



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

DAMON RUNYON

*Guys and Dolls
and Other Writing*

Introduction by PETE HAMILL

GUYS AND DOLLS AND OTHER WRITINGS

DAMON RUNYON was born in Kansas in 1884 and grew up in Pueblo, Colorado. As a teenager he wrote articles for the local newspapers, and in 1898, at the age of fourteen, he enlisted in the Spanish-American War. He returned to work on various newspapers and became a sportswriter for the *New York American* in 1911. During the First World War he was a war correspondent for the Hearst newspaper chain and after the war continued to work as a Hearst columnist. He died in 1946.

PETE HAMILL is a veteran journalist and novelist. He has written many best-selling books, including *A Drinking Life*, *Snow in August*, and *Forever*. His most recent book is *Downtown: My Manhattan*. He is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University. He is a past winner of the Damon Runyon Award from the Denver Press Club.

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Contents

Introduction by PETE HAMILL

Suggestions for Further Reading by DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

A Note on the Text

GUYS AND DOLLS AND OTHER WRITINGS

THE BROADWAY STORIES

Romance in the Roaring Forties

A Very Honorable Guy

Madame La Gimp

Dark Dolores

Lillian

Social Error

Blood Pressure

Butch Minds the Baby

The Hottest Guy in the World

The Lily of St. Pierre

The Bloodhounds of Broadway

“Gentlemen, the King!”

The Brain Goes Home

The Snatching of Bookie Bob

Hold 'em, Yale!

For a Pal

Broadway Financier

Little Miss Marker

Dream Street Rose

Tobias the Terrible

Dancing Dan's Christmas

Earthquake

The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown

The Old Doll's House

It Comes Up Mud
The Brakeman's Daughter
What, No Butler?
Broadway Complex
The Three Wise Guys
The Lemon Drop Kid
Princess O'Hara
A Nice Price
Sense of Humor
Undertaker Song
Breach of Promise
A Light in France

THE TURPS

A Call on the President

EARLY FICTION

The Defense of Strikerville
Two Men Named Collins

OTHER FICTION

Lou Louder
On the Dear Departed
Doc Brackett
Jeremiah Zore

POEMS

A Handy Guy Like Sande
A Jew

TRIAL REPORTING

Arnold Rothstein's Final Payoff
Al Capone
Morgan the Mighty

OCCASIONAL PROSE

Why Me?
Sweet Dreams
Passing the Word Along
Your Neighbor—The Gambler

Mr. "B" and His Stork Club

Essay and Annotations by DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

Introduction

The beautiful thing about Damon Runyon is that he still speaks to us across the decades. He was born in the nineteenth century—fittingly in Manhattan, Kansas—and died in 1946 after a long struggle with cancer. In between, he wrote millions of words of journalism, some poetry, and the wonderful Broadway stories that make up part of this book.

Almost all of them are tales related by an unnamed narrator (who is surely a stand-in for Runyon), and they describe a world that vanished long ago, if indeed it ever existed at all. The world was located in about ten square blocks of midtown Manhattan during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Usually the area is called Times Square, although Runyon, who worked for Hearst and never *The New York Times*, seldom uses that name. It is a world primarily inhabited by the New York children of Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants, although Runyon enjoys describing the collisions of his Broadway people with various outlanders: slumming members of the upper class, greenhorns from way out in America, ambitious grifters in town to make big scores. There are almost no African-Americans (and in the racist argot of the era, Runyon refers to various black porters and waiters as “stove lids”). Harlem in that era was vivid with life and ambition. Runyon, the story writer, never bothered going there, except for glancing visits on the way to and from the Polo Grounds, where a team called the Giants once played baseball, long ago.

The Runyon world appears in these stories to be a male club (one critic describes it as “homoerotic”). His gangsters, gamblers, old bootleggers, prizefighters, waiters, musicians, and newspapermen are triumphantly male. Their language has a male rhythm. So do their lives, where the macho codes often lead them to mayhem. But many of the stories feature women, and the effect they have on men. The women are often tougher than men, and certainly more realistic. Most of them accept the notion of love, but they almost never separate that dangerous and delightful emotion from the hard realities of economics. Runyon’s showgirls all seem to understand that their beauty is a transient thing, an accident of genes and luck, but that with clarity and a certain amount of guile, a doll can build a secure future upon that splendid accident. Most of Runyon’s females would have agreed with Runyon’s advice to young writers: “Get the money.”

