

# Icon

# Gay Talese

He's the arch storyteller, Sinatra profiler and erotic adventurer whose incendiary exposition on America's sexual revolution, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, led to his exile from the literary elite. Now, recently turned 80 and still writing, the man who penned the first chapter of New Journalism tells **Andrew Anthony** about a life that's stranger than fiction

**T**om Wolfe credited him as the founding father of the New Journalism. He wrote what has been called "the greatest men's magazine article of all time". He published a series of bestselling books, and the film rights for one of them sold for a then world-record \$2.5m. Yet Gay Talese is a writer who leaves most British readers blank-faced. Gay? Is that a real name? (Yes.) And how do you pronounce that surname? (It's Taleez.)

Unlike Wolfe and Hunter S Thompson, those renowned renegades of observational reportage, Talese never established a cult audience on this side of the Atlantic. But he played no less a central role in that golden era of journalism in the second half of the 20th century, in which writers went toe-to-toe with their subjects and radically expanded the possibilities of nonfiction prose.

Long before the celebrity interview fell victim to the publicist's death grip, Talese produced exquisitely detailed portraits of the very famous – people such as Frank Sinatra, Peter O'Toole, Joe DiMaggio and Joe Louis. They read like perfectly wrought short stories, complete with memorably poignant scenes and casually revealing dialogue. He also specialised in celebrating underdogs, the failed and the fallen – one of his finest pieces, about the former world heavyweight boxing champion, Floyd Patterson, was simply entitled "The Loser".

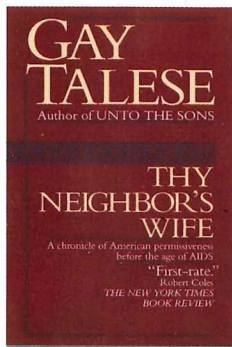
By the mid-Sixties, Talese had established himself as America's foremost magazine writer. And when in 1971 he published *Honor Thy Father*, an unblinking exposé of the Bonanno Mafia family that took seven

years to research and write, he cemented his reputation as a reporter of exceptional dedication and uncommon insight.

He stood right alongside Wolfe at the peak of contemporary non-fiction writing – acclaimed, successful and wealthy. He and his wife, Nan Talese, a well-known literary editor, were one of New York's most glamorous couples, to be found in the starry company of people like Warren Beatty and William Styron. Talese was lined up to take over from Jerzy Kosinski as the president of PEN [the international literary and human rights organisation] in America, a position that would have confirmed his place at the top of literary society. "In terms of stature, I thought I was on the level of any fiction writer," he says like a true New Journalist. "F\*\*\* the novelist. I never thought the novelist was the champion of the world of letters."

But then one day, walking back with his wife to their well-appointed Upper East Side house in Manhattan, he happened to pass a massage parlour. Intrigued, he suggested that they should pay the establishment a visit. His wife declined the offer, but the next day Talese returned and availed himself of one of the young masseuses' dexterous services. Suddenly he had found the subject for his next book – the sexual revolution that was rapidly reshaping America.

It was the beginning of an exhaustive – and, no doubt, exhausting – research process that would make Talese a running joke, transforming his public image from astutely committed writer to a notorious sexual debauchee. The resulting book, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (inset), took the better part of a decade to complete, and although it became a huge bestseller and the film rights sold for \$2.5m, the critical mauling it received, and in particular the mockery that was heaped on Talese, left the author depressed and isolated. While Wolfe consolidated the success of *The Right Stuff* with his >



**Sign of the Times:**  
Gay Talese - the ever  
sharp-suited son of  
an Italian tailor -  
earning his stripes at  
the New York Times  
in the Fifties

**'If you want to  
write about orgies,  
you're not going  
to be in the press  
box keeping  
your distance'**

➤ international hit novel *The Bonfire Of The Vanities*, Talese spent the Eighties in the depths of a midlife crisis from which, in a sense, he has only recently recovered.

**T**he man who welcomes me at the door of his *belle époque* town house, just off Park Avenue, looks in fine health. Physically and sardonically neat, he is far more handsome and dapper than an 80-year-old has any right to appear. He tells me that he visits the gym three times a week and still plays tennis. The son of an Italian tailor in New Jersey, Talese started wearing suits in high school and it's a rare occasion – his swinging days notwithstanding – that he's been seen outside of an immaculate three-piece, which in turn is often capped off with an elegantly tipped hat. The overall effect is as persuasively composed as his meticulously constructed prose.

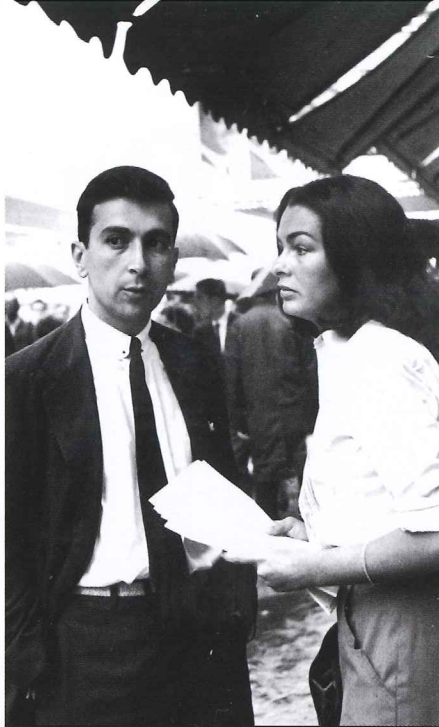
He always dresses in the same high style to go to work, even though his office is located in the basement of the house. He shows me around his home of more than 50 years, and runs through its personal history. Initially it was divided into apartments and he rented two rooms on the first floor, subletting one to his friend Styron, who in turn sublet it to Philip Roth's first wife. Gradually, as his career blossomed, he was able to buy the apartments and return them to one unified house. He now has enough space to have one small room given over to his hat collection.

