

If reading is like traveling, then reading this book is like going on a long trip with a great storyteller who doesn't know where he's going or how's he getting there.

The sprawling, stylish book is part memoir and part explanation of why it took 14 years to finish. Talese doesn't suffer from writer's block as much as writer's detour. That's a pain for him and his editor but a delight for patient readers.

A Writer's Life is for unhurried readers who appreciate literary back roads, who value the journey more than just getting to where they're going. Truly fascinating!

Pulp says

No es una autobiografía tradicional. No al menos una como la esperaba. Gay Talese recorre algunas de sus etapas como periodista a través de algunos trabajos realizados que, al final, no llegaron a ver la luz. En "Vida de un escritor", por tanto, se echan en falta un mayor acercamiento a la faceta más íntima y personal del autor. Más si se toma en cuenta en que estaba en la edad ideal para hacer un retrato de sus años familiares y de formación profesional. Algo hay de eso, no mucho pero lo hay. Son de hecho los momentos más disfrutables del libro, junto con sus reflexiones del oficio de escribir. Sin embargo, Talese prefiere hablar de sí mismo a partir de su propio trabajo. Mostrar su personalidad (la de un obsesivo por el detalle, el buen vestir, el deporte y los restaurantes) a través de los demás. Una visión externa de sí mismo que alcanza a percibirse a través del método de investigación que maneja. Más que anécdotas, abundan las crónicas de algunos eventos importantes del siglo XX en los que estuvo involucrado. De temas sociales a deportivos pasando por dramas de pareja y conflictos raciales. Todo visto desde el peculiar estilo que lo caracteriza, frases largas en donde los aspectos de apariencia significativa, son manejadas con una maestría tal que ayudan a entender por completo al personaje del que se habla, y también al que escribe. Pese a que esa podría parecer la intención (hacer que las creaciones sean tu biografía), da la impresión de que la obra en cuestión no es más que un ensamblaje medio forzado (hay poca relación entre los temas y el hilo conductor se percibe flojo) con el fin de cumplir con un compromiso editorial que el propio Talese reconoce en algunas de las páginas.

Con todo, es un libro con encanto, sobre todo para quienes estamos enamorados de uno de los pilares del "nuevo periodismo". Hay mucho que rescatar aquí, pese a que no siempre sea evidente y a ratos sepa a excesivo.

Bookmarks Magazine says

The disjointed feel of Gay Talese's "memoir" provokes accusations of a "notebook dump" (*Wall Street Journal*), a sentiment all the more galling when considered against his sterling reputation as a founding voice of New Journalism. A few critics did think the Bobbitts' story worth retelling, though most lauded the editor who refused to publish it. *Esquire* recently named Talese's 1966 piece, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," the best piece of writing they've ever published, and his previous books (*Honor Thy Father, Thy Neighbor's Wife*) were all best sellers. Perhaps the memory of past glory causes some critics to cherish this meander through the famed journalist's methods. But most reviewers were hoping for a little more life from this vaunted writer's pen.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Jacqueline Lafloufa says

Não é um livro pra qualquer um. Talese fala sobre fracassos: seus, através das histórias que não conseguiu contar sobre os outros; e dos outros, que falharam em lhe dar material interessante o suficiente pra que houvessem histórias.

Sobrevivendo as 100 primeiras páginas - que pra mim foram entediantes e se arrastaram com descrições minuciosas que eu detesto - Talese parte pra contar sobre temas mais intrigantes e que aguçam minha curiosidade. Destaque pra descrição dos bastidores do NYTimes, do Domingo Sangrento de Selma e dos seus fracassos mais "demorados" - como acompanhar o tal número da rua de NY que só abrigava insucessos quanto por viajar meses a fio atrás de uma história que não se conclui. Aliás, esse é o grande desafio da leitura: saber que muito do que Talese conta é o bastidor do errado, do que não deu certo, do falhado. Não há fim claro em nenhuma das histórias contadas e portanto o segredo é aproveitar a jornada e não esperar pelo final.

Talese tem um estilo de escrita que me encanta, e conta sobre suas próprias falhas de uma forma que aumenta minha admiração: é preciso uma boa dose de autocrítica pra entender as próprias falhas e um outro bocado de resiliência pra lidar com elas e falar sobre elas sem se abalar.

Patrick Wensink says

Talese is my favorite non-fiction writer. I'm excited to learn more about his life. His style is so smooth, I could read 300 pages of him listing his old man medications and be happy.

Look up the story, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" online and see what I mean. He turned Frank Sinatra ignoring him into the greatest celebrity profile ever, in my opinion.

Margarita Funes says

Uno de los mejores ensayos que he tenido en mis manos, no solo por venir de un periodista/escritor, sino por su riqueza histórica contenida en 600 páginas . Relatos continuos, vivos, anécdotas, entresijos. ¡Todo para amar aún más la profesión o querer más la buena lectura! Un final demasiado simple, para un libro tan bueno, pero las restantes 597 páginas lo vale

Scott says

Don't pick this up hoping for how-to stuff or writing tips. Instead, what you'll do here is take a bunch of disparate trips with a great storyteller, with subtle tension arising from his effort, and often inability, to produce a book (or in at least one case even a publishable story) out of his exhaustive research and interviews. His transitions from one story to another are so good that you hardly notice you're on a new trip; and he effortlessly ties the end of the book directly back to the beginning. Good stuff.

