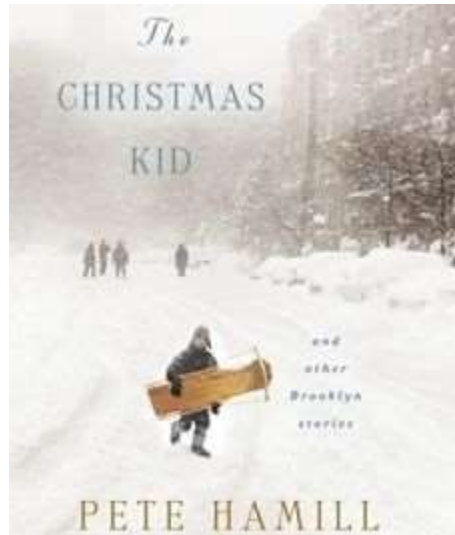


Pete Hamill's Tales from the Old Neighborhood: The Christmas Kid And Other Brooklyn Stories

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Brooklyn born Pete Hamill describes himself as a generalist. Enjoying a distinguished literary career that began in 1960 as a reporter and later a columnist for the New York Post and the New York Daily News, the legendary writer rose to the ranks of editor-in-chief of both tabloids. He was a correspondent for the Saturday Evening Post and briefly worked as a feature writer for the New York Herald Tribune. Along the way, the critically acclaimed journalist became a best-selling author of fiction and nonfiction, an essayist, a screenwriter and an educator. Mr. Hamill's most famous works include *A Drinking Life: A Memoir* (1995), *Snow in August* (1998), *Why Sinatra Matters* (1999), *Forever* (2003), and *Downtown: My Manhattan* (2004). His essays have appeared in *New York Magazine*, the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York Newsday*, the *Village Voice* and other periodicals. Mr. Hamill has written about wars in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Lebanon and Northern Ireland. He has covered murders, fires, World Series, championship boxing, the urban riots of the 1960s, and has written extensively on art, jazz, rock 'n' roll (winning a 1975 Grammy for Best Liner Notes for Bob Dylan's album, *Blood on the Tracks*), immigration and politics. He witnessed the events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath and then wrote about them for the *New York Daily News*.

During his newspaper career, Mr. Hamill published more than one hundred short stories in newspapers, following the example of fiction writers from O. Henry to Alberto Moravia. During his years with the *New York Post*, they appeared as part of a series called *The Eight Million*. It was later during his tenure at the *New York Daily News* in the early 1980s that Mr. Hamill's work became familiar to me. As an aspiring writer at the time, I was an avid reader of his weekly column, and was particularly influenced by a new series of his short stories that were being published in the *Daily News*. These short fiction narratives appeared each Sunday (1982-1984) under the banner, *Tales of New York*.

Raised in the predominantly blue-collar confines of Irvington, New Jersey and attending high school in nearby Newark during the Eisenhower years through the Vietnam era, I identified with the skillful images of these vignettes that captured the white working-class Brooklyn environment of Mr. Hamill's youth (and sometimes the neighboring boroughs), which were similar to my own concrete "hamlet." These tales were richly layered with the textured sounds, places, street jargon and emotions that permeate the urban landscape: candy stores, stickball games, spaldeens, street fights, heroin, drug busts, gangs, neighborhood bars, local book stores, factories, roof tops, music, the

Brooklyn Dodgers, low level wise guys, much of which intertwined with elements of laughter, optimism, conflict, deep sadness, lost love, tragedies and loneliness. I scrupulously saved many of those stories, committing even a few to memory. But following a number of futile attic searches, I must accept that these now yellowed newspaper gems are probably missing forever in the wind. Until only recently, that is.

Pete Hamill's latest offering is his twenty-second book, *The Christmas Kid: And Other Brooklyn Stories* (271 pp. Little, Brown and Co. \$25.99 hardcover; 304 pp. Back Bay Books \$15.00 paperback). This is a short story collection of thirty-six inspired tales, comprised of thirty-three from the *New York Daily News* series, two that were published elsewhere, and one previously unpublished. This book marks his third compilation of short fiction. The earlier collections of stories are *The Invisible City: A New York Sketchbook* (1980) and *Tokyo Sketches* (1992).

At first glance, the collection of Brooklyn tales comprising *The Christmas Kid* appears grounded in nostalgia for a vanished age of lost New York. Do not be misled by the book's title and its enchanting winter wonderland cover of childhood. This is not a warm and fuzzy tome of light-hearted sentimental Christmas tales, although the first story does have a Christmas setting. This book represents outstanding literary fiction at its best, delivered by a master craftsman. Written more than three decades ago, these stories remain fresh as timeless pieces of contemporary life, depicting everyday people through sketches of their childhood awakenings, teenage challenges, middle age blues and supposed golden years.

