## The writer may be gone but the stories will live on forever

Pete Hamill died last week, Wednesday morning. And the world, especially the world of words, is a lesser place for that. On the other hand, it is a better place because he was here with us for 85 years and left behind a whole shelf of books he that he wrote for us and a pile of columns that he crafted for newspaper readers, mainly in New

In fact, even though he lived for a while in other places – Mexico City, Paris, Barcelona, a few others – he was at heart and soul as New Yorker, an Irish New Yorker. An Irish New Yorker who found endless joy and sorrow in the lives and deaths of the seven or eight mil-

lion people around him.

He and Jimmy Breslin and Tom Wolfe and a few others changed the way newspapers in America told you about what happened yesterday. They did it, these reckless wordsmiths, by talking not with gas bags and bloviators, but with regular folks who saw the world through eyes a lot like yours and mine. It was Breslin, who died a couple of years ago



## **Pete Hamill**

now, who was told to cover the funeral of President Kennedy after his November assassination in '63. Breslin went out to Arlington Cemetery and wrote about the man who dug the fallen President's grave.

Hamill was a lot like
Breslin, but calmer. Listen
to what he wrote about another Kennedy assassination five years later.
Hamill was there in the
kitchen of the Ambassador
Hotel in Los Angles that
June night. He heard the
shot and he saw Robert
Kennedy fall to the floor
and he wrote for his readers what he had seen:

"Kennedy's face had a kind of sweet acceptance to it, the eyes understanding that it had come to him, the way it had come to so many others before him. The price of the attempt at excellence was death"

Or this, written for his readers on the morning after 9/11 in Manhattan, the day that most of us were hyperventilating and seeking superlatives to describe the indescribable. He recalled it this way:

"We were gathered at a large table in the Tweed Courthouse, discussing over bagels and coffee its future as a symbol of civilization, a museum of the history of New York. About 8:45, we heard a boom."

And then there was the time he tried to get his head around the genius of John Lennon and tell others something they didn't know back when the Fab Four were everywhere all the time:

"He is the sort of artist, like Picasso, who is always in the process of becoming. I think of this as a kind of interim report from one of the bravest human beings I know."

Sometimes he wrote about himself, usually in disbelief. He wrote a book about it, about his days when he drank a lot, drank too much. He gave it up in 1971 because, he concluded, "I had no talent for it"

In that book, titled "A Drinking Life," he said, "The world was a grand confusion. Finally, when I was drunk, and my mind couldn't do what I wanted it to do, I went home. I would lie alone in the dark, feeling that I was a character in a story that had lost its plot."

A few times he wrote about what he did, about writing, trolling wherever Ed Breen's column is sponsored by: First Farmer's Bank & Trust—see their ad., below.

A MOMENT Ed Breen



he was, hauling in the bits and pieces of what he saw and heard and felt and rearranging them into a story, but he always let you figure it out.

"Don't ever use the word 'tragedy' in a story," he reminded himself and us. "You tell what happened, and let the reader say it's a tragedy. If you're crying, the reader won't."

Sometimes it's what you don't say that speaks loudest. Like in 1989 Hamill was writing about Donald Trump, back before the rest of us caught on.

"The Man of the Decade'? Easy —that guy who built What's-hisname Tower on Fifth Avenue."

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There have probably been 300 books written about Frank Sinatra. The best, a slim late-life volume from Pete Hamill called "Why Sinatra Matters."

"Here in one of the latenight places of an all-night city, Sinatra was wearing a dark suit, a perfectly knotted red tie, a pale blue shirt, silver cuff links, and was drinking Jack Daniels. He was still lean then. The famous face remained an arrangement of knobs and planes that didn't assemble into any conventional version of masculine handsomeness but had an enormous vitality; it was a face that defeated painters and seduced photographers. His eyes were bright and blue, although nobody had yet called him Old Blue Eyes. And the mouth was mobile and expressive. He had a wonderful smile. The voice, of course, was a whiskeyand-cigarette baritone."

Never met Frank Sinatra. Never met Pete Hamill. Sure do wish I had.