Stephen says

In his latest (and final?) literary installment, “A Writer’s Life” Gay Talese is rather frank about the stuff from which it is woven. While not tarrying over the matter, the master of literary fiction makes it quite clear that some time in the '90s he was pretty late with a book to his publisher.

Later, as we cruise through various and vaguely related topics, borne along by the flow of his mellifluous prose, Talese is again frank and fun enough to offer up his pitches, and the responses of N.Y.C. literary illuminati, such as Tina Brown.

Even with queries referring back to his big, “Honor Thy Father,” “Unto the Sons” -bestsellers - the writer is subjected to rejection with such lines as, “At your level, we need a book with a very large sales potential. I don’t think this is it.”

(An editor named Jonathan Segal)

So it is a writer’s life, as the title proclaims, and Talese makes use of the large and copious files he maintained over the years while flailing from subject-to-subject, trying to generate a book that he confesses to having been “blocked” on.

Still cookin’, but old enough to have witnessed things rendered ancient history by 24-hour news cycles, Talese deftly ties his times to his failed proposals that included stories about a cursed building that served as a graveyard for expensive restaurants in his Upper East Side neighborhood, the castration case of Lorena Bobbitt, the peculiar historical saga of Selma, Alabama, or the plight of an ill-starred member of the Chinese national womens soccer team.

The author takes you through these projects of his, shedding light thanks to his low-key, but persistent way of gaining access to people, leveraging his writer’s celebrity as well as possible, hanging around making observations both detailed and general in nature.

highwayscribery's familiarity with Talese dates back, and is limited, to his reading of "Unto the Sons," which the scribe's dad gave to him. Get it? "Unto to the Sons?" It was a charming and in-depth story focusing upon life in Talese's East Coast, Italian-American family, and their forebears in Calabria, Italy.

The paternal half of the scribe's pedigree traces back to Calabria and so the book was a kind of family tree done with another family, but which provided a good idea regarding this unique province of origin.

The cover jacket of "A Writers Life" features a b&w photo of Talese captured in a thin-lipped half-smile the scribe's old man possesses, and which will one day (too soon) be passed onto the highway scribe.

So, anyway, there is an interest in Talese that propelled highwayscribery through this collection of anecdotes by a man of his times.

Among the interesting and unexpected turns in Talese's life was a stint down in Alabama, where he went to university. Years later, in the heat of the civil rights confrontation in the Deep South, this familiarity netted him a plum assignment covering the famed March on Selma, which led to a rather public and televised bloodletting.

In addition to his eye-witness account of what happened, not only at the fateful "bridge" but elsewhere in town beyond the camera's eye, Talese provides ample coverage of a return trip to gauge the progress between races in Selma. His cautious eyes sees improvements in some places, but subtle retreats elsewhere.

In this section of "A Writer's Life" Talese is at his best, using what he refers to as secondary characters to render the true portrait of a subject.

Talese is the king of digression, starting with an Italian waiter at Elaine's in New York, telling you about Elaine, about the waiter, some about the waiter's father, about the new restaurant the waiter was planning to open, about the waiter's wife's sneaking suspicion the place is cursed (she was right), something about her life, before fishtailing off into a history about the building in which the restaurant was to be lodged.

But we say master because it all works as Talese weaves the impulses and energies of distant and disparate occurrences into one another, seeing chains of events and people affecting one another's lives without wanting or even intending to; oft times never knowing.

Although the writer and the book travel well, "A Writer's Life" has a distinctly New York cast to it. Talese enjoyed fame throughout his career and therefore had access to some of Gotham's tonier haunts and denizens. At time it's got a definite "Vanity Fair" feel to it, a touch of the Dominique Dunne, recounting the names of hoo-hahs at fancy schmanzy eateries, but good for him.

And, in the end, that may say something about the change in publishing and what the market deemed doable in this particular writer's life.

Christopher says

I very much enjoy the writing of Gay Talese - he writes nonfiction and often focuses on life in New York City, such as in his books "Fame and Obscurity" (1964), "The Kingdom and the Power" (1969) and "Unto the Sons" (1992).

Some have compared Talese to a latter-day Balzac, in that he was an accomplished "social columnist" dating from his days in high school in Ocean City, New Jersey. In the present volume, Talese compiles an olio of stories from his own writing past - such as the first interracial married couple in Alabama (Talese attended the University of Alabama); the life of a solitary address in New York City (206 East 63rd St.) over several generations - centering on the restaurants that opened and closed there over three decades, and the people who started them.