Though a mediocre student who struggled to attain a university place, Talese was a born journalist with an almost feverish curiosity about other people. He started out as a copyboy at the *New York Times* and wrote his first piece on spec about the man who laid out the electronic news headlines in Times Square. He quickly worked his way up to be one of the paper's main feature writers. But he looked at Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin, who worked on the rival *Herald Tribune*, and he envied the freedom they seemed to enjoy.

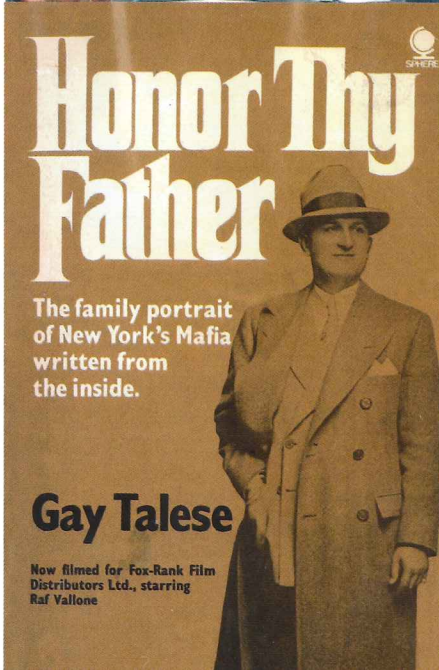
"That's what prompted me to get out of the *New York Times*," he recalls. "I didn't want to work for the paper of record. I didn't want to be a record keeper."

So he joined *Esquire* on contract in 1965, which was then thriving under Harold Hayes, the editor who made the magazine the house journal of New Journalism by commissioning writers like Talese, Wolfe, Terry Southern and Norman Mailer. One of Talese's first assignments was to interview Frank Sinatra. He flew out to Beverly Hills, only to be informed when he got there that the singer had a cold and would be unable to go through with the interview. As he would later write: "Sinatra with a cold is Picasso without paint, Ferrari without fuel."

In fact, Sinatra was worried that Talese was going to write about the great man's Mafia



**A writer's life (clockwise from top left):** Gay Talese on the beat, at a protest march with civil rights and feminist campaigner, and Miss America 1951, Yolande Betbeze; the author with Lauren Bacall at a dinner party for Richard Avedon, 27 September 1993; *Fame And Obscurity* – both of which Talese would experience first hand – a 1970 selection of his works and *The Bridge*, published six years earlier; the writer with former president Harry S Truman, 1963; *Honor Thy Father*, a Mafia exposé that took a 'Sopranos' tack in 1971; heavyweight man of letters Talese with a heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, Havana, 1996



connections, which were then the subject of national controversy. As far as Sinatra and his people were concerned, that was the end of the story. But for Talese, who stuck around Los Angeles for six weeks, it was just the beginning. He set about interviewing everyone he could who had ever met Sinatra, painstakingly assembling a wealth of anecdotes and character assessments. Unbeknownst to the singer, he also stalked him at a nightclub, followed him to a boxing match in Las Vegas and a bar in New York. What emerged from Talese's refusal to accept the collapse of his assignment was a haunting picture of Sinatra's loneliness in a subservient crowd, his caprices and generousities, and the hollow pleasures and resounding burden of his singular kind of fame.

It wasn't cruel or sardonic or superior, nor was it craven or ingratiating. The tone was instead superbly neutral, an omniscient third-person narrator alive to nuance and irony but without Wolfe's tricky hyperbole or Hunter S Thompson's hallucinogenic surrealism. There was no authorial intrusion; just pure craft. In a way, it was old-style reporting, but with such deep focus that Talese seemed somehow to pass through the armoured shell of Sinatra's celebrity and gain access to the inner sanctum of his psyche. And all by watching and asking and listening.

Such was Talese's observational attentiveness some critics began to suspect that he made it up. The whole point of the New Journalism was that it aimed to bring to bear the techniques of fiction – character, description, narrative structure – on the reporting of reality. But the reality that Talese reported was often so rich and satisfying that sceptics suggested he was guilty of invention.

As someone who has always valued accuracy and authenticity, he finds the accusation particularly annoying, not least because it overlooks the long and sometimes laborious work that goes into his research and preparation.

"[Truman] Capote once said that he had total recall," he says, explaining his method. "That's bulls\*\*\*. I don't have total recall but I remember quite well because I listen. This kind of reporting is the art of hanging out."

**I**n the mid-Sixties, he started hanging out with the mobster Bill Bonanno, the son of the legendary New York Mafia boss Joe "Bananas" Bonanno. Slowly, over the years, the younger Bonanno let Talese into his life and shared his secrets and frustrations. The introspective book that Talese drew from the relationship was ahead of its time, more like *The Sopranos* than *The Godfather* in showing the mundane concerns and suburban insecurities of the Mafia men, while not ignoring the violence and paranoia on which the apparent normality rested.

*Time* magazine hailed Talese for his dogged efforts, calling him “the golden retriever of personalised journalism”. But from where could he retrieve his next story? How could he top organised crime? His way of working was to explore large themes through individuals. And in 1971, amid the success of *Honor Thy Father*, he believed that he had identified the ever-enlarging theme of his next book – the dramatic shift in sexual mores that was underway in America; he just needed to find the people who would bring it to life. It wasn’t going to be easy. If many Americans were becoming more liberal in their sexual attitudes, few of them were keen to publicise their private lives in what remained largely a morally and, perhaps more significantly, legally hostile climate.

“Before I started *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, I wanted to write about a massage parlour,” recalls Talese. “I wanted a guy like me, an older guy, who’s getting massaged and then gets masturbated by a young woman of some intelligence. I wanted those two people to be representative of two generations, first in the manual gratification of a jerk-off job, secondly in how this country changed from the Fifties generation – sex is dirty – to the Seventies.”

