

New York Times Book Review

Michael R. Brands/Associated Press

Hunter S. Thompson



Hunter S. Thompson, the maverick journalist and author whose savage chronicling of the underbelly of American life and politics embodied a new kind of nonfiction writing he called "gonzo journalism," died yesterday in Colorado. Tricia Louthis, of the Pitkin County Sheriff's Office, said Mr. Thompson had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his home in Woody Creek, Colo., yesterday afternoon. He was 67.

Mr. Thompson, a magazine and newspaper writer who also wrote almost a dozen books, was perhaps best known for his book, "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," which became a Hollywood movie in 1998. But he was better known for his hard-driving lifestyle and acerbic eye for truth which he used in the style of first-person reporting that came to be known as "gonzo" in the 1960's, where the usually-anonymous reporter becomes a central character in the story, a conduit of subjectivity.

"Nobody really knows what it means, but it sounds like an epithet," he said in an interview that, for him, journalism "can be an effective political tool."

Hunter Stockton Thompson was born in Louisville, Ky, on July 18, 1937, the son of an insurance agent. He was educated in the public school system and joined the United States Air Force after high school. There, he was introduced to journalism, covering sports for an Air Force newspaper at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. He was honorably discharged in 1958 and then worked a series of jobs writing for small-town newspapers.

It was in the heat of deadline that gonzo journalism was born while he was writing a story about the Kentucky Derby for Scanlan's magazine, he recounted years later in an

interview in Playboy magazine.

"I'd blown my mind, couldn't work," he told Playboy. "So finally I just started jerking pages out of my notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer. I was sure it was the last article I was ever going to do for anybody."

Instead, he said, the story drew raves and he was inundated with letters and phone calls from people calling it "a breakthrough in journalism," an experience he likened to "falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool of mermaids."

He went on to become a counter cultural hero with books and articles that skewered America's hypocrisy.

"He wrote to provoke, shock, protest and annoy," Timothy Crouse wrote in his book "The Boys on the Bus," about the 1972 presidential campaign.

Mr. Thompson's pioneering first-person, at times over-the-top, writing style influenced a generation of writers.

As a young man, he was heavily influenced by Jack Kerouac and wholeheartedly followed Kerouac's approach in which the writer revels in his struggles with writing.

Among his books were "Hell's Angels," "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72," "The Great Shark Hunt," "Generation of Swine" and "Songs for the Doomed."



On the Trail Again

By ESTHER B. FEIN

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It may sound hard to believe, but Hunter S. Thompson, the cynical, drug-infused, strange,

gonzo guru and expert on self-medication, actually sounded giddy, like a pee-wee football player whose team had won its first game.

"You can beat City Hall," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Woody Creek, Colo., where he is still obviously high (emotionally) over Bill Clinton's defeat of George Bush in the Presidential election.

"It was fun, real fun," he said of the campaign and the victory, about which he is writing in his next book, "Better Than Sex: Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail 1992," due in the spring from Random House. "When I covered the campaign trail in '72, that was fun. I did it again in '76 with Jimmy Carter, but that was not fun. I tried to stay out of it this time, avoid it. Stay away. Made a conscious decision not to get involved. But it crept into my life like kudzu vine. Just took over." Original 'Fear' Still Popular

Mr. Thompson (who prefers the honorific Dr., although no one is sure what he is doctor of) gave a wild and generational spin to the traditional campaign book with his classic "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72" (Warner Books, 1974), his psychedelic and psychotropic record of George S. McGovern's failed run against Richard M. Nixon for the Presidency.

That book continues to be very popular, and since 1985, when Random House Inc. began keeping computerized records, it has sold more than 700,000 copies in its Ballantine paperback edition, said David Rosenthal, Mr. Thompson's editor at the Random House adult trade division. The book has sold more than 1.5 million copies overall in paperback and hard cover.

Random House has scheduled a 100,000-copy first printing for the new book (for which the company paid in the mid-six figures, people involved in the negotiations said).

His new book will not be so much a chronicle as the original, Mr. Thompson said. He admits having become intensely involved with the Clinton staff. "I was down there for election night, day week, taking care of business," he said, his voice a raspy trail. "I'm a junkie -- for campaigns. Even as I tried to stay away to write my novel -- it's about sex; I'm halfway through it -- I knew it would happen." There's Always Paraguay

He describes the book as a collection of documents, memos, communications, and notes between himself and members of the Clinton staff. And he is completely open about the book's partisan nature.

He said he was planning to move to Paraguay if Mr. Bush had been re-elected. "It's a weird little place," said Mr. Thompson, who is 54 years old. "It's about as far away from anything as you can imagine. Old Nazis go there. It's 50, maybe 100 years behind everything."

