

Published on Friday, February 20, 2009, on the Opinion page of the “Connecticut Post”

PETE HAMILL: READING, WRITING AND REMEMBERING WHERE WE’RE FROM

By Howard V. Sann

A decade in the making, the \$24-million Darien Library – financed solely through charitable donations from 1,300 families (and \$3-million from the sale of the old building) – opened on Jan. 10, and in the first two days 10,000 people wandered past more than two miles of shelves filled with books, music and movies.

“All the materials, every book, every magazine, every computer – every stuffed animal in the children’s room – comes from our annual fund, not one tax dollar. That’s the way it’s been since 1967,” said library President Kim Huffard, introducing the first event, which kicked off the “Meet the Author” series and featured celebrated writer Pete Hamill, whose name is synonymous with New York and who, 40 years ago, was the journalistic voice of another generation, railing in column after column for Civil Rights and against the Vietnam War.

Sporting a close-cropped gray beard, the best-selling author of the novel “Snow in August” and the memoir “A Drinking Life” looked back at his life, work, family

and country with reverence and humor as a standing-room-only crowd of more than 200 people packed the new library's 171-seat community room. For more than an hour, the past was not only prologue, but also masterfully bridged to the present problems facing Americans. Listening to Hamill in person weave several narratives at once, as he does so seamlessly in his novels, one senses that age may have transformed the raging righteous anger of his youth into a glowing, deep compassion for all humankind.

“F

irst we imagine, and then we live,” said journalist, essayist and novelist Pete Hamill, and for him that imagining began in the 1940s listening to baseball on the radio and reading books in the public library.

“I imagined Jackie Robinson before I ever could see him,” he said. “I grew up before television. Robinson existed because Red Barber told us with eloquence on the radio what he was doing. To me, radio is very much like the act of reading – hearing words and translating them into scenes and places.”

Reading the sports pages of *The Daily News*, not “The Federalist Papers” or de Tocqueville, “is what made my father an American,” he said. “When he finally understood baseball, there was no looking back; his nostalgia for Ireland ended and he relocated along Bedford Avenue in a place called Ebbets Field.” In June 1947, Hamill was 12 when he finally saw Robinson, “dancing off second base giving the pitcher and everyone else the jitters and it was even better than I had imagined him.”

The key place in young Hamill’s neighborhood, “that really gave us what we wanted,” was the library. “All these leathery cliffs of books rising in the back where we were forbidden to go. Every library, anywhere,” he said, “is a treasure house of human wisdom, of human folly and also of human evil. Every library adds to our humanity because everything is in there: We can examine the history of what’s known and the history of where people had been before we ever arrived on the planet.”

It was Andrew Carnegie, his “favorite millionaire,” an immigrant from Scotland who, at 11, had gone to the public library in Pittsburgh “to find out about the rest of the whole world.” Dressed like a poor kid and with a Scot’s accent, he was

turned away. Then, after he made his fortune, he was determined to use it “to help the most people – he didn’t forget – and he built 1,600 libraries in the United States, including the Prospect Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library where my mother took me as a boy,” he said. “And when I go back and walk through the library, I always say a little prayer for Carnegie.”

It was there that he began to read seriously. He started with the Babar books, found his way to “Treasure Island,” “The Count of Monte Cristo” and then to “The Arabian Nights” (“the real one, not the expurgated one”) and, for a while, “I wanted to be Ali Baba.” When he first read “Don Quixote” he thought it was funny. “I kept saying, ‘My illustrious Don, don’t listen to them. If you think it’s a dragon, it’s a dragon. Don’t listen to these dopes. Forget Sancho Panza, what’s he know?’”

It was in the public library where Hamill “imagined a world outside myself, a world filled with people I might never meet, but wanted to,” and it provided the impetus for him to join the Navy at 17. “I wanted adventure, the Korean War was on, and I thought maybe I could see the world instead of reading about it and learning geography from war maps.”

In Florida, on the base at Pensacola, he found another library, a tiny, terrific one where he discovered Hemingway, Dos Passos and James T. Farrell, “who wrote about a world that was like the one I had lived in, and it gave me a way to begin to see that the way something was written mattered, that some writers had a kind of music in their prose.” Reading Faulkner aloud is always easier and he could hear “the rhythms of the language. It’s the same with Joyce, when you read him aloud, it’s always a cello.” There, for the first time, Hamill, who wanted to be a comic book artist, thought about being a writer.

