

and it was altogether too bad..." These brief, interminable bits read like Steinbeck attempting Faulkner, to no clear purpose besides a sense of obligation to prevailing trends. Their subjectivity ("Camera Eye" is a complete misnomer) only contradicts Dos Passos's basic aim of conveying the roll and sweep of whole decades and continents. His art really pointed *backwards*, to the nineteenth-century novel; its up-to-date look was mostly a jazzy camouflage. Today's readers will be tempted to skip most of the little intersections, the way they do the cetological chapters in *Moby-Dick*.

The exception among the "devices" are the thumbnail biographies, both scathing and reverent, of actual figures. These are still well worth reading—though better as a separate collection than interruptions to the narrative. The celebrity *Spoon River* features, among many others, Eugene V. Debs, Isadora Duncan, Joe Hill, Edison, Veblen, and "Meester Veelson," that hero of the Europeans, "talking to save his faith in words, talking to save his faith in the League of Nations, talking to save his faith in himself, in his father's God."

Dos Passos declared that "mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people," and its thousand-plus pages do clang with the sound of them, out on the street and in one another's faces, their group names—Bohunks and Polaks and Shanty Irish—less offensive than the nascent market-tested language of Moorehouse and the PR men. In subject matter and descriptions, these three novels still display a grit that hasn't fully lost its effect; they brim over with prostitution, adultery, abortion, armpits. Dos Passos won't show a burlesque girl's gams without zeroing in on their vaccination mark.

Alas, the entire production moves with the curious stasis of a marathon dance. A certain shapelessness may be part of the point (these books can no more truly begin or end than a newspaper, or history itself, can), but the protagonists' rushed, episodic adventures weary a reader. Even when they're thinking, Dos Passos's people never seem to stop walking, and their sheer number forces the author to stop and restart his book, over and over, just to keep us cur-

rent with all of them. World War I seems to break out a half a dozen times, sacrificing, to say the least, a measure of narrative impact. A handful of fine scenes and phrases ("the dark theater full of girls and jazz") can't make up for the effortful bulk of the whole, or for its occasional just plain clumsiness: no one can run down stairs "three at a time."

U.S.A. concludes with a kind of *New Masses* cartoon: above a lonely hitchhiker some coast-to-coast air passengers "sit pretty," except for one who symbolically "sickens and vomits into the carton container the steak and mushrooms he ate in New York." In fact, as he wrote these lines in 1936, Dos Passos had already begun his long journey toward conservatism. The radical had been feeling prematurely anti-Communist even before the Moscow Trials, and Soviet behavior in the Spanish Civil War only further dampened his leftist ardor. By the 1960's he would be pro-Goldwater and writing for *National Review*, a career turn presented as a form of senility by most literary historians of our time. "Henry Ford as an old man / is a passionate antiquarian," the author himself had written in one of the thumbnail biographies; the irony of his own retreat from millenarianism, however principled, could not have been lost on him.

His reputation will have to content itself with the sort of *pro bono* resurrection afforded by the Library of America, whose volumes, complete with page-marking ribbon and rustling paper, have the feel of a missal. The series' relative lack of footnotes does suggest a sensible hope that the books will be read instead of studied, but one suspects Dos Passos's will simply be shelved: authentic literary revivals (the sort that that dark horse Dawn Powell is now enjoying) happen less by deliberateness than little accidents of the Zeitgeist. Nonetheless, it's right to give these three volumes two cheers, if only for the way they remind us of a time when private literary enterprises could be as grandly programmatic as the biggest public-works projects, of an era when the Great American Novel seemed not only achievable but important. ❧

Dis Ain't Brain Surgery

I Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me: A Memoir

Jimmy Breslin

Little, Brown / 219 pages / \$22.95

REVIEWED BY
Joe Queenan

Two years ago, Jimmy Breslin nearly died from a brain tumor. This would have been a great misfortune, for despite his archaic politics and his mannered tough-guy image, Breslin is one of the finest newspapermen the nation has ever produced. In *I Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me*, which is about 70 percent autobiography and 30 percent surgical commentary, Breslin will tell you that himself.

