

# THINK PRINT

BY MICHAEL GROSS

GAY TALESE BEGAN HIS CAREER IN JOURNALISM JUST OVER A HALF CENTURY AGO AS A COPYBOY AT THE *NEW YORK TIMES* AND WENT ON TO BECOME ONE OF THE ORIGINAL NEW JOURNALISTS AND THE AUTHOR OF SUCH MONUMENTAL BEST SELLERS AS *THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER* AND *THY NEIGHBOR'S WIFE* AND, MOST RECENTLY, HIS MEMOIR, *A WRITER'S LIFE*. PETER W. KAPLAN WORKED AT THE *NEW YORK TIMES* AS A CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT, COVERING THE TELEVISION BEAT IN THE MID-1980S, THEN BECAME EXECUTIVE EDITOR AND EDITORIAL DIRECTOR OF *MANHATTAN, INC.*, SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR OF *CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER* AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF *CHARLIE ROSE* ON PBS. IN 1994, HE BECAME THE EDITOR OF THE DISHY, DARING WEEKLY, THE *NEW YORK OBSERVER*. ON A BRIGHT SPRING DAY, THE TWO MET US AT TALESE'S EAST SIDE TOWN HOUSE TO TALK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PRINT JOURNALISM. TALESE WAS WAITING FOR A CALL FROM AN EDITOR AT *NEWSWEEK*, WHICH WAS ABOUT TO RUN A STORY HE'D WRITTEN ABOUT THE CHILDREN OF MAFIOSO JOSEPH BONANNO, SUBJECT OF ANOTHER OF HIS BEST SELLERS, *HONOR THY FATHER*. KAPLAN ARRIVED STRAIGHT FROM LUNCH WITH ARTHUR GELB, HIS ONE-TIME BOSS AND THE RETIRED MANAGING EDITOR OF THE *TIMES*.

**PETER KAPLAN:** Arthur said that you were the second-best writer who ever worked at the *New York Times*.

**GAY TALESE:** I accept McCandlish Phillips as the best. Arthur is the oldest guy who ever worked at the *New York Times*. He probably still does.

**BERGDORF GOODMAN:** He does. He still has his office there.

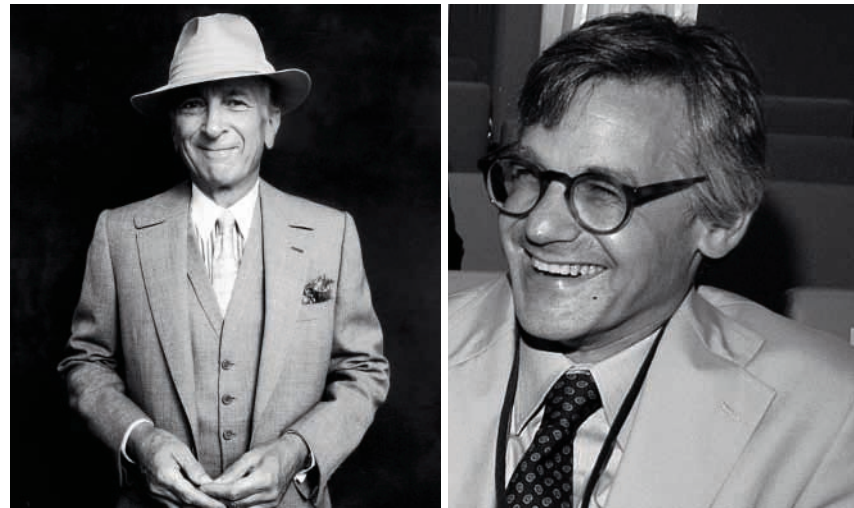
**PK:** He's [former *Times* top editor] Abe Rosenthal's living defender.

**GT:** Oh, I am also.

**PK:** I am too. But Abe was mad as a hatter when I worked for him. I worked at the *Times* for a few years in '84 and '85. I was on the Culture Desk. Abe was just on the verge of being Captain Queeg. But he still had moments of incredible brilliance.