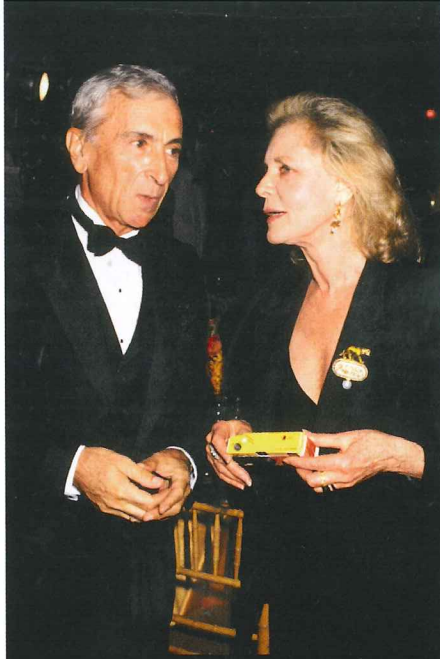
In an essay he wrote entitled “Origins Of A Nonfiction Writer”, Talese acknowledged that one of the attractions of journalism to the journalist is that it can be “diverted into serving any number of hidden personal agendas”. Was Talese using journalistic investigation as an excuse to get his own personal sexual kicks?

“The book gave me the excuse to do those things,” he concedes. “If I didn’t have the book, I’d have no reason. I was a customer getting jerked off but getting these stories. Yes, I’m getting off, 12 seconds of interest on my part – once I came I forgot about it, even forgot about it before I came – but I was interested in the story. I had to pay to get access to the woman. I had to pay to talk to them, but I was a casting director looking for the perfect person. Like if you’re Antonioni and you’re casting for somebody.”

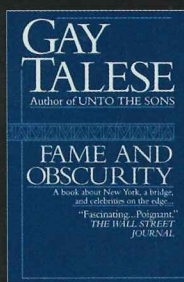
What mattered most to Talese was finding subjects who were prepared to forego anonymity. His principle had always been to write a fiction-like prose with real names – and if his interviewees were not willing to supply their proper identities in print, then they would not make it into the book.

“So many people I cultivated,” he says, shaking his head, “but I could not get people to give me their names. They would agree and then they changed their mind.”

In pursuit of his real-life characters, Talese began running a massage parlour as a day manager and another as a night manager to better understand the workings and personalities of the business. Despite this Method-like commitment to the subject, two years into the



THE BRIDGE  
GAY TALESE



**‘I thought I was on the level of any fiction writer. I never thought the novelist was the champion of the world of letters’**



research process – which is not long for Talese – he had made little headway in terms of the book. But in terms of his own life, he had plunged headlong into sexual experimentation, attending nudist saunas and swingers’ clubs as an active participant.

It was at this point that he agreed to allow Aaron Latham, a young journalist he knew who would later script the film *Urban Cowboy*, write about his forays into New York’s libidinous netherworld. In July 1973, Latham published a long and caustic piece in *New York* magazine entitled “An Evening In The Nude With Gay Talese” which was intent on puncturing the author’s pretensions. Talese was depicted as a vain and lecherous middle-aged man who had taken rather more than professional interest in his research, and was indifferent to the embarrassment he was causing his wife – who was and remains a revered figure in publishing.

Latham described Talese’s cavorting in a nudist spa with a masseuse and a woman he’d picked up at a literary party. At the end of the piece Latham reported that Talese and several others, including the women, went off to partake in an orgy.

The article caused a scandal and in turn generated a media spectacle in which Talese found himself, for the first time in his career, the object of ridicule. He went on TV to protest the charge that he was a “prurient [George] Plimpton”, a participatory journalist who had gone too far, and all in an effort to satisfy his own adulterous appetites.

As he would later put it: “If you want to write about orgies, you’re not going to be in the press box with your little press badge keeping your distance.” But while this may be true, up to a point, there was a sense in which Talese had completely abandoned the press box and had taken, so to speak, to streaking on the ball park. In any case, that was the image that stuck among cultural observers and many of his fellow writers.

“It was humiliating and embarrassing because of my life at that time,” says Talese, still smarting from the obloquy 40 years on. “I had two daughters in school in New York. I had a wife working in the publishing business and I had a reputation as a serious journalist, a serious person, a careful nonfiction writer. And then that article trivialised me. Everything was superseded by the idea that I was a dirty old man who didn’t care what his wife thought.”

Although hurt, Talese was undeterred. He was, however, uncertain how to continue. He had amassed a wealth of material, featuring pornographers, free-love advocates, sexual entrepreneurs and most of the key players who were involved in refashioning America’s post-war moral landscape. More to the point, he had persuaded them to agree to being named. Yet by 1974, despite “many >

# Scene I

## THE DAISY DISCOTHEQUE

Frank Sinatra Profile, 1966 Esquire Mag.

FRANK Sinatra standing at the bar, late at night, pals and two blondes nearby; he is tense, tired - they are aware of this, do not risk irritating him. The stereo, which had been playing rock'n'roll music before, now is playing a Sinatra song. "The Way We Were" but F.S. does not seem to be listening; he talks instead to a blonde, a girl who sits on stool looking at his hands; she looks like a manicured, a little make-up, which F.S. doesn't like - but nothing will really please him anyway tonight; **HE HAS A COLD!**

When F.S. has a cold... his whole world plunges in gloom... maybe that is why his music at this moment seemed to displease him - but it was pleasing the young people who were dancing... I was moved by it - felt that all over America in discotheques or taverns or roadshows, people were dancing to this, slow and sexy, and later, all over America, they would go to bed, make love - thanks, in no small part, to the mood, the mellow mood of F.S. - I myself for years had benefited by his ballads - my whole generation, I thought - owed this man much... TIPPED THE SCOTCH with some girl (in a parked car; in a penthouse; in a village apartment; in an Albany town near Fort Knox) these girls, with songs such as those, here in the mood for love, F.S. had done our wooing -

Yet here, in this Los Angeles tavern, here was the man himself standing looking bored, both-ah. (HE HAD TOLD THEM BEFORE HE DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR HIS OWN RECORDS!)

FRANK WAS IRRITATED by MANY THINGS - The CBS show, coming up NOV. 16; by NBC "Special"; by the film "Assault"; Also, HE DID NOT, I presume, welcome me at this time. HE HAD SO MUCH PUBLICITY - LIFE; LOOK; NEWSWEEK - they'd already been there - "OH TALKED OUT." ALSO, SUSPICIOUS...

