



The World According to Breslin

BY JIMMY BRESLIN

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The San Francisco Chronicle

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JIMMY BRESLIN

*Annotated by Michael J. O'Neill
and William Brink*

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Foreword

Jimmy Breslin has created many marvelous characters, from Marvin the Torch and Fat Thomas to Un Occhio, mythical boss of all bosses, capo di tutti capi, but his greatest invention is his own public persona, a character he has developed as skillfully as Potemkin constructed his stone village, a cigar-chomping, hard-drinking character designed to make everyone think he's only an ordinary guy, not very smart or sophisticated, just stumbling through life like a plumber from Queens, living in bars, burdened by racetrack losses and unpaid bills, companion of the poor and near-poor, disdainful of great men and great thoughts, of big words and complex ideas.

It would destroy him if his readers were to discover he is as smart as any pontificating pundit in Washington, one of the shrewdest newspapermen around (a jump ahead of his editors so often that it is embarrassing), a sharp observer of human history who can capture crime's threat to New York in a single sentence, "Dies the victim, dies the city," who can quote Camus or Teilhard de Chardin without losing his stool at Kennedy's, who in a short simple story can tell us more about ourselves than tons of traditional reporting, and who can do this with grace, simplicity, humor, and wisdom.

In a column about a young Puerto Rican who was caught stealing a car, Breslin explained New York's crumbling neighborhoods better than a dozen official reports: "At age eleven, he is part of the permanent underclass of 500,000 males in this city between the ages of ten and twenty-five, all black or His-

panic, the majority of whom never will be able to get a job At least some of them commit crimes and create the fear that makes the permanent underclass the most powerful cause of change ever to appear on the streets of a major city."

At the same time, Breslin finds hope in the ageless struggle of New York's immigrants for a better place in the American sun. Noting that Chinese students at the Bronx High School of Science were suddenly getting more prizes than middle-class Jews who had dominated the competition, he wrote: "It is obvious that the swinging elbow that runs the life of New York is still at work." Who has ever said it better?

Jimmy Breslin is a short, stocky, rumped man with scattered hair and thick eyebrows, who could pass in the dark for Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden, who in fact still looks like the varsity guard he played at John Adams High School, where, in his zeal for study, he took more than the customary four years to graduate. He lived all but a few days of his life in a middle-class section of Queens, speaking its nondescript dialect in lean, grunted sentences to avoid any suspicion he might harbor long thoughts. He forgot to finish college. He was too busy running copy and writing stories for the old Long Island *Press*, going on later to such other newspapers as the *Boston Globe*, *New York Journal-American*, and the *Herald Tribune*.

He wandered away from newspapers from time to time, to write for the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *New York* magazine, or to produce novels. But he was hooked on news, so he always returned, landing finally at the *New York Daily News*, where he became an instant hit with millions of readers and a constant goad for his editors. He not only stalked breaking stories like a terrorist, looking for his own columns, he also worried constantly about how the rest of the paper could do a better job against the opposition. Around seven every morning, he woke up the city desk with a laconic "So, what's doin'?" fishing for column ideas but also zeroing in, for the editor's benefit, on the one news development that would most interest readers in the next day's paper. And then nearly every midnight, after he had seen the first edition with a bad headline or a poorly played story, he woke an editor at home and shouted, "This is awful! You gotta do somethin'!"

He is Irish to his bone marrow, just as combative as any

member of his race, producing an annual list of "People I'm Not Talking To," and conducting numerous feuds with prominent citizens like Bess Myerson and Governor Hugh Carey, whom he dispatched to political oblivion with a series of savage columns about a playboy politician he labeled "Society Carey." He operates on the sound principle that personal quarrels sell numerous newspapers and that, in any case, "the better way is to go through life with the view that no slight, no difference is so small that it cannot be converted into a feud." Including feuds with the editorial page of his employer, the *Daily News*.

With Breslin, it is a matter of professional honor to disagree with the paper's editorials on every possible issue, siding more or less with the IRA on Northern Ireland, for example, and championing the residents of Howard Beach near Kennedy Airport when they fought to prevent landings by the ear-shattering Concorde.