I spoke with Pete Hamill last month regarding *The Christmas Kid: And Other Brooklyn Stories*, following its latest release in paperback. We also discussed the resurgence of the short story genre, the value of short theatrical films, and his new novel planned for next year.



Q. *The Christmas Kid* is clearly not a book of holiday tales and merriment despite the cover's enchanting winter scene with falling snow, a child carrying his sled and an apartment building looming in the background. These stories reflect the various moods and emotions that people face in the normal course of living a life. The nostalgic quality that comes across in these tales is what is eventually lost in our lives: family, friends and good times. This fatalistic acceptance equates to real nostalgia. It is not mere sentimentality, as you have written about in the past. Although these stories were written more than thirty years ago, they evoke much earlier times of the Depression and World War II, with their overriding themes remaining relevant today.

A. One of the things I was trying to do in this book of stories was explain old Brooklyn to new Brooklyn. I believe these pieces help do that. The kids that have come here and are living in tenements for \$1,800 a month don't know what happened before them. The e-mail and tweets that I have received about this book have been very encouraging because the younger people want to know. I can sense it off my students at New York University Journalism School, who out of curiosity said, 'hey, this guy teaches here' (laughter), and they didn't ever read the *Daily News* in the days these pieces appeared. It's not like history began with me, you know. They want to know who was there before us. When I began to re-read them and say to myself, I wonder if these kids knew what it was like when heroin came around and what a change it made. I wonder if they know what happened when there used to be strikes and now there is no union at all. A lot of these stories are before the blue collar people, the Irish and Italians and working class Jews began to leave. And I have a sense that if you pick up *Homer* or *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina* and you've never read them before, it's a new book. It is something added to your consciousness, and a good thing added to your consciousness. I think you are a better doctor if you read *Madame Bovary*, a better lawyer if you read *Anna Karenina*. It makes you understand that the people you are dealing with are human beings, one at a time, full of doubts and ambiguities, fears and all kinds of things. And I think these stories still had enough of that emotion that the

feelings did not get stale. The neighborhood has changed. In my particular neighborhood, we were lucky because nothing burned down. It's not like East New York or Brownsville where there were terrible fires that burned down a whole block. The buildings are still there, so when I walk those streets I can see who used to live there. They're simultaneous with those who live there now and the world that once was where people lived off the commerce of the port. They were longshoremen. They were operating trucks, loading trucks and taking cargo off ships. All that's gone now, John. The rivers are empty. If Sully, that pilot had landed in the Hudson even ten years ago, he would have run into a freighter. There are no freighters on the River, to speak of. There are pleasure boats, ferries from one point to another point. The thing that made us was that we were a port. That's why I still love going down to the Battery and sit there on an October afternoon. That's where my mother and father on separate ships came to America and gave me my life.

Q. You detail the Battery and the voyage of immigrants so well in your earlier book, *Downtown: My Manhattan*. If not already, it should be required reading alongside *The Christmas Kid* for your NYU students or all New York high school students for that matter.

A. Some of the teachers have recommended the books from time to time.

Q. In the Introduction of the book you mention that most of these Brooklyn tales were written as part of a weekly series published in the *New York Daily News* in the early 1980s. It's interesting that a newspaper would even publish short stories, never mind include them as a regular weekly feature. How was this project conceived? Was it an idea that you floated to the editor?

A. At the *Daily News* it started with a conversation like, 'What are you thinking about?' And I said that I would like to see some real short fiction about people, one at a time. In a newspaper you can get on the train in Brooklyn and by the time you got to work you could digest an entire short story which is why so many papers in the old days used to have them. For example, O. Henry in New York. Most of his short stories appeared in Hearst papers. In Italy, Alberto Moravia's short stories, some of which are masterful, were all from newspapers.

Q. I remember the *Daily News* series of your short stories quite well and looked forward to reading them each Sunday. I had saved a number of them which unfortunately were misplaced over the years. But I keep searching for them. I can actually still recall two or three of my favorites from memory. So when your book was released, I searched to find the few I remembered, but was disappointed to discover they were not included in this collection.

A. That's probably because the stories you refer to took place in Manhattan or that enemy territory of the Yankees, the Bronx (laughter). I think that I am going to do another book because there are about eighty more stories.

Q. I can't conceive of how you had the time to do a weekly column and write more than one hundred short stories over a two year period. That's amazing! I look forward to a second and even third or fourth volume of these stories and you can throw in a few Bronx tales (laughter).

A. Well, I finally ran out and could no longer do it. I became more and more obsessed with making sure there was a story to tell that I hadn't already told. I may have mentioned this in the book, but I keep telling people that in my Brooklyn neighborhood a mixed marriage was a Yankee fan and a Dodger fan (laughter).

