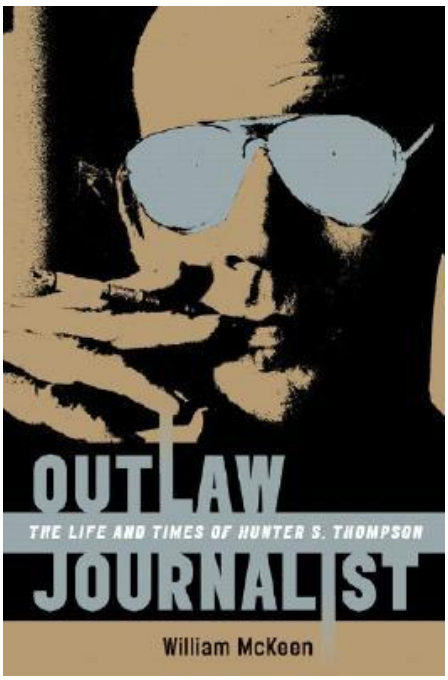

Outlaw Journalist

William McKeen

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Hunter S. Thompson detonated a two-ton bomb under the staid field of journalism with his early magazine pieces and revelatory "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" and "Fear and Loathing" campaign coverage in *Rolling Stone*. When Thompson was on, there was no one better at capturing who Americans were and what America was, be it in politics, at the Kentucky Derby, or in the Hells Angels' lair. William McKeen became friends with Thompson after writing a monograph on his journalism. McKeen now has interviewed many of Thompson's associates who wouldn't speak before, from childhood friends to colleagues, to assistants who sat around the Woody Creek, Colorado, kitchen control room late at night when Thompson did most of his work. McKeen gets behind the drinking and drugs to show the man and the writer—one who was happy to be considered an outlaw but took the calling of journalism as his life.

Outlaw Journalist Details

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ISBN	:	9780393061925
Author	:	William McKeen
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From Reader Review Outlaw Journalist for online ebook

Kahn says

Hunter was many things to many people - not all of them good. So it is fitting - and a measure of McKeen's biography - that Hunter's life is covered here warts n all.
Yes, he shot at his neighbours, yes lived a life that would have killed most of us, but that was Hunter. Uncompromising.
Outlaw Journalist captures all that, bringing to life the inner struggles of a man many of us only know through Johnny Depp and Doonesbury.
The pace of the book also manages to mirror Hunter's life - frantic at first, but slowing down towards the end.
Having read two Hunter tomes so far - Rum Diary and Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas, Outlaw Journalist is the perfect companion book, providing insight into the times and stories behind the stories, while also providing an impetus to pick the next Hunter book off the shelf and dive into the madness...

David Ball says

It's funny. I moved country almost one month ago from Denmark to Canada. I left my wife and kids back in Copenhagen to start a new job and to find us a place to live. One would think a month on my own, with all that time to myself, my reading would accelerate, but the opposite has occurred; this my first book review in five weeks. What happened? I guess my daily routines have changed. In Canada there is plenty of sport on tv, a novelty I've allowed myself to indulge, which has eaten into my reading time. But I've also started reading a lot more magazines, a past time I used to enjoy but moved away from while living in Europe. Which brings me to my point: what's the better use of my time? Reading Outlaw Journalist or the Economist, GQ, Atlantic Monthly and Toronto Life? Outlaw Journalist was a perfectly readable book, but like a harrowing book about the Holocaust, it's probably easier to write an entertaining book about Hunter S. Thompson than a dull one; there is quite a bit to work with. This is the second biography of a 'great' writer I've read this year (I also read the Leonard Cohen book I'm Your Man), and I have to admit, despite Cohen being a more talented writer, and probably a more decent person, I have more time for Thompson. Sure, he was a bit of a one trick pony, and may not have lived up to his potential, but he was smart and funny and didn't take himself too seriously. (Although on a less flattering note, Thompson, like Cohen, seems to have suffered from an abundance of hedonism, selfishness, and immaturity. Are these traits necessary for one to make a mark in the literary world? I would hope not, but I have a feeling the biography of Wilde I have on my to-read shelf will suggest otherwise). Going back to my original question, I think in this case the magazines were a better use of my time - what I learned about Hunter's life I will forget, and what I remember will only be useful in the unlikely circumstances I find myself discussing gonzo journalism (or 1970s US politics). But a well edited magazine can be thought provoking and informative, and cover a vast array of topics (including current events), that is both useful and entertaining. The unfortunate side effect from these new priorities: fewer book reviews, and my fetish for cataloging things is left unsatisfied.

Kent says

Top notch. The best resource on Thompson that isn't his own actual writing. Revisiting the Hunter

mythology was also a light revisiting my 23 year old self. Brings me back.

David says

Like Jim Morrison of The Doors, Hunter S. Thompson pushed the limits of reality via drugs and alcohol to make art...and he destroyed himself and others around him in the process. Thompson devised a new and interesting mode of journalism, but I do not see that as justification for glorifying this guy. Excellent book, and it will lead me to a study of Hunter S. Thompson's writings (Hells Angels, etc). I just saw a movie version (Johnny Depp) of Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" and it is a waste of time, except it gives visual clues as to where the writer mis-spent his life and his brilliant mind.