Once, in the Gold Coin bar—we were boycotting Costello's at the time—O'Neill was on his third vodka and tonic and screamed at Breslin, "Why do you have to attack every editorial we ever write? Can't you agree with us just once?" He added, "For the sake of our publisher, if no one else"—not mentioning the angry complaints that kept raining down on him from the eighth-floor command post in the News Building. Well, said Breslin, this was quite out of the question, as it would ruin his reputation completely, and besides, it was in the best interest of both him and the editors to go their separate ways. In this manner, he explained, we were covering all sides of public issues so that the maximum number of readers would be pleased. By this time, O'Neill had had five vodkas while Breslin was still as sober as a church mouse, faking his drinking as usual, ordering spritzers that were so watered down the ice cubes froze them. Consequently, O'Neill suddenly found great logic in what The Great One said and both men agreed to disagree in public for the sake of their readers and tossed down another round for the road.

Breslin's rule about feuds does not apply, however, to ordinary New Yorkers: they are exempt. Like other Irish writers, he feels only compassion for the workingman, the poor, and the downtrodden, a genetic product of centuries of ancestral persecution, perhaps, but reinforced in his case by a childhood

that reads like an act from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. His father was a penniless piano player, an alcoholic who ran away from the family when Breslin was only six, disappearing for more than forty years until he died a pauper's death in Miami. Breslin's mother, forced to go to work to support her young son and younger daughter, Deirdre, taught school for a while but later worked for more than thirty years in the city's welfare department. It was a hard life, with too little joy and too little time for the family, so "she used to drink too much," Breslin remembers, developing furious temper tantrums and terrorizing her children while she was suffering from "the tincture," as Brendan Behan, an authority on tinctures, used to put it.

Breslin said of her: "My mother also could use her temper for something useful. As she had been a substitute English teacher at John Adams High School, she had been thoroughly exposed to that greatest of Queens County usage, *between you and I*. She seethed whenever she heard this. I grew up thinking that to say *between you and I* was an act of treason.

"She also had a hatred for unfairness that was almost as deep as her dislike for *between you and I*. Because of the unfairness creed, she felt most comfortable with the victims of it. Working as a supervisor at Department of Welfare centers, she was mostly with workers who were black, and she reveled in this because she knew that this bothered her own kind. People she worked with came to our house and we went to their houses, although my mother was much happier when they were at our house, because the visits had the added dimension of infuriating others.

"She accepted no compliments and hid anything good she ever did. One day in 1982, I was flying to Los Angeles, and at the trip's end, with people in the aisles to leave the plane, I saw this black woman in a mink coat look at me and begin to push toward me, but as she was too large she was unsuccessful. She tapped a slim white guy dressed in a blazer, who obviously was an assistant. He slid down the aisle to me and said that Graciella Rivera, the opera singer, wanted to talk to me if I had a moment.

"Out in the terminal, I went up to the singer. She said, 'I worked as a clerk in your mother's office. At the Harlem Wel-

fare Center. She is responsible for my career. She encouraged me to keep on with my singing. She made sure that I took the time to study. You should be proud that you had such a mother.'

"Inside, I was saying to myself that I wished it always could have been like this. But then to keep up the front and the family name, I asked the singer, 'How is it going for you?' She said, 'Fine. I am on a concert tour now.' Of course, I then said, touching the mink coat, 'Don't I get something so I can decorate my mother's headstone?' She walked away laughing, and I walked with that hurt and desire to bring back everything and change it. I had never seen nor heard of Graciella Rivera until that day in the aisle in the plane.

"Why did this woman, my mother, thrive on tantrums when she had so much to give?"

As a result of these early experiences or possibly only because it is a common inheritance of the black Irish, Breslin's view of the world is streaked with an indefinable melancholy, mostly about all the people who never seem to get a break—a brooding sense of young lives rotting away amid the splendors of New York, blacks and Hispanics living as neighbors of the rich and powerful but strangers to them, symbols once of the hope Breslin felt when John Kennedy became president but symbols now of his declining faith in the will of the elite or the ability of government to solve the problems of poverty and injustice.

