

Measuring Fame

NICK

by *Steven
Nester*

TOSCHES

NICK TOSCHES MAY BE the hardest working man in the writing business. A self-taught scholar, he's published 15 books ranging from fiction to poetry to biography, as well as reporting, criticism and musicology, and soon he will publish a children's book. As a working journalist who moves with ease from Hesiod to the mob, from Big Joe Turner to the Rat Pack, Tosches takes nothing at face value.

His crime novels are sympathetic and unsentimental looks at the men behind the guns and his biographies are like none other. For Tosches, a gangster biography is also an examination of the nature of truth. The story of a long-gone minstrel singer is an investigation of popular culture and its roots. All this is standard operating procedure for Tosches, for things are never what they seem to be. There is nothing new under the lucky old sun, Tosches points out, and he stands in awe as humans in their comedy allow themselves to be floored time and time again by the same old song and dance. Combining scholarly research with the respect any artistic body of work deserves, Tosches skillfully situates the ephemera of pop culture into the more expansive timeline of human endeavor.

Born in 1949, Nick Tosches is the son of a Newark, New Jersey gin mill proprietor. A graduate of his own curriculum at the New York Public

Library, he's worked as a paste-up artist in an underwear factory, a snake wrangler for the Miami Serpenterium, and a bartender. During the 1970s his early work was published in rock journals such as *Creem* and *Fusion*, and he later edited a country music journal in Nashville. Along the way he taught himself Greek at the feet of Beat poet Ed Sanders in New York's East Village.

Tosches' first book, *Country: The Biggest Music in America* (Stein and Day), came out in 1977. With its extensive research, scrutinizing of accepted truths, searching for relevance in its subject matter, and bringing the material to life with the clairvoyance of a fiction writer, *Country* set the standard for the author's nonfiction. *Country* is an episodic narrative, a hip and gossipy history of the country music business and, for the book collector, very difficult to find.

With Tosches holding the lantern, the country music tradition can be seen to stretch far beyond the simple folk songs brought over from the British Isles. Tosches links them to more enduring themes of classical myths, giving them a resonance and pedigree that no amount of *Hee Haw* reruns can diminish. Sometimes hilarious (the sections on Jerry Lee Lewis alone are worth the price of admission) and sometimes somber, *Country* is sarcastic and knowing. Even readers who are not the least bit

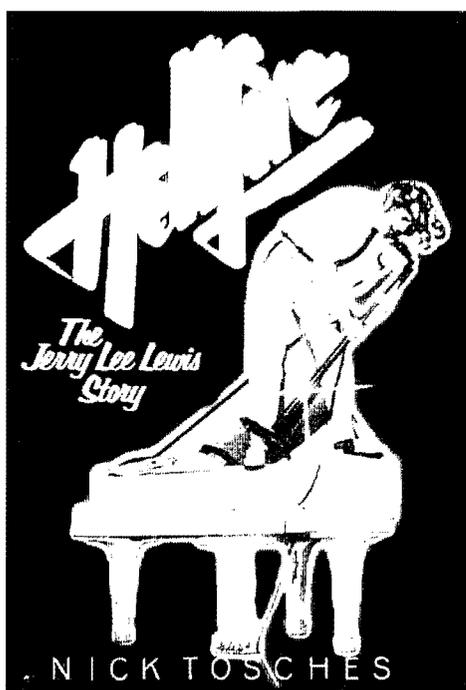
interested in "hillbilly music" will find this a brash and entertaining book.

Country music prides itself on being simple and folksy, but once Tosches removes the Nudie suits and the country hokum, there's plenty of cultural thievery and cheap booze, gunplay and bed-hopping for everyone. And back in the good old days, the lyrics coming from grandma's Victrola were about as lewd and greasy as one could find. The themes of human existence have all been documented, Tosches shows us in *Country*; what is new is how each generation repackages them before claiming them as its own.

For the bibliophile, finding a first edition of *Country* is a challenge. You might find a copy, but most likely it will be a paperback edition or, if you're extremely lucky, a beat-up first edition, but finding a pristine first is going to take some luck or plenty of scratch. There just aren't many first editions in existence.

"I've never seen a second printing," says Kevin Johnson, proprietor of Royal Books in Baltimore. "And of the eight to 10 copies I've encountered in the last 10 years, six were ex-library. I think very few copies made it into private hands. Also, the misleading 'coffee table' style of the jacket has probably caused many copies to wind up either unsold, uncatalogued, or in landfills."