Michael Schmidt says

Well, HST wasn't actually a journalist; or was he? That really, rather than the pill-popping, gun-slinging, wild exaggeration and Wild Turkey, was what lay at the heart of his personal pain. A frustrated novelist, perpetually stunted in his attempts - most stillborn - to write the Great American Novel, HST vented his frustration along with his spleen (never, despite the posturing, his ammunition) on the political establishment, especially his favourite five-o'clock-shadowed villain, Richard Nixon.

We journalists love him because he was immoderate where we feel we need to show restraint; he was the voice of our deepest queasiness with the compromises of our profession, giving us some of the 20th Century's most memorable political phrases such as "the hog's in the tunnel", or "fear and loathing" itself. Calling a spade a spade, and making his name writing about the Hell's Angels, it is often forgotten that despite his deliberately outre freak power campaign for sheriff of ivy league ski resort Aspen, he wasn't much of a radical at all; he was simply a Democrat with a wicked tongue.

His collaboration with Rolling Stone and his unlikely liaison with crazed British portraitist Ralph Steadman (whose inked cartoons were to Nixon USA what George Grosz's satirical paintings were to Weimar Germany) saw him reach the peak of his influence. Sadly, HST clearly peaked early, and, running out of options, he endlessly recycled personal missives of his glory years into yet another "book", and predated upon increasingly young and pliable "secretaries" as his lovers. Ultimately, suicide just made sense, though to have done it while his son and grandson were home was remarkably unthinking; a half-baked end to a half-achieved life.

James says

Like Wild Turkey into the Good Doc’s mouth, so too go volumes on the shelf about him. While most books about Hunter S. Thompson are good because they are about Hunter S. Thompson, William McKeen’s “Outlaw Journalist” is good on its own accord, revealing the allure and talent of Thompson to an audience beyond his indoctrinated disciples. For all his presence and popularity, a Hunter S. Thompson biography could be accomplished with the literary equivalent of connect-the-dots or paint by number. Connect Hunter’s rebellious childhood with his breakout book about the outlaw motorcycle gang Hell’s Angels. Color in Hunter’s hyperbolic writing style with black blotter acid. In the parlance of Gonzo: load and shoot. Don’t aim.

So much has been written about Hunter S. Thompson, and his story is so mythic in its sweep, that it is difficult to summarize his career without restating stereotypes that have already been digested like so much mescaline by tens of thousands, if not millions, of his fans. With careful aim, McKeen avoids these trappings with “Outlaw Journalist.” There is very little of the hero worship and simple recounting of drugs and carousing that typify a story about Hunter S. Thompson. An acquaintance of Thompson’s and a professor of journalism at the University of Florida Gainesville, McKeen is uniquely situated to provide an atypical contribution to the growing cannon of criticism and analysis on such an outrageous and singular subject that is refreshingly divergent and illuminating in its academic classicism and straightforward tradition. In the David McCullough sense. In the Doris Kearns Goodwin sense. Which I felt was a fairly appropriate comparison for “Outlaw Journalist,” and then I got to page 216 and learned that Hunter once ran off with the Goodwin’s babysitter. It’s one amusing tale of many in “Outlaw Journalist,” a biography that is as good, fulfilling, and devoted to its topic as anything by McCullough or Goodwin, never shying away from the realities of its famous subject, but also moderating such antics with an academic examination of craft. McKeen’s achievement resides in his balance and restraint. He tempers the excessive and unconventional biographical information that all readers will find fascinating in the life and times of Hunter S. Thompson with literary analysis that seems to be so lacking in other works about him, and so important for why Thompson is a relevant writer who demands to be read. It is McKeen’s focus on Thompson’s writing that make “Outlaw Journalist” an impressive and worthwhile read. McKeen methodically interweaves historical enlightenment with Thompson’s development as a writer, including both contextual influences and progression in his literary style.

Though McKeen provides plenty of anecdotes teeming with recreational hubris, the majority of the stories he shares pointedly illuminate who Hunter was as a person instead of merely indulging in clichés, hero worship, and perverse fascination with the glamour of substance abuse that only reinforce the stale theme of Thompson as some kind of mere cultural jester. We learn that while Hunter was indeed a difficult child growing up and a budding delinquent with an early disdain for authority, he was an aspiring scholar as well; starting a newspaper, reading Thucydide’s account of the Peloponnesian wars, and leading his friends to the library for bouts of reading between rounds of raising hell. We learn that Thompson broke into a morgue as an adult and stole his recently still-born daughter in order to bury her at home after the doctors had informed him that they would “dispose of” it. These are remarkable instances that McKeen shares, ones far removed from the madness and myths that so commonly surround Hunter S. Thompson’s reputation and tradition. Writing about a man with a searing, vicious wit, McKeen proves himself to be a capable biographer of such an individual by being quite funny as well. In a biography’s pursuit in separating fact from fiction, McKeen deals with the legends surrounding Thompson’s firing from Time magazine early in his career. Did he just leave? Was he fired for insubordination and the destruction of a vending machine? Or did he create such a story to enhance his reputation as a rebel? McKeen settles the matter, telling us, “The truth is probably somewhere in between. One certainty is that Hunter and vending machines never got along.” That clears it up. Especially as a chronicler of Hunter S. Thompson, someone notorious for his exaggeration and paranoid drama, one is smart to ironically understate things as McKeen does in “Outlaw Journalist.” Even though McKeen insists that Thompson’s landmark work, “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” was a heightened version of reality, that Hunter and Acosta talked about the murder of Ruben Salazar and the merits of Acosta’s case against the city of Los Angeles while they were in Las Vegas, McKeen does quickly remind us that, “They also took a lot of drugs and ran amuck.” And that confirms things.