**GT:** Did you ever personally have a run-in?

**PK:** Yes, I was thrown out of his office a couple of times. The day I was hired, he threw



GAY TALESE (LEFT) AND PETER KAPLAN

TALESE: JOYCE TENNESON; KAPLAN: © PATRICKMULLAN.COM

me out of his office. I was working on the dummy of this magazine *Manhattan, inc.* It was just before the first issue, and I was feeling incredibly guilty about leaving. Abe said, "I'd like to offer you a job at the *New York Times*."

I said, "I'm so thrilled and honored, but I've started this new magazine, and the editor is going to be angry at me."

He said, "Mr. Kaplan, apparently I was under a misimpression when I brought you here; I want you to leave my office right now." He didn't offer me his hand. He said, "Leave my office." I thought, I'm done.

**GT:** You left the building.

**PK:** Left the building and went back to *Manhattan, inc.* When I got back to my desk, I called Arthur. Arthur said, "Here's what you're going to do. Pick up the phone right now, call Abe and tell him you had a stroke, an aphasia, you have no idea what came over you, and you accept the job"—and he hung up. I called Abe back, and I followed Arthur's script exactly, and there was a silence, and Abe said, "All right" BANG. [He mimes slamming down a phone.] As you know better than I, he was unbelievable. A genius in his way.

**GT:** Where was Clay [Felker, the brilliant founder of *New York* magazine, who later followed Kaplan as editor of *Manhattan, inc.*]?

**PK:** He wasn't there yet. But as long as we're on this, at lunch today, Arthur said, "There wouldn't have been any sections in the *New York Times* if it weren't for Clay Felker. He said, "I got the lifestyle idea from looking at what Clay was doing." Clay really needs to get his due. The kinds of things that Clay and Arthur created are at risk now, because print itself is at risk. Will newspapers become just an electronic experience?"

**BG:** Gay, when you started at the *Times* do you remember how many newspapers were there?

**GT:** I believe there were seven. I first started as a copyboy in 1953, and then got onto the staff, first as a sports reporter and then as a legitimate reporter, for that ten-year period from roughly '55 to '65, and I used to worry in those days about getting the facts right. I double-checked and double-checked them. I never wrote very quickly, because I

was writing with an awareness that speed or doing something without full attention would lead to a mistake. I'm not sure that's unhealthy. I think that I got it from many of the older reporters, who were not known as writers, but who I greatly respected because they had great concern that whatever they had in the paper might be referred to ninety years hence by some historian, and it should be, right? We were foot soldiers for the historians. Don't speak unless you know exactly what the hell you're talking about and can prove it. If you had a correction, it was mortifying.

**BG:** *The New York Observer* speaks to the continued viability, however shaky, of print, and it is also one of the only publications in New York that still fulfills the classic role of speaking truth to power.

**PK:** There always used to be an intelligent counterpuncher for the *New York Times* in town, and then, when the *Herald-Tribune* went away, there wasn't. I like the idea of the *Observer* being a kind of fun-house mirror reflection of the *New York Times*, and people take the *New York Times*, sometimes for good reasons and sometimes for not good reasons, as received truth, so I needed to send out intelligent reporters who would find daylight between what the *New York Times* had written and what existed.

When I first got to the paper, by the way, when I hired a reporter, I would hand him a copy of [Talese's magazine journalism collection] *Fame and Obscurity*. I'd say, "Memorize this." Because the thing about your magazine pieces was, they were assiduously constructed in terms of both truth and story structure. They had the veracity of a great newspaper piece, but a fictional structure: a beginning, a middle and an end. You know, the famous ones and also the ones that aren't so famous any more, like the Alden Whitman piece and the Peter O'Toole piece, are real gems. I mean that very literally, because they were polished and made. That's a function of your incredible respect for fact as well as story structure.

*The Kingdom and the Power* [Talese's history of the *New York Times*], which to my mind is just about the best thing you could ever read on a newspaper, reads like a novel. You have protagonists and you have genuine conflict. Most newspapermen vanish into the sands of time. But the characters who live in *The Kingdom and the Power* have had the great good fortune to live forever.