One result: the men are terminally wary of women and live with them in a state of comical alert. Here is the narrator in the story “Tobias the Terrible” (1937):

If I have all the tears that are shed on Broadway by guys in love, I will have enough salt water to start an opposition ocean to the Atlantic and Pacific, with enough left over to run the Great Salt Lake out of business. But I wish to say I never shed any of these tears personally, because I am never in

love, and furthermore, barring a bad break, I never expect to be in love, for the way I look at it love is strictly the old phedinkus.

Nobody alive knows what a “phedinkus” is, and Runyon’s stories are sprinkled with other words whose meanings have vanished into air. But their meanings can almost always be deciphered from context. A phedinkus must be a swindle, a fraud, a sweet lie created to tear down personal defenses. Runyon, of course, was not immune to the old phedinkus. All accounts of his life tell the story of his two failed marriages, his estrangement from his children, his erratic romances, his abiding solitude and loneliness. In the Runyon story, there was another object of his enduring capacity for love: the city of New York.

He started life as Alfred Damon Runyan (with an “a”). The date of birth was October 4, 1880, a year before Doc Holiday and the Earps fought in the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral, while Henry James, in a very different America, published *The Portrait of a Lady*. His father, Alfred Lee Runyan, was a second-generation newspaperman, an itinerant who could set type and write stories and who settled for a long while in Pueblo, Colorado. There the boy was raised and began to learn his trade. The boy’s mother died when he was either seven or eleven (the biographical confusion came from Runyon himself, who at the height of his fame shaved four years off his age for an entry in *Who’s Who in America*). The best bet is eleven. His widowed father was part of the hard-drinking newspaper tradition, while Damon roamed Pueblo with his schoolmates. He went only as far as the sixth grade but would get his most valuable education (about craft and life) from working at newspapers, following the unwritten syllabus of a classical apprenticeship. At fifteen he was being paid to write for the *Pueblo Evening Press*. In one of his early bylined stories, a typo changed the “a” to an “o,” and the young man let it stand, perhaps as a small declaration of independence from his father.

In 1898 he enlisted in the army for the Spanish-American War (with the Thirteenth Minnesota volunteers) and was sent to the Philippines. He saw no action but did write stories for papers called *Manila Freedom* and *Soldier’s Letter*. When he returned to Colorado, he moved from paper to paper, constantly developing his craft, before landing at the *Denver Post*, a big-time newspaper. There he became a star sportswriter who could also report features, politics, and an occasional murder. He began writing short fiction for national magazines, much of it set in the West. At the same time he ached for the East, specifically that other, larger, more glittering Manhattan. In 1910 he got his chance.

He went to work for William Randolph Hearst, another westerner who had gone east. He started covering baseball and boxing for Hearst’s *New York American* (where an editor cut the “Alfred” out of his byline). He gave up drinking for life (but kept smoking heavily), married a newspaperwoman named Ellen Egan, and fathered two children. By 1914 he was a star reporter, traveling to the Mexican border to observe Pershing’s futile pursuit of Pancho Villa and covering murder trials, eventually the war in France, the first exploits of pilots in the heroic early days of flight, and then the multiple imbecilities of Prohibition. He was earning about \$500 a week.

By all accounts, he was a small, quiet man, given to expensive clothes and good food, with a fine eye for detail and an ear for the nuances of human speech. As a newspaperman, in that era before television, he could put the reader in the courtroom or the ballpark or the scene of a murder. His silence was not surly. He was listening. Reporters learn quickly that if they are doing the talking, they can't hear a word from anyone else. The same accounts tell us that Runyon, in the years of his growing fame, was a dreadful husband. (His wife would die in 1931 from the effects of alcoholism while Runyon lived in solitude at the Hotel Forrest.) He was, like many of his characters, a heavy gambler, always in need of money.

In 1929, that year when all the certainties of the Roaring Twenties began to shudder and then disappear into the Great Depression, Runyon found a way to get more money.

The first of Runyon's Broadway stories appeared in Hearst's *Cosmopolitan* two months before the Wall Street crash and was called "Romance in the Roaring Forties." It was about a rough customer called Dave the Dude, his doll, Miss Billy Perry, and a gossip columnist called Waldo Winchester. Like most of the Broadway stories, it's about love and money. Dave the Dude was probably based on real-life gangster Frank Costello (who by mob standards was a pacifist, preferring brains to muscle). The gossip columnist was an obvious version of Walter Winchell, who would soon be the most powerful journalist in America and much later, in the last years of Runyon's life, a close friend. That first Broadway story was something new in American fiction, with its own rhythms and language and a view of human beings that was at once cynical and embracing.