McKeen’s is an all-encompassing, enthusiastic biography, taking the reader with Hunter through the struggles, the poverty, the rejection, the antics, the jobs, and traveling with him from Louisville, Florida, New York, Puerto Rico, Big Sur, South America, San Francisco, and Colorado. “Outlaw Journalist” paddles through the mandatory rapids of Thompson’s life: the rebellious childhood, the time in the Air Force and early struggles, the breakout of “Hell’s Angels,” the success of “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” and “Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72” and onto the waterfall of his later life with its struggle to cope with the myth he created and the reputation that enveloped him while his writing deconstructed into self-imitation

and desperate regurgitation.

McKeen is a dutiful docent through this sprawling, unruly life, taking us to Thompson's experience at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and showing how it galvanized and politically radicalized him, even peeping into his life for a rare moment of tears from the stoic man as a result of the violence he witnessed in Chicago. We observe the beginning of Thompson's relationship with illustrator Ralph Steadman and their infamous coverage of the Kentucky Derby. We see Thompson react to Watergate, his rising notoriety and celebrity, and the incessant struggles with money and finances that colored his entire life. McKeen tells us when productive-and-prolific Hunter stopped and cocaine-snorting Hunter took over, all the while detailing the marital deterioration, mediocre speaking engagements, and infidelities that were a part of his private and professional life. The reader sees Thompson's appearance as the character Uncle Duke in the Doonesbury comic strip and his slow devolution into a prisoner of his own cult. We have front row seats for the great political writing that made Thompson so popular and become almost immediately impossible as his own fame became too unwieldy to be a true reporter. We witness Thompson's legendary relationship with Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone magazine. We follow him through his divorce, his time spent in Key West and his extended relationship with Laila Nabulsi, who would go on to produce the film adaptation of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

McKeen's research and capabilities in fully realizing his subject's environment and influences is splendid. As McKeen is certain to inform us about the idiosyncrasies of Hunter's neighborhood growing up as well as the day-to-day activities of Eglin Air Force Base, so too does he provide an appropriate history of journalism, such as the Wall Street Journal's little-person/big-picture approach to explanatory journalism that was becoming increasingly popular as Hunter started in the industry. McKeen also traces the rise of New Journalism with the growing prominence of writers like Tom Wolf and Gay Talese using the techniques of fiction in journalism. In order to place Thompson in the tradition of other writers and journalists, as well as the larger socio-economic puzzle that he was a piece of, McKeen also brushes up the reader on changes in TV journalism and politics, briefly noting the changes television brought to campaign coverage, the increasing grandiosity and theatrical nature of conventions, and the influence of writers like Theodore H. White.

One major appeal of Hunter S. Thompson in our current society of celebrity-worship, a fixation Thompson himself was subjected to, is that his story is a name-dropping extravaganza. He was friends with famous people. Not only was he friends with famous people, he did shocking and hilarious things with famous people that anyone could be jealous of doing with their humble "nobody" friends. Even Jackie Onassis called to check on her kids when she learned Hunter was staying in the same house as them. Such anecdotes of fear and adoration for Thompson, while serving a biographical purpose, are even more ironic and fascinating as McKeen posits them inside a larger survey of journalism, chronicling its rise in the 1970s into a pulpit for celebrity worship.

McKeen puts us with Hunter as events unfolded in subtle and effective ways that ground and illuminate Hunter's work historically, such as McKeen's note that Hunter's article on Ruben Salazar in Rolling Stone appeared alongside a profile of the young singer Michael Jackson. These tidbits make "Outlaw Journalist" an exemplary biography, one that doesn't extol and isolate its subject as a detached and god-like idol, but as a talented and unique man who worked hard and contributed to the culture he was a part of.

Beyond the lively biographical chronology, placed within larger industrial and historical trends and changes, however compulsory, absorbing, and compellingly told, it is "Outlaw Journalist's" focus on Thompson's craft that elevates it beyond mere portraiture and profile. McKeen roots Thompson in the lofty, storied lineage of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, and Jack Kerouac, deferring to an old friend from Louisville to summarize Thompson with, "Philosophically, I always felt that he was firmly based in the stoicism of Hemingway and the hedonism of Fitzgerald." But McKeen does not stop there, going so far as quoting directly from Hemingway so as to compare the two wordsmith's similar sparse, straightforward styles. McKeen does a fine job of analyzing Thompson's writing itself, deconstructing and examining it as metajournalism, journalism about journalism, and "getting the story."

