



The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955-1967

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Here, for the first time, is the private and most intimate correspondence of one of America's most influential and incisive journalists—Hunter S. Thompson. In letters to a Who's Who of luminaries from Norman Mailer to Charles Kuralt, Tom Wolfe to Lyndon Johnson, William Styron to Joan Baez—not to mention his mother, the NRA, and a chain of newspaper editors—Thompson vividly catches the tenor of the times in 1960s America and channels it all through his own razor-sharp perspective. Passionate in their admiration, merciless in their scorn, and never anything less than fascinating, the dispatches of *The Proud Highway* offer an unprecedented and penetrating gaze into the evolution of the most outrageous raconteur/provocateur ever to assault a typewriter.

The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955-1967 Details

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Mike says

I told a friend recently that this is probably my favorite of Thompson's books that I've read. Then he asked me a question that for some reason I wasn't expecting: why? I'm not quite sure, but I think part of it is the artlessness of letters as opposed to entertainment...or maybe more importantly the sense of companionship they offered me while I was traveling this summer. This doesn't mean they're not entertaining; but they're also sharp and alive, clear expressions of thought and lived experience (even when he's riding down the Magdalena River in Colombia, plagued by mosquitoes, under the protection of a captain who is an "old river toad"), which can be surprisingly difficult to produce. They can be very funny as well, much funnier than later in his career when he was trying to entertain:

Drop me a line, while you're at it, and fill me in on the rest of the Richards clan. If you're still with Jo, tell her hello for me, and by all means kill the baby. That's far and away the best thing you can do for the poor bastard. Between leukemia, bomb blasts, Russians...and Red Chinese, I don't envy this next generation one damned bit. It would be merciful to kill them all.

They are sometimes generous and persuasive in his hunger for experience, as in this letter to his younger brother:

I have tried- for Mommy's sake- to look seriously on your endeavors, but christ knows I can't keep a straight face forever. It's all a hideous joke, Dave, and it's fine if you like it. But...let's face it: any man who really wants to work for Burdorf Furniture- or its equivalent- for the rest of his life is bound to be crazy- or a terribly narrow-minded coward...In a nutshell, that's just about all I have to say. I like you- not just as a brother, but as a person- and if you get fed up with all that crap just drop me a line and I'll begin rooting around for an extra bed. I hate to see anyone- especially a brother of mine- buried at such an early age, and god knows the world is much wider and fuller than anyone else in Nashville or Louisville can ever imagine.

And he always had interesting things to say about America:

Once California fills up with people like the rest of our country, it will have the same tragic and paradoxical dilemmas. Right now it is heaven for the negro and Bircher alike, but only because there is still some space out here. Colorado is the next California, and after that I suppose it will be Montana and then Canada...we are simply running out of room.

The Death of the American Dream was one of Thompson's great themes, and maybe the reason he struggled later on to write a book specifically about it is that he was always writing about it, in one way or another. It's easy for us to roll our eyes at the idea when put in capital letters, it's been dead for a long time if it was ever anything more than a parable or a myth to ease the guilt of genocide (although when I talk to people from certain foreign countries who have come here, I sometimes get the impression that it's still like light from a dead star), but I'm also coming to understand that maybe I've always believed in it in ways that are less conscious, less capitalized, than I've been aware of. Even turning 33 without health insurance might not kill it off entirely; it's a masochistic relationship at this point. And Thompson makes you feel the pathos of *having* believed, as I understand he and many others did at a certain point in the 60s, that "...once, for a

beautiful moment there, we thought we had it.” I don’t think that I would vote without hesitation to live in Thompson’s America (although, as he writes in one of these letters, “what *is* hesitation, anyway?”), his lifelong love of firearms is just one thing that’s hard to reconcile, but for better or worse I can identify very strongly with his notion of individualism, of a person who has to make up life as he goes along until he finds that even America comes to an end, and there’s nowhere left to run from yourself.

