

The Life and Legend of Hunter S. Thompson

Hunter S. Thompson was a pioneer in the invention and practice of gonzo journalism - a form of journalistic writing that places the author in the first person narrative. Thompson entertained audiences with his idiosyncratic subjects. He normally wrote about criminals and drug addicts. This complemented Thompson's distinctive writing style. However, it also informed audiences of a neglected population that was affected by corruption, drugs, and new free spirited attitudes. Through his legacy and the development of gonzo journalism, blogging and social media blossomed. Hunter S. Thompson has been seen as just an entertaining joke, but he is more than that. His work spoke to a generation that felt neglected in the time they were attributed. His accomplishments altered journalism today. He should be celebrated not just as a publicity train wreck, but also as a visionary.

Hunter Stockton Thompson was born July 18, 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> His father was an insurance agent, but died when Thompson was a teenager, and his mother was a hopeless alcoholic.<sup>2</sup> He constantly got in trouble throughout adolescence. For many around him it seemed never-ending.<sup>3</sup> His troublemaking was a part of his charm. It eventually leads him to his success as a journalist. His beginnings in journalism started when he was arrested as a teenager for stealing.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Vaughn, "Hunter S. Thompson," *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, 535.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Klein, "Forever Weird," 715.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Joe Klein, a distinguished *Time* reporter who knew Thompson, wrote about him in a New York Times article. Klein wrote that during this trial, “the judge gave Thompson a choice of prison or the military,” and that “he chose the Air Force”.<sup>4</sup> Thompson associated himself with rich troublemakers who could leave unharmed due to their relationship with the judge. Douglas Brinkley, Thompson’s literary executor, said, “he was the poor kid on the other side of the railroad tracks with no dad. The game was fixed.”<sup>5</sup> This theme of a battle between the mainstream privileged and “the others” is displayed in many of his works.

Thompson entered the Air Force in 1956. He became sports editor of the base’s newspaper the *Command Courier*.<sup>6</sup> Eventually he was honorably discharged causing him to pursue a journalism career. He started working for *Time* as a copyboy. His experience progressed when he became the South American correspondent for the *National Observer*.<sup>7</sup> His fame, however, came with his story “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved” published in *Scanlan’s Monthly* vol 1 no.4, June 1970. This is the invention of gonzo journalism.

Instead of reporting on the actual events of the Kentucky Derby, he reported on reporting the story and what he experienced during an alcohol-induced haze. There is no mention of the horses that won, lost, or raced. It is all about the privileged people whose presence is more animalistic than human. All of the people in attendance gather as close as they can to the racetrack. They are drunk off of the seemingly never-ending supply of

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Klein, “Forever Weird,” 715.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Vaughn, “Hunter S. Thompson.” *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, 535.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

alcohol. By midafternoon they start “guzzling mint juleps with both hands and vomiting on each other between races”.<sup>8</sup>

Many would say that this story is an elaborate narrative with no substance, just good humor. This is false. The story highlights actions of the rich that should be considered shameful. He critiques things that other stories of the period did not. The people who attend are “politicians, society belles, and local captains of commerce.” The individuals who society imitates and respects the most.<sup>8</sup> Thompson critiques their lowly behavior and condemns their actions. At the end of the story, however, he reflects on his own life, a popular ending for many of his stories. The original plan was to go to the Kentucky Derby and write a story about the dishonorable drunks in attendance. But in the end it was Thompson and Steadman (the writer and illustrator) who were at their lowest. The last line is “It’s us...”<sup>9</sup> This illustrates that in his gonzo writing he not only outwardly critiques, but he also self reflects. By doing this he is putting everyone on the same plane. Everyone is equal and everyone is responsible for his or her actions.

That was the brilliance of Thompson’s work. It was not uniform or sanctimonious. It was raw and controversial. Thompson continued his gonzo style when he wrote for different publications like *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Playboy*. In one of his most celebrated pieces, “The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat”, he chronicles borderline incriminating stories of his long-term addict friend; Oscar Acosta.

