



Acclaimed New York journalist discusses 'Tabloid City' and print journalism in the internet age

BY JOHN ESPOSITO

NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM

Best-selling author and prolific journalist, Pete Hamill, is for many, the living embodiment of New York City. In a newspaper career that began with the New York Post in 1960, he has chronicled the life of New Yorkers more than any writer of his generation. Mr. Hamill recently spoke with freelance writer, John Esposito, regarding his latest novel, 'Tabloid City' (278 pp. Little, Brown and Company; \$26.99) and the future of print journalism in the internet age.

Q. 'Tabloid City' is not by any means exclusively a book about the newspaper industry, but your fictional newspaper, the New York World, certainly does serve as a center piece for the story. This is your eleventh novel, many of which are set in New York. Why did you decide to write this book?

A. Well, there are always complicated reasons for writing any novel. You're going to spend a year or two years with all these people in our head. I would never write a novel about Hitler. I don't want to have him in my head for the time it takes to write. But, obviously, the shrinking of the newspaper business, which is sometimes literal where the page sizes get smaller and the news hole gets smaller and the fact that some of them are going out of business and then the transition that is underway to internet journalism about which I know much more now than I did ten years ago, which has a kind of inevitability to it. So, I was thinking a couple of years ago about what we lose as a result of that. Not just we the readers of papers, but also the people that make them, the sense of collaboration that comes from working in a city room and bumping into some guy at the water fountain from the Sports Department who has a great idea for a Cityside column, the culture of the newsroom, in a way, which as you know there is chapter near the end where they have a kind of wake for the printed paper.

So that was on my mind, but, also what I wanted was to do a novel that was not just that. I didn't want to do a novel that was only a lament for the newspaper business. I wanted a newspaper, a fictional, imagined newspaper to be a sort of framing device for the novel in which the kinds of people that end up in newspapers are also part of the story. It's not that I am in any way suggesting that they will be lost from the coverage in the future if there are no newspapers, but I wanted it to have that kind of feeling, that the novel itself was a kind of tabloid newspaper, but with the things you can't do in journalism. You can't get inside the head of a person. People tell you some things, but people lie, too!

But to go deal with those kind of people, people that could be part of short features and people who could be page one for four days, in the case of the jihadist, and to bring them into some life that maybe is not possible to do. So, it was a complicated ambition for a fairly simple novel because the other thing that is a result of what I was trying to do, I had to pare down the stories, almost tabloid style to keep it moving, to say that every newspaper is put out against the pressure of space, but also the pressure of time.

Q. Is that why you confined it to approximately a 24 hour time span?

A. Yes and I realize it is just suggesting the density of life in a city the size of this one.

Q. I made a note that the Merriam-Webster definition of "tabloid" means compressed or condensed into small scope. It is also defined as stories of violence, crime or scandal presented in a sensational manner.

A. You know it's interesting if you read the old bound volumes of some of the tabloids, which I did over the years. In 1919, Captain (Joseph) Patterson created and published the Daily News, the first tabloid newspaper in the United States. There were several in London, which he had seen, and said this would work even better in New York because people could read them on subways. At the beginning they were sort of stiff, but then they got witty and they got saucy and they got funny and all that, but the reporting was straightforward. It didn't hype the stories. They knew if they had the reporting on the story, whether it was a murder or a scandal of some kind, if they got the reporting, all they had to do

was tell the story. After the first couple of years the headlines were much like we are use to now. When I was a kid, somebody in the Post said to me, "If you got the story, tell it. If you don't have the story, write it." And that's what they did, so what we often confuse the work with now is the supermarket tabloids, which is taking the standards of the old-fashioned gossip column and putting it on Page Three.

Q. That's very true.

A. The tabloid that I worked for had Murray Kempton on it, Nora Ephron, Mary McGrory and this was the top of class, writing for the tabloids. They weren't people who would spend much of their lives worrying about Lindsay Lohan.

Q. It's no secret to anyone familiar with your work, especially those who have read Downtown My Manhattan and A Drinking Life that you are very proud of your early days with the Post and the camaraderie you had with your fellow journalists and photographers, such as Louis Liotta and Arty Pomerantz. And particularly, your editor.....