The sort of piece I wanted to do required cooperation - and I had great ambitions. I had read almost every article written about him - and they read, with one exception, like talkie copy on his record albums - all the words and pictures, I felt, were embellishments of the cliché - F.S. The Swinger - the Lover; the Tough guy. At 50, battling the Beatles - making his pitch to a new generation; I am a great admirer of F.S. and wished to do an article about this man who, at 50, has done it all - can do whatever he wants. He has money; power; talent. I felt that there was a kind of male love... The barracks... the locker room... a non-homosexual but indefinable male love... **THE MAFIA** - the "Siva Kid" - it is not out work; it is his - he just lets us live in it.

I had seen him, before this night at "The Daisy". I had seen him in person once at Forest Hills; also at Jilly's.

At Jilly's saloon - **IL PADRONE** - he was the boss - a glimpse at him in the back - he was not a kid from the neighborhood, I thought; he brings his neighborhood with him. - FRANK'S MOTHER - **BIG-EYED WOP**

The Italian. I, an Italian-American from New Jersey - would do THE Italian-American from New Jersey.

JANE HONG STORY. THE ALABASTER BIRD story - @@@@

Unsubstantiated - "Lies" "Maunder" "Look" and I felt "Hell with it."

Yet, I felt much was left to be said if I could get to him - but now with his anger - His feeling of mistrust (CBS show); the pressures - I did NOT want to fly out here. BUT THE MAGAZINE 'ESQUIRE' HAD FOR YEARS WANTED A COVER STORY ON Sinatra - and I WAS UNABLE TO TALK HAROLD HAYES OUT OF IT. I DID NOT FULLY TRUST - but if I failed, he would NOT be interested in my foolish excuse about F.S.'s cold - FUCK HAYES...

So - ARRIVE Beverly. Wilshire HOTEL

- a) sexy chambermaids; the TWA stewardess when flying to...
- b) full of hopes - (ride with Sinatra - broods; sex; starts)
- c) Article would be an opportunity to "swing" - have fun.

Yet - Peter Mahoney was saying be careful... Don't talk to him... I saw the situation exactly what I WANTED - BAR; IMPERIAL; NO MIN FARELL TO MAKE FRANK NERVOUS... but FRANK Sinatra had a cold

HE WAS RESTLESS... HE WANDERED INTO THE POOL ROOM OF "THE DAISY"



# Scene II

Mon - NOV 8 NBC Studio (rehearsal)

How's FRANK? ANXIETY; APPREHENSION... NBC'S DWIGHT HENSON WORRIED ABOUT CBS GETTING ALL THE PUBLICITY; ("IT'S A STORM - JIM") Johnny Delgado arrives - People WANDERED OUT TO WATCH "He's Here!" "How is he?" When the lean figure arrived - all expectation. It wasn't FS - IT WAS HIS DOUBLE - DELGADO (ABOUT DELGADO)

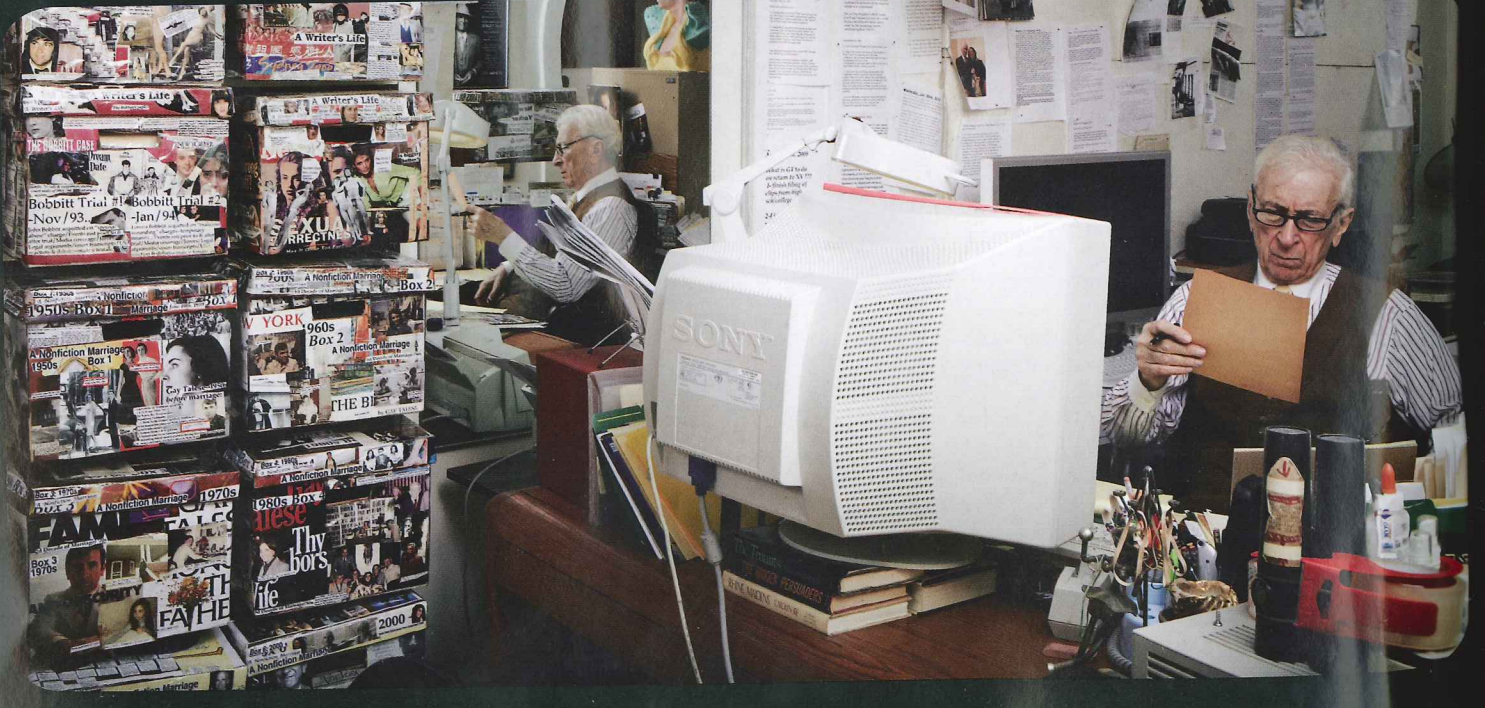
Then FS arrives - and THERE WAS NO DOUBT THIS TIME. SOME THREAT... HE LOOKED AT ORCHESTRA STAFF - IT WAS NOT WHAT HE'D ORDERED. (POUNDS PIANO; MILWA TRIES TO SQUASH HIM) Kilgallon Died (good)