In Thompson’s writing, two clear obsessions come together- sports and politics- and while we see politics becoming more like entertainment we also see sports, in its tedious minor keys of sobriety and patriotism, scandal and public forgiveness, becoming more like politics. They are not objectively equal in importance, but they *are* equal in the addict’s consciousness, as two of the thrills that keep him interested in sticking around. I think Thompson saw this aspect of American culture- it’s no accident that his book on the ’72 campaign ends with the Super Bowl, or that he quoted Nixon somewhere as saying, “...the worst thing about campaigning, for me, is that it ruins my whole football season. I’m a sports buff, you know. If I had another career I’d be a sportscaster- or a sportswriter...”- but he was also a participant in it. And actually, as these letters make clear, it was more than just two obsessions- he also needed to drink, do drugs, ride his motorcycle too quickly around curves, fire guns, run off to foreign countries, listen to music constantly...always some external stimulus, always something outside of himself. Everything needed to be life-or-death. As Gary Hart says in the documentary *Gonzo*, “there was something infantile about Hunter.” At a time when I’ve started to wonder about my own addictive tendencies and why I have them, this really got me thinking.

I’ve had the notion for a while that he started to lose it sometime around 1974. Having just rewatched *Gonzo*, I realize that I must have gotten that notion from the documentary, but it seems to be supported by the fact that I’ve had a hard time reading just about anything he wrote after that time. The Ali-Foreman fight, in Zaire in 1974, seems like it was a turning point. Imagine getting to the point where a magazine would pay you to fly to a foreign country, stay in a nice hotel and write about a boxing match... and you decide to get drunk and sit in the hotel pool instead of going to the match. On one level, I don’t need examples like Thompson or Anthony Bourdain to remind me that success is no immunization from despair. But on the other hand, my awareness of my own lack of success has made the myth of it seem more powerful over the years, and it’s inspiring to see the violence and discipline with which the young Thompson (younger than me, in this book, but let’s not dwell on that) pursues it. But that violence will eventually kill you, too.

So did success ruin his writing? If he had achieved only a little- enough to survive, let’s say, but not enough to be famous- could he have stayed sharp for 30 more years? Would he have used fewer drugs if he knew he needed to stay sharp? I think it’s possible. Then again, 1974 was also the year that Nixon resigned. Nixon brought out some of his best writing- he needed Nixon, just like family members of mine and others I know have come to need Trump, to need their outrage and anger at regular intervals.

So if success, just like every other thing we pursue, ends up not being enough, it’s not very surprising; nor do I think it would have surprised Thompson. But one has to aspire to something; maybe these letters are a testament to playing the game, even when you know how it will end. So what about, what’s it called, inner peace? I brought this up with my friend Dan last week. He waved his hand dismissively: “The Dalai Lama’s got a lot to answer for.”

Charlotte Barry says

Imagine having your dream job of writing, only to be fired 10 times in a row, to then squander in poverty for

10 years with your wife and child, following your dream.... only to become famous for putting yourself in the center of a true story about the Hells Angels where you were almost beaten to death. Hunter lived an extraordinary life, and this hilarious book gives a behind the scenes look from his own Letters. Incredibly, Hunter kept copies of over 10,000 letters he wrote - before photocopying existed - because he felt he was going to be famous one day and wanted to publish a book of his letters. This is the book, and they are unashamedly honest, from getting fired for attacking a vending machine, to skipping out on rent many times on unsuspecting landlords. All in the name of pursuing a dream of writing for a living. Often hilarious and always genius, I highly recommend this book. Give it a few chapters to get going, to the college and Air Force years.

Ali says

If you want to understand what it took to give birth to Gonzo journalism, read this book. Hunter S. Thompson, the man most people know as a drug crazed mad man who answers to no one, has to start somewhere. This book tells the story of a man trying to get his start as a writer and eventually succeeding in piecing together the beginnings of something beautiful. As a bonus, this book also reveals much about HST as a reader.

Shannon Lorraine says

Hunter S. Thompson, the man behind his brilliance. I have many favourite authors, but Thompson is at the peak. These letters of correspondence shed light into the world Thompson lived, whilst sweating over a typewriter, in his pursuit of literary fame. Hilarious, brutal, shocking, but always honest. I plan to enforce this read upon all I know, and all whom should. Enjoy, you will.