Country isn't the kind of book that stays on the shelf for very long; it has a life of its own, shared among music and pop culture lovers, read and handed off to the next aficionado. I've gone through three copies of *Country* myself, all paperbacks, and every time I pick up a new copy, sooner rather than later I drop it in the mail or watch



it leave the house in the hands of another Tosches convert. I console myself with knowing that this is what books are for. Knowledge on the shelf gets stale, but when it gets passed around and recycled, it retains its vitality and importance, which Tosches tells us all along.

From the giants of ancient drama to the lowliest of tabloid hacks, they all knew one thing. John Milton knew it, Hedda

Hopper knew it, and so do the television sensationalists of today. Nick Tosches knows it, too: the rise and fall of the high and mighty makes for damn good copy. It's the kind of story journalists drool over, the

stuff the ancient Greeks made their names by and, in the hands of Tosches, it's given dignity and depth it finds nowhere else.

Tosches' second book, *Hellfire* (Delacorte, 1982), is a groundbreaking biography of Jerry Lee Lewis, one that *Rolling Stone* magazine calls "Quite simply the best rock and roll biography ever written." But it's not a simple look at a simple man. If you're looking for the wives and scandals and hell-raising and how he tortured a teenaged Paul Anka while on tour in Australia by threatening to feed him to the wild dingoes in the Outback, you'll have to look somewhere else. Lewis' darkness and debauchery are there, but not in the excruciating detail one finds in contemporary biographies of artists and performers. Tosches is out for bigger fish. *Hellfire* is about damnation, redemption, puritanical America, and the soul of Jerry Lee Lewis.

Jerry Lee Lewis was one of the original wild men of rock 'n' roll. The son of a sharecropper, he was a tormented man, heeding the word of God one day, then raging on the piano like the devil's own rhythm section the next. The Jerry Lee Lewis whose sanctity



at first prohibited him from singing “Great Balls of Fire” because it was blasphemous is the same Jerry Lee Lewis who committed bigamy by marrying his 13-year-old cousin. Banished from the heights of success by scandalized fans and the music establishment, Act One of his life ended badly in 1958.

With his career in shambles, Lewis spent years in the purgatory of juke joints and addiction. He mounted a slow comeback by reinventing himself as a country music singer, playing the music of redemption to a God-fearing audience that eventually welcomed him back. But the long arm of Satan was never far from Lewis. It tapped him on the shoulder many times to beckon him to the dark side. In 1976, drunk and raving and armed with a pistol, he drove his Lincoln Continental to the gates of Graceland and demanded an early morning audience with Elvis Presley, the King of Rock and Roll. The Memphis police took him to the cooler instead.

What helps make *Hellfire* a classic is the prose that tells the story. “In writing it,” Tosches explains, “I got swept up in the rhythms and cadences of Faulkner and *The King James Bible*.”

Tosches sustains a mood in *Hellfire* that is thundering and portentous and reverent, as if it were a new book to be added to the Bible or the canon of Western Literature, somewhere between the Old Testament and *Paradise Lost*. As best as can be reckoned, *Hellfire* is the American popular culture equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls preserved in a bottle of bourbon.

In 1984, the articles Tosches had written for music journals were collected and expanded in *Unsung Heroes of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Scribner’s). The 28 pieces are mini-epics about the lives and times of the players—the vocal groups, hillbilly singers, country bands and boogie woogie piano men who, largely forgotten, cross-pollinated and contributed to what Elvis Presley is given credit for, the invention of rock ‘n’ roll.

This third book was my introduction to Tosches, and it contains all the qualities that make reading him a blast. The juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane, the over-the-top descriptions, a general exuberance that gives the writing the spirit of its subject matter and, most importantly, a deft reliance on recording logs and pop charts that somehow doesn’t turn the book into a droning spreadsheet. *Unsung Heroes* is, plain and simple, one of the best books written about the early days of rock ‘n’ roll.

Never exhaustive or academic, it’s also a sociological peek at the pioneers of the music who, through

their art, celebrated the simplicities of living for the moment. *Unsung Heroes* tells the story of the poor Everyman, and the motives and methods he or she used to become (if only for a moment) a rich somebody. With the fire of youth in their bellies and the euphoria of life after World War Two still in the air, some were able to enjoy long and productive careers, but many were in it for booze, sex and the thrill of holding a juke joint in thrall of their talent.