Four more years of a Bush Administration, he said, "would have pretty much closed down this generation, my generation, in politics."

He said he felt "vaguely responsible" for Mr. Clinton's victory. "I made a very strong statement urging people to aggressively vote for him, and then I got deeply involved with him and his staff people," Mr. Thompson said. "It would have been humiliating to lose against that creature again." 3 on Thompson

Mr. Thompson has apparently become an official totem of his generation: three biographies of him are planned for early next year. And in case there was any doubt what kind of impression Mr. Thompson has left on the American psyche, one need only observe the subtitles of the three impending books.

"Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson," by Paul Perry, is to be published by Thunder's Mouth Press in January. A month later, E. P. Dutton is to release "Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson," by E. Jean Carroll. For April, Hyperion has planned "When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson," by Peter Whitmer.

When Mr. Thompson learned that three biographies about him were in the works, he responded, "Man, even Faulkner didn't have that many books written about him before he died." Ready for Expansion

Poets and Writers Inc., the only national nonprofit literary organization that both acts as a clearinghouse for information and offers financial support for fiction writers and poets, has a lot to celebrate at its annual fund-raising dinner-dance, tomorrow night at the University Club in Manhattan.

The group, founded in 1970, recently announced that it received a \$1 million grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to expand its readings and workshops program to nine Midwestern states beginning next year.

The program, which has been active in New York State for 22 years and in California since 1989, supports poets, fiction writers and literary performance artists by matching the usually modest fees they receive for readings and workshops sponsored by a variety of organizations. The grant will allow Poets and Writers to finance similar programs in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, in addition to maintaining its activities in New York and California.

Among the writers helped by Poets and Writers in the early days of their careers are Erica Jong, Terry McMillan and Tama Janowitz.

Poets and Writers sponsors other programs to help fledgling fiction writers and poets. They include the publications program, which publishes "A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers," "Literary Agents: A Writer's Guide" and a bimonthly magazine, Poets & Writers; the information center, which answers queries by telephone and letter from authors about literary and financial subjects, and the writers' exchange, which brings four promising poets and fiction writers to New York each year to introduce them

to publishers, editors, agents and new audiences.

'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas'

Reviewed by CRAWFORD WOODS

Published: July 23, 1972

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FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream.

By Hunter S. Thompson.

e were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." The hold deepens for two days, and the language keeps pace for 200 pages, in what is by far the best book yet written on the decade of dope gone by.

"Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" is a number of things, most of them elusive on first reading and illusory thereafter. A solid second act by the author of "Hell's Angels," it is an apposite gloss on the more history-laden rock lyrics ("to live outside the law you must be honest") and-- Don Quixote in a Chevy--a trendy English teacher's dream, a text for the type who teaches Emily Dickinson and Paul Simon from the same mimeograph sheet. It is, as well, a custom-crafted study of paranoia, a spew from the 1960's and--in all its hysteria, insolence, insult, and rot--a desperate and important book, a wired nightmare, the funniest piece of American prose since "Naked Lunch."

Its author comes complete with more than fair credentials for the venture. His previous book, "Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs," was a running history of that evil club (whose members first accepted him and ended by stomping him) and a hard-breathing assault on "media rape," which is what Thompson calls the methodical misrepresentation of the Angels--and just about everything else--by

the traditional press. A hatred of journalists and journalism burns deep in the new book as well, though it must be self-hatred to a considerable degree: Thompson has worked as a sportswriter in Florida, as South American correspondent for *The National Observer*, and is now covering the Presidential race for *Rolling Stone*. (He brings to this assignment, with considerable success, the hellish methods of "Gonzo journalism" developed in "Fear and Loathing.")

After the elections, he will no doubt be found at his home in Woody Creek, Colo., raising unpleasant dogs and cleaning his handguns--the same recovery act he did after "Hell's Angels," at which time he also ran for sheriff of Aspen under the flag of Freak Power, drawing national attention and upsetting local novelist Leon Uris no end. Not to mention the Democrats, who, Thompson later claimed, owed him the governorship of American Samoa.

What a lot of madness! These are the tracks of a man who might be dismissed as just another savage-sixties kook, were it not for the fact that he has already written himself into the history of American literature, in what I suspect will be a permanent way. Because, regardless of individual reader-reactions, his new book is a highballing heavyweight, whose ripples spread from Huckleberry Finn to F. Scott's Rockville grave.

The bones of the story are no more than spareribs. Thompson ("Raoul Duke" in the book), under contract to *Sports Illustrated*, travels with his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, to Las Vegas. They have been summoned to cover a dirt-track motorcycle race, the Mint 400, by a mysterious phone call. "But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism."