Jimmy Breslin is the most revered living practitioner of an art form he claims to have invented: the news column. The news column is a mixture of reporting and opinion, with heavy dollops of sentimentality about working stiffs, the urban poor, gallant bums, shady pols, and picaresque gangsters, all written in a terse, neo-Hemingway style. Every tabloid in the country is filled with would-be Breslins, many of them Irish, most of them absolutely terrible. In fact, the back of the book is festooned with blurbs from such Breslins *manqués* as the industrious hack Bob Greene, the burned-out sportswriter Mike Lupica, and the most famous faux populist of them all, Pete Hamill, master of such bogus proletarian touches as the undone tie and the rolled-up shirt sleeves. Breslin has much to answer for.

He is not unaware of his influence: "I invented the news column form and other papers immediately went out and hired imitators with Irish names. And at great prices. I was responsible for Irish names

JOE QUEENAN's latest book is *The Unkindest Cut: How a Hatchet-Man Critic Made His Own \$7,000 Movie and Put It All on His Credit Card (Hyperion)*.

getting more money than any union since the founding of the wire lathers."

Breslin is also the champion of a class that has virtually ceased to exist: white, blue-collar liberals. Though Breslin's heart lies in the unglamorous borough of Queens, most of the proles he has been writing about for thirty-four years voted for Reagan. That's because they're still living in Queens, where it's a lot harder to be a blue-collar liberal than a journalist living on Central Park West. The Breslin School of Journalism has always been a tight-rope affair, naturally gravitating toward the maudlin, the bathetic, the obvious. Breslin at his best has managed to avoid the prefabricated mawkishness of his protégés and imitators by maintaining an icy heart beneath his engaging Celtic demeanor. The average tabloid scribe devotes at least one column a year to dear old dad or "What I learned at mother's knee." But Breslin tells an entirely different kind of story about his father, who abandoned him as a boy. Learning years and years later that Dad is in a Miami hospital, Breslin tells a friend to buy blood for his father rather than donating his own. A few hours later, when he learns that his father is out of danger, he sends a telegram: NEXT TIME KILL YOURSELF. "My family were people with winter emotions, who could not use warm, affectionate words," Breslin writes on the very next page. Tell me about it.

Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me has two narrative threads. One is the Queens Boy Makes Good, filled with anecdotes about thugs, con men, and people like Ed Koch. Breslin is brutal in assessing young reporters, whose idea of covering a story is to do a Nexis search. "Words are best when they have their start amidst the smell of printing," he says, in the kind of trademark dictum that may or may not be true but certainly sounds good.

And there is, of course, the Church. "There is no such thing as an ex-Catholic," he notes. "You can fall away from the religion as long as you please, you can deny it through a thousand cock crows, you can luxuriate in sin. But let there be one sharp chest pain, one moment of dizziness, and there is some

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loud bawl that you let out for a priest." He adds: "The Catholic Church is held together by one word: *calamity*."

The second narrative thread is a meticulous account of his aneuristic adventures, with loving details about having his face peeled back to allow surgical access to his brain. "A neurosurgeon can attend schools for a decade and learn all of science to do with the brain," he writes. "But let there be one shake of the hand and he is gone and so are you. And that is the job description."

