



Writers tend to get a free pass when it comes to style. Whether it's due to the craft's unreliable paycheck or the false notion that writers are too busy seeing *into* the world to actually pay attention to its surfaces, not much is expected in the appearances department of those who spend their days making words jump across a page. Whenever a writer ends up on a best-dressed list, my usual reaction is to scoff at the imaginative gymnastics required in bestowing that honour and grunt a version of, 'That's generous'. In terms of interiors, I have a confession to make. As much as I adore and worship and personally hoard books—and if you were a friend in my apartment when it caught fire, you would not be permitted to escape without a stack of my favourite first-edition signed novels strapped to your fleeing back—I

GAY TALESE

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once walked into the new apartment of a photographer friend and couldn't understand why the place seemed so open and uncluttered; 'I took all my books to my studio', he explained, and I replied with true despair, 'Oh no'. Thankfully, there are notable exceptions to this literary-aesthetic endgame, and one—perhaps the main one—is Gay Talese. He is 85 years old, pretty much invented the rules of non-fiction profile writing, and lives on Manhattan's East 61st Street off Park Avenue. His block has an elegant, lived-in vibe, right at the juncture where the patriarchal Upper East Side rises out of the manic industry of midtown. Talese's white, four-floor brownstone has a swan's neck of a staircase leading to the main entrance. It also has a separate street-level door to the most famous basement writing room on the planet.





Talese is tall and thin with a handsome, eagle-like face—a darting beak nose midway between slender lips and a slender set of eyes. He greets me on a Wednesday afternoon at his front door wearing one of his signature outfits: a three-piece suit. The vest, jacket, and pants are all varying plays on the colour tan. Under it he has on a white shirt with narrow turquoise stripes, a yellow necktie, and, folded in his jacket pocket, an orange and grey silk handkerchief. This man is a beautiful dresser. In fact, the precise, idiosyncratic beauty of his clothes rubs against my idea of Gay Talese as the consummate chameleon, the writer scribbling notes while embedded in massage parlours, mafia dens, smoky Sinatra recording studios, criminal courtrooms, and the decks of a suspension bridge, among the many places he has taken us in his six decades of writing (the various clothing stains secreted in these places alone could be a tome). In fact, Talese's clothes have nearly cost him a job: in his latest book, 2016's *The Voyeur's Motel*, the author writes of peeping down on an oblivious couple having sex in a Denver motel room, when his tie accidentally slips through the faux ventilation shaft and dangles a few feet above the bed. Talese is the son of an Ocean City, New Jersey, tailor and dress-shop owner. One gets the sense he saved a lot of time by skipping over years of rebellion against his parents and went right to rebellion against the mores of the world. Talese's specialty is the sordid, unsavoury character, the lurker in the shadows, the citizen with a million secrets, the tough guy with hidden holes in his chest. Talese moved into this brownstone in 1957, renting a solitary front room on the third floor when he was a young reporter for the *New York Times*. Right before marrying his wife, the veritable editor and publisher Nan Talese, in 1959, he rented a second room on the second-floor front. It wasn't until 1970, flush with two daughters and the success of his book *The Kingdom and the Power* about the *New York Times*, that he purchased the entire building from the apartment tower next door that saw the brownstone as a necessary low-level structure preserving its views of the East River. There is a story for every room in the house. The first-floor living room, in which we sat, was way back when a rented studio occupied by the fashion model Hope Bryce (and her blind dog) before she was whisked away by Austrian film director Otto Preminger. On

the second floor of the red-carpeted staircase hang several drawings by artist Frank Stella, who Talese met by chance in the '60s during a pick-up game at his tennis club. One walk-in upstairs closet is reserved for a hat collection, handmade by a man in Bogota. Behind a wall of mirrored closets in his fourth-floor study are the author's exquisitely tailored suits; many of the hangers include tags listing their respective style and designer. The literary couple have two small galley kitchens in the residence—that's plenty for Gay, as he is not the stay-home-for-dinner kind. And, of course, there are books, walls and walls of them coursing through nearly every room in the house without it ever feeling closed and cluttered. When Talese took over the basement space that became his writing room, the 'Bunker', it was a crumbling wine cellar. Now it's a cream-carpeted, cream-walled sanctuary filled with file boxes of past projects, their cardboard sides decorated with photocollages. There is also a pegboard above his desk charting the decades of his marriage. His next book is about his life with Nan. Gay Talese is more than double my age, and yet he remains more optimistic about Manhattan than I do. I have a feeling his secret lies in knowing exactly how best to use it.