Often, Breslin's anguish over the human waste around him is converted into outrage, an emotion which never erupted more violently than it did during a rail strike in 1983, when commuters went spilling into the subways, complaining about having to mingle with the blue-collar masses they only read about, fearfully expecting every minute to be mugged.

No one can voice the voiceless rage of subway riders better than Breslin. And no reporter—certainly no editor—knows the city's neighborhoods as well as he does, because he is patrolling them all the time, not the way cops do now, in squad cars, but on foot, walking the streets not riding them, because he never learned how to drive, talking to the people, feeling their feelings, fearing their fears, fighting their fights.

For years, his wife Rosemary used to prowls the neighborhoods with him. She was always referred to as "the former

Rosemary Dattolico" in Breslin's columns and she was a powerful force in his life, managing the six children, fixing the plumbing, keeping him dressed, and attempting with only minimal success to reduce the administrative chaos in his personal affairs. In this last respect, she was more effective than our editorial management team at the *News*, where Breslin's finances were so muddled he qualified for presidential designation as a national disaster.

In a little ritual symbolizing the problem, his personal handler at the paper, Anne Marie Caggiano, would appear regularly at our desks and slip a green voucher under our noses. We never looked up, never said a word, just signed our names like robots. Another \$125 advance on expenses for Breslin. As routine as the next deadline for the bulldog edition. Anne Marie shuttled from one editor to another with her vouchers, to disguise the cumulative drain on the editorial budget, but we compared notes; we knew we were being conned. Still, we signed.

The auditors kept protesting that Breslin was a year behind on his expenses, that we shouldn't give him another nickel until he got his accounts in order. But that was a ridiculous idea; the World Bank could solve Argentina's economic crisis easier than it could figure out Breslin's expenses.

Coping with her national disaster, plus six children, was a burden that Rosemary carried with careless ease and sharpened humor. But it made her eager to flee the house whenever she could. "She liked getting away from the kids," is the way Breslin recalls it. "So after dinner, we'd get someone to take care of them and then we'd go out to the Bronx or to Brooklyn on stories. To bars, police stations, and the political clubs. They were fun in those days. When we'd go into a neighborhood, you could hardly get the story you went for because everybody would start telling you all their troubles. With the cops or the sewers or the water. You name it. You had to listen to what was bothering them before you could ask any questions. Finally, late at night, we'd end up at the Copa. Rosemary loved it. It was fun."

The greatest journalists of our time look at the world from the top down. They mingle with the movers and shakers. They feel important because they are with powerful people who ob-

viously know more than anybody else. So they quote presidents and governors and mayors and police commissioners about what is happening in society, what is going on in the neighborhoods they don't live in themselves or have time to visit, and they call this objective reporting. Breslin, on the other hand, looks at the world from the bottom up, through the experiences of ordinary people who are in the news or victims of the news or affected by the news. He sees what is happening where it is happening and out of the actions and emotions of individuals, out of the smells, the sounds, and dialogue of the street, he produces raw slices of reality which help readers see what they do not see themselves and understand what they do not understand. "You get a little picture that reflects the whole," he explains. "You can get readers interested in the life of one guy, and he can reflect the whole life around him. And it's a better picture than the politicians give you."

What Breslin does is called the "New Journalism," which he and Tom Wolfe are credited with inventing in the 1960s when they were writing for the old New York *Herald Tribune*. This departed from the third-person-singular reporting of the time by employing the techniques of the novelist to bring news events alive and kicking into newspapers, with the writer telling his story in narrative form, using vivid descriptions and great gobs of dialogue to provide immediacy and realism.

The idea that he and Wolfe started something new makes Breslin shake with laughter. Although he appreciates his own talent and is a celebrity quickly recognized on any New York street corner, he does not brandish his ego the way many less able journalists do. He still chases a story as fast as a cub reporter, and usually works harder. With editors he respects, he is surprisingly cooperative. So it was typical of him to reject any credit for a new journalism which he said must have been developed about the same time as the typewriter.

