
The life and times of Hunter S. Thompson

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A self-professed hillbilly, Hunter Stockton Thompson entered the world on the 18th of July 1937 and left it of his own accord in 2005. His life was a complex and bizarre mélange of impotent creativity set against a backdrop of seminal influence on almost everything he touched. Thompson's counterculture appeal was more than skin deep. He may no longer be a household name, but his unconventional perspective shifted the lens of journalism forever. The pioneer of Gonzo journalism, he appeared out of the ether and duly faded into the mirage of fame and pop counterculture.

The origin story

Thompson grew up in Louisville Kentucky. At first, his life was pedestrian. His mother was a librarian, and his father was a public insurance adjuster. Thompson's father died of a neuromuscular disease when he was 14. He had just started making progress as a writer and member of a prominent literary association, but then his mother began drinking heavily. Thompson arguably never managed to deal with the fallout from his father's death. He got into trouble for his involvement in a robbery, precipitating his ejection from the Athenaeum Literary Association in 1955.

Finding his feet

Thompson was lucky enough to spend a mere 31 days in jail following his criminal activity; he joined the air force on his release. Though he was rejected from the aviation cadet program, he took a job as the sports editor for The Command Courier – a newspaper for the air force. Sports writing allowed Thompson the freedom to embellish and excite in ways that traditional journalism didn't allow.

Carving his own path

In the end, Thompson received an honourable discharge owing to his rebellious nature. It was noted that he 'would not be guided by policy'. With some experience, he was able to leave the air force newspaper in 1958 and join Time. But he was fired in 1959. Thompson was far from cut out for a traditional workplace. Losing job after job, he was not a man to go with the flow; he had to carve his own path. Finding inspiration in the work of Tomas Wolfe, the literary-inspired style known as New Journalism began to seep into his under-utilised creative unconscious.

A foot on the gas (or petrol)

Ten years after his expulsion from the literary association, Thompson found refuge in the then-obscure motorcycle club known as the Hell's Angels. Thompson was hired to write an article about the Hell's Angels; it was so well received he secured a book offer, affording him the opportunity to fully immerse himself in its murky underworld. It could only have been their criminal inclinations that piqued his curiosity. He spent the next year living and riding with them. After denying the Hell's Angels a share in the profit from the book, the gang brutally beat Thompson. He nearly lost his life and sustained injuries that would plague him for the rest of his days. The book was published in 1967. Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs, was wildly successful. Though not yet meeting the mark of Gonzo Journalism, it did recalibrate the trajectory of his career.

Political leanings

Thompson was never an uncontroversial figure. He happily criticised the hippie movement as overrun by the pursuit of escape through drugs and devoid of political convictions. He was of the opinion that by 1967, hippies no longer seemed to push for change and progress. In 1968 Thompson signed the 'Writers and Editors War Tax Protest', vowing to withhold his tax payments in protest of the Vietnam War. His political resolve was further cemented after watching the Chicago riots during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. The altercation between the police and anti-war protesters has since been widely documented as a brutal one. The sight of such violence, along with a gut punch from a police officer, left an indelible mark on Thompson. His ex-wife later recounted him talking about the event, saying it was one of only two times in their 17-year marriage that she saw him cry.

'I went to the Democratic Convention as a journalist and returned a cold-blooded revolutionary.' – Hunter S. Thompson

Enter Gonzo journalism

The birth of Gonzo (journalism) is a story that has been retold many a time. In short, he was hurtling towards a deadline, for which he had done almost no work. He dejectedly ripped the manically subjective story from his notebook and sent it off to his editor. The work was later hailed as a breakthrough by Bill Cardoso, editor of the Boston Globe Sunday Magazine. Thompson's style was dubbed Gonzo, meaning crazy and eccentric. The piece in question? A sports article titled, 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved'. What Thompson had seen as abject failure became a defining moment in his career. The style of Gonzo journalism is rooted in intense personalisation. While ordinary journalists stepped aside, Gonzo journalists participated; they were in the middle of the action.

Fear and loathing in Las Vegas

Another jewel mined from the depths of Thompson's consciousness was Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. The book was loosely based on a road trip Thompson had taken with Oscar Zeta Acosta, a prominent Mexican-American activist and attorney.

Thompson's wife said Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas was primarily based on an alter ego come fantasy, but his lucid descriptions of the effects of narcotics were drawn from real-life experiences. The book allows those of us who follow the rules of society to catch a glimpse into a new world. Thompson created an uncensored space that brought to light his mind's darkest recesses. The 1972 book reads like poetry.

A career with one foot in the grave

While Thompson's otherworldly antics took his readers to new heights, Thompson's career had to come down at some point. The inability to surpass his previous successes hastened his depressive alcohol and substance-fuelled demise. In 1974, Thompson travelled to Kinshasa to cover 'Rumble in the Jungle', the fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali. Instead of watching the fight, he spent his time intoxicated in the hotel. He never wrote the article. Hunter was a mere mortal. He was unable to complete much of the work he was commissioned to do towards the end of his career. He could only trade on his name, not his ability to confound us with something new.

Thompson's ex-wife Sandra described him as an incredibly angry man, and as time passed, he gained scars and baggage. Thompson survived through the intense commitment and support of his ex-wife, along with alcohol and narcotics. Without the tools to find peace, he disappeared into a parallel world, rarely, if ever sober. Thompson took his own life on February 20th, 2005. If there is anything to be taken from the story of Hunter S. Thompson, it is that despite our hairy moles and dysfunction, there is something of value inside all of us.