

ALL GONZO ALL THE TIME

J A S O N M O S S E R

Hunter S. Thompson: The Last Interview and Other Conversations. Edited with an Introduction by David Streitfeld. Brooklyn NY: Melville House, 2018. 181 pp. Paperback: USD: 15.99. Kindle: USD 12.99. ISBN: 9781612196930.

Who Killed Hunter S. Thompson: The Picaresque Story of the Birth of Gonzo. Edited and with an Introduction by William Hinckle. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2017. 529 pp. Hardcover: USD: 39.95. ISBN: 9780867198553.

Hunter S. Thompson: Fear, Loathing, and the Birth of Gonzo.
By Kevin T. McEneaney.
NY: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016. 306 pp. Hardcover: USD 35.22.
Kindle: 30.81. ISBN: 9781442266209.

Freak Kingdom: Hunter S. Thompson's Manic Ten-Year Crusade Against American Fascism. By Timothy Denevi. NY: Public Affairs, 2018. 394 pp.
Hardcover USD: 28.00. Paperback: USD 17.99. Kindle: USD 16.99.
Audiobook: USD 0.00. ISBN: 9781541767942.

Fear and Loathing Worldwide: Gonzo Journalism Beyond Hunter S. Thompson. Edited by Robert Alexander and Christine Isager;
Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 352 pp.
Hardcover: USD: 130.00. Kindle: USD 105.29. ISBN: 9781501333910.

HUNTER STOCKTON THOMPSON DIED AT AGE SIXTY-SEVEN on February 20, 2005 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The legendary creator of Gonzo Journalism, Thompson was a cultural icon whose image—mirrored shades, cigarette holder, and Hawaiian shirt—became widely recognizable. Parodied

by Gary Trudeau in *Doonesbury* and portrayed by both Bill Murray and Johnny Depp in several films, notorious for his drunken public speaking engagements, Thompson was a rock star, the guy who rode with the Hell's Angels and pranked the Vegas locals on his journey into the heart of American darkness. Like Charles Bukowski, another hard-drinking wild man of American letters, Thompson has been rediscovered by new generations of readers hungry for tales of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. As critic William McKeen observed, Thompson became the "favorite writer of people who don't read books." Having said that, Thompson has influenced me in ways few writers have: he taught me the eloquence of savage invective, he ignited my interest in literary journalism, and he still makes me laugh, hard. The past few years have seen an increase in what David Stretfeld calls "Gonzo nostalgia," and five new books are devoted to keeping the Gonzo legend alive.

David Stretfeld's collection of interviews raises some important questions about Thompson's literary reputation: "He was influential and entertaining...but did he ever become the artist he palpably longed to be? Was he a madman, or was he a writer who played a role and got trapped in it? Did his prodigious intake of drugs and alcohol weaken his work, or make it possible in the first place?" No definitive answers to those questions are possible, of course, and Stretfeld doesn't presume to offer any, but I would say the answer to the first is no (Thompson aspired but failed to achieve the status of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner), and the answer to the next two is both/and. The interviews Stretfeld has selected deal with themes such as the meaning of Gonzo Journalism (a label Thompson adopted but never definitively explained, or maybe even understood), the difference between objective and subjective journalism, and the professional problems associated with Thompson's celebrity journalist status.

Some of the interviews are really journalistic essays, profile pieces, summarizing Thompson's life and times, usually with a heavy emphasis on his wild and crazy, self-destructive behavior, the Hunter Legend. Two interviews by Studs Terkel focus largely on Thompson's first book: *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1966). From a contemporary perspective, Thompson anticipated that the "first wave" of white, working- and middle-class Americans who feel "left out and put behind" would morph into the disaffected cross-section of American who voted for Trump. Of the two best interviews, the first is conducted by veteran journalist Jane Perlez who engages Thompson on matters of craft such as the importance of multiple drafts (to

a writer who said he believed, like Kerouac, in spontaneity), and the use of tape recorders, a practice Thompson claimed he was the first ever journalist to experiment with during his interviews with the Angels. The next is Australian journalist Mick O'Regan's "Fear and Loathing After 9/11," conducted less than a year after the Twin Towers attacks, in which Thompson rants about the Bush administration and the mass media's complicity in promoting the invasion of Afghanistan. The strangest interview is the titular last interview, the most recent chronologically and the least illuminating. An aspiring young journalist named Jessica Hopsicker manages to get the Legend on the phone but seems to know relatively little about him. Readers who want a more substantive collection of interviews with Thompson should seek out Beef Torrey and Kevin Simonson's *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (2001) and Anita Thompson's *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* (2009).