A. Paul Sann.

Q. When you write about those early years with fondness, there appears to be almost a romantic quality to what went on inside the city room, like the hammering of typewriter keys in profusion as rewrite men rushed to meet deadlines; rough language, lots of smoking with cigarette butts littering the floor without much thought. This relationship you had with your peers seemed to have carried over to places like the Lion's Head or P.J. Clarke's.

A. And that's where someone like me, because remember, I never went to Journalism School or anything like that, so part of my education in the business happened in the saloons. We'd go to some place near the paper, waiting for the first edition to come up, which would be forty-five minutes after we arrived, then there'd be a critique of the paper saying, "Look at this g--damn stupid lead or something," including stuff that I wrote. That was essential to my education as a newspaper man.

Q. Do you think any of this resonates with students who want to be journalists? I want to believe it has to, in some way or another.

A. I think it does. I don't teach a class at NYU, but I'm a kind of drifter. I freehand and I drop in to other classes and talk to these kids. A lot of it is about craft and a lot of it is about the lessons I learned long ago, across a bar in a place before nobody heard of a computer. And what I'm getting from these kids is passion. They want to do this. They don't want to do crap or junk or anything like that. They want to do the best kind of possible journalism and if that means doing it on the internet, then we have to be optimistic about that because that's where some of it is going to go.

Q. Please provide our readers with a little glimpse of what 'Tabloid City' is about?

A. What it's fundamentally about is loneliness. I use a line somewhere in there where I heard from somebody, "You are who you are when you're alone," and New York City, all the years I've been a newspaper man, one of the things that drives people to commit crime, to kill themselves, to marry the wrong people, do all the same g--damn stupid thing or drink themselves to death, is the sense of loneliness and the inability to make something positive out of solitude. And I get into that somewhere, I hope fairly consistent without turning this into an essay. It's not an essay with humans wandering around. But that is the first thing that it's about. Then, just to describe the structure and what goes on in this twenty-four hour period, is that at night, fairly late, there is a double homicide at a good address in Greenwich Village. The dream story for tabloids always was murder at a good address! When you're cynical, you'd sit around saying, "Holy s---t, we need a good murder at a good address." And so there's a double one, including a rich woman and a black woman who is married to an older cop who's been around and is a member of the Joint Terrorism Task Force. But as the night goes on and we try to figure out who did this and why and all that, the story line, it's not a conventional story, it's not a conventional novel in the sense that you follow one or two characters through an entire book and they are ultimately very different at the end of the book from what they were at the beginning. That's the basic sort of arc of a novel. Here, I was more interested in the small collisions that go on among people, the small moments, the kind of thing you might see for three seconds walking down 14th Street at high noon. For example, a young guy in a wheelchair, which I have in the novel, without knowing who he is or why he's in the wheelchair....

Q. Josh Thompson.

A. Yes. And he is an Iraqi veteran who lost his legs and his family and everything else in Iraq and you don't know that passing a person like that in the street, but it happens every single day of our lives as we wander around here. And the kind of people who work at night, including newspapermen and the woman cartoonist who works all night over in Brooklyn. There are a number of different characters, but they all are somehow connected because of the fact of living in New York and because I wanted them to be connected! So there's a Mexican woman who lives in Sunset Park who's lost her job. Her old boss (Lew Forrest) from Mexico is now in a Chelsea Hotel and he's got macular degeneration, the

worst possible thing that could happen to a painter. It happened to Degas. It happened to David Levine just a couple of years ago. And I once lived in the Chelsea and know it fairly well and I wanted to get that in. He was from Brooklyn and went to Paris on the G.I. Bill and had a different life than his father did. Now that sense was true of me, too, so in certain ways, these are all aspects of the author, the things that I knew.

Q. I was planning on making that very same observation, but you said it before I could. Perhaps even more than the painter, Lew Forrest, the strongest comparison to Pete Hamill, the newspaper man can be found in your central character, Sam Briscoe, the editor-in-chief of New York World. While not completely joined at the hip, the ties between the two of you are certainly evident. You served as the editor-in-chief of both the New York Post and the New York Daily News. But getting back to Lew Forrest, you both studied abroad, thanks to the G.I. Bill, but in different countries.

A. I didn't go to Paris.

Q. But you went to Mexico to pursue a painting career.

A. Exactly.

Q. There are additional composites of you found in two other characters in the story. The cartoonist, Beverly Starr, aspired to be a cartoonist much like you. And then there is Bobby Fonseca, the young reporter from the World, who is hungry with ambition, which is reminiscent of your own work ethic during the early years at the Post.

