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52 McGs.: The Best Obituaries From Legendary New York Times Reporter Robert McG. Thomas



Synopsis

Among his devoted fans, his pieces were known simply as McGs. With a "genius for illuminating that sometimes ephemeral apogee in people's lives when they prove capable of generating a brightly burning spark" "(Columbia Journalism Review), " Robert McG. Thomas Jr. commemorated fascinating, unconventional lives with signature style and wit."The New York Times" received countless letters over the years from readers moved to tears or laughter by a McG. Eschewing traditionally famous subjects, Thomas favored unsung heroes, eccentrics, and underachievers, including: Edward Lowe, the inventor of Kitty Litter ("Cat Owner's Best Friend"); Angelo Zuccotti, the bouncer at El Morocco ("Artist of the Velvet Rope"); and Kay Halle, a glamorous Cleveland department store heiress who received sixty-four marriage proposals ("An Intimate of Century's Giants"). In one of his classic obituaries, Thomas described Anton Rosenberg as a "storied sometime artist and occasional musician who embodied the Greenwich Village hipster ideal of 1950's cool to such a laid-back degree and with such determined detachment that he never amounted to much of anything." Thomas captured life's ironies and defining moments with elegance and a gift for making a sentence sing. He had an uncanny sense of the passion and personality that make each life unique, and the ability, as Joseph Epstein wrote, to "look beyond the facts and the rigid formula of the obit to touch on a deeper truth."Compiled by Chris Calhoun, one of Thomas's most dedicated readers, and with a fittingly sharp introduction from acclaimed novelist and critic Thomas Mallon, "52 McGs." will win legions of new fans to the masterful writer who transformed the obituary into an art form.

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Customer Reviews

There are two great experiences in newspaper reading, one if the wedding announcements in the Sunday NY Times, the other is the obituary page every day. No other paper does it the way the Times does, putting a smile on my face even as a life passes before us. The greatest NYT obituary writer of all was Robert McG. Thomas; and nobody laughed louder at his witty and ironic observations than Chris Calhoun, the famous book editor at Sterling Lord who compiled this neat deck of 52 of Thomas' wryest and wittiest obituaries. From a Jewish matordor, to the guy who buried Lee Harvey Oswald to a character whose main claim to fame was that he was the guy the three stooges stuck in the eye all the time, Its uproarious. Just a couple of examples: In an obituary of a guy who discovered a stone age tribe in the Philipines, Thomas ponders whether they were really primitives or it was all a hoax. Either way, he writes, "It was a reflection of their rapid acculturalization that in 1988 several members of the tribe filed a libel suit against anthropologists who called them fakers." That one cracked me up. So did the one about a woman who won a lottery. The real story was she loved cats and spent all her money on cats; but they she died because she was allerigic to them. Well, it was funny to me. Then there is one about a famous genealogist who ended up disproving his wife's claime to be a descendant of one of the founding fathers. That one ends with a quote from a son saying he has not interst in the topic noting, " We were victimese of genealogical overkill."Like the subjects of the obits, this is all subtle. These are not obits of famous people, most had brushes with greatness like the skit on the Letterman show.

Read 52 MCGS: THE BEST OBITUARIES FROM LEGENDARYNEW YORK TIMES WRITER ROBERT MCG. THOMAS, JR. . . . thisis a quirky, fascinating compilation of obituaries about unsungheroes, eccentrics and underachievers . . . among the inclusions were Edward Lowe, the inventor of Kitty Litter ("Cat Owner's Best Friend"); Angelo Zuccotti, the bouncer at El Morocco ("Artist of the Velvet Rope"); and Kay Halle, a glamorous Cleveland department store heiress who received 64 marriage proposals ("An Intimate of Century's Giants").Thomas never got to put these pieces into book form. He died, but a fan of his work decided that his work should live on . . . and I'm glad this was the case . . . Thomas had the gift of being able to find something worth writing about--regardless of the subject . . . my only regret is that all obituaries in loca papers aren't as interesting . .. but as long as I don't come across mine, I won't complain!There were several memorable passages; among them:[in an obituary about Francine Katzenbogen] Her neighbors

were not amused that she planned to house 20 cats in a converted two-story garage she had refurbished at a cost of \$100,000. The luxurious cat complex included tile floors, climbing towers, scratching posts, skylights and cozy, low-lying window ledges where the cats could stretch out and watch the world outside their air-conditioned lair. Not content to recognize a Brooklyn accent, Mr. Berger drew on his broader knowledge of American speech and history to develop a theory of just how the signature "Toidy-told Street" evolved.

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