

## BOOK REVIEW

## Some Kind of Journalist

*Hunter S. Thompson: prolific, Bible-loving, workaholic*

BY DAVID GATES

"WELL, FUCK THE COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW," Hunter S. Thompson said in a 1974 *Playboy* interview, responding to a question about CJR's attacks on his objectivity and credibility. The only hope for the *Review*, he wrote four years later, in *The Great Shark Hunt*, would come when "the current editor dies of brain syphilis." A lot of water's gone over the dam since then—or else you wouldn't be reading this—and the scandalous and scurrilous Thompson's ashes have been launched, according to his wishes, from a custom-designed cannon over his home in Woody Creek, Colorado, to the tune of "Mr. Tambourine Man."

The gala sendoff after his suicide in 2005 cost \$2.5 million. The money was put up by his friend Johnny Depp, who played him in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Terry Gilliam's here-today-gone-tomorrow film of Thompson's most enduring book. By then, Thompson had become—to his obvious pleasure, and perhaps to his private consternation—a revered, if still bracingly disreputable, figure in American literature. The term "gonzo," which he first embraced and then came to dislike, had made it into the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style." His friends and admirers included such respectables as George Plimpton, Ed Bradley, Charles Kuralt, and Douglas Brinkley, who became his literary executor. George McGovern was the featured speaker at his funeral. And in *The Wall Street Journal* (of all places), Tom Wolfe compared him to Mark Twain and judged him "the greatest comic writer of the 20th century."

But the old enmity between Thompson and mainstream journalism lives again in two new books: William McKeen's *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* and a paperback collection of interviews and profiles called *Conversations With Hunter S. Thompson*. They deserve to be read together. Even a biography as thorough as McKeen's has room for only so many digressive glimpses of the man, and you don't want to miss Richard Keil's white-knuckle account of sitting in the passenger seat with Thompson at the wheel, or the self-styled Doctor's judicious diagnosis (from Ron Rosenbaum's 1977 *High Times* interview) of

**Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson**  
by William McKeen  
W.W. Norton, 448 pages, \$27.95

**Conversations With Hunter S. Thompson**  
Edited by Beef Torrey and Kevin Simonson  
University Press of Mississippi  
240 pages, \$22

Jimmy Carter's mix of Puritanism and libertarianism: "He'd put me in jail in an instant if he saw me snorting coke in front of him. He would not, however, follow me into the bathroom and try to catch me snorting it."

Both books devote much attention to Thompson's running feud with the journalistic establishment—and his attraction to it. As a young and unknown reporter for the *National Observer*, he initiated a cheeky correspondence with arch-insider and *Washington Post* publisher Philip Graham, concluding one letter with, "I'm beginning to think you're a phony, Graham." It was a paradoxical, even perverse, way of courting approval. But it worked—they were pen pals until Graham's suicide in 1963—as, in the long run, Thompson's provocations usually did. Had Graham lived, Thompson once speculated, the founder (and really, sole practitioner) of gonzo journalism "could have been the editor of *The Washington Post*."

Where Thompson and the mainstream diverge most glaringly is over the question of objectivity. Of course even the most rigid journalistic purist would agree that, strictly speaking, there can be no such thing: what the word really means is a good-faith effort to be fair and (though the expression has become miserably discredited) balanced. But Thompson's sense of morality overrode any impulse he might have had to place himself at a remove and see both sides of a story. "Objective journalism is one of the main reasons American politics has been allowed to be so corrupt for so long," he told Matthew Hahn in a 1997 interview with *Atlantic Online*. "You can't be objective about Nixon." In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, his account of the 1972 presidential race originally published in *Rolling Stone*, Thompson's liberation from the constraints of objectivity produces both a flow of ecstatic invective—Hubert Humphrey, he writes, is "a treacherous, gutless old ward-heeler"—and such novelistic insights as Edmund Muskie's talking "like a farmer with terminal cancer trying to borrow money on next year's crop." Some reporters from the mainstream press had contempt for this flouting of professionalism. Others, according to his *Rolling Stone* colleague

Timothy Crouse, got “a vicarious, Mit-tyesque thrill” from reading what they secretly thought but were forbidden to say. Frank Mankiewicz, George McGovern’s chief political adviser, called Thompson’s dispatches “the most accurate and the least factual” reporting on the campaign.