A. There are dozens of kids like him right now, and what they are most afraid of is that they will go in and have just a taste of the newspapers and then it will collapse. Like walking on ice all the time.

Q. I presume that over the years, you knew people who were similar to Helen Loomis, the aging consummate professional, who has bouts of loneliness and worry over the future. There is an wistful scene where she looks out at ghosts in the city room – at those former colleagues from long ago who made a difference in her life and career. You have to feel for that person.

A. Oh yeah. She's one part of the heart of the whole paper, more so than Sam is. They are both connected to each other from the past. They were young at the same time, working on papers in a world that's already vanished.

Q. Tell me about the cover photo on the book, which I found intriguing. I noticed the street scene has seven pedestrians - five men and two women. Two of the men are speaking on their cell phones, a third may be looking at a text message, I can't tell. But most interesting is that only two of the individuals are in clear focus. The remaining five people are blurred. Do you have any idea if this was done for a particular reason? I'm trying to play junior detective here. Aside from that critique, I believe that when anyone picks up the book for the very first time, their eyes are going to gravitate to the attractive woman in the red dress with the high heels, who seems...

A. Remember the old Ray Charles song? “--- girl with the red dress on...”

Q. Certainly. “What'd I Say,” that's a great song Ray Charles. Did you have any input into the photo that Little, Brown decided to use?

A. I did not. I've done now seven books for Little, Brown. You know the process is sort of intimate, including copy editing and all that. I did have some input earlier. They did say, “Gee, we're not sure about the title because people think it's about a supermarket tabloid or something, or something raunchy, in-your-face kind of a title.” And I said, “That's up to the way you design the cover.” You don't have to do screaming headlines on the cover. You could do it some other way and have a generic street scene of some kind that would represent many possibilities. And I don't even know who did this photograph. When I saw it I said, “That's great!”

Q. When your best-selling memoir, *A Drinking Life* came out in the mid 1990's, I saw you on the Charlie Rose show. I recall him asking you about the cover photo of that book as well. It's also a street scene.

A. There's a guy that looks like Dean Rusk in that photograph.

Q. Oh really! I'll have to check it out.

A. But I think what happens is the art directors, in both cases, probably ask to see photographs that said New York City in a fresh way, without the Empire State Building, Times Square, and somehow this connected very much to Sam waiting for his meeting with the publisher, you know, on Third Avenue. Clarke's is to the left. The EI used to be there and there are people stopping to pick up a paper here or there. I think that's what must have caught the eye of an art director who had read the book. Because sometimes they don't have enough time. They know roughly what the book is about and where it's set and they come up with covers without having read the book. What I love about Little, Brown is that they care about the craft.

Q. I'm sure that's very gratifying to you and any writer in their stable.

A. They have this back office in Boston, so when I start touring around, I'm insisting on going to Boston so I can go to the copy editors and sign books for everybody. They sit down and they say, "You know, you used that adjective on page 139 and here it is page 204 and you're using it again. Do you really want to do that? That kind of stuff! I'm exaggerating, but not only do they catch inconsistencies, but they care about the style that I can make it feel fresh all the way through. A book, you know is read in two or three days and maybe it took you two years to write. And sometimes you forget that you did certain things or you never supplied the punch line. And as I said much earlier, I wanted the thing to feel like a tabloid, like you were reading a tabloid, in a way. When I finished the first draft I probably pared out fifty pages. I tried to keep it lean, but keep it rich somehow. It was an odd task to try to do.

Q. Was it your intention was always to keep the entire span of the story at twenty-four hours?

A. Yeah, always in twenty-four hours. I eliminated one entire character, just because I didn't want it to be twenty-four hours in twenty-four hundred pages! With that many characters, you have to make sure, or I thought this anyway, that if you're moving around among seven or eight characters, you don't want the reader to say, "Wait a minute, now who is this guy?" and then having to thumb back in the book to the last time the character was on stage. What you want is to be able to make it as clear as possible, as soon as possible and to not have great big gaps between them. Dum, dum lose somebody for fifty pages because then you have to start all over again introducing the character. So I was trying to make it as lean as I could and there is some obvious tagging that goes on, as I call it. I didn't have to always remind you who the kid (Josh Thompson) was in the wheelchair. That one is an easy one.