Ben Goodridge says

Hunter S. Thompson is Decadent and Depraved

My entry vector to the world of Hunter S. Thompson was the film version of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," which I watched in a somewhat altered state, having been awake for nearly 36 hours on a bus trip from Georgia that left me too exhausted to take out my frustrations on anything. Possibly the only way to watch "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" is in a state of severe sleep deprivation.

Later, after reading the book, as well as "The Rum Diary" and a few of his old Rolling Stone pieces, I was able to work up a grudging enthusiasm for Thompson. What we get in "The Proud Highway" is an epistolary look at Thompson's roundabout journey from Louisville, Kentucky to Haight-Ashbury. Along the road, we get to enjoy his legal issues, his casual dismissal of every trend from the Beatniks to the Hippies, his questionable influences, and the merciless beating he caught from the Hell's Angels. It's natural that a pile of letters wouldn't resolve into a narrative, so calling it "uneven" is probably unfair, but I found myself wandering in and out of the reading as if gathering its material at my own convenience. Given that these are early writings, it's natural that he wouldn't yet be at the height of his powers, so he gets three stars.

These days, the world is rotten with charismatic iconoclasts who make phat stax pretending they're not part

of the circus, and Hunter S. was happy to do his rock-throwing from safe within the confines of his own shiny glass house. (Witness how he turned "Fear and Loathing" into a brand.) The original Gonzo journalist brought a new perspective to the trade, but as I read through the hagiographic opening, I was left with a suspicion of anyone who "tells it like it is." This, maybe, isn't Thompson's fault, but falls in the lap of the biographer. God knows what Thompson would have made of 2017.

Nicholas says

I started reading this four or five years ago, got about a fifth of the way through it and put it on the shelf. I guess I was wanting drug addled ranting at the time which is not really what this book is made of. However on picking the book up again recently in a more open and mature state of mind I found it to be a thoroughly good insight into the man's character and sometimes dire (mostly self-inflicted) situations he faced as a young man learning his trade.

The book is well edited with notes between the correspondences regarding the situations at hand and information on the characters involved.

I've read a couple of biographies on HST but this gives a much more in-depth understanding and altogether more complete idea not only of the man in question, but also the workings of the world of journalism and the general political state of the world at the time (which remains depressingly similar to the present).

For me the book started off as a bit of a slog but as progresses it builds into a compelling structure of HST's inner workings that's well worth the ride.

Hailey Johnson says

This is my first (albeit short) review that I have written on this site: I cannot more highly recommend any book or collection of Hunter S. Thompson's papers, ephemera, etc. If you have read any of his work read this-- every letter that they have found of his, including return correspondence, is collected in this rather massive collection.

Craig says

Municipal Court Magistrate, Town Hall, West Milford, NJ November 6, 1959:

"Dear Sir,

Earlier today I was given a summons to appear before your court on November 9, on a charge of 'leaving the scene of an accident.' I shall have to decline this appearance, and I hope this letter will explain why. By November 9, I shall be well out of the state of New Jersey, but I don't want to leave without explaining my position..."

"So, faced with a choice of paying a minimum of \$25 for falling off a motor scooter on a public road, and fleeing the state to avoid prosecution, I chose to leave the state. I am a free-lance writer and simply cannot afford to pay a fine of \$25 or more at this time. And, since I obviously left the scene and am therefore guilty, I would have no choice but to go to jail in lieu of paying the fine..."

"So, we are all criminals: those of us who skid and fall on damp, unmarked roads, and those others who stop

and give aid to the injured. If this situation is not patently ridiculous to you, then I can only congratulate myself on having the good sense to avoid an appearance in your court..."

To Judy:

"...P.S. Are you still getting fatter and fatter? My new address is on the back of this sheet. If you aren't too fat, how about sending me another picture of you. The two I have are a little old..."

David says

This is a book for those who love literature, especially Hunter S Thompson's work. The hundreds of letters that make up this book show his many moods and his honesty.

Thompson was critical of himself and others, but not in a nasty way. Well, yes, he could be a complete pain in the arse, but he always seems to apologise for rudeness if it's to people he cares about. Those who are called to account without mercy are usually unimaginative dolts who lack creative ideas.

I'm biased, of course. Many will find Hunter S Thompson abrasive and reckless.

I find his honesty refreshing and I'm thankful for his brilliance.