McKeen's work insists that despite Hunter's decadent reputation as an avowed drug user and vicious social critic given to belligerent ranting and raving, he was a very meticulous writer and cared about every word. McKeen relates a story in which a friend described Hunter sitting on a seawall in Cozumel, "reading a $1.25 newspaper that would have cost a more sober man 25 cents." Hunter saw that and said, "No. No…it is better if we make it 24 cents." Such scrutiny is what made Hunter great and such detail and inclusion inside of the larger chronological narrative of his life is what makes "Outlaw Journalist" such a superb profile of Hunter S. Thompson. It reveals a man, however eccentric and overshadowed by entertaining flaws, who was admirably committed to his craft.

McKeen illuminates and examines unpublished and lesser known manuscripts and articles that reveal Thompson's progression as a writer, such as "The Gun Lobby," a 'bridge book' between "Hell's Angels" and "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," that followed Hunter's shock at the assassination of Robert Kennedy. McKeen notes that it was written in an unusual style: "Rather than use the just-the-facts approach the subject would seem to require, Hunter turned it into a long narrative, with himself as the central figure, as the window through which to view America's violent character." Hunter S. Thompson as we know him, was born. From there, McKeen takes us along as we learn about Hunter's procedures, his writing methods, his work habits, his relationships with editors and assistants, and his writing style as assembly that came in bursts of brilliance. McKeen details Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo Journalism as a process of aggregation that required a large contribution from editors, hand-holders, baby-sitters, and enablers. Despite this coven of crutches hobbling around drinking this man's twisted brew, McKeen goes to great pains in insisting that Thompson was not the careless, drug-gobbling fiend that so many take him for. "It had never been easy," McKeen tells us, "but Hunter had the gift of making his work appear so. His legions of stoned admirers probably really thought he took a hundred hits of acid before sitting down to write. But the craftsmanship those close to him saw as he agonized over his words spoke to how much went into making it look like a breeze."

Analyzing and examining Hunter's prose, McKeen deconstructs and isolates the writer's work, detailing his specific themes and styles: the use of a confederate/sidekick, false editor's notes, himself at the center of stories, "getting the story" as the primary story, and wild flights of fancy. Such basic analysis and identification of elements familiar to any casual Hunter S. Thompson reader seems simple, but as McKeen explains, "His narrative device, in which getting the story became the story, fit his political reporting perfectly. It allowed him to present a scene, then ask the questions readers asked. As he questioned his sources, readers were collaborators piecing together facts. Hunter presented himself as a manic and somewhat inept reporter, a clever way to mask his shrewd style." Thompson wore a cloak of ineptitude and ignorance that allowed him to say things other journalists could not. Such a device permitted Hunter to contrast himself, the vulnerable hack/drug fiend, to the slimy politicians and establishment stalwarts he was writing about and railing against.

McKeen's biography paints Hunter S. Thompson as a man who was indeed a special writer with immense talent and without rival, but hardly someone without significant flaws. Further evidence of McKeen's balanced portrait and refusal to engage in blatant infatuation and praise is his inclusion of Thompson's most obvious failures and disappointments. The Ali-Foreman fight was one of the biggest stories of the year and Hunter S. Thompson was there to cover it. Instead he sold his tickets and floated in a swimming pool of marijuana during the fight. Norman Mailer grumbled that Hunter's fans were too easily pleased and would accept anything from their man. McKeen agrees: "Hunter could have given his fans a story about a nightmare assignment in a horrible, uncomfortable city. He could have written about smuggling elephant tusks into Kennedy Airport or his intense paranoia about the Zairean officials and their attitudes about drug use. His fans would have accepted anything, and loved it." Inside McKeen's framing of "Outlaw Journalist," this isn't so much a condemnation of Hunter's fans and their lack of taste and sophistication as much as it is a testament to Thompson's abilities and prowess as a writer and an essential thread, however disappointing, in understanding Hunter S. Thompson. He was good, very good, able to divine a story from any experience, but in many instances, simply didn't.

With Thompson’s time in Vietnam, McKeen further explores the brash and absurd nature of Thompson. He was no doubt a man controlled by considerable vices, but a man who was aware of his flaws and made such afflictions into a semi-profitable and certainly prosperous career. But in Vietnam, as at the Ali-Foreman fight, Thompson is exposed as a reckless and disappointing hack who he had made a career of admonishing. Beyond McKeen’s recounting of Thompson’s “country-club approach” in Vietnam and his silly escapade to Hong Kong in order to buy gadgets and electronics when Saigon finally fell, McKeen arrives at his most severe criticism near the end of the book. McKeen observes that Thompson had prided himself on “getting away with it” and had turned such an act into a major theme in his writing to great success, but Thompson spent his later years trapped in a mythology he had created and stuck in a rut of self-imitation: “He had worked hard, but too often had taken the easy way out, seeing what he could get away with.”
It would be easy for a biographer to connect the dots left unconnected by Thompson’s late-career waning, obvious failures, and suicide and discern the form of a Cautionary Tale or Obnoxious Farce. McKeen does neither. Instead he colors in several important aspects of Hunter S. Thompson’s life that have only been lightly shaded in by the pencils of blind praise and celebrity worship with the permanent marker of serious literary analysis and balanced, cogent perspective. Thompson would no doubt be miffed by such a reasoned, straightforward telling, but the literary community and fans should be thankful as McKeen’s work on Hunter S. Thompson is a fitting, balanced portrait of a man who is, and has been, too easily caricatured, mythologized, and blindly embraced. Properly loaded, aimed, and fired, “Outlaw Journalist” hits the target.