**BG:** Is it still in print?

**GT:** Yes, it just came out again, about three months ago—in paperback.

**PK:** I only wish there was a second volume that would take up [the story].

**GT:** Someone could do that, I guess. But I think you cannot write from the outside on a newspaper. You really have to be within the family.

**PK:** You do, but you've also got to have a devotion to detachment, and I don't think a former editor of the *New York Times*, Joe Lelyveld or Max Frankel or any of those guys, could possibly achieve that. Arthur Gelb's book is very good, but it's a memoir. *The Kingdom and the Power* is like a Shakespearean history. You're sorry it ends.

**GT:** It is true that one should have detachment. Moreover, in my case, I was, in my mind at least, a newcomer to America. I think this could be true of many people of my generation who were new to the experience of getting a college education. Many of us—Peter mentioned Arthur Gelb and Rosenthal—were first-generation in our families to have gotten a college education. You were Jewish, you were Italian, you were Irish . . . Unfortunately, not too many were African-Americans then, and it's probably still true now. We brought a sense of distance or detachment, wonderment. We were always on the outside looking in.

I don't think you can be either a fiction or nonfiction writer without having your own sense of being apart from what you're seeing, but also having a wish to know, and something also of respect for the people you're writing about, even if they're notorious people. I've written about pornography, and I've written about gangsterism and other disreputable types. But I tried to see from their vantage point how they saw the world. And if I didn't have respect for them on some level, I didn't write about them. Because why bother? Why write at all if you're there just to destroy what little character they may have?

**BG:** What effect do you think the Internet has had on literary nonfiction?

**PK:** For Gay's generation (Tom Wolfe has written about this) the model for nonfiction writers was the nineteenth-century novel. But for the kids who are showing up now, the model for what they want to write is crumbling or ruptured. It's either modernistic fiction or the Internet, which is a very splintered instrument. I'm going to go back to the *New York Times* because they are, in so many ways, the only gold standard left. So if they don't demand authority and important writing in that newspaper, there is no template to follow.

The kids that come in to the *New York Observer*, who I interview for jobs, ingest electronic media day and night. The amount of writing that they take in that is classically structured is getting less and less, and the result is nonfiction that is a lot less like what Gay created. I want somebody out there to create a new gold standard that will be hugely influential. In the last forty years, forty-two years, every presidential cycle, there has been one great book. *The Making of the President* in 1960, or *The Selling of the President* in 1968. Somebody has taken the ball and run with it. I'm rooting for somebody to look at this presidential race, which is an amazing story in the making, and sculpt something fantastic from it. Because if they do, it could be electrifying. Remember, in the '60s, people were saying baseball was going to go away. The crowds were shrinking, they weren't scoring runs. Then they had a revival. I think writing needs that kind of revival now. Writing needs a Reggie Jackson, you know?

**GT:** It needs people who are going to go out on the road, whether it's Mailer with his marchers, or Wolfe with his crazies, or me here and there. You need to leave the computer behind. The twenty-four-to-thirty-one-year-olds today are too educated, in a way. [They're] not dissimilar from the people they're writing about, particularly in government. They know and go to the same parties and are on familiar terms, almost too familiar, with those who dwell within the realm of government. [That] created a climate of acceptance of the versions of truth coming from powerful people. I don't mean they should be irresponsibly disruptive or overly skeptical, but they need a sense of distance. If I were powerful, with the *New York Times* under my fingers, I might take the liberty of detaching half of the Washington Bureau and sprinkling them out to the state capitols of the nation and reducing the possibility of their relying too much on familiar sources of information. They'd have to sell their Georgetown houses and swimming pools and go out there and see the larger nation, and feel the vibration of the people, and create new people who are going to speak for the country, even if it's farmers' wives (if there are any farmers' wives left), and give a picture of America that will be a new nineteenth-century novel view of the country.