You've lived in New York City for more than 60 years, and I've lived in this city for more than 20. So we've seen a few things—one being the waning of the literary personality. You don't see these stylish public intellectuals sweeping through the city's social sphere like you used to. I guess I'm wondering, are interesting people disappearing and being replaced by boring ones? As a spokesman, I'm only qualified to speak for myself. But what I am and have always been interested in are people at night. Not in the daytime.

You're not interested in anyone who's awake in the morning?

I'm not entertaining in the morning. I don't even exist in the morning. I stay up late—until 4am or 5am. The reason is that I'm an insomniac, so I go out every night. Last night I went to a film screening downtown and then out to dinner. I like having dinner at bars. Some nights I'll go across the street to the Regency because I can sit at the bar and have dinner watching a ball game on the TV. But most nights I go out and see a lot of people.





So what time do you wake up?

Well, I get up at 7.30am to walk the dogs. My wife is 83, and I'm 85. We've been married since 1959, and we've always had the same dogs. Not the same exact dogs, but the same kind. We've had 15 dogs and they all look alike. They're Australian terriers, about the size of a fat loaf of bread. We have a little greenhouse attached to the back of the house, and they go out there and take a leak. I pick up the two newspapers—the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. I put the dogs in bed with my wife, who's still sleeping, I close the door, and I have an hour of quietude to read the two papers and have a cup of coffee. No

they tend to be very introverted characters with reasonable bedtimes.

Writers are usually solitary people. They work as silent communicators because they deal in words on paper. Joan Didion, Philip Roth, or JD Salinger are more reclusive examples. But there are non-typical types of public guys like Ernest Hemmingway, Tom Wolfe, or Norman Mailer. I am a public person. I like meeting strangers. I like seeing how people who I don't know live in ways that I find novel. I am not a novelist. I find storytelling in a reality mode to be much more interesting than if I created something from my imagination. You have to have an intense curiosity to get into



one's around and the phone isn't ringing. And then I go back to bed and don't wake up again until 1pm. The best hours of sleep I get are between 9am and noon.

You write in the afternoon?

Yes, that's when I go down into the 'Bunker', which is my little private office underneath the house. You access it by going out the front door and down to the street. It has a separate entrance. I work down there until 6pm or 6.30pm, and then I want to go out. Every night I have something to do. And if I don't have something to do, I make something to do.

You're not a homebody. Maybe what's changed is the conception of the writer, because now

the world of other people. And there are no half-steps on reality. I only use real names. The sex book, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, the mafia book, *Honor Thy Father*—everything I've written I've used real names. For my last book, *The Voyeur's Motel*, the hotel proprietor with the fake ventilation panels only gave me permission to use his name after 30 years. It takes patience to get people to give you their name because they have a lot to lose—least of all their privacy. Maybe because they are doing something naughty. It took me seven years to get the mafia guy on record. The adulterous couple in *Thy Neighbor's Wife* took 10.

It must be so frustrating to wait on a good story for the subject to agree, if they ever do.

What do you think it is about you that gets people to open up? Is it your intellect? Your charm? My reputation starts with being honest and not making my subjects into fools. People are not fools in my writing. Many writers make people look like asses and tear them apart.

You're almost trained as a writer to use people with impunity.

I don't do that. I try to find a way to write the truth, but not to do it with a sledgehammer. That requires a good use of language. And it's a wonderful language to use to say honest things with a certain grace or understatement. You can say what you mean with a lyrical line without

So you can let the reader know what you mean without beating your main character up.

And yet, by and large, throughout your career you specialise in unsavoury characters. Absolutely. According to the Supreme Court, I hung out with some of the most obscene people for *Thy Neighbor's Wife*; they were involved in porn, orgies, massage parlours.

I have to tell you, there was a piece written in 1972 in New York magazine called 'An Evening in the Nude with Gay Talese', where you are nude and at one point a woman at this sex club tugs on your penis. This is the same Gay Talese



hurting people. In *The Kingdom and the Power*, for example, where I wrote about the New York Times, I visited Arthur Hays Sulzberger, who was the paper's publisher. I went to visit him in his apartment on Fifth Avenue after he retired. I'm talking to him and a nurse comes down this long hallway with a tray holding a glass of water and a pill. Mr Sulzberger takes the pill and drinks the water. Now the nurse is this beautiful blonde woman with a beautiful body leaning over this elderly man. She turns and walks back down the long hallway, and the old guy is just straining to watch her walk down the hallway. I might as well not have been there, the way he was looking at her. But my way of describing it in the book was that he had an eye for an ankle. I didn't call him an old lecher.

so impeccably dressed in tailored Italian suits. That piece, when it came out, did me a lot of harm. But I believe if you work in non-fiction, to do the work you have to show up. If you're going to write about people living in a nudist colony, you have to live in a nudist colony. You take your clothes off. You hang your three-piece suit up and you don't see it for months. If you don't want to do that, don't write about a nudist colony.