James Biser says

This book is a fantastic review of the life of Hunter S. Thompson, perhaps the author who is the voice of the end of the Twentieth Century in the United States. The reader learns how he began his life in journalism and politics, and how he ended it. This is a great history as well as a good introduction to the man known as Hunter. Everyone should experience this story, as well as be familiar with all of his writing.

Diann Blakely says

"Night of The Hunter"

Artists, consciously or unconsciously, tend to choose one of two paths after finding, through years of apprenticeship, a signature style: continue pursuing that style, attempting to hone and improve it with each new effort; or make their vocation one of varying, even destroying, that initial means of self-presentation through words, music, paint, or performance, and embark on another fork in the road.

Examples of the latter include Faulkner, Picasso, and Bob Dylan. Examples of the former include Hemingway, Cézanne, and the Rolling Stones. The problem faced by Hemingway--and the Stones, for that matter--was the same faced by Louisville’s most notorious native son, the late Hunter S. Thompson. Though he idolized Faulkner as much as he did Hemingway, he found the voice by which he is remembered in FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS and eventually found himself stuck in repetition, self-parody (which wasn’t helped by being made into a cartoon strip character by Garry Trudeau, which Thompson called “a nightmare of celebrity coming true”), and then, a long if intermittent creative blockage, during which, at his best, he continued to produce work by which he will be remembered.

Like Hemingway, his problem was compounded by the creation of a persona. “It’s a good way to sell

books," says his literary executor, historian Douglas Brinkley in GONZO, the solidly edited new oral biography by Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour. Yet, in Thompson's case, that persona, from the start, sprang from a way of life inseparable from the writing itself; and a lifestyle founded on compulsive physical risk, firearms, and alcohol--not to mention nerve-fueled writing marathons--is almost inevitably a fatal one. "Wild Turkey and tobacco are the only drugs I use regularly when I write," he says in the University Presses of Mississippi just-published collection of interviews, CONVERSATIONS WITH HUNtER THOMPSON. "The only drug I really count on is adrenalin. I'm basically an adrenalin junkie."

Adrenalin can be a dangerous drug, however, particularly when it's no longer self-generated. Which is to say that, again like Hemingway, Thompson became a public icon and found himself further trapped by the celebrity he nonetheless craved for the high and the energy it gave him--and despised for the way it kidnapped his soul. "It would be much better if I died," he said on more than one occasion, explaining that the real person could get out of the way and the myth could then take over--and people could make movies. Which, of course, they have.

But it was a combination of the pressures of celebrity during his own life and infirmity that caused his suicide at the age of 68. After a hip replacement, then breaking a leg, Thompson was crippled and confined to a wheelchair. Invited for a New Orleans blow-out when his friend Sean Penn was re-making ALL THE KING'S MEN there, he couldn't make it up to the second floor of one of the Big Easy's illustrious dining rooms without Penn, Johnny Depp, Brinkley and James Carville picking up his wheelchair, a humiliation he found untenable.

If Thompson's premature ageing was aggravated by alcohol and drugs, and if his contribution to American letters was not as substantive and monumental as he had hoped (o that elusive Great America Novel!), did suicide at sixty-eight seem the only choice? The answer is probably. Thompson's son says he always expected his father to kill himself rather than be subjected to a slow death in a hospital gown.

Yet out of what other mode of life could Thompson's writing have come? "Buy the ticket, take the ride," his famous motto as a journalist, seems tragically yet somehow joyously and rebelliously appropriate when applied to his own life, chronicled in recent books like CONVERSATIONS; GONZO; THE KITCHEN READINGS, by longtime Aspen friends Michael Cleverly and Bob Braudis; THE JOKE'S OVER, by Thompson's chief co-conspirator, illustrator Ralph Steadman; and, just off the press and perhaps best--certainly the most comprehensive--of all, William McKeen's OUTLAW JOURNALIST. Each avoids, miraculously, becoming a tiresome string of Thompson's "wild escapades and deadline frenzies," as Wenner puts it, by constantly varying perspective. Yes, Thompson shot things, shocked people (literally and figuratively), drove like a maniac, drank Heinekens and Bloody Marys along with his coffee and large breakfast upon rising, got himself beaten up by the Hell's Angels, managed an hour-long discussion about football with his nemesis-in-chief, Richard Nixon, attended conventions of horse-lovers, presidential candidates, and DAs. Yet these books, in their commentary on Thompson's life and work, allow the voices of interviewers, friends, and colleagues, as Thompson himself did, to intervene between the objective and subjective, between the event and the meaning of it, so that the former is given purpose, if not gravity, and something of Thompson's capacity for great generosity of heart.