The audience must have loved it, and certainly magazine editors did, in that era when the short story was a major form of American fiction. More than eighty stories would follow, featuring Nathan Detroit, Feet Samuels, Sky Masterson, Big Jule, Nicely-Nicely Jones, Madame La Gimp, Good Time Charley Bernstein, Miss Missouri Martin (based on Texas Guinan), Benny South Street, and scores of others. Many would later appear in the Frank Loesser musical *Guys and Dolls*, which opened on Broadway in 1950. Runyon wouldn't live to see this wonderful show, but I suspect he would have loved it. The lyrics, music, and spoken word were absolutely true to Runyon's stories and his vision of Broadway.

The voice of those stories is usually the "historical present," as in "Butch Minds the Baby":

One evening along about seven o'clock I am sitting in Mindy's restaurant putting on the gefilte fish, when in comes three parties from Brooklyn wearing caps as follows: Harry the Horse, Little Isadore and Spanish John.

The narrator is not sitting in Mindy's while he is telling the story; this unfolding story happened in the past, even though Runyon uses the present tense. But the simple device gives the stories a kind of energy that would be absent in most uses of the past tense. It looks easy, until you try to do it. The voice was above all urban, drawing on Yiddish, which in the 1920s was New York's second language, as Spanish is today.

Thus, a five-dollar bill is a “finiff” and various people are “starkers” (tough guys) or “gonophs” (thieves, cheats, pickpockets). Sometimes we can hear Runyon’s people talking above their station, playing social roles that are lies, but we certainly don’t mistake them for characters out of Edith Wharton, who do the same thing.

This is, of course, a fictional world. The gangsters don’t speak the way real gangsters spoke in that era, or in ours. There is no obscenity, for example, no compounding of vile words to express contempt. And in the tales of romance there are subtle implications of sexual activity but no clinical details and no eroticism. Runyon is often accused of sentimentalizing his gangsters, and is sometimes guilty as charged. But a close reading of most of these stories shows us a clear darker side. His people often do terrible things to each other, and out of base motives.

He actually knew many of the people he describes in his fictions. One such character he called Nathan Detroit in some stories and in others, Armand Rosenthal, *The Brain*. The character was loosely based on the notorious gambler Arnold Rothstein, who was said to have fixed the 1919 World Series. In his 1925 masterwork, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald presented a minor character named Meyer Wolfsheim, also based on Rothstein, but alas, he is a clumsy anti-Semitic caricature. Runyon’s version was free of this virus, for good reason. He knew Rothstein well and often sat with him for coffee at the Rothstein table near the cashier at Lindy’s restaurant on Broadway (as Mindy’s, the location of many of his stories). Rothstein was no common thug. He was, by most accounts, articulate, subtle, intelligent. Presumably their conversations were about gambling, women, and food, and not the meaning of life, but Runyon never told us. On November 4, 1928, Runyon had one final whispery conversation with Rothstein at Lindy’s before the gambler went off to be shot dead at the Park Central Hotel for welshing on a gigantic gambling debt. He lives on in Runyon’s stories.

So does the New York that almost certainly existed only in the imagination of the man who wrote about it. Perhaps it was New York as he wanted it to be, the place he had yearned for when he was young in the West. Perhaps it was a city that was both magical and real. Certainly Runyon loved New York as William Faulkner later said he loved Mississippi: in spite of, not because. These stories were almost all written during the Great Depression, but hard times never overwhelm the players, even the two-dollar horse players. They know that their fate is to die broke. Runyon was free of ideology, generally embracing the principles of the New Deal (although he grew more conservative as he grew older). There are a few ideologues in the stories, usually figures of fun, and at least one story deals with the civil war in Spain, which consumed so much energy among many New Yorkers. But Runyon did not write fiction to change his readers’ minds. He wanted them to laugh. And they did, and still do.

Yes, he was an entertainer. So was Mark Twain. He never wrote a novel. Neither did Anton Chekhov. He said he wrote for money, and he made a lot of it at the typewriter, with at least sixteen of his tales becoming movies. “I took one little section of New York,” he said once, “and made half a million dollars writing about it.” Around 1940 he moved to Hollywood, where he worked for a few years as a producer and made more money. He continued writing his newspaper column. But he was already sick

with the cancer that would ultimately kill him.