Q. Freddie Wheeler is a peculiar character in the novel. He was fired by Briscoe years earlier.

A. Yeah, the guy writing the gossip column.

Q. How did you devise his character? You probably worked with people who suffered similar fates.

A. Or combinations of stories. Not just people who I had firsthand knowledge of. Irwin Shaw once gave me very good advice 35 years ago. He said, "There is a good story and it's about you. Make it about somebody else. And if it's about somebody else, make it about yourself."

Q. I like that!

A. Because if it's about somebody else and you then put it in the first person, you get a more intimate sense of that story. And if you do it the opposite way, you get a more objective sense. It's very good advice from a master craftsman. I didn't know all these characters. You know, a novel is a work of the imagination and so I combined facets of different people and put them together and to me, they're like individuals now. I don't sit there and say, "That's where so and so talks."

Q. One of the more debatable literary questions down through the years is what qualifies as the definitive New York novel. Some people will argue in favor of such works as 'The Great Gatsby,' 'The Age of Innocence,' 'Invisible Man' and 'Bonfire of the Vanities.' What's your opinion?

A. I answered the question when I was asked one time what's the great New York novel. I said the New York Daily News. I meant the density, if you thought of the bound volumes as all volumes of The Human Comedy like Balzac or something. That's what I meant by it in a way. I think that there is never going to be the great New York novel. There are great New York novels, obviously. But there is never going to be the New York novel because it's a dynamic city that is constantly changing and, you think and finally say, "Gee, I finally understood New York." Then the g--damn place changes the next day! You look up and there's 20,000 Haitians marching across the Brooklyn Bridge and protesting the shooting of a Haitian. You know what I mean?

Q. Absolutely. New York is forever evolving. Nothing ever remains the same.

A. That's why I think that nostalgia and I don't mean sentimentality, but nostalgia, is a common emotion in New York because of the immigrant tradition. There are so many people who came here who couldn't go home again. They came here and they had an ache for the old country, even though that country drove them out of the place and forced them to go to America. But it was still the place where they were once five or six years old, running barefoot in grass, playing. And you hear it in the music and the immigrant radio stations. I hear it from the Chinese guy who plays the twelve-string violin down in the Canal Street subway station. He is playing music full of ache. So, you have that and combine the immigrant thing with the rapidity of change. You go away and your favorite coffee shop when you get back is selling jeans or something. And everybody is scattered to the wind. And you've only been away about a month. So that it's not like certain places that don't change and where you can write great novels of an absolutely different kind. That's why

nobody ever wins the championship of New York novels. Everybody adds a little piece to it.

Q. I would like us to now spend some time speaking about the future of print journalism in our society today. With each month that goes by the outlook seem more dismal. There was a piece in the New York Times about two or three years ago. The Times reporter interviewed several NYU students who were approximately 19 year old journalism majors. The reporter asked them, "When was the last time you went to a store and bought a newspaper to read?" The responses were mostly, "Maybe when I was 13 or 14. I don't really recall." I was stunned to hear that collective response. Maybe, I shouldn't have been.

A. But what I tell these kids is, "You've got to read papers because you're not getting everything yet on the internet that comes to the level of good journalism in a newspaper. It's not there yet.

Q. During the last week in March (2011), the Times started charging online subscriptions rates to access their web site. I believe this was an eventuality and now other newspapers are watching in earnest and taking copious notes to see if the Times model is successful. I think this is a good thing as journalists have to be paid. Two good friends of mine, who are professional people, both are lawyers, said to me that their kids want to become journalists. They want their kids to pursue their dreams and not discourage them, but they're concerned about whether financially, this profession is going to work out for them. You have to be able to earn reasonable wages to put food on the table and provide for your family.

A. Well that's what I mean when I say that I think the internet is getting professionalized. The fact that the Times, the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times are online and the Christian Science Monitor is now only a daily online publication (weekly in print), and now charging for content is essential. This is not a hobby. This is a profession and you can't ask somebody to go to Afghanistan and risk his or her life trying to get the truth about something and not pay them. They can't go there by borrowing some money from Daddy. It's too expensive. You need a secure hotel. You need perhaps a bodyguard. You certainly need a driver who knows where things are and that means you can't do it by just dropping in and hoping for the best. You could still do that in Vietnam.