"I never thought about how to do a column," he said, recalling when he first started writing pieces based on news rather than sports. "It just came naturally, I guess. It had a point of view and it had to spin right out of the news. Everything of moment demands that it be done that day. Even when a few sentences don't work when you get to the deadline, there is an immediacy that makes the column fresh. Like you were cov-

ering the eighth race at Belmont. But no one was doing it when I started. That's why everyone thought it was new."

In the early days, he remembers covering the sentencing of the crime boss Tony Provenzano, and treating it "like it was a sports event." "Everybody was excited and they put it on the front page. But all I did was show you didn't have to kill the reader. The story could be entertaining. It was nothing new. Capote had written the book *In Cold Blood* but I was copying Westbrook Pegler. I was copying what he was doing in 1934."

He rattled off the names of John O'Hara, John McNulty, Paul Gallico, and Red Smith, and said they had all used similar techniques. But in the early 1960s, at the *Herald Tribune*, he and Wolfe were an instant success. "We were ahead of everybody in bringing back the past," he said. Hundreds of young writers followed their lead—a few brilliantly, most in only clumsy imitation—and the "New Journalism" movement was firmly established in the nation. It quickly produced a number of offspring, including "personal journalism" and "advocacy journalism." It also kicked off two decades of controversy because it violated the sanctity of such long-held beliefs that only the objectivity of a eunuch and the most impersonal kind of reporting can lead the public to the trough of truth.

Many of journalism's failures—coverage of Joe McCarthy, for example—testify to the tricks that objectivity can play with reality. And yet the clichés linger on in the trade and the prejudices against the New Journalism remain strong. So when we nominated Breslin for a 1982 Pulitzer, we knew it was a futile gesture; the Pulitzer juries convene every year in a spirit of solemn conformity, resolved to reward the conventional act rather than the individual exception. Breslin got the Meyer Berger award once and the Sigma Delta Chi award but not the Pulitzer, which would have been an affront to tradition. And every time there was any kind of ruckus in our profession, we would get calls from suspicious young journalists, without an ounce of Breslin's talent or class, demanding to know why we let him make up characters and commit all kinds of other crimes. Exasperated, we would say that in more than thirty years in the business we had never seen a better reporter, anyone

quicker to spot a story and develop the right angle, a harder worker, or a better writer.

Sure, Breslin made up characters, great characters like *Un Occhio*, who was a spoof on a Sicilian don that was so true to life a lot of readers never caught on and the Arizona State Police wrote for more details so they could put out an APB. He once wrote a satire about the Equal Rights Amendment, making up a story about a lesbian conference at an Illinois college. Breslin aficionados immediately spotted the telltale clues to what he was doing, but others did not and a *New York Post* columnist chimed in with a serious commentary. Another time, someone questioned a powerfully realistic column he wrote about a man who had just learned that his cancer had been temporarily cured. What we knew at the paper was that Breslin was really writing about his own wife and his own relief over a brief remission of her disease. In fact, in all the years we worked with Breslin at the *News*, his reporting generally passed muster. Readers got violent about him. Reporters and editors were constantly sniping. The haughty editors of *The New Yorker*, always offended when city grime rubs off on their white gloves, accused him of "sensationalism" and "irresponsibility" in the famous Son of Sam mass murder case. But there have been few successful challenges to the substantive things he has covered. More important, his nonconformist reporting has brought his readers closer to the truths about their society than much of the conventional journalism which his critics so righteously espouse.

It is Breslin's genius to look into the lives of individuals and, like Dickens in another age, discover in their stories the personal problems, the tensions, the fears, the emotions, the shifting opinions that are the harbingers of social change and future crisis.

Although Breslin's sympathies have been with the blacks and Hispanics, in his view the true successors of the Irish and Italians as New York's immigrant poor, he has also been sensitive to the feelings of the city's white middle class. Before most reporters or editors caught on to what was happening, his columns revealed the emerging revolt of this middle class against the programs of the Great Society, something which produced

the first receding wave of the civil rights movement and one of the most significant developments of the last decade.