In 1932, a year after his first wife died, Runyon married a young woman he called Patricia del Grande of Caliditas, Spain. She was, he insisted, “a Spanish countess.” Maybe she was, but her story is the stuff of fiction. In one version Runyon met her in Mexico when he was covering the Pershing-Villa events, was touched by her poverty, and offered to pay for her education. She was then simply Patricia Amati. She was also Mexican, not Spanish, and definitely not a countess. In the late 1920s she came to find Runyon in New York, where she hoped to become a dancer. He fell in love with her, in the sudden way so many of his characters did, even though he was twenty-six years her senior. For a while they lived very well indeed, in Beverly Hills, and in a villa on Hibiscus Island in Miami, across from Palm Island, where Al Capone had his mansion.

In 1944 Runyon’s cancerous larynx was removed. He continued to write occasional newspaper columns, but the fiction dried up. At some point his wife began to live a separate life and divorced him in early 1946 to marry a younger man. By then he was back in New York, where he had lived most intensely and written his finest work. After his death his ashes were scattered over Manhattan from an airplane flown by the World War I ace Eddie Rickenbacker.

Today not many remember Runyon himself, or the era in which he lived with so much verve and melancholy. But here are the stories. They forever remain part of the long tale of New York.

—Pete Hamill

Suggestions for Further Reading

by Daniel R. Schwarz

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A Note on the Text

The works of Damon Runyon appeared in a great variety of periodicals, books, and newspapers throughout his lifetime, and beyond. The following Broadway stories were taken from the collection *Guys and Dolls: The Stories of Damon Runyon*, published by Penguin Books, 1992: “Madame La Gimp,” “Blood Pressure,” “The Lily of St. Pierre,” “The Bloodhounds of Broadway,” “Dream Street Rose,” “Tobias the Terrible,” “Dancing Dan’s Christmas,” “It Comes Up Mud,” “Broadway Complex,” “The Three Wise Guys,” “The Lemon Drop Kid,” “Sense of Humor,” and “Breach of Promise.” The following Broadway stories were taken from *Romance in the Roaring Forties and Other Stories*, published by American Play Company, 1986: “Romance in the Roaring Forties,” “Butch Minds the Baby,” “The Hottest Guy in the World,” “The Snatching of Bookie Bob,” “Hold ‘em Yale!” “For a Pal,” “Little Miss Marker,” “Earthquake,” “The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown,” and “The Old Doll’s House.” The remaining Broadway stories can be found in *The Damon Runyon Omnibus*, published by The Sun Dial Press, 1944, which features selections from three of Runyon’s volumes (*Guys and Dolls*, *Blue Plate Special*, and *Money from Home*): “A Very Honorable Guy,” “Dark Dolores,” “Lillian,” “Social Error,” “Gentlemen, the King!” “The Brain Goes Home,” “Broadway Financier,” “The Brakeman’s Daughter,” “Princess O’Hara,” “A Nice Price,” and “Undertaker Song.” The final Broadway story, “A Light in France,” was first published in *Collier’s*, January 15, 1944. “A Call on the President” first appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 21, 1937, and “The Defense of Strikerville” in *McClure’s*, February 1907. “Two Men Named Collins” was printed in *Reader*, September 1907, and “Lou Louder” in *Collier’s*, August 5, 1936. “Mr. ‘B’ and His Stork Club” was first published in *Cosmopolitan*, May 1947. For the original sources of all remaining inclusions, please refer to “Essay and Annotations” by Daniel R. Schwarz.

Guys and Dolls and Other Writings

THE BROADWAY STORIES

ROMANCE IN THE ROARING FORTIES

Only a rank sucker will think of taking two peeks at Dave the Dude's doll, because while Dave may stand for the first peek, figuring it is a mistake, it is a sure thing he will get sore up at the second peek, and Dave the Dude is certainly not a man to have sore up at you.

But this Waldo Winchester is one hundred per cent sucker, which is why he takes quite a number of peeks at Dave's doll. And what is more, she takes quite a number of peeks right back at him. And there you are. When a guy and a doll get to taking peeks back and forth at each other, why, there you are indeed.

This Waldo Winchester is a nice-looking young guy who writes pieces about Broadway for the *Morning Item*. He writes about the goings-on in night clubs, such as fights, and one thing and another, and also about who is running around with who, including guys and dolls.