Q. I can definitely relate to that based on a few couples I know (laughter).

Q. You have two pages of Dedications in this book, where you thank an array of individuals, many who have quite interesting nicknames from your old Brooklyn neighborhood: Shrovelhead, Howdy Doodie, Boopie Conroy, Hot Dog McGuinness, Icebox McNiff, Pinhead Lupinsky, Downtown Ronnie, Cookie, Blackie the Cop, Nit-Nat DelVecchio and No-Toes Nocera. These names pop out at you like characters in Damon Runyon tales.

A. I kept putting names down and tried to get as many as possible that I could remember with some help. I would call my brothers, Denis and Brian, and we were trying to figure out the names. Some of the names were like, Nit-Nat, because the guy was tongue-tied. No-Toes Nocera was a man who had one foot run over by a trolley car and had no toes on his foot. He was a nice guy.

Q. Were these stories based on real events or completely from your imagination?

A. These fiction pieces came partly from stories I heard from the white working class neighborhood where I grew up. In some cases, because it's fiction, if something was embarrassing, I would try to disguise the identity. I would

change a guy's occupation or take the physical characteristics from a different person, but give him the character of himself. And that is a freedom you have when you are doing fiction that you don't have with journalism because you can't change the guy's identity or explain what he was feeling at two o'clock in the morning. You need to have really close, intimate ties with whoever is telling you the story, so you can get it right. It's amazing, you would go to a wake and everybody is out on the sidewalk smoking and they start to tell stories. Under certain circumstances, people will remember other people through the stories they relate.

Q. Despite the issues that confront the characters in these stories, brought about, in part by the attitude and toughness that exists on the Brooklyn streets, you convey a fundamental decency of the people who lived in these neighborhoods. I think of my own upbringing in an urban environment when I read these stories. It caused me to recall some special memories of people that I knew so well from my past, many who have remained close friends, and sadly those good pals who have since passed on and are missed very much.

A. Including, by the way, as I say in the Introduction, most of these people were decent, including some of the Mob guys and that was not romanticizing them. Woe to the punk who hurt a child or an old person. If the cops didn't find him, the Mob guys would.

Q. There seems to be a renewed interest in short stories by readers today, a resurgence of sorts. And there are more short fiction compilations now being published, such as *The Christmas Kid*. I don't believe that short fiction will unseat novels any time soon, but a recent example is the Canadian author, Alice Munro. In October, she was awarded the prestigious 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. She has written fourteen story collections.

A. And she has never written a novel. After receiving the Nobel she had two on the bestseller lists, which is great for the form. Yes, I do think the short story is due for a revival. This is because of the shortened attention span of people here and in other nations. I would like to see the Internet develop a paid professional go-to site devoted to the short story.

Q. One of the more poignant stories in this collection, *A Poet Long Ago*, has recently been made into a powerful short film. It takes place in present day where Sonny, a sanitation worker, and Malloy, a newspaperman, meet by chance and reminisce about their grammar school days together back in the 1970s Brooklyn. Immediately, an old wound is opened, and through flashbacks we see how the least likely of the pair had an astonishing gift of poetry beaten out of him by a narrow-minded father hell bent on protecting him. I saw the trailer and it looked excellent. You must be delighted.

A. Bob Giraldi is a wonderful movie director who made this short film. (Mr. Giraldi has directed a number of productions including the independent film, *Dinner Rush*, and the music video for Michael Jackson's *Beat It*.) I first saw it a couple of weeks ago in a movie theater in Connecticut.

Q. Mr. Giraldi cast two very good actors in the film, Steve Schirripa, who plays Sonny, and who most people know from the *Sopranos* television program and Boris McGiver, as the newspaperman, with whom I'm not familiar.

A. Neither was I. But it turned out to be exactly what you needed. If he was over familiar to you, it would have distorted the film, to me anyway.

Q. I listened to an interviewer asking Mr. Giraldi if he had considered making it into a full length movie. His response was that he believed the story's length was perfect as a short film.

A. We don't have a regular place in our culture yet for the short films, to the equivalent of short stories. Even if it is something that you watch on the computer. In other words, if you have an iPad, you could watch a story on your way to work riding on the train that would make you maybe see the other people at the job in a different way. Certainly, bosses ought to be doing this to understand that people have complicated lives sometimes.

Q. I understand that you are now at work on a new novel. Can you tell me something about it and when you expect it to be published?

A. Yes, my wife and I are heading off to Europe in mid-December where I intend to finish up working on my new novel. It is set partially in Brooklyn and Sicily. We're going first to Paris for a week or so, then to Palermo, Sicily and also Rome because the great Baroque sculptor, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, is a figure, offstage obviously, in this novel.

And so I am going to look at the Bernini sculptures, some of which are just amazing. What I hope is that if I turn it in sometime in February, then my publisher will decide whether to do it for the summer or bring it out in the fall.

Q. I enjoyed our conversation today and want to thank you very much. I wish you and your entire family a wonderful Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas. Enjoy your trip in Europe and much success with *The Christmas Kid* and your upcoming novel next year.

A. Thank you, John. And you enjoy the holidays too.

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