It was no accident he would become a wanderer. While he’s lived in Dublin, Rome, Barcelona, Mexico City, Los Angeles and Santa Fe, New Orleans is one of his favorite cities, “because people talk normally: they say ‘poil’ instead of pearl, ‘terlit’ instead of toilet.”

He traced his “wanderlust” to the grandfather he never knew, Peter Devlin from Belfast, who went to sea in the early 1900s, “because on the sea nobody asked what your religion was; the sea was free.” Traveling, Hamill began to see “what all cities have in common.” He said that there was much to learn from other countries then, but there’s much that we can teach the rest of the world now about

immigrants, “because of what we did with our amazing city, the great fundamental gift from the Dutch.”

The oldest of seven (six boys), Hamill described himself “as part of the last generation of white New Yorkers who grew up poor in the tenements of Brooklyn because the Depression lasted in those neighborhoods until 1950. The people who lived in them, mostly Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants didn’t profit from World War II, they fought it. They went, they did it, they came home to live out their lives and they married the girls they left behind. Those places aren’t what they were when I was a kid, but people like us are still there.”

Hamill said that almost every immigrant wave has brought us great gifts: language, music and food. “Our lives in Brooklyn really began when Mrs. Caputo came across the hall at last and taught my mother how to make a sauce. Once we had the sauce, my brothers and I wanted pasta for breakfast, for lunch and for dinner. We were liberated. What I think of is the influence of vowels over consonants, the Italian language with all its vowels just cleans it up.”

The generation that came through the Depression and World War II “were some of the most extraordinary people, and I think of them a lot now because we’re entering a period of hard times. True toughness is what they had,” he said. “A toughness that allowed them to get through a day of humiliation or disappointment, and they did it with a sense of what they were saying and the weight of what they were saying, accompanying it with: one, laughter; two, kindness; and three, convincing their kids that there’s more to life than money – and they did an amazing job with that. But there are lessons to be learned from that generation that are still worth remembering: You could be tough, you could get through it, and at the end, you didn’t have to apologize, or brag, about how you got through it, you just did it.

“I was lucky because I grew up in a neighborhood where nobody ever finished high school and I got the [benefits of the] GI bill, the most amazing piece of social legislation in my time. I also had the fortune to go to a Jesuit high school, and for those of you who don’t know, who aren’t Catholic, the Jesuits are famous for creating more atheists than Stalin,” he said to uproarious laughter. “The Jesuits had this punishing demand for excellence, which was one of the greatest gifts.

As a foreign correspondent, Hamill covered the war in Vietnam, saw Communism fall in Prague, filed stories from Managua when the Contras were trying to overthrow the government and reported from Belfast when the Catholics

and the Protestants were fighting each other. “It was a way to see the world, to experience it,” he said. “That thing that started in the library.”

Yet it was “sheer chance” that got him a job on a newspaper, where “my life truly began.” He earned his first byline on *The New York Post* in 1960. “It was a story about a guy – I’ve thought about him a lot in the last few months” – who’d been evicted from his apartment in Bushwick. “The rain was coming down, his three kids were all huddled around this piece of furniture, a bureau, and he was sitting on the bureau and telling his tale, and I was writing notes trying to stay out of the rain, then went back to the paper and wrote it. It appeared the next day and then the readers took over the story with job offers, with places for rent not too far from where the kids were living so he wouldn’t have to change schools. I realized then what the press can be at its best: It doesn’t have to be mean-spirited, snarky or nasty. You can help people. It reminded me of a moment with my mother when I was 9. She was also an immigrant.”

Anne Hamill, he wrote in “Downtown: My Manhattan,” was a “determined walker” who always took him on long walks. “Walking in a city and getting lost in a city,” he said. “Finding your way in and finding your way out was the only way to get to know it.” And Pete and his brother, Tommy, loved to go to Manhattan to see the *Normandie*, the luxury liner converted into a troopship that burned at the pier on the Hudson River in 1942. “Every time we saw it there was less of it because they were cutting it up and sending the scrap to be converted into tanks or something.”

Their mother would take them from Brooklyn by subway and one day, walking west on 43rd Street at 10th Avenue, they saw “what we would now call a homeless guy, bedraggled and dirty sitting in a doorway holding out a cup, and Tommy and I started making typical, Brooklyn apprentice-hoodlum jokes, making fun of this guy and my mother lost it. She pulled us aside and said, ‘Don’t you ever look down on anyone unless you are giving them a hand to get up.’ It stayed with me all my life,” he said.