Ribald and politically incorrect, factually complete, and with a nice balance of pith and plethora, Tosches’ distinct voice can be heard in every sentence. *Unsung Heroes* gives credit where credit is due without irony or pity or sentimentality. Rock ‘n’ roll, says Tosches, was dead before Elvis Presley hit the stage, and while the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll considered induction into the army a career move, the real masters of the form stayed at home to expound on the joys of what they knew really mattered: “fried fish, sloppy kisses, gin and the saxophone.” No glib overview of the music’s founders by a long shot, *Unsung Heroes* belongs on the shelf of any prose or music lover.

Tosches’ next book was *Power on Earth: Michele Sindona’s Explosive Story* (Arbor House), a long and complicated piece of crime journal-

ism. An international businessman born in Sicily, Michele Sindona was privy to the business dealings and intrigues between corporations and governments—friendly and not so friendly—at their highest levels. Perched on this vantage point in international high finance, he served as a deal-maker for the Vatican, the Mafia, rogue nations and secret societies that operated like ghost governments. Sindona was an international man of mystery with a front row seat for inconceivable skullduggery. For instance, who would’ve guessed that in 1969, Libyan dictator Muammar Quaddafi helped bail out Italian automaker Fiat with a 200-million-dollar loan for the construction of an auto plant in Russia, a loan which was later restructured as aid to the Russian government? Sindona’s inside knowledge of many things is credited—although never proven—with eventually delivering his death.

Tosches’ relationship with Sindona began in 1984, while Sindona was serving a 25-year prison sentence for his role in the 1974 collapse of the Franklin National Bank. The two met while Sindona was in the Manhattan Metropolitan Correction Center,

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awaiting extradition to Italy on murder charges. "Sindona was the most remarkable and intriguing man I have ever known," says Tosches who, with a copy of Sindona's own typescript memoir and material from lengthy interviews, pieced together the intricate *Power on Earth*.

The prison interviews continued while Sindona stood trial but, before the conclusion of that trial, Sindona was dead from cyanide poisoning. Was it murder or suicide? No one knows. The fatal draught was in his morning cup of coffee. Sindona's death and that of his associate Roberto Calvi—who was found hanged beneath London's Blackfriars Bridge in 1982—further deepened the mystery of Sindona and the shadowy interests of those he served.

Sindona's story is fascinating and detailed, but *Power on Earth* is not an easy book to read. Keep it away from your nightstand. Readers must pay careful attention, and the payoff comes when a curtain is slowly pulled aside to reveal how men of power manipulate the world in secret.

Cut Numbers (Harmony, 1988) is Tosches' first novel, and one of the best crime books you've never read. A Mafia story, it exists somewhere between the pompous *omerta* of *The Godfather* and the poetically rendered crooks of George V. Higgins' *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. On the basic level of plot, *Cut Numbers* is a thriller concerning an attempt to fix the New Jersey State Lottery and the resulting betrayals that occur as the players struggle to consolidate their power and their chunks of the payoff.

The story chronicles the doings of one Louis Brunellesches, a young loan shark with nowhere to go but up, who is trying to realize the American dream by bankrolling himself with petty scams and barroom hustles. Hovering over the action is Louis' Great Uncle Giovanni, a wise old Mafioso out for revenge and an instant retirement account.

On a day-to-day, page-by-page level, *Cut Numbers*

is about how Mafia toughs put on their pants one leg at time, just like everybody else. Brunellesches shows us that hustling and collecting gambling debts from deadbeats can be as soul eroding as sharing an office cubicle with Dilbert. Even thugs wish for something better but, as unrepentant criminals, they stick to what they know. In the meantime, they chisel away at a living while dreaming of the big score—kind of like how the rest of us dream of the Publisher's Clearinghouse crew barging into our lives with a big cardboard check.