Despite its provocative title, Warren Hinckle's book on Thompson does not purport to entertain conspiracy theories into the death of a famous writer. It's a collection of reminiscences by over forty people, many well-known literary figures, and much else, including a long introductory essay by Hinckle, a figure who played a crucial role in the creation of Gonzo Journalism. In 1970, as the editor of a countercultural magazine called *Scanlan's Monthly*, he received a call from Thompson pitching his interest in writing an article about the Kentucky Derby. Thompson, a native Louisvillian who in his rebellious youth had been forced to choose between military service and incarceration, used the opportunity to go back home and settle some scores. Under tremendous stress and copious quantities of alcohol, both the writer and the story fell famously apart and Thompson began desperately feeding pages into the Mojo Wire (a prototypical fax machine), dispatches that resulted in "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," and Gonzo was born. Hinckle can also claim credit for introducing Thompson to Ralph Steadman, the illustrator famous for the cover and grotesque caricatures in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as well as many other books and articles by Thompson.

Hinckle situates both *Scanlan's* and *Ramparts* (which he also edited) in the muckraking tradition of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. A die-hard sixties radical, he regales the reader with entertaining anecdotes, all designed to reinforce Thompson's well-deserved reputation as a wild and crazy guy with a penchant for dangerous weapons and destructive

behavior. You can't fault him too much for cashing in on his friend's memory to sell a few books, especially since there's lot of interesting material here, but his agenda seems primarily to promote the importance of Hinkle's own "radical slick" publications. True to the Gonzo precept that the reporter is always at the center of his own story, Hinckle's essay is almost as much about him as it is about Thompson. One of the best features of Hinckle's book is his generous inclusion of illustrations including glossy color reproductions of *Ramparts* and *Scanlan's* covers, cartoons by R. Crumb and P.L. Crabb, weird faxes, and plenty of photos and remembrances of Thompson by friends and colleagues.

Like William McKeen's earlier *Outlaw Journalist*, perhaps still the best book-length study of Thompson, Kevin McEneaney's book is a critical biography, more up to date and extensively researched, but not as comprehensive. McEneaney begins with a biographical overview of Thompson's career and a short chapter on his early novel *The Rum Diary*, a Hemingwayesque *roman a clef* unpublished until 1998. His analysis of Thompson's *Hell's Angels* is trenchant, focusing on the Angels' "made-in-America patriotic sensibility" and their adherence to the "cult aspect of edgy sub-groups" during the 1960s. He is also prescient in identifying the Angel's paradoxical relationship to the police, heralding the "incipient development of fascism" in our current political scene. With *Hell's Angels*, he says, "Thompson had found the voice and character for which he would become famous." That legendary persona was both "hippie outlaw" and "gun-toting freedom loving cowboy".

Throughout his study, McEneaney weaves in references to earlier, lesser known Thompson pieces that enrich the reader's understanding of Thompson's progression as an artist. What is missing from the early part of the book, however, is a more thorough consideration of the place Thompson occupied among the other New Journalists of his era like Wolfe, Mailer, Capote, Didion, et. al., during the rise of that sub-genre from the 1960s through the 1970s. Nevertheless, McEneaney goes to great lengths to situate Thompson's body of work in the tradition of great American humorists like Mark Twain, James Thurber, and again, H.L. Mencken. "In the American tradition of popular humor," he observes in the context of the Kentucky Derby story, a comic masterpiece, "the humorist remains a mischievous anti-intellectual on the surface while delivering an intellectual and moral critique that subversively lurks beneath the surface of the narrative."