Though outspoken in his admiration for aforementioned predecessors, Thompson sometimes said he wanted to be the Mark Twain of the twentieth century. Inwardly, however, the writer he seems most closely to resemble--and the one he most idolized--is F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose name he gave his only child, Juan Fitzgerald Thompson. "All his writing was about the loss of some mythic world that he may once have inhabited," says James Silberman in Gonzo. "It was no accident that," despite his admiration to and similarities with Hemingway, "Gatsby was his favorite book. I said to him at one point, 'You're really

writing one lifelong book called The Death of the American Dream. And that stuck."

As well it should have. For while one of Thompson's greatest admirers is fellow Southerner Tom Wolfe, who helped introduce him to the world in his groundbreaking anthology, The New Journalism, another is the author of IRONWEED, the prolific, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Kennedy, who turned down Thompson for one of his earliest newspaper jobs but whom he later befriended. "He liked the idea of being part of the New Journalism ... but he wanted to transcend it, and he did. He wanted to be singular, and he was."

How did he get to be that way? Tim Crouse, a writer for ROLLING STONE in the 1970s and author of the political classic THE BOYS ON THE BUS, gives us a fascinating look into Thompson's writing process. After his customary breakfast, he would sit at a card table with his signature red IBM Selectric, "his elbows out to the sides, his back very straight, and he would get this sort of electric jolt and blast out a sentence. Then he'd wait again with his arms out, and he'd get another jolt and type another sentence. Watching him, I began to realize that he was trying to bypass learned attitudes, received ideas, clichés of every kind, and tap into something that had more to do with his unconscious, his intuitive take on things. He wanted to get the sentence out before any preconception could corrupt it." After Thompson's suicide, his widow's first act was to box the Selectric and send it to Bob Dylan, knowing her husband believed that Dylan had amassed a greater body of work--and one possessed of more integrity--than anyone of their era. Which is our era too.

If you're not a writer, such descriptions of process and aesthetic assessment probably aren't as interesting as hearing about the propane tanks Thompson liked to shoot at as a means of blowing off steam, but if you are, or if you have aspirations of becoming one, Crouse's observations are worth continuing to read: "One of Hunter's methods of composition was to write a bunch of ledes and then somehow fit them together. By lede, I mean the opening portion of a story, which is ordinarily designed to pack more of a virtuosic wallop than the sections that follow. Early on, I remember, Hunter showed me a stack of ledes he'd accumulated, as if he were fanning a whole deck of aces. On a tight deadline, my job would be to stitch together the lede-like chunks that Hunter had generated. Ideally, the story would function like an internal-combustion engine, with a constant flow of explosions of more or less intensity all the way through."

As great as he was, Thompson will not be remembered as the equal of his literary heroes, however. Both his first wife, Sandy Conklin, and his longtime agent, Lyn Nesbit, put their finger on the reason why. That magnanimity of heart, commented on in all of these books by every single person Thompson knew, no matter how much of a jerk they were aware he could also be, in the end proved to be something he could not bring fully and completely into his work. "He couldn't deal with that part of himself consistently," Nesbit says, "and that led to so many kinds of abuse--self-abuse and abuse of others." (Thompson was rarely able even to mention the three children he lost with Conklin, much less pick her up at the hospital after their deaths, not out of cruelty, but out of what McKeen calls the native, and at times crippling, emotional repression of the Southern male.) With Nesbit, and apparently with certain other women, he could talk about life and love, not just personally but in an "abstract," "more interesting" way, but he could not open himself to putting that largeness of spirit into what remains essentially a satirist's prose.

But what prose it is, and how one wishes Thompson could have survived to the moment where a black man and a woman have just finished vying for the Democratic nomination for president, the African-American triumphing with his message of change and hope. Barack Obama's message, like his time, is an entirely different one than the message of fear, anti-intellectualism, and implicit greed generated in the Nixon and Bush eras. Had Thompson lived in this moment, his own message, in the end, might have changed, and his writing taken an unexpected, and more expansive, change of direction. Or would Thompson continue to feel, watching Obama (now wearing a flag pin) tack suddenly, subtly toward the center, that the only candidates

who make it to the White House are those willing to compromise--or corrupt--themselves sufficiently to get there?

GONZO: BUY THE TICKET, TAKE THE RIDE, director Alex Gibney’s feature-length documentary, opens, appropriately enough, nationwide on July 4th. Buy the ticket, take the ride, and think about what the Good Doctor might be cogitating this very moment with his spirits in the sky.