He writes affectionately of the iconic Elaine Kaufman and her restaurant "Elaine's" on Manhattan's Upper East Side, which was a beehive of activity bringing together the NY publishing and entertainment worlds during the late 1970s. Talese talks about how he would take a table for dinner, and while eating, make notes about what was being discussed at adjoining tables -- and the reader gets to eavesdrop as well. He knows a number of influential writers and mentions many throughout this book; but these references are not summoned for egotistical ends ... in fact, each of these notable individuals is brought into the story for practical reasons, and Talese handles it all quite deftly.

Talese talks about his relationship with his editor and publisher, and his method of acquiring and filing information for future stories/books. It is a stream of consciousness in that it wends its way from one concept to another, with the common thread of a place, person, or idea. As a memoir, it holds considerable interest for me; but it is also a first rate account of the publishing process. He talks lovingly and extensively about his wife Nan, an executive at Doubleday Books, which underscores just how thoroughly the creation of books consumes his personal and professional lives.

Talese is a very talented and prolific writer, and this book would be greatly appreciated, I believe, by anyone interested in how a book comes to fruition (definitely NOT a linear process) along with its attendant challenges.

Tristan says

A bit boring, and a little too focused on his love for social clubs, hanging out with celebrities and fancy restaurants. Man, he really loves restaurants. I think his favorite phrase is "we dined..."

Had hoped there would be more about his time at the NY Times and the New Yorker.

Interesting to hear about his writing habits.

Liked the story about how he went after the story about the Chinese soccer player blamed for blowing the women's World Cup final. However, the story kind of ended with a shrug, so I'm not sure why he started and ended the book with it.

Syl says

One of the best biographies I've read

Dauro Veras says

Li e recomendo Vida de escritor, de Gay Talese. É uma combinação de autobiografia com algumas histórias levantadas por ele que terminaram não sendo publicadas. Ou por rejeição do editor, ou porque ele não sabia o caminho a tomar e decidiu abandonar o projeto. Talese tem fascínio por personagens anônimos e pelos que fracassam.

Passou meses na China pesquisando sobre uma jogadora de futebol que perdeu um pênalti na final da Copa do Mundo, numa partida que deu o título aos EUA. Durante anos, coletou informações e fez entrevistas sobre um prédio antigo em NY, onde diversos restaurantes bacanas abriram as portas e faliram em poucos meses. Também acompanhou de perto o caso de Lorena Bobbit, a equatoriana que decepcionou o pênis do marido. O resultado é um painel que revela muito sobre o método de trabalho dele, suas obsessões, bloqueios diante da página em branco e a paixão pela reportagem.

Do posfácio de Mario Sergio Conti: "Vida de escritor traz precisamente o que o título enuncia: um relato do calvário. ... O livro não tem nada de condescendente nem conformista. Os seus assuntos são o trabalho e o fracasso. ... Ao mostrar as frustrações do relato de apurar e relatar, Talese desmistifica o jornalismo".

Conti conta ainda que Vida de Escritor, de 2006, foi o livro de Talese que teve pior recepção nos Estados Unidos. As restrições foram de duas ordens: ele seria um pot-pourri com restos de livros que goraram; e a sua construção era forçada e frágil. Conti diz que não há o que discutir quanto à primeira ressalva, mas a restrição não se sustenta, pois considera a construção do livro "altamente requintada" - labiríntica, autoquestionadora, fragmentada.

John says

Hailing from an era when journalists were influenced by William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, Talese's prose is excellent and makes the mundane details interesting. This book collects his unfinished writing projects and rounds them into a decent book. The section on the Bobbitt trial is compelling, turning the tabloid trash story of the 90s into insightful sociological commentary. The chapters on Alabama are worthwhile as well. Docked two stars for the boring sections on China and the World Cup, a story that never really goes anywhere.

Karla V. H. says

Después de abandonarlo por bastante tiempo, por fin me he decidido a retomar y terminar este libro.

Conocí a Gay Talese gracias a una de mis clases de periodismo en la facultad. Como él había escrito ese impresionante perfil de Frank Sinatra (uno de mis intérpretes favoritos) tenía que acercarme a su trabajo. Después de leer algunas cosas, decidí, rápidamente, adentrarme en su biografía. Esperaba encontrar muchas lecciones de un profesional que me parecía tan sofisticado e importante.

El libro es una largo viaje. Se construye de partes más personales del autor que de su trabajo periodístico o como escritor, así que sí: en muchas ocasiones resulta demasiado. Sin embargo creo que son sus memorias y puede (y lo hizo) hacer lo que quiera.

El personaje de Talese me parece interesante, con sus vicios por los restaurantes y su frustración hacía algunas historias que nunca vieron la luz. Me gusta el lado B de leer sobre trabajos sin éxito porque muestra por lo que muchas veces los periodistas (o estudiantes de...) pasamos a menudo, cuando nos enamoramos de una historia pero sinceramente no tiene futuro. También me encantó que mostrara su forma de trabajo, de obsesionarse con las historias, su rutina para escribir y sus percepciones de todo esto porque de eso personas como yo vivimos para intentar acercarnos lejanamente a nuestros ídolos.

Definitivamente Memorias de un escritor dejó algo en mí para la posteridad, una inspiración (más que una guía) para desarrollarme en mi profesión. Estoy esperando por leer más de sus trabajos.
