

Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride

An Unabashed Appreciation of Hunter S. Thompson, 1937-2005

by David Petersen

We're living in a time when sex means death, when raindrops can kill you, when people shoot at you on the freeways, when everybody in politics is a lying swine. I'm embarrassed for a generation of people who accept this.

—Hunter S. Thompson

My heroes have never been cowboys. They are teachers, artists, activists, and iconoclasts; people whose boldly creative lives open minds and help keep culture on course. One such was Hunter S. Thompson—a.k.a. Dr. Gonzo, Raoul Duke, Uncle Duke (*Doomesbury*), et al.—who killed himself on February 20, 2005, in the kitchen of his Woody Creek home. Looking ahead, Thompson had asked friends to scatter his ashes by cannon fire, an appropriately flashy exit befitting a theatrically garish life. Even in death, Thompson knew the value of humor.

If you've read him, you know that HST was profoundly profane, gleefully disrespectful of oppressive authority, and an unrepentant abuser of illicit substances, tobacco, and booze. He was also a uniquely astute political observer with a hound dog's nose for liars and a sharp-tongued critic of knee-jerk liberalism, censorial political correctness, and dangerously dumb people in power.

As a writer the Duke was a masterful literary stylist and the inventor of Gonzo journalism—wherein the narrator is a central character, fact and fiction become comically blurred, and the verbal gloves are always off. William F. Buckley Jr. found the definitive analogy for the bipolar reactions Thompson evoked when he quipped that HST's writing "elicits the same kind of admiration one would feel for a stalker at Queen Victoria's funeral."

In critics and fans alike, Thompson provoked passion. You were either on the Gonzo bus for good, laughing all the way, or you were diving headfirst out the nearest window, fleeing in horror. Literalistic readers, those unappreciative of sideways-nuanced humor and those incapable of distinguishing the difference between love of country (patriotism) and blind loyalty to bad leadership (nationalism), tended to hate him, which is one reason he was important. As Ed Abbey warned, either we keep the cultural stew well stirred or we get a lot of scum on top. In this essential regard, Dr. Gonzo was a master chef.

In 1991, Thompson came to Durango to stumble through his trademark drunken-lout act at Fort Lewis College. Next morning, he and friends staggered into George Hassan's Southwest Book Trader. After introductions, George produced a mint first-edition copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, worth \$500, and requested an autograph. "As soon as Hunter got his hands on the book," George chuckles, "he clasped it to his chest and ran out of the store muttering 'My book. I wrote it. Mine!'" Hassan

gave chase and a tug-of-war ensued. "In the end," says George, "I got the book back, but no autograph."

Others had better luck. During the early 1970s in San Francisco, Tim Cahill (*Jaguars Ripped My Flesh*) and Thompson worked together at *Rolling Stone*. "I liked Hunter," Cahill told me recently. "Of course he was exhausting to be around, especially in public, where he'd push most every encounter as far as it would go. As a reporter, he was superb. And he was pals with people you wouldn't expect, like Pat Buchanan, John Chancellor, Ed Bradley, and many others. He was generous in offering help and advice to young writers, but brutal to those who copied him. Hunter is associated with drugs and bad craziness, but he was also a firm advocate of constitutional rights and was deeply offended by police brutality and the venality of politicians and 'Greedheads.'"

All writers with a social conscience should feel indebted to Thompson for pushing the free-speech envelope to its essential edge, thus granting truth more room to stretch and blossom. The First Amendment, Thompson knew, is the central prerequisite to freedom of thought and true democracy. When he said of the warmongering Bush regime, "Fuck those people," Dr. Gonzo was celebrating America's strength.

In the end, the suicide of Hunter Thompson—at 67 and in failing health—was a final finger thrust in the puckered face of an increasingly doctrinaire PC culture that would control not only our lives and speech but our deaths as well. "Fuck those people," indeed! With the best of it clearly behind him, here was a man who saw the dignity in Mozart's dictum, "To talk well and eloquently is a very great art, but an equally great one is to know the right moment to stop."

"He died with his glass full," says Thompson's family, "a fearless man."

Just so. I see the Duke smirking, even as the hammer dropped. Gonzo all the way. He bought the ticket. He took the ride. We are less without him. ■

REVIEWER: David Petersen's new memoir, *On the Wild Edge: In Search of a Natural Life*, has been hailed as "the feral confessions of a Thoreauvian neo-troglydite."