In some moods, Thompson denied he was a reporter at all. “I’m a writer,” he told *Playboy*. “Nobody gives Norman Mailer this kind of shit. I’ve never tried to pose as a goddamn reporter. I don’t defend what I do in the context of straight journalism.” But he never denied he was *some* kind of journalist; it was just that he was ambivalent about the whole enterprise. “The best people in journalism”—David Halberstam and Harrison Salisbury were two he always praised—“I’ve never had a quarrel with. I am a journalist, and I’ve never met, as a group, any tribe I’d rather be a part of or that are more fun to be with.” Or so he told McKeen in 1990. Two years earlier, in his introduction to *A Generation of Swine*, he’d written that “I have spent half my life trying to get away from journalism, but I am still mired in it—a low trade and a habit worse than heroin, a strange seedy world of misfits and drunkards and failures.” (Gee, Hunter, you say it like it’s a bad thing.) Thompson was hardly the consummate professional: editors often had to piece together and sequence the fragments he turned in for publication. On the other hand, he was a meticulous stylist, seldom if ever guilty of grammatical lapses, and his reputation—richly deserved—as a drug-crazed Lord of Misrule obscured a more-than-Protestant work ethic. He often started writing after everyone else had turned in or passed out, but he knew “you’ve got to have pages in the morning. I measure my life in pages. If I have pages at dawn, it’s been a good night.”

Thompson’s great journalistic innovation, though, was to subvert the very idea of journalism. In his best work, the real story was Thompson getting the story—as in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72* and even in his far more conventional 1966 book *Hell’s Angels*—or better still, failing to get it, as in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. After snagging an assignment to cover a motorcycle race in the desert for *Sports*

*Illustrated* (which rejected the copy he turned in), Thompson traveled to Vegas with Oscar Zeta Acosta, an activist Chicano attorney and fellow drug aficionado whom he was trying to interview for another piece, and ran amok. “We were somewhere near Barstow,” his report began, “on the edge of the desert, when the drugs began to take hold.” What follows is a phantasmagoria involving speeding cars, casinos, drug abuse, a National District Attorneys

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Conference on drug abuse, the “American Dream”—on which subject Thompson had been contracted to do a book for Random House, and which turned out to be the name of a burned-down nightclub—and, incidentally, the Mint 400 motorcycle race. Thompson calls himself Raoul Duke; Acosta has become a Samoan named Dr. Gonzo. The expenses they ran up, according to McKeen, caused American Express to ban Thompson for life. As to its journalistic value, the whole book is, as they say, too good to check.

Thompson, for whom modesty was no virtue, called *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a “masterwork.... It’s as good as *The Great Gatsby* and better than *The Sun Also Rises*.” We can argue about the merits of this comparison, but it’s telling that he chose to measure his work against two novels. (*Fear and Loathing* has been called a novel, but not by

Thompson himself.) To think of fiction as a nobler calling is the journalist’s traditional mode of self-disparagement—the novel-in-the-drawer syndrome—and Thompson, an original in most other respects, took the cliché to heart. In 1979, journalist Toby Thompson (no relation) plucked up his courage and told him: “‘Everything you publish these days seethes with a contempt you bring to journalism.’ Hunter stared at me. ‘There are not many people who get that,’ he said.” As a young writer, Thompson would type out passages from Faulkner and Hemingway to absorb their styles; when he was in his sixties, he still felt “I was basically meant for higher things. Novels.” His first serious work, in 1961, was a novel called *The Rum Diary*, which he finally published, in much-revised form (and to little acclaim) in 1999. In a 1993 interview for *Spin*, Thompson told Kevin Simonson, “I always had and still do have an ambition to write fiction. I’ve never had any real ambition within journalism, but events and fate and my own sense of fun keep taking me back for money, political reasons, and because I’m a warrior.”

Apparently he was just born that way. In McKeen’s words, he was “wired different.” His elementary-school principal in Louisville, Kentucky, called him “Little Hitler,” and one schoolmate recalled that he “almost had demonic power.” When he was nine, FBI agents came to his parents’ door, accusing him of vandalizing a mailbox; he missed his high-school graduation because he was serving a jail term for ripping off somebody’s wallet. “What do you think made Hunter the way he is?” his straight-arrow older brother, a Cleveland insurance man, asked one of their boyhood friends at Thompson’s memorial. Thompson himself once speculated that “there may be some genetic imperative that caused me to get into certain situations”—or, as he put it in his *Playboy* interview, he was “a natural freak.”

His compulsive productivity is one indication. In addition to his published books, some twenty thousand of his letters survive. (Before the days of photocopying, he made carbons.) Those collected a decade ago in *The Proud Highway* add up to nearly seven hundred printed pages, which only takes us from

1955 to 1967—and Douglas Brinkley, who edited the volume, says he included only one letter out of every fifteen. Whether or not Thompson's energy came from drugs—he once said he used only tobacco and Wild Turkey “regularly” while writing—it was scary to behold. Timothy Crouse remembers watching him at his IBM Selectric, “his elbows out to the sides, sitting up very straight, and then he would get this sort of electric jolt and start to type. He'd type a sentence and then wait again with his arms out, and he would get another jolt and type another sentence.” In a 2003 profile for *Relix*, Jesse Jarnow noticed that Thompson talked the same way: “He speaks in tight bursts, quickly stopping and starting, as if allowing his hands time to type. I've never understood. What a memoir. Really.”