You immerse yourself in the element, that's for sure. But my question for you is, is it ever hard to come back? You live for months and months in a nudist colony in California; can you just put the three-piece suit back on and return to this townhouse without any damage or drag?

apartamento - Gay Talese





I define myself as having a split personality. As a reporter I'm consumed with curiosity. Most reporters are voyeurs who see the imperfections in the world. It's like being an actor who, in order to play the villain, must briefly become the villain. I'm essentially a character actor in the writing world, where I want people to allow me to become their partner or pen pal or copilot. I'm a partner in their privacy. I become a character in their world.

How do you know when you run across someone that would make a good story? Is it a sixth sense? A little itch about their hidden activities? I am drawn to characters that other people

watching and listening to the women spending the afternoon chatting and browsing through the dresses, trying them on, putting them on and taking them off. I was an 11- or 12-year-old kid dusting the cabinets and folding the boxes. I started being an observer, or a voyeur if you wish, of middle-aged women in the middle of the afternoon in a dress shop talking about their lives. So I see minor characters as worthy of attention. Minor characters have given me my best stories even when I'm writing about major characters. When I wrote about Frank Sinatra, when the singer wouldn't talk it was the minor characters who gave me all the insights.



wouldn't be drawn to. The ego satisfaction I get is writing about people who, were it not for me, would never be written about. My ego is in sometimes writing about people who, because I wrote about them, will now get an obituary when they die.

You bring these people out of the margins. Because I am in the margins myself. I can wear terrific suits and have handmade shoes and live in this Manhattan townhouse, but I am still that little boy from Ocean City, New Jersey, south of Atlantic City. I developed my sense of wonder by hanging out in my mother's dress shop. Talese Town Shop catered to overweight women who had money—the wife of the mayor, the wife of the Cadillac dealer. I would be

To this day, I have trouble imagining the pitch you gave your editor at *Esquire*. 'Sinatra won't talk, but I can interview his manager, his mother, and his friend'. What editor in their right mind would say, 'Sounds perfect!' to that idea? I didn't even want to do that piece in the first place. It wasn't my idea. I'd left my job as a reporter for the *New York Times* in 1965 because I wanted to write longer stories and take more time. I didn't want to meet the daily deadline. A monthly magazine like *Esquire* gave me time. The deal I made was that I would write three pieces that I wanted and then I would be assigned three pieces that the editor, Harold Hayes, wanted. He wanted me to do Frank Sinatra, which I thought had already been done by every magazine. But this

was a cover story, and I was going to fly out to LA to talk to him. I got out there, and everything that Harold Hayes told me was going to happen didn't happen. The press agent couldn't deliver the access they promised because Frank Sinatra had a cold and, moreover, had second thoughts. Frank was worried that this CBS special that was being made about him was investigating a rumour that he was connected to the mafia. I was told that Frank would do the interview if his lawyer could see what I wrote before we published it. Deal breaker. I said I couldn't do that. So I told Hayes I could get the hell out of LA and go back to New York or I could stay out here, get a cheaper hotel, and talk to a few people that knew Sinatra. I didn't know what it would amount to.

How did you even know you'd get the people in Frank's circle to talk?

The reason I knew a lot of people is that I was always a restaurant goer. I like going to restaurants and getting to know the owners. I knew the owners of a place called the Daisy on Rodeo Drive not far from the Brown Derby. And the piece starts at the Daisy, standing at a bar with two blondes. Jack Hanson, the owner, who also was a famous designer of women's clothes, had a list of all the customers who were Sinatra's friends and ex-friends. After two weeks, I was getting some great stuff and Hayes told me to stay out there. So I'm still that boy in the store. I always have been.

The Sinatra piece is legendary, and even to this day there's an entire corps of magazine-profile writers trying to copy that style you founded. Why do you think journalism was so strong and subversive in the '60s?

I will tell you what happened. Firstly, what made the '60s a glorious time for non-fiction was that fiction writers joined the group—Normal Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Gore Vidal. They all wrote for *Esquire* under Hayes, which didn't over-edit and gave writers voices. The *New Yorker* would edit you into their style, but *Esquire* would let you go. So we had a lot of freedom. Then what happened is that little by little the tape recorder came into being and infected journalism. That allowed publishers to pay writers less money. If I had done the Sinatra piece in 2015, I wouldn't have flown to LA and got a hotel and car. I would have talked to him for two hours while he was staying at the Pierre before a show at Radio City

Hall. Done. The tape recorder took away the larger, outside world. It reduced the scope of an article to the dimensions of a hotel suite.

