

## Damon Runyon Biography

By Jeffrey Couchman

Damon Runyon was a man of many lives—notably a journalist, a fiction writer, and a bona fide New York character. He was born Alfred Damon Runyan in 1880. A newspaper printer accidentally changed the spelling to Runyon in 1900, and several years later an editor on the *New York American* chose to delete “Alfred,” creating the byline Damon Runyon, which would become famous the world over.

Runyon started life in Manhattan, Kansas, and grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, when the West could still be considered wild. According to family legend, Runyon carried a six-gun in his youth, and there is no reason to disbelieve the story. Runyon’s mother died when he was eight years old, and for the next few years he wandered the steel town of Pueblo, playing hooky, smoking cigarettes, and drinking whiskey. (He would swear off drink around 1910, though he replaced alcohol with coffee, drinking some forty cups—by some accounts, sixty cups—a day.)

He also, however, spent time reading in libraries and learned the newspaper business from his father, Alfred Sr., who was a typesetter and partner in a string of Western papers. The *Pueblo Chieftain* published a poem by the eleven-year-old Alfie Runyan, and a year later the boy was working as a reporter on the *Pueblo Evening Press*.

When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Runyon was not old enough to join the army, but the determined young man, not quite eighteen, found his way to San Francisco and wangled his way into a contingent of Minnesota volunteers, who were shipped out to fight insurrection in the Philippines. It is doubtful that Runyon saw action, but he did use the experience to expand his reportorial skills. The *Chieftain* published Runyon’s account of life in Manila—a vivid piece that displayed his already distinctive journalistic voice.

On his return to the States, Runyon jumped from newspaper to newspaper, reporting politics in Denver, writing up sports events in San Francisco. These early years established Runyon’s lifelong fascination with hard-drinking journalists, gamblers, and other tough-minded individualists. His itinerant life, however, ended in 1910 when he married society reporter Ellen Egan and moved to that other Manhattan on the East Coast to become a sportswriter for William Randolph Hearst’s *New York American*. (The marriage would end

twenty years later. Runyon then married a dancer named Patrice Amati Del Grande, who divorced him some six months before his death in December 1946.)

For thirty-five years Runyon was a top sportswriter and featured columnist on the Hearst papers, a dapper man-about-town, and friend to those within and outside the law. (When Al Capone went off to prison he gave Runyon, a dog lover, his two prize whippets.) Runyon brought a keen eye and a personal style to everything he wrote, whether covering baseball games or boxing matches, following General Pershing to Mexico on the hunt for the guerilla leader Francisco "Pancho" Villa, or filing 5,000 words a day on the Lindbergh kidnapping trial ("probably the best American courtroom reporting ever done," according to fellow journalist Jimmy Breslin).

Runyon was also a prolific poet and short-story writer. Between 1907 and 1929, he published volumes of often grimly humorous verse and stories in *Harper's Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan*, and other leading journals of the day. For the Hearst Sunday papers, Runyon wrote a series of stories about "My Old Home Town," employing a style and a narrative stance that evolved into his most famous works about Broadway guys and dolls. Alongside his Broadway yarns, Runyon continued to publish many other stories, including parodies of hard-boiled detective fiction, pieces centering on "My Old Man," and epistolary sketches of an everyday American couple named Joe and Ethel Turp.

As amusing and colorful as these lesser-known works are, they are far surpassed by Runyon's masterful stories about such Broadway characters as Joe the Joker, Dark Dolores, and Sky Masterson. The first of the Broadway tales, "Romance in the Roaring Forties," was published in 1929, and the idiosyncratic world that has come to be known as "Runyonesque" was already on full display. All the Broadway stories are narrated by an anonymous character who is at once a participant in and an observer of events. He speaks in present tense without contractions and employs a patois that is partly a record of language Runyon heard all around him in underworld and sporting circles, but is chiefly the author's own inspired invention.

His work is still in print all over the world and lives on in the many works adapted from his stories. Hollywood has made more than a dozen Runyon movies. The first was Frank Capra's *Lady for a Day* (1933), based on Runyon's touching "Madame La Gimp." Capra remade the story for his final film in 1961, *Pocketful of Miracles*. Runyon provided Shirley Temple with her first starring vehicle, *Little*

*Miss Marker* (1934), a story that Hollywood cannot seem to get enough of, remaking it in 1949 with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (*Sorrowful Jones*), in 1962 with Tony Curtis (*40 Pounds of Trouble*), and once more in 1980 as *Little Miss Marker* (with Walter Matthau and Tony Curtis back as the villain). Runyon's stories were also dramatized on radio for the 1949 program *The Damon Runyon Theater* and on television in yet another *Damon Runyon Theater* as part of the 1955–56 CBS season. The most famous Runyon adaptation, however, is no doubt the 1950 Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls* (music and lyrics by Frank Loesser, book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows), an artful weave of various Runyon stories, including "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown," "Blood Pressure," and "Pick the Winner."

The subtitle of *Guys and Dolls* is "A Musical Fable of Broadway." Runyon's New York is a fabulist's terrain, in some ways a kind of never-never land, yet it remains grounded in the real Broadway landscape of the 1930s and '40s. ("Broadway," as Runyon's son explains, includes "Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues, from 42nd Street to Columbus Circle.") Mindy's restaurant in the stories is a stand-in for the famous Lindy's. Waldo Winchester is modeled on Runyon's journalist friend Walter Winchell. Dave the Dude is a version of the mob boss Frank Costello.

When Runyon died of throat cancer in 1946, his friend Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War I flying ace and president of Eastern Airlines, fulfilled a request in Runyon's will, and from a plane above Times Square scattered the writer's ashes over the Broadway that Runyon loved and immortalized.

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