

Gangsters, guns and gore:

In Madison,
Breslin snitches
on the mob

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By **Lisa Reisman**
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When the announcement came that Jimmy Breslin was running late for his scheduled appearance at R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison on a recent Tuesday night, there were some grumblings from the crowd. Every inch of the space was packed, people were still streaming in, and a call was going out for extra folding chairs.

Still, during the 20-minute wait, punctuated by intermittent updates of the most recent exit on I-95 that Mr. Breslin had passed, the audience seemed less impatient than possessed of a giddy anticipation.

This was, after all, the Pulitzer Prize winner for Distinguished Commentary, who in 1969 tried to take over the city as running mate to friend, fellow writer, and mayoral candidate Norman Mailer. This was the street-smart dean of columnists who, when New York was gripped with fear by a maniac taking murderous directions from a dog in the summer of 1977, became a kind of pen pal with the Son of Sam, answering his letters with a piece of sage advice: surrender. Not to mention the consummate beat reporter with the molecular-level knowledge of New York and a liver that could withstand Olympian drinking bouts with the revered Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

This was, above all, the greatest Mafia writer in America. No one covered organized crime like Breslin because no one was on a first-name basis with so many bosses and mob killers, including those on which "Goodfellas" and "Donnie Brasco" were based.

As the Gambino family captain and loanshark specialist Sal Reale has put it: "The thing about Jimmy Breslin, O.K., is he's a guy when he walked into a lounge on Queens Boulevard none of the wiseguys got uptight, O.K.? He could have a cocktail at the bar, O.K., and wasn't looking to zap you."

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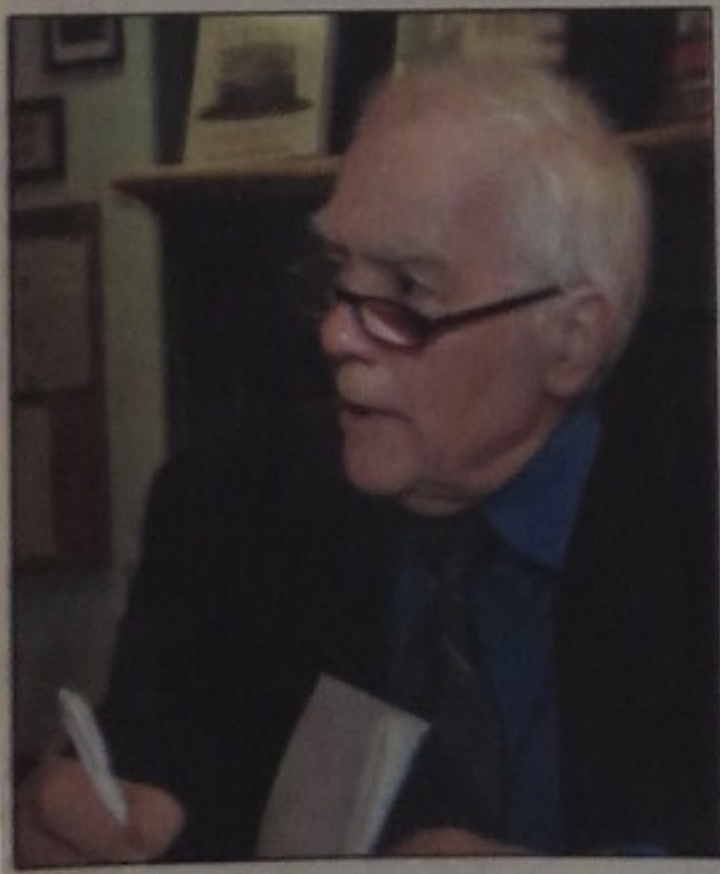


Photo by Mara Lavitt

No one covered organized crime like Breslin because no one was on a first-name basis with so many bosses and mob killers. Above, the New York icon in sleepy Madison.

Jimmy Breslin: Gangsters, guns, and 'The Good Rat'

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Breslin grew up among the pinky-ringed gangsters and sharkskin potentates of Ozone Park, Queens; that's one reason he's offered the peculiar immunity he enjoyed around cold-blooded killers. In addition, "as crooked as they were, they never committed the greatest crime of all, being boring," a transgression he ascribes to, among others, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. "You want me to write about them?" he once asked. "Just watch the books fly off the shelves."