Certainly Thompson could function after consuming quantities of drugs that would immobilize—at best—a more chemically sensitive soul. “There are very few things that can really beat driving around the Bay Area on a good summer night—big motorcycle, head full of acid,” he told Rosenbaum in his *High Times* interview. Thompson's self-mythologizing may have encouraged tall tales about his exploits. “Obviously, my drug use is exaggerated,” he said in 1990, “or I would be long since dead.” But if he ingested a tenth of all the LSD, mescaline, speed, cocaine, and cannabis (often in combination) that he himself claimed, he was, to quote McKeen, “a genetic miracle.” He also drank constantly, “probably enough during a twenty-four-hour span to render a minor-league infield unconscious,” McKeen writes. “He breakfasted on bloody marys and beer and drank Wild Turkey and Chivas by the tumbler, but he was rarely shit-faced.” In his *Playboy* interview, he claimed to have spent \$1,400 on cocaine just to finish one section of one *Rolling Stone* story—and that was in 1974 dollars.

You'd think that these habits, combined with his fondness for shooting off guns and his Tourettec abusiveness—he once told his son Juan, then a toddler, to bring him cigarettes or he'd “rip his balls off”—would have made Thompson a pariah. In fact, he was widely and deeply, though hardly universally, beloved. His

house at Woody Creek became a salon, superintended in his later years by a succession of devoted assistants and lovers—one often becoming the other. His devotees were hard to alienate: a pair of college interns whom he'd menaced with an ax came back to work for him a week later. In 1983, he traduced socialite Roxanne Pulitzer in *Rolling Stone* as “an incorrigible coke slut.... In six and a half years of marriage, she had humped almost everything she could get her hands on.... At thirty-one, she looks more like a jaded senior stewardess from Pan Am than an international sex symbol.” But after she lost custody of her children in a divorce trial, he apologized to her for years, and ultimately won her over: “I really grew to love him,” Pulitzer tells McKeen. Somewhere inside the bad boy, people saw the good man—just as the ferocity of his political writing ultimately failed to hide the patriot, the moralist, even the prophet. “I have stolen more quotes and thoughts and purely elegant little starbursts of writing from the Book of Revelation,” he wrote in *Generation of Swine*, “than anything else in the English language.”

Thompson was sixty-seven when he ended his life: young by actuarial standards, but older than he ever thought he would be. He'd had a hip replaced and he was in constant pain from nerves impinging on his spine. A month before his death, during a trip to New Orleans, Thompson planned to attend a party given by his politico friend James Carville, but he was in a wheelchair and wouldn't let people carry him up to the dining room. And he knew what everyone else knew: that he'd done his best work twenty years before. Brinkley, like Thompson's first wife, Sandy, partly blames cocaine—which Thompson called “a worthless drug” even as he snorted it—for the long, slow slide. And self-inflicted celebrity got in his way. After the 1972 campaign, he was too famous to do much reporting: wherever he went, he became the story, no longer just for himself, but for other reporters. *Rolling Stone* miscast him as a war correspondent during the fall of Saigon in 1975: he missed the evacuation while trying to buy eavesdropping equipment in another part of the city. The previous year, he'd gone to Zaire for the Ali-Foreman fight, and missed that, too. He

was in the hotel pool, floating around with a pound and a half of pot he'd thrown in—and he didn't even file *that* story. For the rest of his career, he was essentially an armchair commentator, retooling his Nixon-era outrage to fit Ronald Reagan, Bush forty-one, Bush forty-three.

It's painful to read the accounts, both in McKeen's biography and in *Conversations*, of the aging Thompson commanding his Woody Creek visitors to read his work aloud, and insisting that they slow down in order to bring out the rhythmic nuances. You can't help but be reminded of King Lear coercing his daughters to demonstrate their love through flattery: it suggests an unassuageable insecurity. Sandy, who asked him for a divorce in 1978 when she could stand no more of his drugging and womanizing, considers Thompson a failure on his own terms. “He was a tortured, tragic figure,” she told McKeen. “I do not think he was a great writer.... He had the genius, the talent, and, early on, the will and the means. He was horrified by whom [sic] he had become and ashamed.... He knew he had failed. He knew his writing was absolutely not great. This was part of the torture. And yet, he could never climb back. The image, the power, the drugs, the alcohol, the money... all of it... he never became that great American writer he had wanted to be. Nowhere close. And he knew it.”

But how much great work can any writer do in a lifetime? Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Faulkner and Twain, all produced more tailings than gold. Thompson left us one canonical classic (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), the funniest and darkest book ever written about the American political process (*Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*), and volumes of letters rivaled in American literature only by those of Ezra Pound for their voice and vigor. It should have been enough to satisfy anybody but Thompson himself. **CJR**

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