<sup>10</sup>This acts as Acosta’s obituary. Acosta was a lawyer, drug addict, alcoholic, and

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<sup>8</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat.”

overweight Mexican man. He also was Thompson's best friend and accomplice. He was the Samoan attorney, Dr. Gonzo, in Thompson's acclaimed novel, *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas*. Acosta disappeared in 1974, but friends and foes alike doubted this. This prompted the creation of this odd obituary.<sup>11</sup> It starts with stories of Acosta's drug smuggling and other illegal activity within a courtroom. It then branches out to his quest for adventure and knowledge while high on LSD and other narcotics.<sup>12</sup> The very end says that Acosta is better off dead. It also states that no one is mourning him, except maybe "in Fat City, where every light in the town went dim when," they "heard he'd finally cashed his check."<sup>13</sup>

One could say that it was a disrespectful admittance of Acosta's "recreational activities", but in reality it talked about the isolation of outsiders in America. It discusses paranoia in the beginning saying that "paranoia is just another word for ignorance...they really are out to get you."<sup>14</sup> Paranoia of Richard Nixon, government officials, and the other Americans was intense. People were so paranoid that they alienated the new youth attitudes. Only someone with a similar attitude to Acosta's could really appreciate him. Prompting only the Fat City (Aspen's) mourning. No other journalist would write such an incriminating piece as an obituary. No other journalist would have an underlying message of social injustice in it either. Thompson is unique in that way. He used his own illegal activities and the bubbling tension of the time to connect to an audience much like him. People ready for change.

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat," 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat," 59.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat," 49.

This craving for change sparked him to even run for sheriff in Aspen on the Freak Power platform. In his *Rolling Stone* article, “The Battle of Aspen”, he writes about being the campaign manager for Joe Edwards. Edwards was a lawyer running for mayor who wanted to see change in Aspen.<sup>15</sup> Through corruption and fear of the “freaks” that inhabited the town, the Freak Power platform lost. But it sparked Thompson’s own campaign.<sup>16</sup> Once again corruption and voter intimidation stopped the Freak Power platform from winning, but it brought to the surface all of the government’s exploitation. He spells out all of the corruption the powerful men in Aspen use to continue their reign. For instance the sheriff had a “huge rubber sack that he quickly flips,” over Thompson’s head, and then arrests him for “felony conspiracy.”<sup>17</sup> This is a totally illegal act done by the one man who stands for legality. This article is one of Thompson’s most hard hitting stories, but it still has his classic humor embedded throughout. This is a pivotal moment in Thompson’s career. It took his life and thoughts off the page and into action. It turned from just written words to actual activism. In a sense it calls on the public to change their ideas about government. The youth movement at the time was not happy with the central government. But this forced Americans to not just look at the big picture, but at smaller local government corruption as well. Even a place like Aspen has issues.

The only thing Thompson hated more than the corruption of Aspen, however, was President Richard Nixon. Thompson was critical of Nixon because he saw him as a corrupt warmonger. Nixon was the reason Thompson got into politics. Everyone Thompson associated with hated Nixon. His mom, his son, his friends, and him all

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<sup>15</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Battle of Aspen,” 31.

<sup>16</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Battle of Aspen,” 37.

<sup>17</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Battle of Aspen,” 36.

bonded over their hatred. When Thompson finally met President Nixon and told him of his hatred, the President responded, "Don't worry, I, too, am a family man, and we feel the same way about you." An interaction published in Thompson's obituary for Nixon in the 1990s, "He Was A Crook," in *Rolling Stone* June 16, 1994. Although this interaction is after the majority of his work was published, it brings together the idea that even though the world keeps spinning and time keeps passing, Thompson's values never changed. Even Thompson's book, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, takes jabs at Nixon. He dedicates the book to both his son and Nixon; "To Juan and to Richard Milhous Nixon, who never let me down."<sup>18</sup>

