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Pete Hamill discusses new book, future of newspapers

By John Esposito
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The rich, narrative style and attention to craft that have defined Pete Hamill as a critically acclaimed journalist and best-selling novelist are especially apparent when the subject includes Manhattan. In a recent interview, the author discusses his latest book, "North River" (Little, Brown), New York City love story for adults.

Hamill also shares his views on the present state of flux in the newspaper industry and the future of newspapers.

Q. Let's begin with the title "North River." I find it interesting that you chose to use the original Dutch name for the river rather than calling it the Hudson River as most people refer to it today. I believe it is the southernmost part of the Hudson River.

A. Yes, roughly these days from the Tappan Zee Bridge on down. It obviously had no boundary line in the old days. That's what it was called when I was a kid. It was still common then and I think it began to go away sometime in the late '50s where I didn't hear it much anymore, but I was other places, Florida, and in the Navy. So by the time I got back it was sort of gone. And it's not on the maps. It used to be on all the maps, too.

Q. The story begins in the late morning hours of New Year's Day 1934. A severe snowstorm has gripped New York City. The main character is Dr. James Delaney, a general practitioner. The doctor is summoned in the predawn hours to a nearby Little Italy social club where he treated an old World War I Army buddy, since turned gangster, for multiple gunshot wounds that had been inflicted by a rival mob family. Having now returned home, the sleep-deprived doctor is greeted by a surprise in the vestibule of his house. I would ask that you to pick up the story from here.

A. It's still snowing and he looks up and sees steam, an opaque look in the windows of the vestibule, up one flight of stairs as all those houses were in those days. He goes up to investigate and finds his 3-year-old grandson (Carlos) wrapped in swaddling clothes, in a beat-up stroller parked in there with a note from his daughter (Grace) which explains that she's gone off to find her husband, who she thinks is in Spain. ... He gets a housekeeper to come in through a friend, an Italian woman (Rose Verga) from Sicily,

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from Agrigento, which was (Luigi) Pirandello's home town.

It's a love story for grown-ups. The river, which is frozen at the beginning of the novel because it is a dreadful winter, stands in a way as a kind of metaphor for the guy's life. The ice begins to melt under the influence of this little boy and this Italian woman.

It's a very simple story. I didn't want to write a love story that was about some woman dying of a fatal disease. I wanted it to be a series of small moments that bring us to a rebirth.

Q. It's significant to note that Delaney's troubles and anxiety go beyond that of his missing wife, the sudden appearance of his grandson, a lover, outside pressures from a mob family and even the FBI. The conflict in his life is made all the more severe by the Depression years. Delaney's earnings as a self-employed physician are now so meager that he worries about his capability to provide for little Carlos and the patients who desperately need his care.

A. I did a lot of research into that. I used to live on Horatio Street, but in an apartment house that replaced (No.) 95. During the Depression, those neighborhood doctors would charge \$2 for an office visit and \$3 for a house call and most people did not have the money, because it was a part of the Village, off the river. A lot of people were out of work, the longshoremen and so on, because the trade had basically stopped into the port. But people didn't charge for it. And my guy, because he is a veteran of World War I, stays in the neighborhood by choice, because it's his people, and is not going to charge people who don't have the money, and he never charges veterans. He can't do that. He'd rather move to Miami than charge a veteran. È

Q. Delaney treats children, prostitutes, mobster friends and mobsters who are not his friends. He is just a decent human being with an enormous heart.

A. And that was the challenge. How do you write a novel in today's literary climate about a good man? You know, it's easy to write a villain, but it's hard to write about a good person that's recognizable. Particularly if you are an Irishman. They always accuse you of sentimentality.

Q. Italians, too.

A. Exactly.

Q. You have infused the pages of the novel with colorful politicians, athletes, places, newspapers and notable events from the era. For example, Tammany Hall chieftains; Fiorello LaGuardia and his mayoral win in 1934; and Tony Pastor and his vaudeville house on the Rialto where Delaney took his wife, Molly, for nights out on the town.

A. Yes. On 14th Street. And John McGraw, (the New York Giants manager), dies.

Q. Delaney apparently does not own an automobile and makes his house calls riding his "Arrow" bicycle about town.

A. Yes. I had to get one that was not absolutely contemporary. I am such a Jesuit in my heart of hearts that I ended up getting a history of bicycles and found one that he could have bought before the war and still had in 1934. It apparently was a very popular bicycle at one point.