The NBC rehearsal begins - Pucci; Devota; Al Silvani; Delgado; MAHOONEY; HAIR LADY;

SONGS - Dialogue - ANGE - The slow ENDS - FS STANDS OUT... DEVOTA follows with 2ST. "COULDN'T BRINGLES"

## FEAR

- (TUE NOV 9) BACK TO PALM SPRINGS
- THE LONG WAIT IN ABBEVILLE... FRANK'S FEAR... USE GOOD LIPS!
- I AM ANXIOUS - WANT TO SEE PIECE... BUT CAN'T. JIM NOW WANTS TO GET G.T. OUT - FARGAT PLACE - JIM, YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT YOURSELF... FEAR - WHY? HE KNOWS THE STORIES... NO COOPERATION... LOSS... FUCK UPS (YES, BILLY...)
- 1 - I CALL FLOYD PATTERSON (but situation call, is on way to Nassau)
- 2 - CALL NANCY ST - get Nancy to - comes back quickly - cuts off Hen
- 3 - my phone tapped? Recon bugged?
- 4 - ORCHENNY CALLS MONEY ROAD...
- 5 - Pucci's Restaurant - Description: PARTHOLAN - while TRAIING...
- SAT NOV 13
- c) Write note Nancy St - I call what?
- d) Bill Davidson - in town - my...
- e) Warren Couss - usual talk; see...
- f) Pucci restaurant - 1617...
- SUN NOV 14
- 1) RAINY SUNDAY - Beverly Wilshire... STOP WORK I WALK AWAY... BUT... A RAINY DAY AT THE TALKING... THEIR STORIES...
- 2) ...
- 3) ...



# SCENE 6

RECORDING SESSION  
(NO CHOICE - SINGERS - ITALY?)  
NOVNIAN

- = TALK WITH NANCY JUNIOR - Cyprien Restaurant
- = TALK WITH ~~BRAD~~ - SANICOLA - 25-1
- " " (TOUR) - KNAPPY - 25-1
- " " (TOUR) - BRAD DEYTER 25-3
- (FINE LIST)

## NO. 25 RECORDING "Moonlight Sinatra" 25-

- 1) QUOTE ROBIN: DOUGLAS - HOME (see MAGAZINE NOTES)
- 2) VOICE WAS GREAT -
- 3) TALK VICENZO - 25=5
- 4) TALK JOHN LILLIE 26-1
- 5) " PATTY D'AMORE 26-5
- 6) " SANICOLA - 26-7
- 7) " LAZAR (CURSE THE BASTARD) 26-9

NO. 27 - TALK - NANCY 27: 4  
(CHANGE-UPS - ALSO SEE 24-9)  
→ HE'S JUST LIKE ANYBODY ELSE

NO. 28 - PARKING LOT ESCAPE (JIM CANNOLY -) - 28-C  
RECOLLECTIONS OF BRIEF FS TALK 28-2

NO. 29 - NANCY - "His better than anybody else" - 29-4 - REPEAT HADLAW ELLISON

NO. 30 - RETURN TO NEW YORK RECOLLECTIONS - THOUGHTS - NO. 30

NO. 31 - JILLY - FR JR.

NO. 32 - PARENTS + FR. JUNIOR  
• SUM KID?  
• MOTHER GOODWORKS  
• FRANK TAKES AFTER ME  
= FRANK JUNIOR - DAD STEALS PLUMMET

# SCENE IV The Fight LAS VEGAS

- RAIN PAIN
- NO. 18 = BREAKFAST WITH AL SILVANI - HIS THEORY - (HE TERMINED FRANK SINATRA AND THREW FRANK AWAY)
- P. 1 - SILVANI, NANCY, MAILE, GEO PLIMPTON - **grab**
  - P. 2 - SARDS DUNES - UGLY PEOPLE - **grab**
  - P. 3 - NANCY'S TABLETS, LADY DRUNK TRYING TO GET FS
  - P. 4 - "GEORGE" THE BASSIST.
  - P. 5 - JOEY BISHOP CAN'T SIT NEXT TO FS!
  - P. 5 - THE WHORES GATHER (FRANK STAYS UP ALL NIGHT NOT TO LET THEM DOWN!)
  - P. 6 - THE FIGHT - THE COMMON: FIGHT - FIGHT!
  - P. 7 - AFTER FITE - FRANK'S SPEECH - TO ME ---
  - P. 7 - THEY ABANDON FR. - NEW OFF TO OTHER PITS.
    - a) SAMMIRA - DON RICKLES -
    - a. 8. 09 (RICKLES)
    - P. 9 (B) FS LOSSES BLOOD GUMBLING AT SARDS
    - P. 10 - TALK TO JACK INITIATOR
    - P. 11 - ESSAY NOTE - FRANK PUSHES HOUR TO FOLLOW
    - P. 12 - I --- WAR IN - THEY ALL LEAVE; THEY. AT 8PM - I HEAR MARTIN LUTHER KING SINGING

## NO. 19 - ASSAULT ON A QUEEN SCENE 5

Frank Sinatra returns, a DAY LATE, TO LOS ANGELES - RESUMES FILMING "Assault On A Queen" [NO. 19 - P. 6] - ON FOOT WITH URM LILL: = STEVE ROSS! = HEY FAG! - 21-21- = QUICK, QUICK - GET THIS FUCKING PICTURE OVER WITH Anthony Franciosa - NO. 23 P. 2 (HIS VIEWS)

"WHERE'S THE FAT DIRECTOR?" 24-16  
= "LOOK MAGAZINE" - LIKES IT -  
= "DOWNT HIT MY BIRD!" - LILL  
= THE LONG LAST KISS  
= CAGNEY IMITATION P. 13

GEORGE JACOBS. NO. 24. = MY ONLY TALK WITH HIM [24-9]

1. Frank looks through corner eye when d'Alis is G.
2. Frank can sleep in a chair with Toledo... no creases
3. "Shame you leave here, F. will leave here. ... shame you than you know about"
9. Ears blow; dials in chair - etc - etc.