Brian R. Mcdonald says

Okay, one of the book groups in which I participate has developed a tendency of late to pick an author each month rather than a single book. Each participant reads what she or he chooses by the writer selected and we gather the compare and contrast, This being HST month, I inteneded to reread F&L on the Campaign Trail, in keeping with my past tendencies to pick political or electioneering books when possible, but this critical analysis of the Doctor's writings had been sitting on my dresser for a while; it was a lot easier to just pick it up and start than to actually go out and buy on of HST's own works. As it turns out, my other book group, which has always previously done the traditional thing and read one book, broke down this month because too many members had personal pet non-fiction works they just had to read and about which they just had to comment. As a result, this appears about to become a sort of generic and disorganized non-fiction discussion month. This this volume may well do double duty.

McKeen's long friendship, or at least close acquaintanceship, with Thompson gave him an inside track with all of the latter's friends. He was able to get great interviews with HST associates who have otherwise guarded his privacy in life and his image postumously. Combined with years of research, over a period long enough to do homage to his famously deadline-averse subject, this access leads to a detailed and readable tome, more about the writings than the life. Oh there is plenty about the life as well, both the legend and the reality behind it, but this is mostly a literary study. A damned good one too. It is marred by odd contradictions in chronology and paragraphs which refute others on the same page. It's as if the proofreader decided to pay tribute to the gonzo spirit with what appeared to be Wild Turkey-influenced fact-checking.

Meanwhile, the book group doing the HST month is planning a Mission District pub crawl this coming Sunday, dressed as the good doctor. Assembling an HST costume turns out to be more complicated than expected, a fact that would undoubtedly please the subject. Cigarette holders, especially the shorter kinds suitable for Dr. T or almost any male other than FDR, are difficult to obtain. Knowing nothing at all of smoking and smokers' culture, I assumed that a few people still used such holders and that they would be found in cigarette stores or the like. No such luck; not only are they not to be found there, most smoke shop employees younger than myself, even those in shops still focussing on tobacco, had no idea what the hell I was talking about. Vintage clothing sources were a little more promising [in fact I still have hopes for a couple of such sources] but nothing so far. I figured the internet generally, and Ebay more specifically, are the default answer to finding anything, but even there it is an uphill struggle. I actually ordered one from what appeared to be the main Ebay dealer in suchlike items; only after placing the order did I realize that it is being shipped from the Ukraine and is unlikely to arrive in time. Checking further, I found that a substantial majority of all the cigarette holders available are from two Ukrainian dealers. Even the used vintage holders seemed to come from Canada or Europe with estimated shipping times out of range.

Luckily, some of the other essentials of a gonzo costume are easier to assemble. His trademark Hawaiian shirts are similar enough to my trademark Hawaiian shirts that I can pass. My dad is deeply afraid of sunlight an always wears Gilliganesque hats which can be adapted to the Thompson look. Over the years I've often

been out without my sunnies and have bought dodgy ones I'll never wear again just because they were readily available. There are a bunch around the house somewhere, and one ought to pass for aviator style. Now if I can get the [bad word omitted] cigarette holder.

Of course one more indispensible prop is the ever present bottle of Wild Turkey. However, I'll be doing all of my advance research in the spirit [and spirits] of his only novel. The Rum Diaries.

John Hood says

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Homage to an Outlaw

Bill McKeen on the Late, Great Hunter S. Thompson

By John Hood

It’s tempting to say that when Hunter S. Thompson blew his brains out with a shotgun in 2005, the event marked the end of an era. The problem is his death didn’t mark the end to anything but his life. See, Thompson belonged to no era, unless you’d care to consider him an era all his own.

You already know the gonzo details: Journeyman reporter breaks big after hanging with — and getting stomped by — the Hell’s Angels and turns his newfound notoriety into a mad dash of a career, first at Scanlon’s, with The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved, then at Rolling Stone, with the Fear and Loathing reports. Along the way are whisky by the barrelful, drugs by the score and guns galore. There also is celluloid immortalization, first by Bill Murray in Where the Buffalo Roam, and then by Johnny Depp in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.

More though, there is the work, which not only rips the scabs off a wounded nation and pours salt into the new cuts, but does so with wit, style and violent honesty.

Which is much of the point behind William McKeen’s Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson (Norton $27.95), an homage which explains that if Thompson were not first a talent, he’d never have become a legend.

McKeen makes for a good source on the subject; after all, he did cover the cat back in ’91. And if the two weren’t exactly best buddies, they were close enough for Thompson to have given McKeen an essay gratis — and to have threatened McKeen’s life. Then again, HST threatened to kill just about anybody he came across, especially biographers, so being threatened was really a badge of honor. People who knew him well knew he wouldn’t kill a pal (though he was certainly equipped to do so). It was the recurring threat of suicide that was the concern.

According to McKeen, Thompson “was obsessed with death and wrote about it his whole life.” Better yet, “[h:]e even had a place in mind”: Iron Mountain, Ala., a summit just about halfway between Eglin Air Force Base in Florida (where he was stationed early in his life) and downtown Louisville (where his family lived). McKeen quotes HST saying he would “‘come down that mountain road doing a hundred and twenty and keep going straight right there, burst out through the barrier … and there I’d be, sitting in the front seat, stark

naked, with a case of whisky sitting next to me, and a case of dynamite in the trunk.… It'd be a tremendous goddamn explosion.'"