Early in 1977, for example, when Andrew Young fired a charge of racism against Queens, Breslin instantly took the pulse of the neighborhoods, talking first to a man named Lester, who was taking his family to a beach halfway out on Long Island so they wouldn't have to go swimming in the city with blacks. "I could stay right here in Queens and go down to Rockaway Beach, but who wants that? . . ." Lester said. "By the middle of the afternoon you think you're in East Africa."

Breslin then interviewed a cousin of his who watched "The Rockford Files" on television instead of "Roots" and who complained, "A lot of people voted for this Carter because they thought he could keep these people under control, being he was from Georgia . . . Well, I'll tell that Carter something. Nobody in Queens ever let these people get away with things the way Carter does."

Breslin also has caught the fading self-identity and ambiguous impulses of the American Irish. In one column, he lamented that the Saint Patrick's Day Parade "is about all the Irish have left to indicate where they are from" because they had deserted their poetry and knew little about "death on the crumbling streets of Northern Ireland." At the time of Mayor Daley's death in Chicago, he wrote: "For as they prayed over the body of Richard J. Daley, the immigration of the Irish to this country officially ended . . . Dick Daley, the last boss, took the meaning with him into the ground."

No less than the Irish, the Italians of New York have been captured with brilliant fidelity in Breslin's typewriter. Even with Governor Cuomo's election, no ethnic group in the city considers itself less honored or less appreciated, more deprived of power, than the Italians. And Breslin said everything they felt in a column about an Italian FBI agent named Joseph Pistone who had gone undercover to help convict mobsters in the Bonanno crime family—who testified "for all the people who arise at seven in the morning to go to work for a living and bring to the life of this country the special warmth and gentle humor that goes with their vowels . . ."

The ability to express the innermost feelings of his neighbors, no matter how diverse, constantly surprises his readers,

making them say, "Yeah, that's right; that's the way it is," and producing what Aristotle called "the joy of recognition." As a result, Breslin is the champion feature in the *Daily News*. Admired or hated, he regularly leads the reader surveys, topping even such powerhouse columnists as Ann Landers and, in the ultimate testimony to success in America, producing revenue for his employer by selling thousands of newspapers.

How all this is accomplished is a never-ending wonder even to the crisis-hardened editors who regularly handle his column. While we were at the *News* their ulcers would flare in unison every night that Breslin was writing, just after 5:00 P.M. when the last stories of the day were being rushed down to the composing room for the first edition. As usual, the first take of Breslin's copy still had not appeared. Stabs of pain and audible groans would spread rapidly through the editorial ranks, from the city desk to the news desk to the copy desk, finally reaching Brink, the managing editor, who was under heavy pressure to close the edition on time to please the circulation department and the publisher.

"Any sign of Breslin yet?" Brink would cry, as the old four-sided clock over the city desk clacked its way to 5:30 P.M., the final copy deadline. "None," was the invariable reply. For at that same moment, in a far-off corner of the seventh floor, the great man was still mugging his typewriter with his stubby fingers, painfully writing, rewriting, and polishing the first paragraphs of his column, engulfed by coffee-smeared notes and dozens of crumpled false starts, with an anxious copyperson hovering over him, waiting to rush the first take to the news desk. The rest of the staff didn't need this human delivery system because they wrote directly into the computers; Breslin did because he rejected computers as deportable aliens.

Finally, with most of the news desk crew already in the composing room, the first page would arrive with more potholes in it than a South Bronx street, full of changes, cross-outs, and revisions, but with the words somehow tracking. Other takes would come flying in with the breathless copyperson and, somehow, they would all get into the paper, usually the last copy on the edition, later even than last-minute sports results. On a few occasions, when Breslin was outrageously late, Brink simply choked off the flow and his column appeared in the first

edition in a decapitated condition. This was always a terrible blow to a perfectionist like Breslin, making him inconsolable but, at the same time, inspiring speedier future performances.