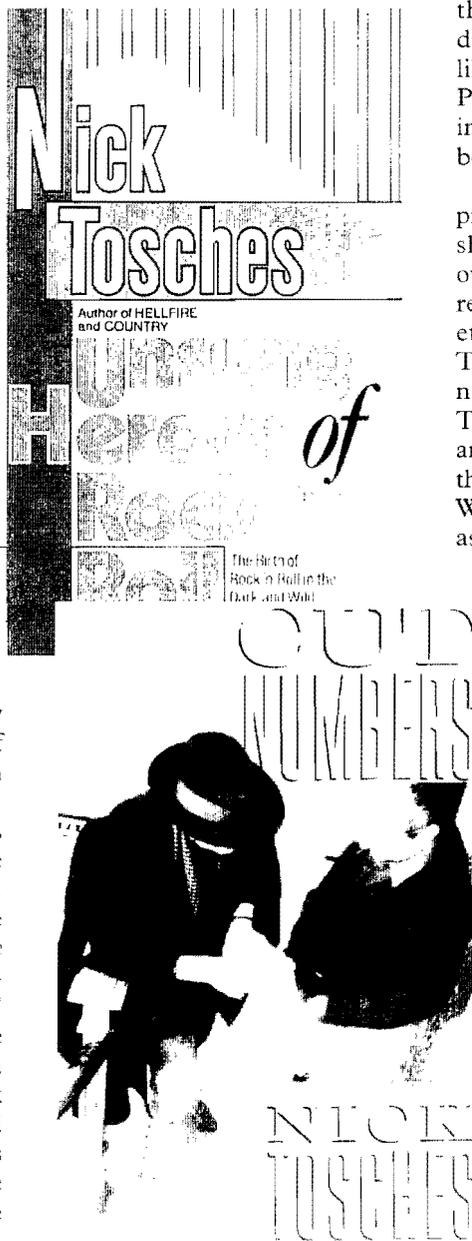
Tosches' mobsters take antidepressants and grapple with relationship problems. They feel old age overtake them and see their youthful replacements as strangers with pocket calculators and different values. Tosches' old-timers nursed their neurosis with scotch long before Tony Soprano made his bones. They and their way of life are at the end of the line, and they know it. The Old World vanishes before their very eyes as attrition and gentrification slowly

erode Lower Manhattan. It's the fall of Rome all over again, only this time the barbarians wear Prada and drink neon blue cocktails decorated with tiny umbrellas.

Cut Numbers is a character-driven novel, but its gangsters are no stereotypes. Tosches makes them sing the language of the streets without lapsing into hyperbole or the type of linguistic tropes and miscues of a Norm Crosby, and the poetry and nuance of lowlifes attempting to make sense while speaking the Queen's English is not to be missed.

After this foray into fiction, Tosches returned to biography with *Dino: Living High in the Dirty Business of Dreams* (Doubleday, 1992), an examination of the life of one of America's most popular—and misunderstood—singing actors. It all came

so easy to him, this son of immigrants. Born Dino Crocetti in Steubenville, Ohio and rechristened Dean Martin, the singing and acting, the hit records and movies came with so little effort that it was difficult for him to tell if he was acting or not. Life was a piece of cake for Dino, right? But what can a man do when



he sits at the top of his profession and is no longer impressed by his talent or the riches and pleasures it has brought? Does he, like the Gods of Olympus bored with their own omnipotence, wreak havoc on the lives of mortals living below? Or does he forsake everything and climb into a bottle?

After reaching the peaks of show business, Dean Martin got tired of it. Slowly but surely, he willed the world to go away. The phony drunkenness, once a part of his act, became real. In the late 1960s he became to many a show business castoff, a lout in a velvet tux and cheesy sideburns, a used car salesman crashing the Age of Aquarius. For a while he was a guy who didn't know when to leave the stage. Whether performing with the remnants of the Rat Pack or hosting his television shows, he no longer seemed to care how he represented himself.

In *Dino*, that is the fate of the fresh-faced kid from Steubenville. After surviving multiple careers in American show business, his starry eyes became bloodshot, and the respect for the business he once dominated diminished. Years and experience showed him how filthy and underhanded the business of dreams and glamour really was. "He was a wise man. Wisdom blessed him with a disregard for the worth of his own racket. Where others sought nobility in acting or art in song, he had known things for what they were, and that knowledge had set him apart."

No longer believing the hype about himself and seeing the shallowness of show business vanity, Martin set out on a slow and torturous retreat, at first withdrawing from his fans through careless and lackluster performances. Then he left the business and everyone associated with it. Finally he ignored friends, broke contracts and appointments, and stopped returning phone calls. In his later years, he turned his back on the world.

Tosches gives pathos to the life of this entertainment insider and eventual anti-hero, and makes it

plain why Martin retreated. And there is even more to *Dino*. With histories of organized crime, immigration and show business contained within its pages, it's a book about their convergence and how they created and eventually destroyed Dean Martin.

Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living," and he might as well have been referring to crime books and the characters that inhabit them, for the bad guys in this day and age are an awful philosophical lot, which isn't as pretentious as it sounds, so long as their diction and usage don't wander too far from Newark or Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Tosches does not make this mistake in *Trinities* (Doubleday). Published in 1994, the author's second novel is an examination of good and evil wrapped in a thriller set in the international drug trade. *Trinities* is a big book, and Tosches' skill in creating and maintaining complex plotting along with three-dimensional characters who can stand on their own two feet is constant and consistent. It's a

superb book with plenty of room for character development and action that supports a plot revolving around an aged Mafia don who's planning to corner the world's heroin supply.

The main character is Johnny Di Pietro, a young nephew who becomes the old man's global emissary. An updated *Oliver Twist*, Di Pietro is a fast learner. Plucked from the ranks of low-level hoods and elevated to the boss' right hand, Di Pietro is the book's moral sounding board as he becomes more involved in the plan and the deaths and deceptions needed for it to succeed.

Like the criminals in *Cut Numbers*, the players here are fully fleshed out.

As they contemplate life, death, personal relationships and the depths of evil to which they will descend in order to accomplish their mission, the dialogue extrapolates but never reverts to mere explanation. There is also plenty of collateral knowledge dispensed in *Trinities*, ranging from the details of police work to



TRINITIES

NICK TOSCHES

the import-export business to the wheeling and dealing of international finance.

In 1999, Tosches published *Chaldea and I Dig Girls* (CUZ Editions), a tiny volume containing 25 poems and one short story, the eponymous *Chaldea*. Lewd, funny and confessional, this idiosyncratic volume is a result of Tosches' sporadic poetry readings.

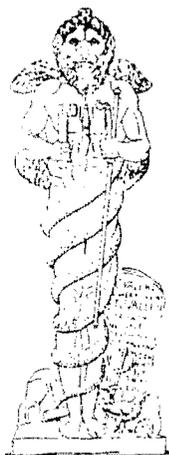
Boxing and organized crime go together like breaking and entering, and the nose-dive denouement of Sonny Liston's life and career is investigated and mused upon at length in Tosches' *The Devil and Sonny Liston* (Little, Brown 2000).

No one believed Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston in 1964, perhaps not even Clay himself. But when he beat Liston again in their 1965 rematch, there was no doubt to observers of sport that the first-round KO of Liston was the "dive heard 'round the world." The plummet stretched over five long years, ending when the former champion was found dead at his Vegas home under mysterious circumstances.

Born poor into a life of anger and servitude, Sonny Liston was a fighter and an outsider from the word go. He could hit people hard and he liked doing it, and for a while his long police record was the only thing he had to show for it. During one of his stays in prison he learned to box. He'd found his calling: the perfect job for an angry young indigent was beating up people for money. It's a lucky man whose vocation and avocation are one, except in the case of Sonny Liston. The only constants in his life besides fighting and boxing were run-ins with the law and money problems. Liston might've heard those words of Socrates and taken them to heart, for he understood his role in life and embraced it. "There's got to be good guys and there's got to be bad guys....The bad guys are supposed to lose. I change that. I win."

Sonny Liston was human chattel. The civil rights movement may have been gaining ground, but it didn't apply to him. Everybody owned a piece of Liston.

CHALDEA and I DIG GIRLS Nick Tosches



only confirmed that Liston was a product and not his own master. But it was anger that was Sonny Liston's true master. He was beholden to it and outside the ring, its effect on his life was almost always disastrous.

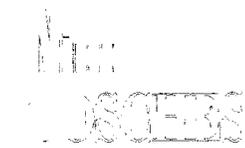
Liston had a criminal swagger that no one could bring into line. After continued scrapes with the police, including an alleged rape, the powers in the boxing business decided that his out-of-the-ring behavior was too risky to handle. No one, not even members of the underworld, wanted to invest in a boxer who had a pretty good chance of serving hard time. Even the N.A.A.C.P. thought Liston was bad news. And with the emergence of Cassius Clay, whom Tosches calls "the darling of a more elite mediocrity, a white intelligentsia who sought meaning and metaphor in boxing," fans tired of the reign of a bad guy finally had a reason to cheer. Clay represented profits. People loved him. The time had come to cut Sonny loose.