“But that sentiment was not unique to her,” he said. “I think again to that generation formed in part by immigration, that generation formed by being outsiders, by having no chance at certain things. Among the Irish I used to call it, ‘the green ceiling.’ So many kids of the Irish from that generation who wanted to be actors, writers or artists were discouraged by their parents; it wasn’t that they had contempt for the imagined dreams, but they didn’t want them to get their hearts broken, because the idea was that the deck was stacked and it was not

unique to the Irish, it was also happening with African Americans and now – since Obama was elected – they can't say that anymore.

“But I do think if it's within the power of any of us, no matter what we have learned or done for a living, that we owe it to the people who got us here, our parents or grandparents or the people before that – all those little short people – you see them on the railings in the photographs of Ellis Island; they are very short with beautiful faces on the women, wary looks – but they're in Florida now, the ones who are still alive – they're called ‘headless drivers’ and you usually see them doing 60 backing out of a driveway – but they were giants.

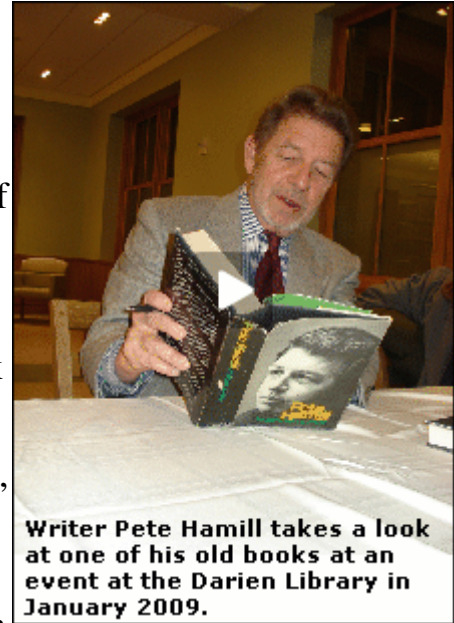
“When you see a Mexican woman leaving an office building at two o'clock in the morning after cleaning up after people who wouldn't hold her coat, remember – that's your mother, grandmother or great-grandmother. So I think whatever can be done by people to get those immigration laws to really work, should be done in the name of the people who gave us the opportunity to make this a different country, to make it one you could be proud of – what Camus once said that he wanted: ‘To love his country and justice, too.’

“We also need to teach some of our own people about the great advantages of immigrants,” he said. “These are the things we should be talking about in the year ahead. It's going to have to be one of the things that gets settled, and it always worked best when tolerance was the heart of the matter.

“We have a chance to do that now, to help those people who do the nastiest jobs so their kids can go to the best universities, so their kids can give us the treasures of art and the literary masterpieces that will end up in places like this if we only give them a hand at the right moment. So, in their names and in the name of my own parents,” he said, “one final reminder: “We're in this together, and if we get a chance to give someone a hand to get up – we better do it.”

Following a short question-and-answer session and rousing ovation, Hamill sat at a table and patiently signed books. To a shy young girl whose mother had volunteered for her that she was thinking of studying journalism – which earlier he'd called “an imperfect craft, especially in a time when the complete notion of newspapers is being shaken by the Internet” – he advised: “Don't give in to your fears. Pursue your dream. Go for it!”

When his turn came, Peter N. Hillman, a Darien lawyer and self-professed Hamill aficionado hauling a canvas bag loaded with hardcover copies of half of Hamill's 10 works of nonfiction and 10 novels, withdrew "Irrational Ravings," the 1971 collection of articles and essays whose title, Hamill pointed out, came from a quote by Spiro T. Agnew (Nixon's disgraced vice president forced to resign after being charged with accepting bribes). Hamill held the book up to his face, contrasting the cover picture of the then-hard-nosed 36-year-old newspaperman with the now-seasoned 73-year-old writer. "Who is that guy?" he asked rhetorically. Then he said that he was worried when he heard Nixon's enemies list was coming out, but, later, relieved to learn "that I was on it."



Writer Pete Hamill takes a look at one of his old books at an event at the Darien Library in January 2009.

Howard V. Sann is a Bridgeport resident and business owner and an occasional contributor to the opinion pages of the Connecticut Post.