**PK:** I agree with what you're saying, in the "all politics is local" category, and part of what the *Observer* does, and what I believe in, is doing as much storytelling as you can here in town. We have an incredible cast of characters in town right now. One of the reasons why we love covering the media, even though it's a little incestuous, is because that's a little town on its own.

**BG:** You both, albeit fifty years apart, follow the dictum Clay Felker set down at the first editorial meeting of his brief-lived *East Side Express*. Somebody asked, "How do we cover the East Side?"

His answer was, "You are in that world, but not of it"

**GT:** That's exactly what I said. Another thing: I am occasionally invited to visit a city room, and I am aware of how quiet it is as compared to the '50s, when we had people talking at one another across the room and you could eavesdrop on these conversations, or just hear phrases that reminded you of the fact they were from a different region or had a different perspective on the moment. Now, what I am impressed with and also unimpressed with is not only how quiet it is, but how journalists sit there in a kind of enclosure and communicate with other people through the screen.

**PK:** The fact is that there is something very two-dimensional, defeated about the whole thing. They're not getting out. They're not getting on the street. That's A. Then, B, they wait for e-mails. They wait for things to show up on a Web site. It's not life, and it's not that interesting.

**GT:** I remember reading the apologia from the management of the *Times* with regard to Jayson Blair. If I remember, one of the mid-level editors, Jon Landman, who has now been

elevated, was on the same floor as the then-executive editor, Howell Raines. And Landman sends an e-mail, something to the effect that we must stop Jayson Blair from writing again for the *New York Times*, after he'd done thirty terrible stories. Isn't this crazy. What would I have done if I was that mid-level editor? I would have gotten up from my desk and walked across and knocked on the door and said, "Mr. Raines," as I would probably call him, "Look at me. I have something to tell you. Look into my eyes. I am not going to have this man on my staff, and we're going to get rid of him. And if we don't get rid of him, we'll get rid of me. Now, which is it?" That's the way you talk about things that matter. You don't use e-mail in a city room! Do you know what would have happened? Howell Raines would still be the executive editor at the *Times*. And Blair would have gotten out of there sooner. You don't use e-mail when you can walk over and hit the guy over the head with a newspaper!

**PK:** I will say, parenthetically, Landman is one of the best at the *Times* now. He's superb. But, of course, you're right. The virtual world, or e-mail, or whatever you want to call it, is a kind of restrictive tyranny. It passes for information, but it's not really information. It creates a closed, weirdly elitist society of people who are speaking the same language instead of putting journalists among new subjects.

**GT:** It diminishes passion. You see, it brings a kind of civility, or a kind of mellowness, instead of being really passionate or more, even disrespectful at times. That's very valuable, to know how much ire we are capable of. Sometimes it's wonderful to lose it.

**PK:** It's true. And it has degraded writing. But I do want to say that e-mail and the Internet are also, on a certain level, the greatest democratizing factor in journalism in my lifetime, because everybody has access. People in Eastern Europe can find out exactly what we can, as fast as we do.

**GT:** But I think there's something inherently undemanding about it. Reporting, communicating, sometimes if it's difficult, it's even better. Sometimes, in the hesitations, you hear a harking of reticence and confusion, that you can draw out. There's another language besides words.

**PK:** There's also no clatter any more. If I remember correctly, don't you still use an IBM Selectric [typewriter]?

**GT:** Yeah, and I don't have e-mail.

**PK:** One of the lovely things about the *New York Observer* is we are like a tiny, little old-fashioned newspaper. We yell at each other.

**GT:** You know what else you have on your paper? You have voice. When I was working later for magazines, such as *Esquire*, we had voice.

**PK:** I'm very lucky, because I was able to spend time with Felker. Clay always said "Point of view, point of view." Not to get too romantic about it, but it's putting your soul into a piece. If you merge that with real reporting, respecting your reader, and taking facts seriously, but if you're powerfully subjective at the same time, then you've got something. Speaking of that, do you think that we have gotten the kind of journalism out of Iraq that we should have?