The prose in *The Devil and Sonny Liston* is taut and vivid, and the ornately rendered

reveries common to Tosches' writing are tightly controlled. This is a work of journalism that doesn't rely on the type of speculation common to crime writing that mixes fact and fiction to forge a truth that exists only on the page. This is an extremely well researched

Nick Tosches
THE DEVIL AND
SONNY LISTON





book; readers can't help but stand in Sonny's corner and understand the battles he faced inside and outside the ring.

Also released in 2000 was *The Nick Tosches Reader* (Da Capo Press), a collection of more than 100 poems, interviews, short fictions and previously published magazine pieces. One of these, an investigation into the business affairs of Sydney Korshak, a shadowy Hollywood lawyer, fixer and mob confidant, was first published in *Vanity Fair* and is one of the most outstanding pieces Tosches has ever written. There is also a profile of country artist George Jones commissioned by *The New Yorker*, but later published in a music magazine. It, too, is fantastic. For small and varied doses of Nick Tosches, this fat collection—it's almost 600 pages long—will keep readers busy for a while.

One small article in the *Reader*, "Memories of Joe," exemplifies the entire Tosches take on the fleetingness of fame, the speciousness of celebrity, what constitutes culture, and how it all gets repackaged from one generation to the next. For almost 50 years the subject of the article, Joe Franklin, hosted an East Coast C-list television talk show. It bounced around between networks and time slots and, as might be expected, Franklin's guest list was a bit eccentric. There were some famous guests, but there were plenty of low-level types, entertainers with old-school showbiz razzamatazz and ventriloquists—bad dressers to a man—guys who never made it and never would. They all stopped in on their way out of the spotlight.

Tosches recounts a day in the early 1970s when he was working in the underwear factory. Picking up his lunch from the delivery guy on the street, he recognized the man as someone he'd seen on Franklin's show. The guy's specialty happened to be spooky voices, and he'd released an album to prove his worth to the ages. Once he'd held a modicum of fame—he'd been on television, hadn't he? Now he was an errand boy.

But for a moment, though past his prime and his allotted 15 minutes of fame, this man once again transcended the humdrum if only in the mind of Nick Tosches, who knew who he was. The world again resonated ever so slightly with his feats, however small. His career was deader than a doornail, but he was remembered. Once famous, always famous, so long as

someone recognizes you—even if it's on a filthy New York sidewalk and your reputation is now that of a has-been.

Where Dead Voices Gather (Little, Brown, 2001) was a long time coming—23 years, in fact—but close readers of *Country* should have seen it on the horizon. Two chapters of *Dead Voices* are devoted to a southern man born in Macon, Georgia at the turn of the century who died forgotten in 1962. With only a handful of

recordings to his credit, itinerant drinker and singer Emmett Miller was a vocalist whose "startling and mesmerizing music seemed to be a Rosetta Stone to the understanding of the mixed and mongrel bloodlines of country and blues, of jazz and pop, of all we know as American music," says Tosches.

Miller was perhaps an intimation of things to come when American popular music was at a crossroads. A minstrel performer during the 1920s and 1930s—blackface and all—he worked the tent show circuit when it was in its death throes. Record companies were interested and, in 1928, he recorded some sides in a small group setting with the Dorsey Brothers, Eddie Lang and Gene Krupa. Miller called them his Georgia Crackers.

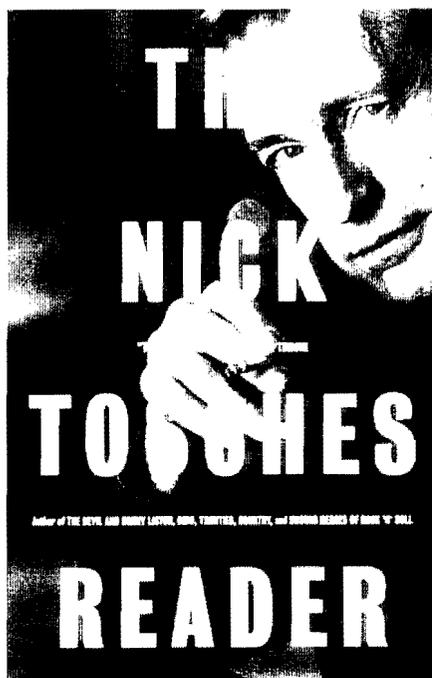
What Miller brought to the mix of musical styles was his one distinguishing vocal feature, a "trick voice." He yodeled and swooned and put into his singing

vocal techniques and rhythms that couldn't be found anywhere else. Enter Jimmie Rodgers—the ur-country artist and granddaddy of them all. Credited with designing the structure of the modern country song and known as the "Yodeling Brakeman," he and Miller had the opportunity to cross paths several times in the late 1920s. Did they ever meet and exchange notes? And if so, who influenced whom? The answers to these questions could rewrite music and popular culture history. For soon after their paths might've crossed, Rodgers was recorded sounding like Emmett Miller. Because it is impossible to document Miller's direct contact with Rodgers, and through him his influence on country music, Miller's uncertain participation becomes a metaphor, opening the narrative to threads of possibilities and speculations that go far beyond country music.