It also allows the subject to control the conversation. If someone is taking notes, you don't have control of what they are writing down or catching or observing. But a subject can decide what goes on record in a little black box. That's right. And the celebrity voice is all that matters. The celebrity sells the cover. All magazines these days are movie magazines. Anyway, the recorder took away the art of the magazine article. And writers stopped being paid as much. I was making more money in 1965 and 1966 than writers get paid today. I was also getting my expenses paid even when a piece didn't work out or didn't get printed. I flew out for Natalie Wood, and even though nothing ever came of it they didn't get mad.

In your memoir, *A Writer's Life*, you're very up front about the fact that 80 percent of the stories you've researched never end up getting published. For every voyeur that comes in from the cold for you, there are four subjects you've followed diligently that never reach the printed page. Do those lost years of researching ever infuriate you?

It happens. I bet I couldn't even get that Sinatra piece published today. I wrote an even better piece in 1996 called 'Ali in Havana' about Muhammed Ali. I found out that he couldn't talk, so I again concentrated on the minor characters. When I came back to New York and wrote it up, no magazine would take it. As a writer, you just have to accept rejection.

I want to ask about your relationship with New York. Do you think the city has got better or worse over the years?

I think everything's changed for the better. Or let me say, when I look outside my third-floor front window, the view across the street in 2017 is the exact same as it was in 1957. It's the same damn street. Not one building has changed. Now beyond it, yes, there are 99-storey buildings shooting up into the sky from 57th Street. Now, what about the people? Are they better or worse? Better. I wouldn't live in this city for 60-plus years if I didn't like it.

But what about those darker elements you're attracted to as a writer? Those massage par-





hours you frequented in the '70s? That sordid underbelly of New York has been pretty much scrubbed clean.

Yes, that's pretty much gone. I guess you're right. But you can still find the under-life. There are still hustlers and the homeless. It isn't exactly sanitised. Maybe massage parlours aren't advertising in the *New York Post* anymore, but you can still find the dark side if you're looking for it. And the city is better because people are nicer. I ride the subway a lot. I'm packed into a box of white people, black people, purple people, Wall Street hedge fund people, homeless people—everybody. The whole world is in one car. And they all tolerate each other harmoniously. It's a great, egalitarian city.

Who is your personal tailor in the city?

My local tailor is across the street on 61st Street, the southwest corner, one flight up. L&S. I have things made by him. His name is Sal Cristiano.

Do you go to him frequently? Does he have your measurements memorised?

I go there a lot. I don't gain weight much, so I can keep clothes for a long time and have them altered. He will take an old suit of mine and add suede piping around the collar and along the cuffs to change it. But I also buy things off the rack. There is a guy in Paris named Francesco Smalto who's just terrific.

Do you tend always to wear a three-piece suit?

No, sometimes it's double-breasted, but you have to be careful. You should never wear a double breasted if you're sitting on a stage or on TV.

Because it hangs awkwardly?

Not just that. It gets stuck and sometimes the tie dangles out from below.

We've talked about what you learned from your clothing-merchant parents. I'm curious if anything about being raised Catholic helped you as a writer. Maybe I'm biased because I was raised by Jesuits.

My wife and I were both reared by the Catholic Church. You know what I like is their charity. The church has always been open to the poorest of people, and it gives them a sense of hope. Institutions don't give hope. The government doesn't give hope. Sure, the govern-

ment cleans up a flood once in a while. Steve Bannon was raised Catholic and he's very critical of the church. He says the church is in favour of undocumented immigrants because they fill the pews. If they fill the pews, great, because no one else is giving space to the impoverished. What I don't like about the church—and why my wife and I were married outside of the church—is their restrictions on abortion, and we had abortions on premarital sex, which we certainly had, and in my case on extramarital sex, which I'm not proud of but is hardly a secret because I wrote about it. The church believes in forgiveness. I do too.

Forgiveness is my favourite quality there, too. Do you have any regrets about the lengths you went to in order to research your books?

No. It was all very positive. The women I knew outside of marriage were very enhancing intellectually. It's not about the sex. Sex was never the issue. A lay can be good, but that's never the important part. The big thing about sex is the pillow talk. After sex is the best time to hear stories. When a person has shared their intimacy and trust they open up to you and become great sources of information. They tell you about themselves. They are giving you their stories and enlarging your life. Every extramarital affair is like an education or a trip abroad.