To Breslin, every word, every sentence he writes is what marble was to Michelangelo, something to be sculpted with love and care. Like Yeats, he makes the reader think he writes his columns as easily as he spills drinks in a bar. Yet he fusses endlessly with his ideas. He chews them over with people he meets. He probes for the reactions of editors and accepts their suggestions faster than many less talented reporters, although he regards "somebody else's hand on my work as an attack on my person." He labors furiously to get just the right nuances of expression and the most effective story structure. He shapes the language with affection and is so fanatical about good grammar that he won't even plunge an adverb into the middle of a predicate. This is something he learned from the Sisters of Saint Joseph at the Saint Benedict Joseph Labre grammar school. "The nuns taught us two things," he said, "fear of sex and fear of 'you and I.' "

The end result of the enormous effort Breslin puts into his writing is a style that is very pure, a little like Hemingway's prose, marching along in a natural narrative cadence. Real people, their experiences, and their conversations do most of the work of communication with the reader. But Breslin adds his own special spices—irony, humor, and surprising insight, producing in the process some memorable expressions.

He observed that "gangsters, just like politicians, have yet to find anything that is too small to steal." Because suburban commuters take city services without paying for them, he called them "white welfare." Seeing some familiar-looking soup lines in Paris, he said "it showed that any evil in New York is a communicable disease." A senator stupid enough to vote against a woman justice for the Supreme Court, he said, "is a man asking to have a musical comedy written about him." He wrote that Irish-Americans had lost their ethnic identity because they had taken on "the shopping-center faces" of true Americans. In a piece about Marvin the Torch, he explained that "the place went up like an exception to a test ban treaty." In a sentence that said books about a whole American generation, he wrote that in the case of his mother-in-law, "the Depression arranged

all of her life," and explained why she rummaged through grocery stores frantically looking for bargains, lecturing Breslin, "You're cheaper off if you do it my way."

Stories about his mother-in-law, his family, and his personal problems have inspired some of Breslin's finest humor. While his columns about the city are honed with a fine sardonic wit, his tales of personal woe reveal a fuller, more classic kind of humor. They cut to the core of human experience like all great humor, bordering on sadness or tragedy, instantly recognized by every reader as part of the perverse nature we all share. In one gem, Breslin sees a television commercial about a man having a heart attack and suddenly feels all the symptoms, screaming out in the middle of the night, "I'll never take another drink, or smoke another cigar," and concluding by morning that "I had only minutes to go." In another winner, he seized on an announcement that Mayor Koch and City Council President Carol Bellamy, both bachelors, would dearly like to have some children. "When these stories reach my house at night, I read them with the eye of a criminal," Breslin wrote.

Breslin was coping alone and incompetently with family matters because Rosemary had finally died of her cancer in June of 1981. It was the worst thing that ever happened to him, and for months he was in emotional turmoil. In September 1982, however, he was rescued by Ronnie Eldridge, a well-known and politically active New Yorker who was also a widow. Although the *Times* business section missed the story, their marriage was one of the year's most celebrated corporate mergers, bringing together nine children, the Catholic and Jewish religions, several different life-styles, the mutually hostile cultures of Queens and Manhattan's Upper West Side, and two mothers-in-law. It was supposed to be one big, joyous family, a milestone in the ecumenical movement, but it fell a trifle short of these ideals, as the head of household confessed in a column about the refusal of the children to share in each other's celebration of Christmas and Hanukkah.

It was a column full of poignant humor, illuminating a serious contemporary problem with almost cruel realism, doing it in a way every reader could feel personally. The Breslin children were used to the public exposure of their private lives but the Eldridge children were not. They reacted with anger

and tears, creating new stresses in the extended family. Breslin sighed. "The trouble was," he said, "the column was true."

In the final analysis, this is what matters most about Breslin's work. That so much of what he says is true. That we discover in his columns so much about ourselves and about our society, that we seem closer to neighbors who are strangers and a little less confused about the world which surrounds and threatens us. It is Breslin's private hope that in future generations, when the words of the politicians and the traditional reporting of his colleagues have been forgotten, people will look back on what he has written and say, yes, this truly was the way it was during his time.

His hope deserves fulfillment.

—Michael J. O'Neill