**GT:** No. Absolutely not.

**PK:** Why not, do you think?

**GT:** Number one, embedded reporters. That is becoming a mascot of the military. Again, I'm repeating myself. But watch the television channels, you watch these people, these journalists who are on all the time, they're all in the same club. They have the same information. It's very knowing without being incisive, and certainly never do you get the great contrarians. Even among the young people. Is this the worst generation? Young people going to college, and there are no protests!

**PK:** I've been trying to figure out if we should assign a "lamest generation" piece. I'm astonished by it.

**BG:** Let me change the subject. In the '50s, the great fear of newspapermen was that tel-

evision was going to ruin print. Now we have the same fear, only the villain is the Internet.

**PK:** Throughout my entire lifetime, people have been running around screaming that the theater is near death. It was the fabulous invalid. Of course, the theater never died. I think what's going to happen with magazines and newspapers is that electronic journalism will grow and grow, and, in fact, get more interesting. I think that what I like to think of as metaphysical journalism, actual print that you can hold, will always be there. There will be a readership for it the same way that there is an audience for theater. Television did not destroy the movies, and the movies did not destroy theater. In fact, print journalism is the realest, best way to read, to interact with the writer. I don't think anything can destroy it...I hope.

Also, as much as we whack the Internet and e-mail, to me it is a total gift. It's the revolution of my lifetime. It's a blast. I love it. At the same time that I hate it and find it diminishing. It's an amazing, astonishing thing to be able to sit there and look at YouTube, to be able to get news as it happens. But there's a lot of romance that's taken out of journalism when you can have all the available facts that you need coming to you through Google day and night, on demand. So it's a very mixed blessing.

**GT:** I think the challenge is to bring to the reader (hoping you have readers) what they did not know, what they had no other way of finding out. I would like to think that there are stories that no one else knows, and you can send your staff and get these stories that no one else can get, and readers will find nowhere else. Let's talk about one of the great men of our city. I have been in the city for fifty years, and I have never known a greater mayor than Bloomberg. Yet we know nothing about him. Someone could write about him, not in a way that ever would reflect dishonorably, or reveal a kind of jibing sense of him, or wish to destroy some of his illustrious career and how he's done so well by the city as a political leader—but to get in the head and heart of that man; it can be done.

**PK:** You need editors and reporters who have discipline and some courage in terms of demanding what they care about, demanding complexity and enthusiasm and integrity from writing. One of my great pleasures professionally is, I've known some great editors, and they asked writers to follow their best instincts and give them something great. When you did the Frank Sinatra piece ["Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," for *Esquire*], and you kept writing back [to say Sinatra wouldn't cooperate], and they said, "Stay out there."

**BG:** But how many reporters are there at this point who would have the chops to write a story like "Frank Sinatra" without Frank Sinatra?

**GT:** You can write about anybody without . . . if you get around them, you kind of crowd them, and you get the whole chorus that's around them.

**BG:** So why haven't we read a write-around about the mayor? There are so many of these mysterious characters in New York now who everyone thinks they know but no one has ever adequately explained.

**GT:** You have to have an almost perverted curiosity that is not going to be put off the story.

**PK:** Clearly that's something you've got, and it's a gift when you have it. You have to have a huge humanistic curiosity. If you have the desire, on the most respectful, the most complicated level, to understand human behavior and then convert it into literary terms, it's a wonderful thing. We don't have enough of that. Our writing economy doesn't actually support as much of that as it ought to.

**BG:** Or as it used to. But can print afford to abandon that sort of story?

**GT:** Perhaps it's to get these kind of stories done with the notion that it will lead to a more profitable print institution. How do we create a new appetite, or new awareness? How do we grow a different kind of fruit that isn't in the marketplace today that will find an audience? Maybe human nature defined within print. Fictional it may be in structure—but factual, of course. Making it magical. If it's both real and fantastic, and both true and not true. You think, "That can't be true." But it is true! Verifiably true. Then I think it will sell. Because people want stories. People want drama. They want to be surprised. They want to feel part of something that they're not part of, but vicariously can be made part of by prose. BG