McEneaney divides his discussion of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* into two chapters, one each devoted to the first and second parts of the book, and here, as in his chapters on the Angels and the Derby, he provides something lacking in most books about Thompson, close analysis of his characteristic style and episodic narrative structure. After years of debate about the generic status of *Vegas* (Is it journalism? Is it sociology?), the critical consensus, with Thompson's blessing, now seems clear: it's a work of fiction. McEneaney's virtual scene by scene explication of Thompson's novel is a tour de force. He cogently argues that "The schizoid split of the rational narrator and the behavioral savage provides the comedic heart of Thompson's novel". Relying heavily on other biographies and on Thompson's published correspondence, McEneaney knows who Thompson read and was most influenced by, but there are moments when the sources he claims informed Thompson's imagination seem a little over-ingenious. For example, was Thompson really thinking about Homer when he began *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* with bats hovering over Dr. Gonzo and Duke?

Inexplicably, McEneaney completely ignores Thompson's most sustained work of Gonzo Journalism, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail, '72*, his agonizing marathon journey covering the Nixon-McGovern campaign, and arguably his best political writing. It's difficult to understand how he could have so overlooked this book. If not the "Birth of Gonzo," as his title announces, Thompson's campaign journalism is certainly one of its fullest realizations. Readers interested in *Campaign Trail* are advised to refer to McKeen's *Outlaw Journalism* (1991) and to my chapter on *Campaign Trail* in *Participatory Journalism* (2012).

McEneaney jumps from *Vegas* to *The Curse of Lono*, co-authored and illustrated by Ralph Steadman, whose drawings, it's fair to say, are more interesting than Thompson's text. Thompson and Steadman had been hired to cover an event in Hawaii for *Running* magazine. Thompson intersperses a relatively inconsequential narrative with a pastiche of historical documents which to McEneaney represents "postmodern quandaries of identity.... [a] philosophical portrait of the artist imprisoned in a postmodern hell." While Hinckle dismisses the idea that Thompson had declined as a writer, McEneaney is closer to the truth when he says that at the time of writing *Lono*, "Thompson's working habits had seriously deteriorated...and he was easily distracted by political news or friends [and] preoccupied more with cocaine

than with writing.” He concludes, correctly I believe, that *Lono* “looms as an aberrant decorative enigma in the form of a coffee table book.”

Adopting a novelistic approach to the ten most important years in Thompson’s career as a writer, the period during which he wrote *Hell’s Angels*, *Las Vegas*, and *Campaign Trail*, Timothy Denevi focuses on his role as a “political writer, as a literary journalist in the essayistic tradition whose activism remains underappreciated.” Denevi’s narrative begins with the catastrophic assassination of John F. Kennedy, an event which caused Thompson to fear a reactionary retaliation from the Right, justified by the suspension of constitutional right and the silencing of journalists. Having abandoned his project of becoming a successful novelist for a hybrid form of impressionistic journalism, Thompson grappled with a question familiar to his fellow New Journalists: how to report accurately in an a period of such rapid change and uncertainty. While covering the infamous 1964 Republican convention in which Barry Goldwater suggested that the only way to save American might be to destroy it in an atomic apocalypse, Thompson was once again confronted with the menacing presence of Denevi’s principal antagonist, Richard Nixon, described as a figure “with an innate and sinister talent for deception that the American electorate, when presented over and over again with its unabashed used-car-salesman tenor, somehow kept mistaking for an entirely different trait—ambition.”

Denevi’s narrative covers a lot of familiar territory: Thompson in San Francisco riding with the Hell’s Angels; Thompson returning to his hometown Louisville to cover the Kentucky Derby, Thompson in Aspen Colorado running for sheriff; Thompson in Vegas running amuck with Oscar Zeta Acosta in search of the American Dream, Thompson shuttling back and forth across the country reporting on the Nixon-McGovern presidential race. Nevertheless, readers unfamiliar with Thompson’s career will find this a compelling account. Denevi populates this biographical study with an interesting array of characters who played a role in the unfolding of the Hunter Legend, and he provides insightful glimpses in Thompson’s thoughts as he struggled with questions crucial to his life and times. How could he as a writer transform his “personal expression into a political act”? Was it better to work within the system or to tear it down? Were hallucinogenic drugs the means to achieve a revolution in consciousness and thus in politics, or were they, as he ultimately concluded, simply an end in themselves, an escape? Denevi dramatizes Thompson’s uneasy alliance with the sixties countercul-

ture while he chronicles his boozy, Dexedrine-driven lifestyle over this ten-year period, the peak of his productivity. Some of the more compelling scenes include behind-the-scenes anecdotes of Thompson battling writer's block and dealing with the anxieties and vicissitudes of free-lance journalism.