DICK BAKALYAN - AFTER BEING PRACTICALLY A CAPTIVE IN A DRUG STORE AND A HOTEL FOR THE WEEK - WITH LEO DODGING ME AND EVERYWHERE I GO... I FINALLY REACHED WARREN COVARD AFRAND... I FINALLY REACHED A MAN WITH SOME GUTS. NOT AN ENEMY, BUT A FRIEND WHO KNEW FS. HAD BEEN CLOSE... WOULD REVEAL SOMETHING... WE MADE A DATE TO MEET ON THIS TUE, NOV 10... AT DAVEY'S PLACE, BOOTH IN BACK. WOULD I HARM DICK'S CAREER... INTERVIEWED BY MALONEY'S PHONE, BY UNLIT. BY MY OWN NERVOUSNESS. FEAR MALONEY WAS FOLLOWING ME.

16. (PM) CBS SHOW - WATCHED IT AT DICKIE'S B's. MORE DB TALK No. 17

17. INFO - FUCK EVERYBODY - WHY NOT JUST DRIVE OUT TO NBC TO MEET WITH ME? I AM NOT WELCOME. WHAT WILL HAPPEN?  
TRIP TO BURBANK... THOUGHTS - ESSAY OF FRANK THE HOPE... DOV FRANKS...  
DOMINI RISPETTATI... THE SWISS GIVARD AROUND HIM... WE BLESS THEM. SINGS TO HIS OWNERS... JUDICATE AND  
ARRIVE AT NBC = FRANK IS HAPPY! "WE OWN THE WORLD"  
Dialogue; the session ends... BRAD... ON SHOT UP BRAD... SEND A FIST THROUGH THE MAIL - TO DOV HENIT

Sinatra happy (kind) refer to NO. 16 - BRAD NO. 16 - HADLAW KILWA  
NBC SHOW (NOV. 17) NO. 12 - ESSAY (P. 5. outline) JAMES GOODWIN (see 24-9)

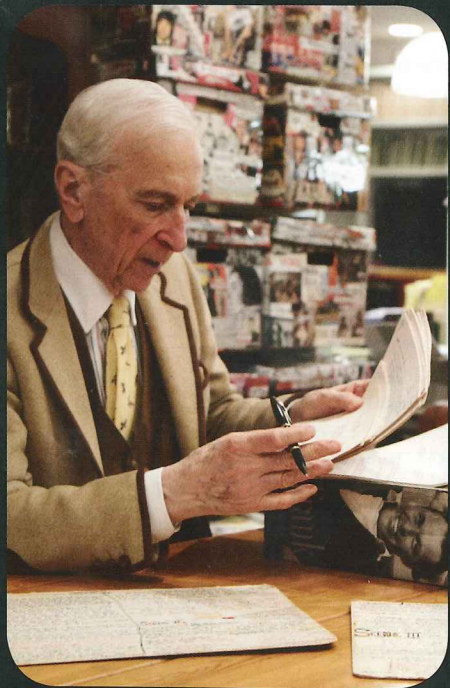
IN DRESSING ROOM (NBC) -  
Q: DOMINI - GET SANDWICH.  
Q: I TALK TO FS - #13 - P. 7  
Q: WE'LL GO TO FIGHT - Yeah, yeah!  
Q: Frank picks PATTERSON - comments

Things are looking up! NO. 12 - P. 7-8, 89

"It is not our world - it is his; he just lets us live in it" - P. 14 in the notes of THE NOTES  
"WHAT DADDY IS, IF WE COULD BOTTLE IT, WE'D REALLY HAVE SOMETHING" - NO. 21 P. 3 - NANCY PA.

BRAD DEYTER - ON FRANK NO. 16  
1. HELE. HE MEANS IT  
2. INSTANTANEOUS DESIRE TO LIVE MOMENT TO LIVE. EXPLOSION...  
3. FS TALK AT JFK - HATE FOR BORDY  
4. MAKE LOVE  
5. DON'T CREDIT HIM  
6. THEN IMITATE HIM  
7. ANGSTISM - ATTRACTS BOTH GOOD + BAD  
8. HE CAN SPOT A PHOENIX (RALLY?)  
9. NO GUILT... NO FEAR  
10. "I'LL KILL FOR HIM"

She/Don Kella - 1 - HE'S NOT ONLY ARTIST - BUT PRECISE BUSINESS MAN - NO. 16 - P. 8 - VICE COMM - NO. 16 - P. 9  
GET ON FRANK - HE KNOWS THE SOUNDS - JIMMY (NO. 20-23)



Photographs Michael Scott Slosar

Me and my shadow: Above: After Sinatra cancelled his interview, Talese followed the singer in secret for six weeks, interviewing those close to him. Pictured here is the outline to his story, scrawled on a shirt board. The result was 1966's 'Frank Sinatra Has A Cold' - dubbed 'the greatest men's magazine article of all time'. From left: the octogenarian at work in the basement study of his New York home of 50 years, surrounded by meticulously kept work from that time



months of pondering behind his typewriter”, as he would admit in *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, “he had been unable to write a single word”.