Q. What was your own experience like in Vietnam? Were things particularly risky where you were living?

A. No. When I went to Vietnam, the Post sent me. So, I was getting paid. But there were some young people who had been sent there by the Army and then took their discharge there and became journalists. So, there were guys who could do that. They knew Saigon well enough to live there and stay alive and they knew where the risky places were and a lot of them had to go there for various reasons. But you can't go to Afghanistan that way. It's dropping into the seventh century, so you have to be very careful and I'm glad they're charging for content.

Q. So am I. It's definitely the only option.

A. I saw some number and I think I used it in one part of 'Tabloid City,' that seventy percent of the cost of putting out a newspaper today is paper, ink and trucks to deliver. That means only thirty percent is for journalism. So if they can make the internet work, just on use, regardless of advertising revenue, which will come if the audience is big enough, but not to depend so heavily on advertising as the American newspaper has depended for the last seventy-five years. Then I think we can still get a high level of journalism. And I think what will happen is there will be – nobody has time to troll through the internet, hour after hour. There will two or three major go-to sites, probably the New York Times in whatever version it is, probably the Wall Street Journal, maybe some new paper. At the moment, there are a lot of specialized sites. There is Politico and TMZ for gossip.

Q. Huffington Post?

A. And Huffington Post, which I think will be getting more professional and start paying its contributors very soon. I think we are going to see the landscape changing fairly rapidly, if this works with the Times.

Q. The hope of many is that somehow print journalism and internet journalism can co-exist so that newspapers don't vanish completely like so many have predicted.

A. Oh that's what I hope, too. When I am in New York, which is most of the time, I read the papers. Sometimes I see a story that I want to save and I go online and print it.

Q. I do the same. It's a way for me to collect and save research.

A. I keep fairly extensive files, which I should start throwing out, but I do it that way and then I look at some other sites, here and there. I look at the Daily Beast and at Truth Dig and a couple of others that have stories that sort of interest me. I don't sit and read the media sites and all that. I read David Carr in the Times and others, but when I'm out of the country, or I'm out of town...when I was in Cleveland, I want to see the New York papers. You know what I mean?

Q. I know exactly what you mean.

A. With so many people moving and having second homes in Florida and Arizona, older people are, I think, more and more looking at the Times and Daily News in Chicago or whatever the home is, so there will be a chance to hold onto certain readers after they go off to retirement or something. So that's why I'm reasonably optimistic, compared to some people. I don't think it's the end of civilization.

Q. It will be a drastic change for many people.

A. Yeah, but I would not be surprised if circulation goes down and the internet version is carrying the paper paper. We'll see.

Q. I want to thank you for this interview. I enjoyed it very much and wish you much success with 'Tabloid City.'

A. Thank you.

John Esposito is a freelance writer who lives in New Providence, New Jersey with his wife and two children.

Excerpt Notes from the Official Pete Hamill Website Biography:

Pete Hamill (born: June 24, 1935) is an American journalist, novelist, essayist, editor and educator. He is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University.

From the beginning, Mr. Hamill has been a generalist, not a specialist. He has written about wars in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Lebanon and Northern Ireland. He covered the urban riots of the 1960s. He has covered local and national politics. He wrote about the New York underclass too, their hopes and ambitions, and sometimes, tragedies. His longer journalistic work has appeared in New York Magazine, the New Yorker, Esquire, Playboy, Rolling Stone, and other periodicals.

He has also written about jazz, rock 'n' roll (winning a 1975 Grammy for Best Liner Notes for Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks"), boxing, baseball, and art.

At different periods (in addition to Barcelona and Dublin), he has lived in Mexico City, San Juan, P.R., Rome, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, N.M. He has always returned to New York.

'Tabloid City' is Pete Hamill's eleventh novel. Other best-sellers include 'Snow in August' and 'Forever.' In addition, he is the author of two short story collections; two memoirs, one of which is the critically acclaimed, 'A Drinking Life'; two collections of his extended journalism, including an extended essay on journalism at the end of the 20th century; two books of nonfiction on the lives of the singer/actor, Frank Sinatra and muralist, Diego Rivera.

Pete Hamill lives in New York City with his wife, the writer Fukiko Aoki. He has two daughters and one grandson.