Sometimes this is very embarrassing to people who may be married and are running around with people who are not married, but of course Waldo Winchester cannot be expected to ask one and all for their marriage certificates before he writes his pieces for the paper.

The chances are if Waldo Winchester knows Miss Billy Perry is Dave the Dude's doll, he will never take more than his first peek at her, but nobody tips him off until his second or third peek, and by this time Miss Billy Perry is taking her peeks back at him and Waldo Winchester is hooked.

In fact, he is plumb gone, and being a sucker, like I tell you, he does not care whose doll she is. Personally, I do not blame him much, for Miss Billy Perry is worth a few peeks, especially when she is out on the floor of Miss Missouri Martin's Sixteen Hundred Club doing her tap dance. Still, I do not think the best tap-dancer that ever lives can make me take two peeks at her if I know she is Dave the Dude's doll, for Dave somehow thinks more than somewhat of his dolls.

He especially thinks plenty of Miss Billy Perry, and sends her fur coats, and diamond rings, and one thing and another, which she sends back to him at once, because it seems she does not take presents from guys. This is considered most surprising all along Broadway, but people figure the chances are she has some other angle.

Anyway, this does not keep Dave the Dude from liking her just the same, and so she is considered his doll by one and all, and is respected accordingly until this Waldo Winchester comes along.

It happens that he comes along while Dave the Dude is off in the Modoc on a little run down to the Bahamas to get some goods for his business, such as Scotch and

champagne, and by the time Dave gets back Miss Billy Perry and Waldo Winchester are at the stage where they sit in corners between her numbers and hold hands.

Of course nobody tells Dave the Dude about this, because they do not wish to get him excited. Not even Miss Missouri Martin tells him, which is most unusual because Miss Missouri Martin, who is sometimes called “Mizzoo” for short, tells everything she knows as soon as she knows it, which is very often before it happens.

You see, the idea is when Dave the Dude is excited he may blow somebody’s brains out, and the chances are it will be nobody’s brains but Waldo Winchester’s, although some claim that Waldo Winchester has no brains or he will not be hanging around Dave the Dude’s doll.

I know Dave is very, very fond of Miss Billy Perry, because I hear him talk to her several times, and he is most polite to her and never gets out of line in her company by using cuss words, or anything like this. Furthermore, one night when One-eyed Solly Abrahams is a little stewed up he refers to Miss Billy Perry as a broad, meaning no harm whatever, for this is the way many of the boys speak of the dolls.

But right away Dave the Dude reaches across the table and bops One-eyed Solly right in the mouth, so everybody knows from then on that Dave thinks well of Miss Billy Perry. Of course Dave is always thinking fairly well of some doll as far as this goes, but it is seldom he gets to bopping guys in the mouth over them.

Well, one night what happens but Dave the Dude walks into the Sixteen Hundred Club, and there in the entrance, what does he see but this Waldo Winchester and Miss Billy Perry kissing each other back and forth friendly. Right away Dave reaches for the old equalizer to shoot Waldo Winchester, but it seems Dave does not happen to have the old equalizer with him, not expecting to have to shoot anybody this particular evening.

So Dave the Dude walks over and, as Waldo Winchester hears him coming and lets go his strangle-hold on Miss Billy Perry, Dave nails him with a big right hand on the chin. I will say for Dave the Dude that he is a fair puncher with his right hand, though his left is not so good, and he knocks Waldo Winchester bow-legged. In fact, Waldo folds right up on the floor.

Well, Miss Billy Perry lets out a screech you can hear clear to the Battery and runs over to where Waldo Winchester lights, and falls on top of him squalling very loud. All anybody can make out of what she says is that Dave the Dude is a big bum, although Dave is not so big, at that, and that she loves Waldo Winchester.

Dave walks over and starts to give Waldo Winchester the leather, which is considered customary in such cases, but he seems to change his mind, and instead of booting Waldo around, Dave turns and walks out of the joint looking very black and mad, and the next anybody hears of him he is over in the Chicken Club doing plenty of drinking.

This is regarded as a very bad sign indeed, because while everybody goes to the Chicken Club now and then to give Tony Bertazzola, the owner, a friendly play, very few people care to do any drinking there, because Tony’s liquor is not meant for anybody to drink except the customers.

Well, Miss Billy Perry gets Waldo Winchester on his pegs again, and wipes his chin off with her handkerchief, and by and by he is all okay except for a big lump on his chin. And all the time she is telling Waldo Winchester what a big bum Dave the