That confession comes in the final and most startling section of the book, in which Talese writes about himself in the third person at Sandstone, a utopian sexual community located in the Topanga Canyon hills outside of Los Angeles. As Talese stays scrupulously outside the narrative for the first 500 pages of the book, his sudden arrival at the end is disconcerting, and all the more so because he recounts his orgiastic adventures at the commune in the dry tone of a dispassionate reporter, as though he were indeed in the press box rather than performing on the floor in a tumescent tangle of bodies.

Overall, the book, including Talese’s walk-on role, presents a vividly optimistic impression of sexual liberation in all its forms. When Talese began his research in 1971, a strong current of intellectual thought maintained that the ending of sexual repression would usher in a new era of human fulfillment. By the time the book was finally published in 1980, such grand dreams were all but spent. Many previous sympathisers had grown concerned with the sordid side of the sex business, and the early feminism of Betty Dodson (a fellow Sandstone habituée), which preached a “c\*\*t positive” approach to sex, had been replaced by a more antagonistic critique of female sexual exploitation, exemplified by Andrea Dworkin’s anti-pornography movement.

While Talese accepts that *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* captured a moment that had passed, he is reluctant to dwell upon the negative aspects of pornography and the sex industry. He prefers to focus on the emancipatory and enlightening aspects of the experiment.

“I met Alex Comfort [the author of *The Joy Of Sex*] at Sandstone,” he says, “so I did meet

## ‘Everything was superseded by the idea that I was a dirty old man who just didn’t care’

educated people. When I was researching that book, even though I was not liking the publicity, I felt I learned things about myself. I got to like men and feel comfortable with men. How many of us, aside from gay men, actually embrace other men when we’re nude? You know it can be done with a great deal of comfort and real fraternal feelings and that’s what I got out of living as a nudist at Sandstone. I became friends with new people to the point when you can actually kiss a man on the mouth and have your arms around him and genuinely feel fondness. You don’t have to have blow jobs and anal sex. If they want to that’s fine. I wasn’t inclined that way and the men I chose might have been inclined but not with me. But it didn’t inhibit us. For an Italian tailor’s son this was new stuff for me, believe me. What I discovered was how wonderful it was to feel a male body. Yes, women were there, we were having a foursome or sixsome thanks to the research. It was research but it was also personal. It was both.”

**W**hat of Nan, the woman who had earned the commiseration of Talese’s critics, what did she make of it all? One afternoon at Talese’s house I asked this question and he responded by calling his wife down from upstairs to answer for herself. Like her husband, she is youthfully well-preserved, and also gamine-pretty with a room-warming smile.

The furthest she ever went in joining in Talese’s research, after incessant prompting, was to attend a nudist colony in New Jersey. She found the experience absurd. “I told him, ‘I don’t know why you’re interested, but I’m not interested.’”

“You were interested when I used to call you from an orgy at Sandstone,” Talese butts in.

“I know it,” she says. “He would call me and I would have a picture of him – I don’t know why, I always thought of you with your sneakers on and all these writhing bodies. I thought it was pretty silly.”

Silly or not, the book was an instant bestseller when it was finally published and William

Friedkin was lined up to direct the film, the rights of which had sold for that world-record amount of \$2.5m. None of which pleased Talese. He considered the film money unearned, and as it turned out the infamous financial disaster of *Heaven’s Gate* left *Thy Neighbor’s Wife’s* cinematically stillborn. What really got to him, though, was the manner in which the book was dismissed by critics and frowned upon by literary society.

“I made a lot of money but that was even worse,” he says. “That put me in the trash category. I had to withdraw from PEN, even though PEN is supposed to defend the right of literary freedom, because I’d become too notorious for those pricks. After the book was published, it changed me. I wanted to clean up my act.”

He decided he was going to write a book about the car industry – a subject that seemed safely distant from controversy. “I thought if I had a book on the automobile business,” he explains, “it would get people to forget about the sex business and I would then regain what I had lost.” Then his best friend David Halberstam mentioned that he too was going to write a book on the same topic. The ensuing dispute caused Talese to stop talking to his fellow writer for the next 13 years, though they managed to resurrect their friendship before Halberstam died, with cruel irony, in a car crash.

As it happened, after 18 months of work on the book, Talese decided he wasn’t really interested in cars. He was in despair. He felt his career was over. In the words of his psychiatrist, he had committed “literary suicide”. And he resented the way in which his wife had emerged as the hero of the drama. “She got a lot of wonderful articles about her pegged to the book. She became a public figure as a result of that book – the suffering wife and great editor despite being married to me.”

One day when Nan went off to London on business, Talese decided to disappear to Europe. “I went to Italy with my career in the s\*\*\*pile,” he says. He didn’t want a divorce but he felt that his marriage was finished. In Italy he took up with the young interpreter he employed, an affair that lasted on and off for years, and which, he implies, still continues to this day. He remained based in Italy, researching a book on his ancestors, *Unto The Sons*, for most of the following five years.



**Sketch book:** In his office in 1991, Talese studies the Post-It notes forming an outline chart of his nonfiction book *Unto The Sons* (1992)

**W**hen Talese returned to America and published *Unto The Sons*, he still felt unsettled and excluded. He struggled to re-establish his journalism. At one point, in 1999, having watched a women's football match between America and China, Talese resolved to write about the Chinese player who missed a decisive penalty. So without warning or a commission he flew to China and stayed for five months. The piece never materialised, at least not in print.

Nan's attitude to these sudden departures seems to be the same pragmatic acceptance she has displayed towards Talese's affairs. "I've always loved writers, even at school," she says. "I wanted to live with Gay and he didn't want to get married or have children, so I made sure it wouldn't affect his writing. I think in marriages you either give 100 per cent or it doesn't work. I don't think people change."

Three years ago, the couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. Talese believes the secret of their union is mutual respect. "Love can come and go but respect is what holds people together," he says. "That's the most important thing. It's certainly never sex. Sex is never the issue."