Down the desert. The trunk of their car looks like a "mobile police narcotics lab"; a towel soaked in ether washes vapors over them from the floorboards. But their reception in the city is none too friendly, even when they represent themselves as the factory crew of the Vincent Black Shadow, the world's most frightening motorcycle--perhaps because they are stoned into a state of sustained paranoia that turns everyone they deal with into some sort of reptilian foe.

A flurry of picaresque disasters alters their plans as the dope alters their minds. Drug and dream, event and recollection become inseparable. (Thompson now says that when he rereads his book he can't remember what he made up and what really happened. Pure Gonzo journalism. Pure Gonzo fiction.)

But the sporting life collapses in any case when a wire comes from *Rolling Stone*, keeping the crew in Las Vegas to report on a national district attorneys' conference on dangerous drugs. Coverage of the conference is the book's centerpiece. It includes an imbecilic meeting of narcotics agents, where the officers are solemnly assured that a marijuana butt is called a roach "because it resembles a cockroach"; and a macabre, incredibly funny conversation with a Georgia cop, who is warned of a smackhead migration to his state because they like warm weather. Vegas, Duke decides, "is not a

good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted."

The book is about that twisting. Like Mailer's, Thompson's American dream is a fanfare of baroque fantasy. It should not, despite its preemptive title, be mistaken for a synopsis of the American experience (even though the narrator comes to think of himself as a "monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger"). But its limits are no narrower than the limits of lunacy, and its method is as adventurous as any to be found in all the free-fire-zone writing of the past dozen years.

"Writing" is as exact a label as the book will carry. Neither novel nor nonfiction, it arrives with fashion's special sanction. Its roots are in the particular sense of the nineteen-sixties that a new voice was demanded--by the way people's public and private lives were coming together in a sensual panic stew, with murder its meat and potatoes, grass and acid its spice. How to tell the story of a time when all fiction was science fiction, all facts lies? The New Journalism was born.

But who taps fashion for wisdom gets poison in the sap, and "Fear and Loathing" is the quick assassin of the form it follows. Not the least of Thompson's accomplishments is to suggest that, by now, the New Journalism is to the world what the New Criticism was to the word: seductive, commanding--and, finally, inadequate. The form that reached apotheosis in "Armies of the Night" reaches the end of its rope in "Fear and Loathing," a chronicle of addiction and dismemberment so vicious that it requires a lot of resilience to sense that the author's purpose is more moralizing than sadistic. He is moving in a country where only a few cranky survivors-- Jonathan Swift for one--have gone before. And he moves with the cool integrity of an artist indifferent to his reception.

For the things the book mocks--hippies, Leary, Lennon, journalism, drugs themselves--are calculated to throw Thompson to the wolves of his own subculture. And the language in which it mocks them is designed to look celebratory to the stolid reader, and debased to established critics. This book is such a mind storm that we may need a little time to know that it is also, ting! literature.

Much the same thing happened with Henry Miller--with whom Thompson has perhaps even more kinship than with Burroughs. Hero of all his books, drowning in sex and drink, Miller makes holy what Thompson makes fundamental: appetite. In both writers, the world is celebrated/excoriated through the senses. But the taste of the one is for rebellion, of the other for apocalypse writ small.

Apart from the artistry, it is a modestly eschatological vision that lifts "Fear and Loathing" from the category of mere funky reminiscence. It unfolds a parable of the nineteen-sixties palatable to those of us who lived them in a mood--perhaps more melodramatic than astute--of social strife, surreal politics and the chemical feast. And it does so in language that retires neither into the watery sociology of the news weeklies nor the zoo-Zen of the more verbally hip. Far out. Thompson trusts the authority of his senses, and the clarity of a brain poised between brilliance and burnout.

"We are all wired into a survival trip now," he notes, "No more of the speed that fueled the Sixties. . . a generation of permanent cripples who never understood the essential fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody. . . is tending the Light at the end of the tunnel."

The book's highest art is to be the drug it is about, whether chemical or political. To read it is to swim through the highs and lows of the smokes and fluids that shatter the mind, to survive again the terror of the politics of unreason. Since plot has been scrapped, the whole thing must be done in the details, in cameo sketches and weird encounters that flare and fade into the backdrop of the reader's imagination. These details are technically accurate, which is a contemporary form of literary precision, with all ambiguity intact.

The same accuracy is preserved in the use of drugs as metaphor. The suggestion is that to drop acid in 1966 was to seek the flower at the heart of the cosmos, but to shoot heroin in 1972 is to hide from the pain of the President's face. ("It is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon. . .") Dope--once mystic, private and ecstatic--has become just another way to kiss goodbye.

'The Great Shark Hunt'

Reviewed by JOHN LEONARD

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THE GREAT SHARK HUNT

Strange Tales from a Strange Time.