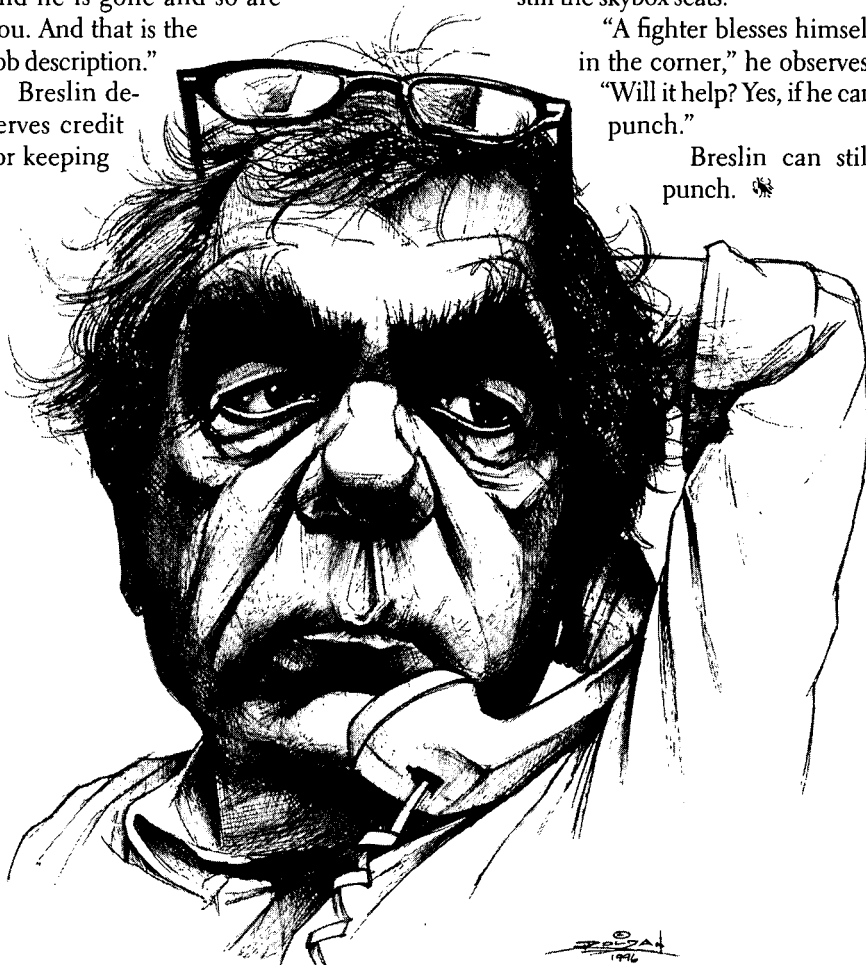
Breslin deserves credit for keeping

what amounts to his last will and testament short; in an age where even the roadie for Led Zeppelin needs 391 pages to tell his story, Breslin comes in at just 219. As he puts it, "You do not need a complex sentence to deliver a complex thought." Amen.

Breslin is an inveterate name-dropper—JFK, Winston Churchill, Jack Ruby—but these names are worth dropping. He pats himself on the back far too much for a good Irish-Catholic; anyone from our shared tradition learned early in life that self-praise stinks. But perhaps there is a reason for this autumnal search for approval; at various points one senses in Breslin a vulnerability. He knows that west of Gotham he is best known not for two books—*The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight* and *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game*—but for the titles of those two books, endlessly recycled by desperate headline writers. That puts him a cut above Mike Royko, Mike McAlary, and innumerable other big-city columnists named Mike, but a few notches below H.L. Mencken. That's still the skybox seats.

"A fighter blesses himself in the corner," he observes. "Will it help? Yes, if he can punch."

Breslin can still punch. ❧



Digging His Own Grave: Ross Talks to a Real Reporter

Citizen Perot: His Life and Times

Gerald Posner

Random House / 400 pages / \$25

REVIEWED BY

Tucker Carlson

Just about every week, one of the television news magazines runs an exposé of a corporate scandal, often one having to do with a company that has knowingly sold dangerous or defective products to kids in an effort to increase profits. Invariably the highlight of such stories is the Culpable Executive Interview, in which the sweaty-looking company president is posed a list of unanswerable questions and otherwise humiliated. Culpable executives know the drill as well as anyone, and the smart ones stay indoors, or respond with a tersely worded letter denying all responsibility. But there are others—most of them egomaniacs—who go ahead and sit for the interview. By force of powerful will and boundless charisma, they imagine, they will be able to charm the reporter into producing a positive story, or at least avoid being savaged. It never works.

Ross Perot obviously doesn't watch television very closely. We know this because last year he gave the first in a series of interviews to investigative reporter Gerald Posner. The result is *Citizen Perot*, the strongest proof yet that, if you're guilty, explaining your side will only compound your guilt.

Author of *Case Closed*, the definitive study of the Kennedy assassination, Posner has spoken to nearly every significant person in Perot's public life over the past forty years. He also must have spent weeks rooting through government archives in Washington, Texas, and elsewhere; the reporting is relentless, enough to make ordinary journalists feel inadequate. But even Posner did not expect to land an

interview with his subject. Perot generally does his best to stay away from any journalist more rigorous than Larry King. For some reason, though, he fell for Posner, even calling the author at home and offering to help gather information for the biography.

What emerges is stunning, even for long-time Perot watchers. Ross Perot turns out to be nastier, more manipulative, suspicious, self-absorbed, and deceitful than all but his bitterest opponents, and possibly his secretaries, could have imagined.