The precursor to this episode was his article "Fear & Loathing On The Campaign Trail '76." It is a long story about the road to the Oval Office for the '76 candidates, and the victory of President Jimmy Carter.<sup>19</sup> When talking about Presidents Thompson could not resist bringing up his favorite person to hate, Richard Milhous Nixon. Thompson criticizes Nixon's secrecy and paranoia surrounding the secret White House tapes. Thompson also shames Nixon's final attempts for saving himself, as well.<sup>20</sup> Thompson's criticisms were harsh and completely biased. Although this is unlike most journalism it is the basis of gonzo. He stated in the article that even Nixon's friends and advisers were convinced that he was so insane with rage, booze and suicidal despair that he was two martinis away from losing his grip entirely. Thompson pictured him suddenly locking himself in the Oval Office, "to make that single telephone call that would have launched

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<sup>18</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales From A Strange Time*.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "Fear & Loathing On The Campaign Trail '76."

<sup>20</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "Fear & Loathing On The Campaign Trail '76," 59.

enough missiles and bombers to blow the whole world off its axis”.<sup>21</sup>

His intense words about Nixon were very courageous. President Ford had pardoned Nixon by this point, which by definition exonerated Nixon for all his misdeeds. It was Nixon’s immorality that transformed President and public relations. It was Nixon’s actions that created the temperature surrounding the ‘76 campaign. Thompson’s courage is not just through printing rude words about a former President, but also through the idea that people need to take responsibility for their actions. Thompson makes the case that Nixon would create even more turmoil in a longer presidency. He states that Nixon was a temporary dictator who created chaos just for the completion of his agenda.

This reflects back to the elements of journalism. Thompson is acting on his conscience. He saw problems and acted on them. This does not just go for Nixon’s wrongdoings. It goes for the wrongdoings of the rich like in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” and in his book, *Hell’s Angels*. The book showed the fraternity of the gang as well as their vicious offenses.

Thompson’s articles like “The Battle of Aspen” shows how serious his journalism was. His novels *The Rum Diary* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* can cause misconceptions of who he was as a writer. Yes, he was under the influence for most of his reporting, but the experiences he reported on spoke of greater truths about society at the time. Corruption, death, and exploitation are all common themes of serious reporting then and now. Thompson’s gonzo style, however, personalized it. This is a lot like personal journalism today. Anyone through blogging or social media can be a journalist, no degree or real experience required. It just takes a photo and Wi-Fi to become one.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Bloggers write in a first person narrative, and much like Thompson, they critique the world around them. They write their personal experiences, and audiences learn from them. Thompson's open discussion of drugs and other illegal activities also changed journalism. He wrote in a time where there was a social push for more freedoms, and he embraced those ideas. His credibility came from his honesty about drug and alcohol use, as well as the various crimes he committed under their influence.

Thompson continued to work up until the day he died. He continued to write politically fueled commentary and humorous tales from his past. Thompson committed suicide. He was pronounced dead of a self inflicted gunshot wound on February 20, 2005 in his estate in Colorado. His son, Juan Fitzgerald Thompson, said that he was not surprised his father committed suicide because, "old age is a difficult concept for a perpetual adolescent." As Klein said, "Hemingway couldn't handle it, and Hunter went out the same way".<sup>22</sup>

Thompson's legacy, however, is more prominent than he will ever know. At least three movies have been based off of his life and works. This includes, *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1980) starring Bill Murray, *Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas* (1998) featuring Johnny Depp, and *The Rum Diary* (2011) also starring Johnny Depp. Thompson's outrageous stories and giant personality have touched millions. It has also helped to create the public journalism that is known today. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll are not taboo topics anymore. The world has now embraced the idea that anyone can write what he or she feels. The original personal journalist was Hunter S. Thompson. His original subject matter was sex, drugs, and the revolutionary attitudes that come with living in the

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<sup>22</sup> Joe Klein, "Forever Weird," 715.



1970s. He was an outcast and a rebel, but always had certain morals that were transparent in every piece he wrote. In Thompson's own words, "I was never trying, necessarily, to be an outlaw. It was just the place in which I found myself."

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