

Pete Hamill's latest novel, 'Tabloid City,' delivers murder at a good address

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BOOK REVIEW

'Tabloid City' by Pete Hamill

One of the more debatable literary questions has been what qualifies as the definitive New York novel. There certainly have been a great many time honored works of fiction set within the confines of The Big City, such as "Washington Square" (1880), "The Age of Innocence" (1920), "The Great Gatsby" (1925), "Manhattan Transfer" (1925), "The Catcher in the Rye" (1951), "Invisible Man" (1952), "Bright Lights, Big City" (1984) and "Bonfire of the Vanities" (1987).

The most precise answer to this age old query is actually none of the above. This is because no such book has ever existed and realistically, will ever be written. A seemingly credible explanation supporting this assertion comes from the prolific journalist and novelist who has chronicled the life of New Yorkers more than any writer of his generation. "Manhattan ...absolutely refuses to remain as it was. It is dynamic, not static," says Pete Hamill. "What seems permanent when you are twenty is too often a ghost when you are thirty."

The long, skinny island cannot be defined by a particular period in its history for a number of reasons. In large part, this is a result of immigration. The arrivals bring new customs, native food and fresh ideas, all of which generates what Mr. Hamill once described as the "velocity" of change. Another reason is because of the cramped landscape, where "neighborhoods are cleared and buildings are hauled down and new ones erected." A much-loved pizzeria on Third Avenue eventually gives way to a dry cleaning establishment and later to a Korean deli. Nothing will ever stay the same. All that remains is memory. Gotham is forever changing, always evolving and reinventing itself. No one book through time can capture that essence.

Bearing this in mind, Mr. Hamill's latest offering, "Tabloid City" (278 pp. Little, Brown and Company; \$26.99), perfectly delivers us the quintessential present day New York novel for this young century. The framework for this tome is a fictional afternoon newspaper, New York World. However, this is by no means a newspaper novel, but rather on a much larger scale, it is the author's version of what "one" day in the life of New Yorkers could be.

The story begins on a fateful, cold January night, with a sensational double murder in a stately townhouse on Patchin Place, in New York City's West Village. A wealthy socialite, Cynthia Harding and her personal assistant, Mary Lou

Watson are murdered following a small dinner party to raise funds for the New York Public Library. And in the best sense of tabloid journalism vernacular, we are afforded “murder at a good address” and good reason to “stop the presses.”

From the author’s perspective, city life is marked by a number of emotions which transmit into laughter, friendship and greed. The night, in particular, is marked with the pervasive emotion of loneliness, which in some cases, he believes, can drive people to amazing creativity and sometimes destructiveness. All these emotions are on display in "Tabloid City" as the police and the New York World work to investigate and solve this tightly knit Manhattan murder mystery.

Over roughly the next twenty-four hours, an array of intriguing New Yorkers make intermittent appearances. Their separate and distinct lives during the course of a night, a day and a night, form a connection that relates to the deaths of these women. Mr. Hamill’s careful attention to character detail and a sound connect-the-dots approach allow this thriller to unfold at a controlled pace through its suspenseful climax at a gala event held at a former mosque turned into a dance club.

The central character is Sam Briscoe, the 71 year old editor-in-chief of New York World, whom the author has returned to the fold from three of his earlier novels, "Dirty Laundry" (1978), "The Deadly Piece" (1979) and "The Guns of Heaven" (1984). Others include a bold, young reporter in Bobby Fonseca; a veteran, 65 year old plus reporter, Helen Loomis, whom Briscoe regards as “the best g--damned rewrite man any of them would ever know” and the somewhat less than respected, Richard Elwood, the man they call F.P., a/k/a, the F----- Publisher of New York World, who has an unpleasant message to deliver.

Beyond the newsroom we are introduced to a celebrated, almost blind painter, Lew Forrest, living in the Chelsea Hotel, who, thanks in large part to the G.I. Bill, achieved success after studying in Paris; an illegal Mexican immigrant wife and mother, Consuelo Mendoza, on a mission for her family; a hedge-fund swindler, Myles Compton, on the run; an angry young jihadist, Malik Shahid, who plots a deadly attack; a bitter gossip blogger, Freddie Wheeler, set on revenge; a talented, hardworking cartoonist, Beverly Starr; a bitter Iraq veteran, Josh Thompson, who lost his legs in the war and much more; a very successful advertising agency Vice President, Sandra Gordon; and a NYPD detective and member of The Joint Terrorism Task Force, Ali Watson, who has a personal incentive to investigate the killings.