He is a man who has given at least five entirely different versions of why he requested an early discharge from the Navy. (The government, for its part, found Perot "emotionally maladjusted for a regular Navy career.") That's just one of the smaller details he lies about. Posner mostly resists the temptation to psychoanalyze—harder than it sounds with Perot—which is good: a book this well researched doesn't need a shrink. The facts shout for themselves.

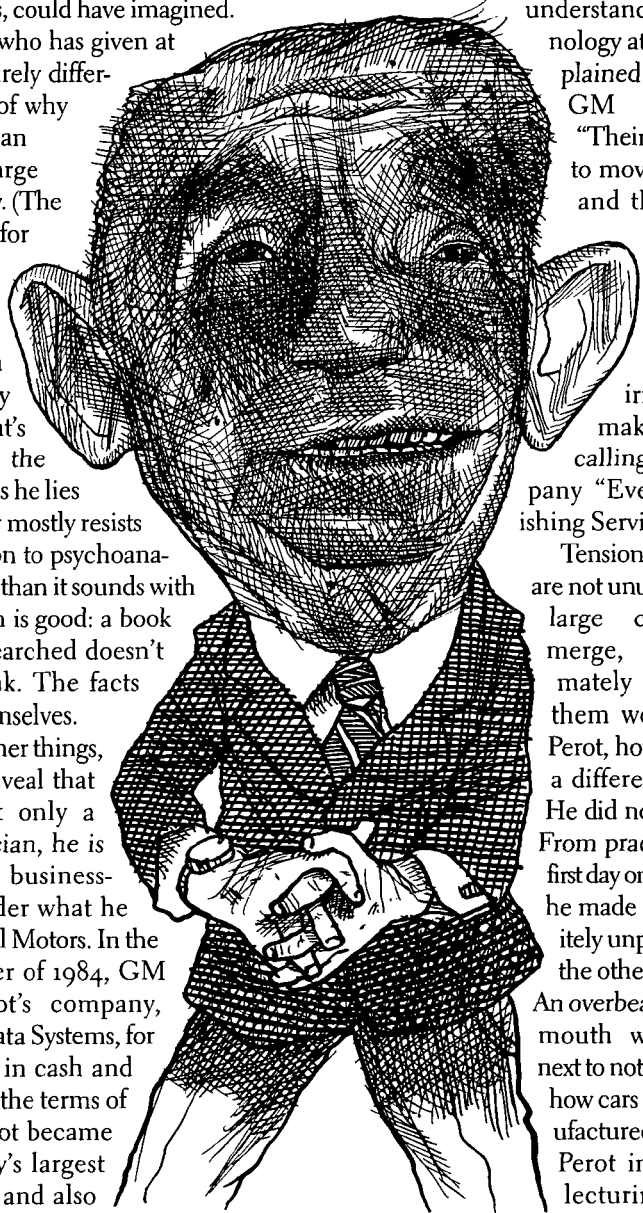
Among other things, those facts reveal that Perot is not only a sleazy politician, he is also a sleazy businessman. Consider what he did to General Motors. In the early summer of 1984, GM bought Perot's company, Electronic Data Systems, for \$2.55 billion in cash and stock. Under the terms of the deal, Perot became the company's largest stockholder, and also joined GM's board. In

return, GM gained full access to EDS's considerable technological expertise. Computer experts from Perot's firm were charged with streamlining the movement of inventory and making the auto giant more efficient.

There were serious problems from the beginning: EDS employees, the gung-ho veterans in crew cuts Perot was famous for hiring, were mocked and despised at unionized GM. Nor was Perot's company nearly as efficient as GM Chairman Roger Smith had imagined. EDS bungled basic tasks—putting the wrong beneficiaries on employee insurance policies, for instance—even as it added redundant positions to the GM payroll. "They just don't

understand the technology at all," complained one senior GM engineer. "Their method is to move in quick and throw people and money at the problems." In Detroit, irritated car makers began calling the company "Ever Diminishing Service."

Tensions like these are not unusual when large companies merge, and ultimately most of them were eased. Perot, however, was a different matter. He did not go away. From practically his first day on the board, he made life exquisitely unpleasant for the other directors. An overbearing loudmouth who knew next to nothing about how cars were manufactured and sold, Perot insisted on lecturing men who had spent



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