He is currently working on a book about his relationship with Nan, provisionally entitled *A Nonfiction Marriage*. Or he would be if he hadn't been sidetracked by his first love, journalism. Over the past year or two, Talese has begun writing for the *New Yorker*, whose editor, David Remnick, has been an admirer of his work since the *Esquire* days. "He combines the short-story form with the legs of a newspaperman," said Remnick, for whom he has written about the Russian soprano, Marina Poplavskaya, and Tony Bennett's musical liaison with Lady Gaga.

## 'He combines the short-story form with the legs of a newspaperman'

**David Remnick, editor, New Yorker**

When I visited him, he was immersed in a piece on a baseball coach as he prepared to fly across the country to interview the coach's sister. He had no idea what he would bring back from the trip, which could prove to have been a wasted journey. Talese estimates that 80 per cent of his research is barking up the wrong tree, but he contends that it's the only way to find the right tree. His relentless energy shames that of writers half his age.

"What am I writing about in this book? An old guy who was once a young guy, and the same woman," he says, sorting through files in his basement study of his various works in progress. "The problem is if I have a heart attack, it's not going to be any fun to do the book. I'm thinking, what am I doing this thing for the *New Yorker* for – I might be dead. Maybe I'm making the wrong decision, I don't know. But I figure I don't know that I can't do both."

A couple of years ago *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was republished in America, where it is now widely recognised as a modern nonfiction classic. The pall of infamy has finally dispersed from around Talese, leaving only a sharply observant writer in a finely tailored suit. He shows me to the door. It's 7pm. He and Nan have a dinner party to attend and he's ready for his evening Martini. Outside, Manhattan burns with illuminated promise, a city in which hard work and a good story can still find their just reward.

Sinatra, wrote Talese, "makes old men feel young, makes them think that if Frank Sinatra can do it, it can be done; not that they can do it, but it is still nice for other men to know, at 50, that it can be done".

Talese makes young men feel old, but it's still nice to know that, at 80, it can be done. 

# Searching for the perfect escape?

[www.condenastjohansens.com](http://www.condenastjohansens.com)

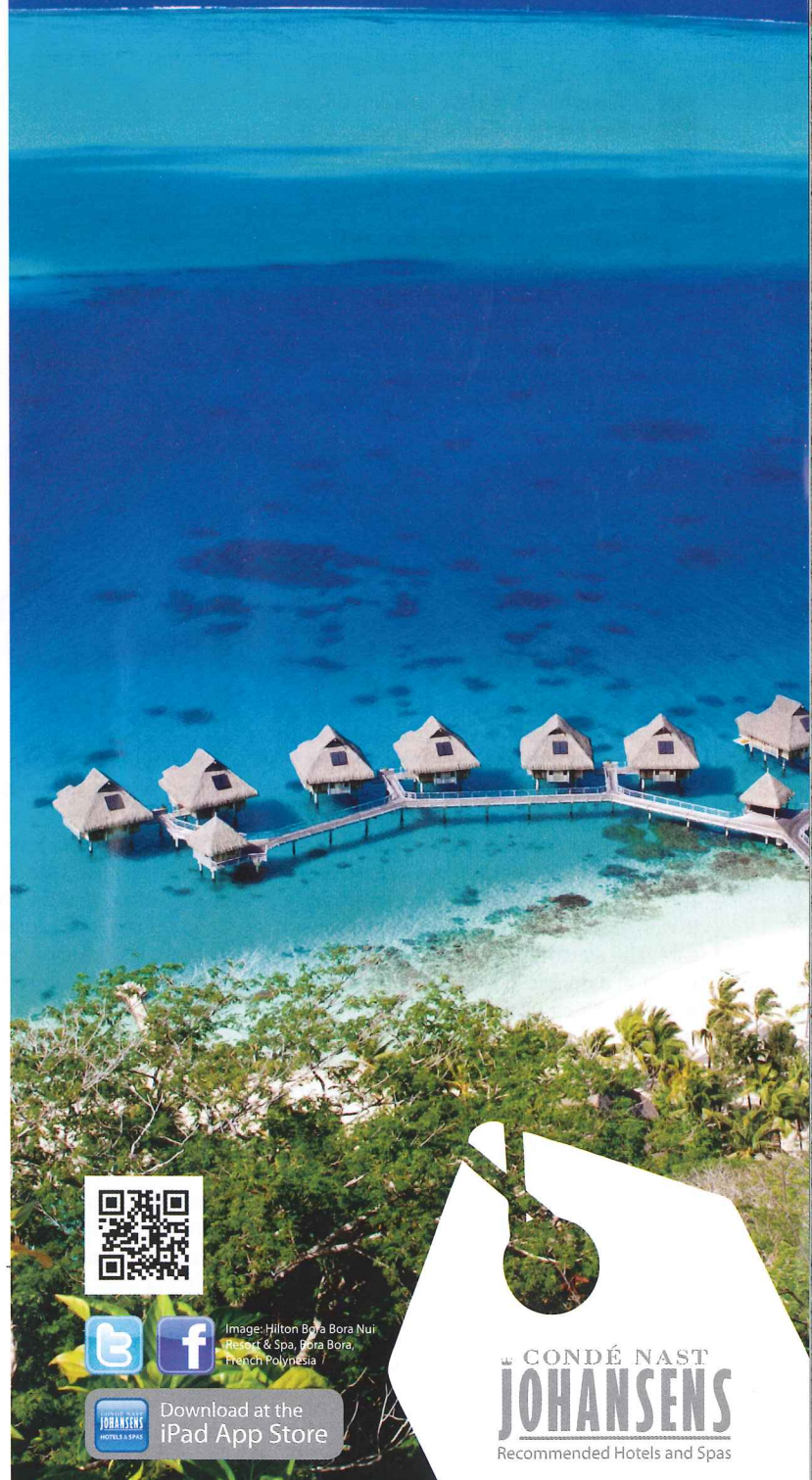


Image: Hilton Bora Bora Nui Resort & Spa, Bora Bora, French Polynesia



Download at the iPad App Store

CONDÉ NAST  
**JOHANSENS**

Recommended Hotels and Spas