It was with this same deadpan humor that he apologized for his delay in arriving at R.J. Julia's Tuesday night. The traffic coming out of New York was "beautiful," the white-haired, bespectacled 79-year-old squawked in his trademark Queens accent — beautiful being Breslinspeak for horrendous. "I had no idea so many people lived up here."

Which also may explain why he claims to have never once watched "The Sopranos," the current touchstone for most Americans of mob culture: "It was based in the suburbs, and I don't recognize anything that doesn't have an El running through it," he said, referring to the elevated train, or what he has elsewhere called the "subway up on stilts."

This is what sets Breslin's work apart from the rest of the Mafia genre: he understands the American love affair with organized crime but he's seen too much to romanticize it in the style of "The Sopranos" and

"The Godfather."

In Breslin's hands, there's nothing glamorous about the greed, the mania for killing, the body dumps in vacant lots across Brooklyn, the Staten Island mansions, the extortion of public money and the corruption of public officials.

The current Mafiosi, Breslin writes in his latest bestseller "The Good Rat: A True Story," are "grammar-school dropouts who kill each other and purport to live by codes from the hills of Sicily that are actually either unintelligible or

ignored."

"The Good Rat," the paperback version of which Breslin had come to Madison to promote, focuses on the 2006 case of *The United States v. Stephen Caracappa and Louis Eppolito*, two NYPD detectives accused of moonlighting for the Lucchese crime family. It was the "first great mob trial of the century," Breslin told the crowd. His lead character is 70-something Burton Kaplan, "the Mafia Witness of the Ages," who, while raising a daughter and running a garment business, also trafficked in drugs and set up hits for the mob. With "a morgue full of answers," Kaplan has turned informant, hoping to shave a few years from the 18 he has left to

serve on a drug conviction.

Kaplan, in short, is a rat — a vicious murderer betraying what is left of his soul — but nonetheless the "good rat" of the title because, until he spilled the beans on the crooked cops, he was among the last of his confederates to "stand up" — in mob parlance, to refrain from snitching. In this way he embodies Breslin's obituary for the U.S. Mafia. It's a death notice made possible by the 1970 RICO Act, which revolutionized gangsterdom by upping jail terms from the traditional five years to 50 or more and made it a no-brainer for no-necks to erase such jail terms by testifying against each other, gradually depleting their ranks.

In spite of the Mafia's decline and no matter the sordid tales chronicled in Kaplan's testimony, there's no mistaking the palpable enjoyment Breslin takes in detailing his characters' villainy. Kaplan's partner, Anthony "Gaspape" Casso, for example, was "the son of a longshoreman who was called Gaspape because he used one to break heads." Casso's own son, Breslin writes, "took the same nickname and the same weapon. I don't know much more about the father, but I do know that the son batted right handed."

Watching Breslin's face light up as he reminisced about his time as guide to the underworld, it's not hard to understand what mobster Sal Reale was talking about.

"There's just an ease about him," said Diane Biren of Killingworth who was born and bred in Queens. "But at the same time you know he's been with some pretty brutal human beings. Plus he's a New York icon. So of course it was worth the wait."