By Hunter S. Thompson.

n 1973, Hunter S. Thompson--self-styled doctor of divinity, chemotherapy and "gonzo" journalism--had a dream or nightmare or vision or hallucination or the bends. Here is what he imagined:

"Our Barbie Doll President, with his Barbie Doll wife and his boxful of Barbie Doll children is also America's answer to the monstrous Mr. Hyde. He speaks for the Werewolf in us; the bully, the predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string- warts, on nights when the moon comes too close. . . at the stroke of midnight in Washington, a drooling red-eyed beast with the legs of a man and the head of a giant hyena crawls out of its bedroom window in the south wing of the White House and leaps 50 feet down to the lawn. . . paused briefly to strangle the Chow watchdog, then races off into the darkness. . . towards the Watergate, snarling with lust, loping through the alleys behind Pennsylvania Avenue, and trying desperately to remember which one of those 400 identical balconies is the one outside Martha Mitchell's apartment. . ."

Is this fair to Richard Milhous Nixon? The Columbia Journalism Review certainly wouldn't think so. But Dr. Thompson is seldom, if ever, fair. And he is always hallucinating. At Super Bowl VIII in Houston, for instance, he attends a party at John B. Connally's house; Allen Ginsberg is there, and 13 thoroughbred horses are slaughtered, "by drug-crazed guests with magnesium butcher knives." At the Senate Watergate hearings, he slips an "ostrich lasso" over the head of Herbert W. Kalmbach and jerks him into the bleachers. In Aspen, Colo., where he is running for sheriff, he confronts his natural constituency, the freaks, who insist on voting two weeks before the election and who then gobble up their own candidates.

Craving Our Credulity

We are asked in this collection of Dr. Thompson's magazine articles and snippets from his books to imagine the forced urinalysis of Representative Harley O. Staggers of West Virginia; Jean- Claude Killy ordering from room service a cattle prod and two female iguanas; Senator Edmund S. Muskie strung out on Ibogaine, and Dr. Thompson himself up in a crow's nest, splitting "a cap of black acid with John Chancellor." When Mr. Nixon's lawyer J. Fred Buzhardt Jr. first hears the June 23, 1972, "smoking gun" tape and has a heart attack, Dr. Thompson assures us that we will never see him alive again because H. R. Haldeman will sneak into the hospital "and stick a hatpin up his nose while he's wasted on Demerol, jam it straight into his brain. . ."

Enough. Along with his hallucinations, Dr. Thompson relies on pills, joints, beer, Wild Turkey Bourbon and buzz words. Many of these buzz words are unprintable. His favorite printable verbs are "lashed" and "addled." The modifiers are usually "terminal" and "atavistic." The nouns include thug, drone, swine, gunsels, landraper, greedhead, waterhead, leech, hyena, banshee, wolverine, dingbat, fascist and, again and again, geek.

A geek, you'll remember, is the guy in the circus sideshow who bites off the heads of live chickens. In a number of ways on various occasions--at the Super Bowl, the Kentucky Derby and the America's Cup yacht race--Dr. Thompson has behaved like a journalistic geek.

But a book reviewer, unlike a doctor of gonzo journalism, is supposed to be fair. There are some chickens that need their heads bitten off. And there are some sections of "The Great Shark Hunt," reprinted from such unlikely periodicals as *The Reporter*, *The National Observer* and *The New York Times* magazine, that are surprisingly straight, ungeeky and often quite moving. We are reminded that Dr. Thompson, who considers himself an outlaw, was from the beginning attracted to those who were outside the protection of the law or who were oppressed by that law.

He took his chances, of course, with the Hell's Angels, and he should have left Las Vegas alone, but he also went where establishment reporters were reluctant to go--to East Los Angeles to talk to the Chicanos; to Olympia, Wash., to listen to the Amerindians; to Louisville, Ky., to report on the blacks; to Brazil and Colombia and Bolivia and Ecuador and Peru. The fear and loathing that he found in these places was not a hallucination. The rage he acquired seems inexhaustible.

He became, in the late 1960's, our point guard, our official crazy, patrolling the edge. He reported back that the paranoids were right, and they were. The cool inwardness of a Joan Didion, the hugging of the self as if to keep from cracking up, is not for him. He inhabits his nerve endings; they are on the outside, like the skin of a baby; he seeks thumbprints. The failure of the counterculture--"which values the Instant Reward. . . over anything involving a time lag between the Effort and the End"--to develop a coherent politics infuriates him. "It is," he says, "the flip side of the 'Good German' syndrome."

He is also, as if this needs to be said, hilarious. It is nice to think of him naked on his porch in Colorado, drinking Wild Turkey and shooting at rocks. Somewhere, beyond John Denver, he smells injustice. Scales grow on his torso; wings sprout on his feet. Up, up and away. . . it's Captain Paranoid! The Duke of Gonzo! Super Geek!