

AUTHOR AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST TIMOTHY L. O'BRIEN '80

# Documenting Some of the Defining Moments of Our Time

When asked about his distinguished journalism career, *New York Times* reporter Timothy L. O'Brien '80, uneasy in the *Focus* spotlight, mentions "luck" as a contributing factor.



Timothy L. O'Brien '80 today

But a commitment to doing justice and determination have more to do with the journey O'Brien has made from his days as a Rambler to his work as a highly respected journalist and author.

Connecting themes in O'Brien's body of work paint the picture of a brilliant and innovative writer with a deep sense of social justice. He admits that value was instilled through the combined work of his parents and his experience at Loyola Academy. "I've arrived here thanks to the great friendships I formed at Loyola and the background my parents and my educational experience have given me."



Timothy L. O'Brien in 1980

The seventh of eight children, O'Brien joined the Academy's Jesuit tradition of education in 1976. Years before, his father, the late Arthur O'Brien '42, graduated from Loyola's original site, Dumbach Hall. O'Brien is modest about his accomplishments and was truly surprised when *Focus* approached him about this story. "I'm not much of a role model. I think I spent my first two years at Loyola in 'JUG!'"

Still, after hard work and many achievements at Loyola, O'Brien set out for Georgetown University, where he earned a B.A. in literature, spending his junior year abroad at the University of Sussex.

After graduation, O'Brien combined a desire for travel and commitment to service, spending a year in South America volunteering in Peru. Challenged by brushes with typhoid and fleas, he worked in a small town of about 600 people, raising money and overseeing local development projects. He continued his travels in Japan, teaching English and studying karate.

Teaching was an initial focus for O'Brien professionally. Earning a scholarship to Columbia University, his first foray into graduate school was in a doctoral program in U.S. History. Upon completion of his M.A., he decided against professorship and began his life as a journalist. *National Geographic* was the first assignment for O'Brien in Washington D.C. But New York beckoned, once again, and he returned to teach in the city's public schools.

In New York, O'Brien began to freelance as a journalist. He returned to Columbia, where he earned an M.A. in journalism and an M.B.A. His goal was to begin a magazine, which the collapse of the advertising market during the first Gulf War preempted. However, he continued freelancing for various prominent publications. One series of articles—with a social justice theme—led to his "big break."

O'Brien began writing a series of articles for *The Village Voice* on the collapse of the Freedom National Bank in Harlem. The bank had been started by Jackie Robinson to foster development and grant small business loans in Harlem. Common belief was that the bank was failing because of pressure by regulators due to racism inherent in the banking establishment. An investigation by O'Brien uncovered that members of the bank's own board had looted it. As a result of this reporting, *The Wall Street Journal* offered a job to O'Brien, where he reported from 1992 to 1997.

From there, O'Brien held posts at some of the nation's most respected publications, moving to *The New York Times* in 1997 and,



*TrumpWorld*, O'Brien's latest book due out in October, examines how and why pop culture, business, and the American Dream have come to intersect.

an economic development tool in low-income towns that have lost other forms of industry, that is a problem. And the industry's reliance on compulsive gamblers for a big portion of their revenue is a problem; in that aspect, the industry is predatory."

The upcoming book, *TrumpWorld*, focuses more on sociological observation, looking at the convergence of American pop culture and business in the figure of Donald Trump. O'Brien observes, "Donald Trump is a vehicle for looking at Americana, from casinos to reality television to business. He is a modern-day P.T. Barnum, and the book aims to examine how and why pop culture, business, and the American Dream have come to intersect." O'Brien has been covering Donald Trump as a reporter for 15 years and, as a result, has a great deal of interpersonal experience from which to draw.

As for his day job at *The Times*, O'Brien reflects, "I've been lucky to have a voice that is heard, and I can make a contribution—it's a privilege to work here. The paper allows me to pick my own topics, and I have its resources behind me." His recent subjects have ranged from the continuing threat of online identity theft, the Manhattan art world, and money laundering to investor Warren Buffett and investigations of Russian organized crime.

Still, when it comes to his life, O'Brien is quiet about his accomplishments, crediting his parents, Loyola, and luck more than his own talents. "I've been lucky, and I've lived my life according to values that are important to me." And what he values most today has nothing to do with his career. "My children (as well as family and friends) are more important to me than my work or career." Tim O'Brien, along with his daughter, Greta, 12, and his son, Jeffrey, 9, live in Montclair, New Jersey. †

in 2000, joining former *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* editor Tina Brown in her new venture, *Talk* magazine. When *Talk* folded in 2003, O'Brien returned to *The Times* and has been there ever since.

In addition to his regular reporting for *The Times*, O'Brien's recent work has included two books, 1998's *Bad Bet: The Inside Story of the Glamour, Glitz, and Danger of America's Gambling Industry* and the forthcoming *TrumpWorld*, due out in October. While both books and much of his work revolve around the subject of business, there is an undercurrent of social criticism and observation.

Every reporter has, says O'Brien, "a responsibility to be an advocate for the reader, to ask and answer the questions that the reader wants answers to." *Bad Bet*, for example, looks at the rapidly growing gambling industry and the inherent threats to certain elements of society. He is objective about gambling in a general sense but sees social injustice in some aspects of the trade. "I don't have a moral opposition to gambling. But when it is positioned or used as

## What was he like as a Rambler?

A former teacher and two former classmates give us the inside scoop on Tim O'Brien's Loyola days:

"Tim was a terrific student—articulate, literate, and intelligent. Whenever he handed in papers, and there were many of them, he was head and shoulders one of the better writers in an excellent class. I was not surprised to see that he had taken on writing as his line of work. An eloquent and superb writer as a student, he had a great style to his writing and really knew how to tell a story."

**JOHN D. AIELLO, PH.D.**  
Social Studies Instructor  
Loyola Academy

"Fighting the powerful in professional life and becoming a recognized force through his work has not changed Tim's interest in his old friends. He has always been and still is immediately available to shield us from danger and failure and also to encourage and celebrate our victories. It is Tim's way to give away strength and to thereby make his friends strong."

**MICHAEL D. WHITE '80**  
Home Mortgage Consultant  
Wells Fargo Home Mortgage

"He's really one of the best writers of our time. His personal life, his professional life, and his spiritual life are all about the truth. He is unique in his ability to pull the facts out of people and report the truth. He is tireless in his effort to report and to put it out there so that justice will prevail. That said, he is one of the funniest guys I know. In high school, he was the cut-up! But he was also the one who could really take a stand. He's a friend I value tremendously."

**JOHN J. BETTERMAN '80**  
Private Wealth Advisor



Social Studies Instructor John D. Aiello in 1980



Michael D. White in 1980



John J. Betterman in 1980