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Where Dead Voices Gather is a beautiful and complex book, and one of Tosches' best. It's a biography, a history of American popular music and a meditation on mimicry, creativity, modern day minstrelsy in pop culture, and things deeper. Tosches is poetic, evocative, and even though the big questions remain unanswered, you don't go away empty-headed. From this beautiful daydream and what it imputes, implies and insists, there is plenty to keep readers wondering about who and what they're really listening to.

In Tosches' third novel, *In The Hand of Dante* (Little, Brown, 2002), the author gets a little post-modern and steps out from behind the typewriter to speak directly to the reader, obscuring the line between fact and fiction. Written as a crime caper concerning the discovery and sale of the original manuscript of *The Divine Comedy*, it involves much more. Tosches revives the Louie character from *Cut Numbers*, and resuscitates Dante Alighieri to portray him as a rebel and a subversive. Tosches then introduces himself as a character. This rambling book moves between Fourteenth-century Italy and modern Manhattan, where the troubles of Dante are compared to those of

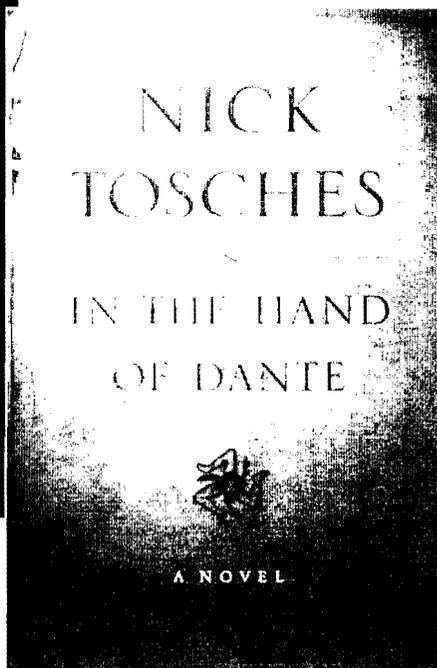
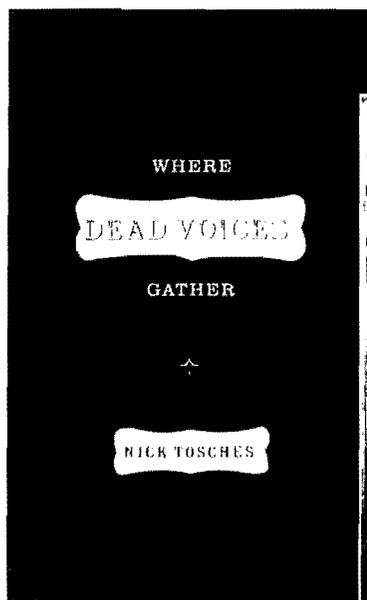


philosophy and, most importantly, an experiment in how a narrative can be written as fiction while incorporating as much from "real life" as it can without becoming nonfiction. *In the Hand of Dante* has many issues at hand and even though it's a fiction that relies on factual matter, it's never dull or pedantic.

The Last Opium Den (Bloomsbury) first appeared in 2000 as an article in *Vanity Fair*, where Tosches is a contributing editor. It's a thin book, reminiscent of, say, Lillian Ross' *Portrait of Hemingway*, which first appeared as a *New Yorker* article in the 1950s.

Fed up with the theme-park dissipation found in Manhattan, Tosches began a global quest for an opium den of yore. He headed to Europe, then Asia, in search of "dark, brocaded-curtained, velvet-cushioned places of luxurious decadence, filled with the mingled smoke and scents of burning joss sticks and the celestial, forbidden, fabulous stuff itself. Wordless, kowtowing servants. Timeless. Sanctuary."

