

Hey Rube

Blood Sport, the Bush Doctrine, and the Downward Spiral of Dumbness

Modern History From the Sports Desk

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

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Syracuse beat Kansas last night for the U.S. college championship of the world. It was a wildly exciting game that came down to a failed final shot, but it hardly seemed to matter, compared to the horrible news from Iraq, and basketball faded away. There was bigger entertainment on the screen, primarily in the form of bombs dropping on people—mainly foreigners, of course—and news-readers from CNN said we were winning. Is this a great country or what?

—Hunter Thompson, April 9, 2003

This chain-smoking, hard-drinking dealer in Fear and Loathing can be as arrogant as a southern politician, as rude as a drunken teenager, as foul-mouthed as a marine drill sergeant. Moreover, the man is a boastful abuser of illicit substances and in recent years has become a raving caricature of himself. But these qualities are only part of the reason Hunter S. Thompson is one of my favorite writers.

More importantly, Thompson—a.k.a. Doctor Gonzo and Raul Duke—is an unnaturally astute political commentator, a pioneering literary stylist (having essentially invented Gonzo or “new” journalism with his first book, *Hell’s Angels*), a frontline champion of the freedom of speech, a savage sports commentator (appreciated, though I’m no sports fan), and a refreshing and obscenely funny antidote to today’s knee-jerk liberalism, censorial political correctness, and the crushing reality of Mean People in Power.

Gonzo journalism in general and HST in particular are not for Everyman. And absolutely not for Everywoman. Yet his fans are many and fiercely loyal. Read Thompson for the first time (I’d start with his best-known and most twisted work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and you’ll either be on his boisterous bus for the long haul and smiling all the way or diving headfirst out the nearest window, fleeing in horror and disgust. Thompson’s latest, *Hey Rube*, is also about gambling, which inspires both the title and the collection’s theme. “Without gambling,” professes HST in a Descartian moment, “I would not exist.”

A magazine editor I know has been known to complain that “Thompson hasn’t done anything sustained and original in years. All his recent books are just odd bits slapped together.” Indeed, *Hey Rube* comprises 83 of Thompson’s ESPN.com “Page Two” installments, with sports and politics blended not only in the same columns but often (as in the opening quote above) in the same paragraph. Certainly I, too, would love to see another *real* book from the good doc, a sustained thematic effort. But even in “odd bits slapped together,” Thompson is reliably entertaining and often important.

Continuing a Gonzo tradition, in *Hey Rube* my fellow animal lovers will be deeply touched by the author’s creative use of such cuddly similes as “jump you like snakes on a toad,” “laughed like a gang of Hyenas,” “chopped up like a pig falling into a meat grinder,” “curled up like worms in a bonfire,” “shamed like ani-

mals who urinate on themselves,” and “like watching scum freeze on the eyeballs of a jackass.”

You get the pictures, and they are rarely pretty. But that’s the intent, and taken in context such grotesque hyperbole is a significant element of Thompson’s weird attraction.

Often, what we think of a book is unfairly colored by stern expectation. I was eager to read *Hey Rube* primarily because I’d heard it was foremost a blood-splattered verbal beheading of the problematic Bush regime. Consequently, I was disappointed to discover a chronological collection of short outtakes mostly about sports, gambling, and the lives of the Rich and Infamous. Even so, Thompson is so good that he holds my interest even through prolonged boys-and-balls commentary, which in the hands of any other writer would be torture. Nor do Bush and Co. exactly get lost among the roaring stadium crowd. Consider the doctor’s September 15, 2003, take on the trickle-down negativity our current “war president” inspires among the blacker elements of our culture:

The Bush family reeks of fraud and bad karma. But even worse than our wretched gibbling president are the cowardly whores in Hollywood who are currently smearing film stars and music people like Johnny Depp by calling them unpatriotic Americans for righteously questioning the wisdom of invading a whole nation of Muslims—which is a dangerously stupid idea. Disagreeing with Donald Rumsfeld about bombing anybody who gets in our way is not a crime in this country. It is a wise and honorable idea that George Washington and Benjamin Franklin risked their lives for.

Even if we can’t quite bring ourselves to *like* this caustically charismatic writer, we *need* him as a voice crying in a wilderness of dangerous political compliance. As George Orwell noted, if liberty means anything at all, it is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. In that essential regard, Hunter S. Thompson is the preeminent libertarian of American letters. ■

REVIEWER: David Petersen’s most recent tome is a revised and expanded edition of *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections From the Journals of Edward Abbey*. His dozen other titles include *The Nearby Faraway: A Personal Journey Through the Heart of the West* (both from Johnson Books).