Q. Would it be a fair assessment to state that your novel is about second chances in life and the choices we make?

A. Yes, absolutely. It isn't over 'til it's over. And you have options, you know. As long as you have a heartbeat.

Q. As someone who began as a reporter at the New York Post in 1960 and subsequently became editor in chief of both the Post and the New York Daily News, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you some questions about the present state of flux in the newspaper industry. It seems that you can't go more than two weeks without seeing an article in the business section of any newspaper that doesn't report layoffs; advertising dollars shifting to the Internet and away from newspapers in print; and the overall loss of readership. With the online version of the newspapers growing stronger each year, do you believe the doom and gloom forecast many are predicting for the print medium?

A. Well, I think there is a temporary problem and it's caused mainly by cable news and the Internet. It's also caused by other problems such as the high cost of news print, the cost of gasoline where you have to distribute the papers, etc. But I think there is always going to be a role for newspapers, particularly in the age of the blog. Some blogs are very good and I'm not a blogger of any kind. But the majority are therapy, or insidious kinds of political agendas which are being promoted on blogs. The most famous example is the "Swift Boat" campaign.

What the newspapers have to keep in mind, in my opinion, is that they must be the verifying force in American media. They have to make three, four, five, 10 phone calls to see if something is actually true. They also need enough money to spend on good reporting. A good example of that lately is the Washington Post with Walter Reed. They spent four months making sure they had the goods, that they cracked the codes, that they got entry to be able to describe what conditions were like for soldiers coming back from a ... war. You can't do that on a blog. Which is not to say that you take a Luddite position and ignore the Internet. ... You can have both as long as the standards of veracity and truth and the attempt to really get it right are driving the enterprise. We must also wait for one other big thing to happen, which is for the children of all these immigrants to become fluent in English. This is happening as we speak, because that's the next wave of people who I believe are going to read newspapers, particularly at the beginning of their lives because they can't afford computers, they can't afford printers and all kinds of stuff. They are not going to whip out a laptop on the D train and see who won the Lakers game in California. It's not going to happen that way. So the great next wave, I think, of newspaper readers are the people who are not quite mature as readers yet, but they're coming, just like the Italians came and the Jews came and the illiterate Irish of the famine days began to learn to read English, they're coming.

So there has to be some patience among the publishers. You are not going to make the money you made, for a while, but if you diversify and have really good Internet sites, not ones that have Anna Nicole Smith running for many, many inches and the casualties in Iraq reduced to a paragraph. You can't do that, you got to say what really is important here. And once you have that, I think, down the line another 10 years maybe, you're going to see a boom again.

Q. Let's hope you're correct. It seems that many people are stretched for time in their jobs and they want to read quick clips. My daughter's softball coach told me recently that he reads more papers now than he ever has. When I asked him to explain, he said that he reads them online. I suspect the attitude for many is that if you want to find something about a particular athlete or team which you follow, who are not within your local area, be it a Peyton Manning or the Indianapolis Colts, you would go into the Indianapolis Web site.

A. Also what you lose is, if you pick up the paper, there's no single reader of a newspaper, there's a coalition of readers and somebody's going to start on the sports page and somebody else might want to

read news about fashion and food and others are going to read the politics and the page one events. There's an element of serendipity in reading a newspaper that you might start with sports and then move to other parts of the paper and say, "Geez, I didn't know that." But if you're just looking up the one thing you're interested in, that's not enough. It's like the difference between ordering books online and going to a bookstore. If you go to a bookstore and you walk around you say, "I never heard of this book. When did this come out? Or "What about this?" You're not just looking for the latest bestseller, you're looking to be surprised. The same with music stores. When Tower Records goes down, I lose something. I lose the sense of surprise that comes by just walking in the door. I might say, "Gee, I want to get that Dizzy Gillespie thing that's just been reissued but on the way I find three others." You can't do that online. At least not now.

Q. I'll pose a final two-fold question. If you were back in your old chair as editor in chief of the Post or the Daily News, what initiatives would you consider adopting to insure the future of the printed newspaper? Given the Internet's ascendancy, how can a balance best be achieved so that the print and Web versions of a newspaper can co-exist?

A. That one I'd have to think through. I haven't thought that way for a while. Fundamentally, we're in the news business. One of the things about news is that it has to be new (laughs) and it has to be accurate. So no matter what the medium is, whether it's the Internet or the Web site of the newspaper, you still have the obligation to separate rumor from truth. You have to make sure that what you're saying is accurate and have sources and be wary of blind sources. All of that has to take place no matter what the particular medium might be, as long as the standards are the same. Then I think in the Times Web site, you see it's basically the paper plus the breaking news of the day. So I think they are going to be very scrupulous about what they do. All news is not of equal weight.

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