The Last Opium Den is a quick history of the drug and, more importantly, offers Tosches' thoughts on the loss of mystery and danger in the modern world. Tosches questions his idealized perception of opium parlors, the "brocaded-curtain, velvet-cushioned" pleasure palaces, for they are nowhere to be found on his tour. In fact, except for accounts of the "golden era" in Shanghai, everything he has read describes these places as dives.

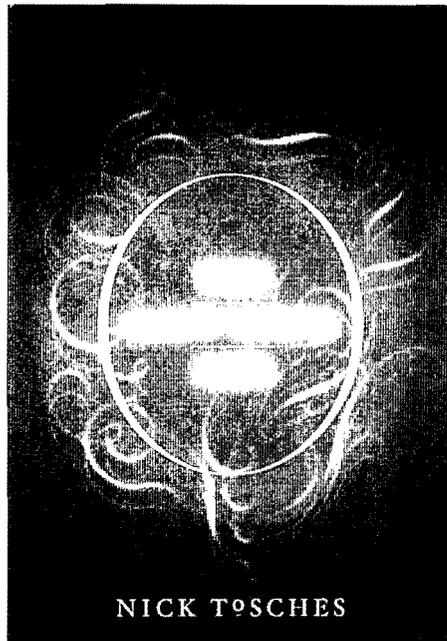


Tosches finds his “taste of paradise” in the jungles of Cambodia, but there is nothing luxurious there with which to clothe the skeleton of his second-hand nostalgia. In this day and age, an opium den is usually a rickety second story atop a filthy animal shed somewhere in a rain forest, and this one is no different. Tosches suggests that it’s better to pursue a romantic dream than to sit and behold in one’s hand the genuine mediocrity of the modern world.

Arnold “the Brain” Rothstein was a bootlegger, gambler and financier to the mob, and was long regarded as the mastermind behind the 1919 World Series scandal. He was the basis for the Damon Runyon character Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls*. F. Scott Fitzgerald, the voice of the Jazz Age, co-opted Rothstein as Meyer Wolfsheim, Jay Gatsby’s street-wise Fagin. Right there in those three specious representations is a fair sampling of how much posterity knows of Arnold Rothstein, and they’re all fiction. The whole matter could be put to rest simply by believing whatever was written about the man and call him the stuff of legend. This doesn’t sit well with Tosches.

He took the near-vacuum of information and wrote a biography, *King of the Jews* (Ecco, 2005), which turns out to be as much of an examination of truth as it is an account of the life of Arnold Rothstein. The truth is that nobody really knows much about Rothstein—when he was born or schooled—and no one can verify the details of his murder, the alleged result of a refusal to pay a \$300,000 loss in a crooked poker game.

To accomplish the task of piecing together Rothstein’s life, Tosches began by thoroughly impugning the several books written on the man and then stuck to the arid documents of legal and government records. There is no fleshing out the details in *King of the Jews*. “I have long ago given up the ‘tricks’ of my trade...I no longer wish to be a purveyor of lies or entertainment,” Tosches has said. And the



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facts include some fairly mundane stuff. Tosches introduced a 1927 newspaper profile, Rothstein’s autopsy report, testimony from the trial contesting his will, newspaper articles about the Black Sox scandal, and some ephemera from his estate sale, as well as histories of Jews in Manhattan, crime, turn-of-the-century theater, horse-racing, baseball and dope peddling.

With all this the reader enters the milieu of Arnold Rothstein and his times, and by implication is invited to put together the life of Rothstein with what Tosches presents. While the pieces aren’t

enough to assemble the man completely, the reader closes the book more enlightened than when he picked it up.

Always busy with journalism for slick magazines, Tosches has written a yet unpublished children’s book, *Johnny’s First Cigarette*. He is at work on a history of the second half of the Twentieth century—the so-called Nuclear Age—which has as its central figure The Rolling Stones’ guitarist Keith Richard.

Tosches has discovered that fame, as an increment of measure on the yardstick of immortality, can be qualified. A miserly Andy Warhol gave everybody 15 minutes. Others take destiny and reputation—along with a can of spray paint—into their own hands. A hot ticket today, Tosches seems to say, although it may be trash on the street tomorrow, is almost always recycled.

Of his own work and its fate, he is wry and realistic. “I see my work recycled in the usual ways, all of which lose and erase the nature and spirit of the original writing.” How long a piece of literature endures and how many lives a cultural antecedent has is the truest measure of fame and worth. So far, there is no need for others to plunder or rehash the works of Nick Tosches. All his books are available. 

