

# B-movie guys and dollars

Stephen Hargrave

DAMON RUNYON  
A Life

By Jimmy Breslin  
Hodder & Stoughton, £17.99

DOUBLE CROSS  
The Story of the Man  
who Controlled America  
By Sam and Chuck Giancana  
Macdonald, £16.99

According to his publishers Jimmy Breslin is "America's most colourful and celebrated writer/journalist". To judge from this biography he is one of those colourful and celebrated writer/journalists who cannot resist the temptation to displace their subject, no matter how much more colourful and celebrated that subject might be.

In this case the subject was very promising. Damon Runyon was the great chronicler of the American gangster. He lived among thieves and murderers, went racing and boxing with the likes of Al Capone, and wrote about them a series of short stories later made famous as the musical *Guy and Dolls*. In doing so he sanitised them, made them cuddly; one wants to know why Breslin does not tell us.

Facts are hard to spot in the tangled undergrowth of Breslin's

prose, but it does seem that Runyon was born in the small town of Manhattan, Kansas in 1880. The son of an entrepreneurial journalist, he did his first reporting at 12, later serving in the US Army in the Philippines before moving on to the other Manhattan and an unshakable position as chief low-life feature writer for the Hearst newspaper group. He died in 1946.

Like Runyon, this biography presents us with the lovable side of the gangster lifestyle. They may kill and maim, but they live life to the full and talk like B-movie filmstars. That is partly because Runyon himself set the tone for those movies. In America the hood and the seedy private dick alike are seen in heroic proportions. It says something for the Land of Opportunity that it should celebrate its small-timers thus, and Runyon is a key figure in that tradition.

Breslin largely avoids such speculations, preferring a stream of wisecracks and long digressions in which Runyon himself is forgotten. Thus we are treated to five pages of his father's war dispatches, several more on 1880s print technology, a history of New York's City Hall and dozens of lengthy conversations reported verbatim in direct speech. Unless Runyon owned the world's first

tape recorder, these conversations may have been invented. If this might be false, how much is true?

It is not simply a matter of detail. There is plenty of detail, most of it pointless. Indeed the episodic nature of the text suggests that America's most celebrated writer/journalist must have produced it in the brief pauses between some of his more colourful columns. But we are not really interested (are we?) in what Champ Segal said to Nigger Nate Raymond when George McManus shot Arnie Rothstein; nor are we all that interested in the details, such as Breslin provides, of Runyon's own daily round of race-track, boxing hall and speakeasy. We are interested in what drove a very good writer to spend his life in the gutter.

There are, incidentally, no footnotes, index or photographs.

*Double Cross* has a good index

and plenty of photographs, mostly of people who were up to no good. Its authors are the son and nephew of Chuck "Mooney" Giancana, formerly Mafia boss of Chicago. The book lacks the pretensions of the Runyon biography and is all the better for it. Mooney is presented as a greedy psychopath who not only killed people when he felt like it but made normal life impossible for his own family. This is a camera-angle never used in the B-movies.

The authors rely on Sam's recollection of conversations with his brother. Mooney claimed to have been involved in many major events over the years and the word of a Mob chief is perhaps not the most reliable; but anyone who still believes that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of Jack Kennedy should read this book.

Mooney himself came to the mobster's traditional end in 1975.