While not completely autobiographical, several of these cast members are strong composites of their creator. As a young boy, Pete Hamill dreamed of becoming a comic book artist. His early influences included the cartoonist, Milt Gross. He devoured such strips as Milton Caniff’s "Terry and the Pirates," "Captain Marvel," "The Human Torch" and "Captain America," in much the same way as the novel’s Beverly Starr. Moving in much the same direction as his fictional Lew Forrest did after discharge from military service, Mr. Hamill went to Mexico (not Paris), in pursuit of a career as a painter. After one year, however, he decided his best avenue was to become a writer. He began his long career as a newspaperman when he was hired by the New York Post on June 1, 1960. At the time, the Post was located at 75 West Street, nearby the fictional 100 West Street address of the New York World. As a young reporter, the author demonstrated the same passion for going after a story as his own, Bobby Fonseca. Coming full circle is the character of Sam Briscoe, who is perhaps the author’s ultimate alter ego, the reporter turned editor. Mr. Hamill, himself would later hold the unique distinction of becoming the editor-in-chief of both the New York Post and the New York Daily News.

By its very definition, “tabloid” means compressed or condensed into small scope; a newspaper that is about half the size of an ordinary newspaper, featuring stories of violence, crime or scandal presented in a sensational manner with much photographic matter. In most cases, the tabloid chooses conflict over analysis. Mr. Hamill uses the concept of the tabloid as a springboard to transmit the feelings of New Yorkers and any urban dwellers for that matter. He accomplishes this in Tabloid City in the same manner that he approached his work as a journalist, that is, by dealing with human beings one at a time and allowing them the opportunity to tell their stories.

A certain romantic quality exists in Mr. Hamill’s vivid portrayal of the city’s last afternoon newspaper, as it begins its descent. There are wistful, solitary remembrances of colleagues, past loves and the city room itself by Sam Briscoe and Helen Loomis during scattered, unspoken interludes in the story. There are recollections of magical moments in

the not too distant past when the hammering assault on manual typewriter keys could be heard as rewrite men raced to meet deadlines. And a time when blue nicotine fog was everywhere and extinguished cigarette butts made up a large segment of the floor decor. And it was a time when the raucous, bawdy yelling and occasional bad language in newsrooms was tolerated, if not completely acceptable.

A cautionary note is extended to those newspapers lovers who revel in the “good old days” sentiment filtered through the novel. Such feelings should not be construed as a basis for optimism that print journalism will co-exist in harmony with internet news, webcasts and blogs, or even that newspapers will survive. As Sam Briscoe discovers, the future has arrived.

Beyond mere sentimental attachments, there is real nostalgia that exists for the likes of Sam and Helen, who experienced the newspaper life and gave it a presence. It is a powerful remembrance of those once living and breathing human beings whose skills and contributions truly mattered and are now lost in time. To that end, "Tabloid City" is not without its ghosts – certain giants who walked the city room floor, such as editor, Paul Sann, the journalists, Al Aronowitz, Murray Kempton and Jimmy Cannon, and the photographers, Louis Liotta and Arty Pomerantz – real life newspapermen who made a difference, not only in the lives and careers of Briscoe and Loomis, but also the author when he was young. “As a New Yorker,” Mr. Hamill states, “I ache for certain places and times and people. But the recurrence of that ache is obvious proof that they were alive and so was I. They existed in the world and I was there to see them. I’m among the most fortunate of men.”

Pete Hamill has often remarked that journalism is a craft, not a hobby, and carries the vital function of educating and informing the public by seeking out the truth. As an industry in flux, the future of print journalism remains unknown, although not overly promising. But regardless of the platform or device that is used to disseminate information to us, solid, intelligent journalism will always rise to the top of the heap. This responsibility, Mr. Hamill insists, is entrusted to those talented men and women, who did not enter the profession in search of big salaries and fame, but rather who demonstrate a passion and desire to provide people with the accurate and reliable information they need to thrive in a free society. As long as this gold standard is upheld, journalism will continue to prosper and influence, no matter the medium.

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