The narrative climaxes with Thompson's hope that McGovern might still save a seemingly doomed republic from descending into authoritarianism and then crashes with the horrible reality of Nixon's landslide re-election, a cataclysmic event he and other journalists were barely permitted to cover, much less prevent. Denevi writes that Thompson was "watching the Republic fail and there was nothing he could ultimately do but offer his own fragmented testament to its ruin" (249). History provides the denouement as the Watergate scandal brings Nixon down, and Denevi captures the bitter irony that the mid-seventies simultaneously signaled the end of Thompson's major contributions to literary journalism and his slow decline. Burned out from years of booze, speed, and cocaine, Thompson himself recognized that he had traded "time now for time later". He continued writing, but never with same authority and insight. Denevi's most important contribution to Thompson scholarship might be the documentation he provides, almost 100 pages of notes, a massive achievement in itself.

Full disclosure, I was a reader on Rob Alexander's and Christine Isager's book, *Fear and Loathing Worldwide*, a collection of essays about Thompsonesque literary journalists, and Rob is a friend and colleague from the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies. When I was first offered the opportunity to review the book, I confess that, having published an article on Gonzo, cited by some of these contributors, in which I argued that there is only one true Gonzo Journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, I was a little skeptical about the application of the term Gonzo to such a wide range of journalists. However, I am now convinced of the validity of this categorization, more appropriate in some cases than others, but this collection promises to extend the definition and understanding of Gonzo. One of the book's main strengths is its international scope. Another positive is the diversity of perspectives represented by the selection of essays.

Fiona Giles' "Mastering the Art" begins with my definition of Gonzo as a mode of perception and set of narrative techniques and then draws on that observation as the basis for her claim that two Australian writers, Jack Marx and John Birmingham, should be included in the "Gonzo canon". Citing a

profile of Thompson by Susan Chenery, “Fucked and Far From Home,” Giles maintains that it is “rare for women to write gonzo” but, she adds, it is “rare for any journalist to write Gonzo.” Giles extends the definition of Gonzo by claiming that it “celebrates confusion...offers a critique of clarity...as wishful thinking” and “dramatizes an abject loss of self, challenging the Enlightenment, masculinist notion of a singular, unitary subject, and undermining the concept of authorial narration.” The primary strength of her article is that she situates Gonzo in the context of feminist literary theory, citing Helene Cixous’ concepts of *l’écriture féminine* with *l’écriture masculine* “which might hold revolutionary potential for sexual politics and the well-being of both sexes.” In “Dirt Cheap: Gonzo Ethnography,” contributor Sue Joseph cites Jack London’s *People of the Abyss* (1903) and George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) as predecessors of Gonzo Journalism, a somewhat dubious claim: Thompson was not alone among the New Journalists who practiced the same deep immersion in their subjects. Joseph also adds some new critical labels to the mix: Gonzo Immersion, Gonzo Ethnography, Gonzo Advocacy; again, however, she begs the question by applying the adjective Gonzo to standard New Journalistic practices. Nick Nuttall, in “The Truth is Always Gonzo,” draws the closest parallels between Thompson’s journalism and that of Nigel Leigh. He closely compares and contrasts the two, placing Leigh squarely in the Gonzo tradition in terms of style, subject, and attitude, and making a strong case for the efficacy of the Gonzo approach.

Admittedly, few American readers, including this one, will have read many of the primary texts discussed in these critical essays. What seems to be called for now is a Worldwide Gonzo anthology featuring these journalists’ primary texts. In any case, the essays in this collection are highly accessible and relatively free of academic jargon, and *Fear and Loathing Worldwide* makes a significant contribution to the study of literary journalism.