Be that as it may, reading back through Thompson's life, one can't help feeling that he spent it all taunting death — the drugs, the liquor, the guns, the bombs, all a big "Fuck You!" to whatever's out there. Till one day he decided that the only way to really cheat death was to choose when it would come, so he took out his trusty .45 pistol and did what needed to be done.

To McKeen's credit, the author doesn't dwell on Thompson's death, or his antics, or even the antics that took place after his death; instead he delivers a copiously chronicled account of an extremely lived life. It's the reportorial equivalent of cracking open a fifth of Wild Turkey and sharing it with a grave. Had Hunter's ashes not been blasted by cannon all over Owl Farm, one gets the feeling he'd be kicking back in his coffin, penning yet another death threat

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Violet says

Given normal circumstances, I would have never picked up a book on Hunter S. Thompson on my own. First of all, I'm not a big reader of biographies. Second of all, I've never read any of his stuff and you'd think that kind of would be a prerequisite for reading around 360 pages on his life. The only reason I read this thing was because I had to for my journalism history class at Boston University.

My professor for the course wrote this biography actually. He claims that he assigned it not out of ego, but because he thought we'd be interested. Maybe some of us were, but in reality, I can probably bet that a good number of people didn't read the book and just skimmed Wikipedia for the test. I know I was just going to read a chapter or two, certainly not the whole thing.

However, I got hooked. I had always enjoyed McKeen's lectures. I had always felt like I was sitting down to story time twice a week instead of trudging into a class were I would struggle to keep my attention focused. (I can tell you it made studying and taking notes a lot easier.)

And this biography often read like one of his lectures. Sometimes even the same stories he would tell in class would pop up in the book, nearly word for word. Like the few side notes about Theodore H. White or the rundown of the Watergate scandal. It made for an easy, enjoyable, and entertaining read. Yes, sometimes it was a little dry, but it's hard to avoid given the genre. Plus, those moments were brief, quickly followed up by another development in Hunter's life.

The narrative had a motion, a rhythm that easily pulled me along. I often found myself wanting to know what would happen next. How would Hunter get out of this mess? What would he write next? Would he ever get that story done? In that way, it was kind of a good thing that I didn't know much about Hunter because it kept me guessing, kept me going.

McKeen actually met Hunter a few times while compiling an anthology and gathering material for this book, and he obviously deeply respected the man. "He was good to me," McKeen writes in the preface. Therefore, the flaws of Hunter's character like his temper or his affairs were also only momentarily mentioned. Things are objectively presented, but true objectivity is almost always nearly impossible to achieve.

Instead McKeen focused on Hunter’s lifelong conflict between how he saw himself and how he really was, and later how the world saw him. He had these grand expectations for himself as a writer and became deeply disappointed and even depressed when he didn’t live up to them. The fact that the world eventually saw him as the drug-crazy Raoul Duke from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and later from the comic *Doonesbury* didn’t help matters. He apparently struggled with expectations verse reality nearly all his life. And it was mainly that struggle, and McKeen’s literary portrayal of it, that keep me turning the pages.

Now that I know so much about the guy, I guess I should actually read some of Thompson’s stuff now, shouldn’t I?

Keith Goldschmidt says

An entertaining and insightful examination of the merit, value, genius and talent of one of literature’s most colorful authors.

Jessie B. says

A well written look at a fascinating person

John McNeilly says

There was a lot I didn't know about HST.

He hit many women, as just one loathsome example. He took his reputation as an influential American writer deadly serious. In OUTLAW JOURNALIST, well written by a friend and University of Florida journalism professor, Thompson consistently comes across as an unlikable person. And, despite the biographer's willingness to (mostly) overlook Gonzo Hunter's lifelong drug and alcohol abuse (both developed into raging addictions as he aged), it ultimately, inevitably ravaged the author and his work.

His writing in the '70s shines. He was at his full creative potential as the '60s came to a violent end, transitioning into the vacuous '70s (though HST liked the cocaine part of the Disco era). After that? Not so much. For the remainder of his life, HST surfed his stardom, became embarrassingly lazy, and took notorious advantage of the expense accounts of those who brave enough to hire him (especially the also not-very-likable Jann Wenner, owner and publisher of Rolling Stone.)

Although I respect Thompson's early style, which truly was unlike anything before it, it's difficult to respect a man who slapped and abused women so regularly (and, in one case, even shot one, sending her to the hospital), derided his celebrity stature while at the same time taking full advantage of it, and blew his brains out while his son and young family were visiting his house.

What is clear, however, is that this ultimate act of selfishness, and what comes across in the end as a quite sad personal life, hasn't in the least negatively impacted his reputation as one of the most famous, influential writers in American letters.

I bet he'd dig that.

Barry says

Fills in quite a few gaps in understanding Hunter S. Thompson. The writing tends to be a hair repetitious, especially noticeable when listening to it, but quite good nonetheless. Well worth your time if you have any acquaintance with Thompson and would like to know a bit more of where he "came from."
