



books

THE GANG THAT COULDN'T SHOOT STRAIGHT

A novel by Jimmy Breslin. Viking Press, \$5.95.

by Jeff Greenfield

It's very hard not to think of Jimmy Breslin when you get to know him. This is because he likes to keep in touch—like at 2.30 in the morning the phone will ring, and you shake yourself awake and reach over your wife and wonder who has died or what nut is trying to call what other nut at this insane hour.

"Hullo."

"Wat's dooin?" comes the growl at the other end.

"Jesus Christ, Jimmy, do you know what time it is?"

"Lissen, I seen that guy and he don' know what he's dooin. You better get that other guy out there, he's pretty sharp that other guy."

The first few times this happens you have the uncanny sensation that you have stumbled into a dialogue with Casey Stengel. What you soon learn is that you better stop complaining and start listening, because Breslin *has* seen that guy, and he *don't* know what he's doing, and you *better* get that other guy out there and shut up about it.

He knows what's doing because he cares what's doing. New York is Breslin's town and he guards it like a neurotic mother, prowling its streets and checking in with his contacts to make sure it's holding together. He endorsed my boss, John Lindsay, last fall, and more than anything else I got the sense he did it because he took Mario Procaccino as a personal insult.

But there is more to Breslin than a man with the city in his blood. Since he first got off the sports pages and into the columns, Breslin has had a habit of surprising people. He was written off by many of the Upper West Side set as a right-wing barfly who couldn't spell straight. Then he went to Vietnam, and suddenly a dirty, stupid war that was killing Americans for no good reason was in front of you. He went to Arlington Cemetery in November of 1963, at a time when every writer and report was summoning up solemnity and tragedy and turning into sawdust. And Breslin spoke for a while to the man who dug John Kennedy's grave, and all of a sudden you remembered that what happened was that a vibrant young man had been killed in cold blood. He went on the campaign trail with Robert Kennedy and found a unique political man—and he went out with Nixon and the cardboard cut-out who now reigns

JEFF GREENFIELD, former legislative aide to Robert Kennedy, is now an assistant to Mayor Lindsay.

Newsweek and the New York Times have written his novel off—a coalition which must make Breslin feel like Spiro Agnew. The fact is that "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" is a very funny novel, and if you don't think that's significant, try to think of the last book since "Catch-22" that made you put it down and laugh.

Breslin's plot concerns a rivalry within the Brooklyn Mafia family under the direction of Anthony Pastrumo, Sr.—Baccala to his friends (he doesn't have any) and hierlings (lots). An incompetent lieutenant, Kid Sally Palumbo, wants a bigger piece of the pie, and Baccala lets him try his hand at organizing a six-day bicycle race which the mob will use for gambling purposes. The race turns into total catastrophe, and when Baccala announces that Palumbo is to be humiliated, Kid Sally revolts and the war is on . . . sort of.

Because it turns out that Kid Sally's allies are the most incompetent army since Egypt's. They constantly muff their assignments, bringing upon themselves untimely demises, moving funerals, and new performances by Mrs. Toregressa, "the finest mourner in all of South Brooklyn."

What makes it all work is not so much this rickety plot as the characters from Breslin's world who people the book. There is Big Jelly Catalano, professional degenerate (as a schoolboy, he used to lean over and whisper into girls' ears "sodomy," "period," and "come"). There is Big Mama, offering pithy advice to grandson Kid Sally ("you watch you ass"). There is the Mayor, a tall, good-looking, harassed Protestant (obviously a figment of Breslin's fertile mind). There is a large and hungry lion.

There are also the little gems that flavor the book. Breslin has a two-page history of the FBI and the Mafia that's worth a dozen

cardboard cut-out who now reigns in Washington was shown for what he is, a man with no class and no courage.

Now Breslin has tried his hand at fiction for the first time—officially. And once again, they are selling him short. Both

the Mafia that's worth a dozen National editorials, and a one-paragraph explanation of Italian-Puerto Rican hostility that would take the Times a 40-man task force to find. One caveat—he can't write about sex at all. At one point, describing a liaison between his heroine and a bemused Italian visitor who gets trapped in the gang warfare, you aren't sure whether the girl is making love to the guy or throwing up all over him.

Small pickings. The fact is this is a funny book and a good one—and it's going to make a hell of a movie. I don't know if Breslin's going to direct it, but I wouldn't be shocked. He has a way of surprising you—even when he's not calling at 2.30 in the morning.