Austin Savill says

Interesting to see Hunter's early life and reaction to some of the big events in his life from the letters perspective instead of as an article or story.

furious says

i started reading this when i was working w/ Suave at the library in glassboro over winter break junior year of college, & then i didn't pick it up again until about a month ago. now i am taking it slow, because it is fantastic. and i remember how quickly i devoured the letters volume 2 (Fear & Loathing in America). i wish i had had the foresight to save a copy of every word i ever wrote...

Tommy says

This may be my favorite Hunter Thompson book. It's a collection of letters (he saved carbons of everything he ever wrote) from a young writer, not yet proven, but cocksure and brash as they come. He reaches out to publishers, politicians, and friends as he begins to carve a niche as a journalist and novelist.

It's his most honest writing, and as all these letters were written before his legend had surpassed his talent, you don't get the 'Gonzo' treatment, or the lazy indignation that fueled his later work, but a hungry, ambitious craftsman, pummeling his readers with words in an effort to impress, inspire, and intimidate.

Before the drugs and the madness, the fear and the loathing, there was a simple Southern Gentleman, trying like hell to become the next Hemingway.

Laura says

If theres only one thing you're ever going to read by this man, make it this. Its his life biography, written in real time in prolific letters to everyone and anyone who would listen in his life. if you want to learn anything about hunter s. here is the best place to do it with the most accuracy. its amazing.

Jake says

I wouldn't normally recommend a book of correspondence, but when it's Hunter S. Thompson the normal can be thrown out the window. As a young man in high school, he showed his incredible arrogance/confidence in saving almost everything he wrote, making carbon copies of his letters and noting that they would someday be published in book form, years before tasting any sort of fame. This book of letters reads almost like fiction. Hunter is forced to enlist in the Air Force to avoid a burglary conviction as a teenager. He talks his way into working as a sports reporter for the Air Force newspaper. He then talks his way into an early and honorable discharge to pursue his journalism career. Wasting no time, he writes letters to The New York Times applying for jobs which he is wholly unqualified for, telling them they will regret ignoring him (while often threatening physical violence). He also writes to prominent authors of the era, sometimes getting replies due to his incredible audacity. Included on this pre-fame Hunter anthology are letters to and from Tom Wolfe, William Kennedy, Norman Mailer, and of course the famous letter to President Lyndon Baines Johnson in which Hunter offers to be territorial governor of American Samoa, which was later withdrawn as Hunters protest for Johnson's Vietnam policy. In an early letter, written in a sense of desperation and depression due to his lack of success, Hunter says that he IS a writer, and will continue to write until he proves he is a writer or the world proves to him that he is not a writer but is, in fact, nothing. Reading this, I knew that Hunter was destined for fame and counter-culture glory, but I couldn't help but feel the desperation of continued failure of a young writer trying to make it, from Kentucky to New York and South America and San Francisco and Colorado. Towards the end of the book, Hunter lands on the best-sellers list with his wonderful book, Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga and does he double down and make a lot of money? No. He holes up in Colorado and gets into woodworking. A man who lives a life of paradox as a gun-toting, Governor Reagan hating, hippy baiting, Ayn Rand admiring, conservative/liberal, he continues to defy anyone's expectations of what he should be. The book closes, as it begins, with Hunter in desperate financial straits. But in the end we know that just a few years later the classic Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas will be written, ensuring that Hunter will be able to continue to waste his incredible talent by living on his iconoclastic personality and the idol of the individual (him), until he chooses to kill himself in old age (rather than fade away) and have his remains shot out of a cannon in his backyard with famous friends present, including Johnny Depp, Pat Buchanan, John Kerry, etc, etc, etc. Highly recommended for fans of HST, and lowly recommended for all other fans of literature. Avoid at all costs if you are trying to get by without making any waves.

Michelle says

My last exposure to Hunter S. Thompson was in high school, when I read the Rum Diary and of course Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas; it's not to say I wasn't impressed, but after reading the Proud Highway I am completed..enamored..? by Thompson's writing. Nothing can be more insightful than this amazing collection

of his correspondences, and of course his letters are incredibly well-written, politically charged at times and there are even a couple of love letters thrown in the mix. so good!