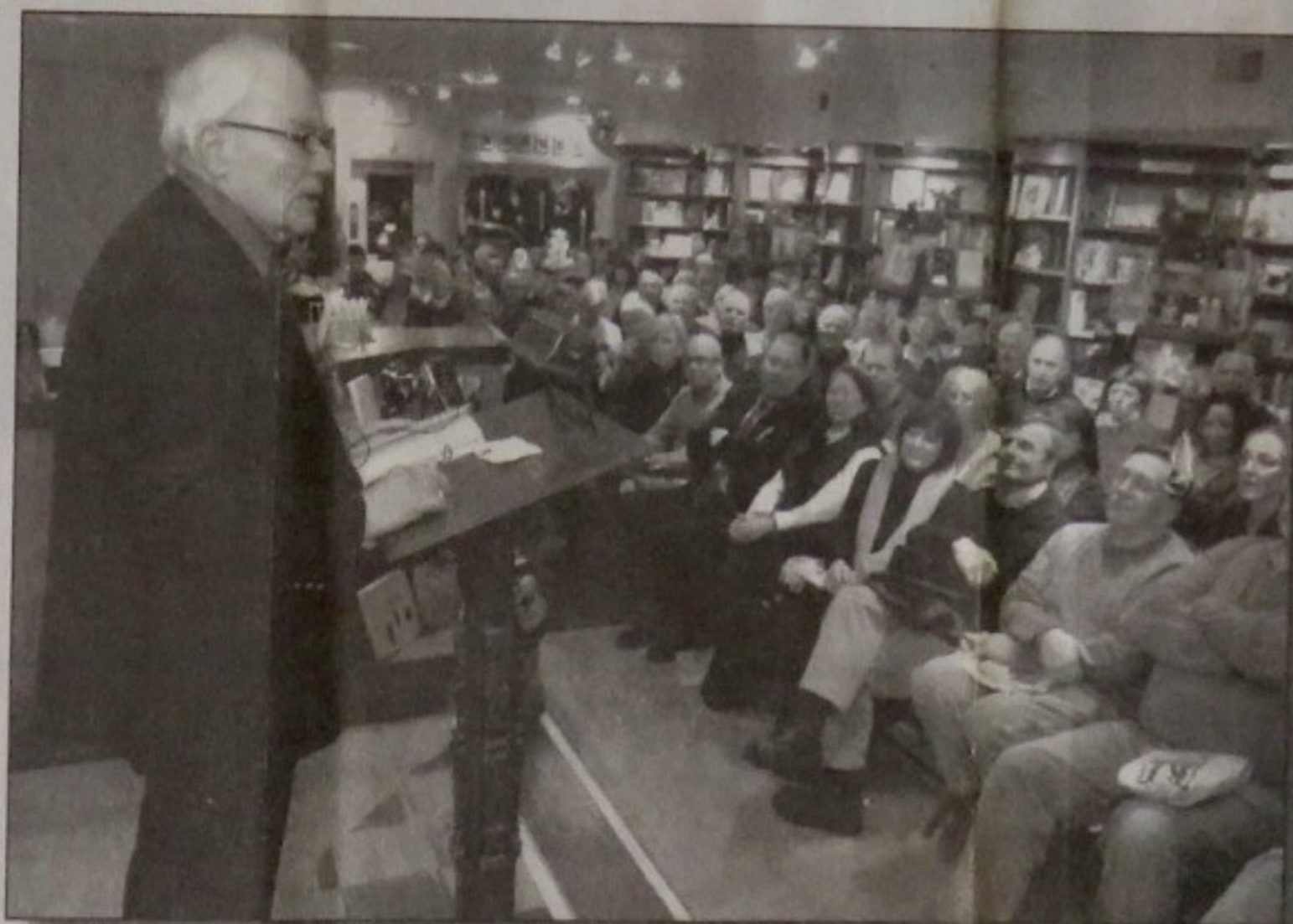
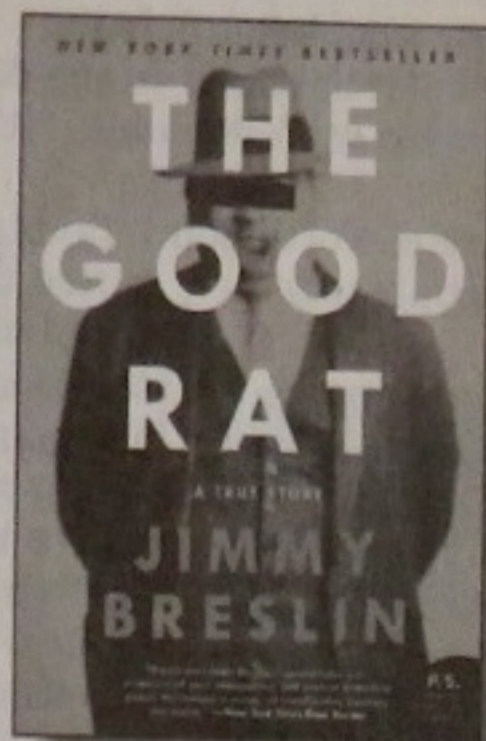


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Jimmy Breslin, who grew up among the pinky-ringed gangsters and sharkskin potentates of Ozone Park, Queens, kept his audience spellbound in Madison, a stop on his book tour.