

Books in Communications



Breslin at Bat

WHEN JIMMY BRESLIN was riding with you in the back elevator of the New York *Herald Tribune*, whether or not anyone else was along, it seemed crowded. Breslin occupied more space than most men. He was always in motion, always in a hurry, as if he had forgotten something or was missing the next big news break in town. Shirt open, tieless always, clutching late editions, suffering visibly, he would rush out of the building like a blocking back, cursing to himself, half including you in the conversation, grumbling about office red tape, worrying over the next story idea. Those of us who worked with him had to stand back and admire all that energy. "He was always frantically scheming how to get the best story out of any news event," his editors comment. He was a prodigious worker and the motive force was passion. Breslin cared about his friends, from Pat Thomas to John Hay Whitney, his neighbors (negatively), and about his departed newspaper especially.

The *Tribune* is gone, but this collection of his work in the paper, *The World of Jimmy Breslin* (Viking, \$5.95), preserves some of the good. It brings Breslin back, just as readable the second time. It shows a remarkable reporter breathing hard against the toughest deadlines. It demonstrates the splendid camaraderie on the *Tribune* between the staff and some exceptional editors, blessed with tolerance. And, not least, it expresses the spirit of a great newspaper in its last days. Breslin does not stand for all *Tribune* men, nor above the line ones. He is far from typical. But I for one, as a *Tribune* man in Breslin's day and before, acknowledge gratefully this expression of the paper's spirit.

The book has been most successfully annotated by two of the paper's finer executives, James C. Bellows, the last editor, and Richard C. Wald, the last managing editor. The Bellows-Wald connecting passages and some of Murray Weis's patient guidance, give clues to why the *Tribune* was such a happy place to work. Some interoffice memos are preserved. Breslin rolled them out of his hot typewriter as profusely as columns about Marvin the Torch (an arsonist) or Jerry the Booster (a department store thief). There is also a hitherto unrevealed teletype exchange between

Art Buchwald in Washington and Breslin in New York in which each tries to outbid the other on the size of his nonexistent Christmas bonus. I'd say you'd have to hand the honor to Buchwald.

For a *Tribune* man it is hard indeed to imagine the same office spirit prevailing at *The New York Times*. Breslin's book is one measure of what dropped out of New York newspaper life when the *Tribune* went under.

Breslin's writing for the *Tribune* and for its *New York Magazine* covered a lot of ground in a few years. He could be firesome, certainly, talking about his foot food. He was a brash one, all right, and very self-assertive. He soon moved further field, reporting on the student riots in Rochester, the Selma-Montgomery march in Vietnam, and the assassinations.

As his editors point out, Breslin had the knack of finding the small incident that would illustrate the large event, and he hooked into stories in unlikely but illuminating places, as when he followed the surgeon-in-charge into Emergency Room One in Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas and the gravedigger in Arlington.

A Breslin sentence has wondrous simplicity. "A pool room always was a place where you could go to chuck their arguments upon me." When Jerry the Booster tried Tiffany's for size (it proved too big) Breslin put his finger on the one flaw in Jerry's technique. "A suitcase in Tiffany's is the same as an open seacock in the Queen Elizabeth." When he saw personnel carriers armed with machine

guns moving into parks in Rochester he wrote: "Machines that men use for killing never look nice when you put them in places where children play."

Breslin is never snide and never hits below the belt. He once wrote: "A smile came on Nixon's face. The smile was made of poured concrete." That was about as harsh as he could be.

His last column for the *Tribune* ends the book. He was angry at the newspaper crisis and the union shortsightedness that brought it about. But he ended on a gentler note. On what turned out to be the *Tribune*'s very last day, Emma Bugbee, at seventy-seven, was retiring after fifty-six years on the staff, and he devoted the column to her. Somehow Emma—her loyalty to the paper, her always sunny concern for her colleagues, her professional competence—threaded it all together. It was nice that he ended with Emma.

Press War: Journalism has rarely been so adventurous, so resourceful, or so free with the truth as it was during the Spanish-American War of 1898. If Vietnam is the first TV war, then the Spanish-American War was the last appropriated by the newspapers. At times it was as stirring a battleground for such rival publishers as Hearst of the *Journal* and Pulitzer of the *World* as for the Spanish and American navies. All this Charles H. Brown relates—and the exploits of such reporters as Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Stephen Owsen, Sylvester Scovel—in *The Correspondent's War* (Scribner's, \$7.95). Persistently, the author follows the crisscrossing of correspondents, ship tracks, and battle lines from the sinking of the Maine to the surrender at Manila. One possible quarrel with the scholarly scope of his technique is an apparent failure to decide whether this is a book about the war as seen by the correspondents or a book about the correspondents against the background of the war. Now it is one, now the other.

All in Type: A catalogue of 424 of the most important books ever set in type, each skillfully summarized and assigned a place in the world of thought, has been published in a large, handsomely designed volume, *Printing and the Mind of Man* (Dolt, Rinehart & Winston, \$27.50). The works are run in chronological order from, naturally, Gutenberg's Bible in 1455 to Churchill's wartime speeches. Turning the pages gives one the sweep of Western ideas and reveals some interesting topical juxtapositions, as when Gaspard Bauhin's *The Nomenclature of Plants* in 1623 precedes Shakespeare, and John Harrison's *The Chronometer* in 1763 follows Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*. —STUART W. LITTLE.

