

Hunter Thompson: Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

What can only be described as an explosion of words carefully crafted into a story about the journey of a man seeking the American Dream, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is one of many books written by Hunter S. Thompson.

From the start of Thompson's writing career, he strived to go against the everyday portrayal of journalism. There were multiple cases where he was fired from his positions on the papers because of his desire to go against the norm. Often times it was because of his use of the idea of New Journalism. Journalist who partook in this style brought a distinct set of culture and social concerns to their work. "Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits – a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy piss-ridden hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage" - *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson. The authors of this idea incorporated personal opinions, reactions, and fictional asides as added color in their work. Thompson took this idea one step further, branding his style with the word *Gonzo*. "This can be defined as a highly personal style of reporting where the writer becomes so involved in his story that they become the central figures in their piece"(Bio). This concept in combination with his hard-driven lifestyle of illicit drugs and firearms went hand-in-hand with one of his most famous works, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

The story follows journalist, Raoul Duke, who is meant to represent Thompson himself, and his attorney Dr. Gonzo, as they explore the American Dream

on a road trip to Las Vegas. With a car full of alcohol and illegal drugs the two set out to cover a story on the *Mint 400* and end up having the adventure of a lifetime. The original purpose of being there, covering the event, gets pushed to the back burners and the two engage in experiences that leave them paranoid and dazed over as they raise hell in Sin City.

The theme of the book depicts a focus on idealism and Thompson's desire to highlight the oppressive appearance of greed and materialism in Las Vegas.

Thompson's idealism arises from the 1960's when America became an emerging drug culture. The story of his outrage of the corrupted American Dream is fueled by consumption of drugs and alcohol, "as though intoxication were the only possible response to the horrors of corruption and ignorance in the American society" (Bookrags). Though heavily intoxicated, Thompson depicted his environment closely. He saw what was happening in the city and reacted with sarcasm and humor, though obviously feeling a great deal of grief. Regardless, he retained a readiness to immerse himself in whatever was occurring around him.

Told from a first person point of view, readers are able to follow along with a little more ease after gaining insight into Thompson's process. This is a major help, seeing as it can be difficult to follow because of his experiences with drug consumption, erratic nonsensical behaviors, and descriptions. That being said, "given the amount of drugs he reports consuming, his thoughts could not have been nearly as lucid at the time as they are in text. Thompson, therefore, was forced to sacrifice a certain amount of accuracy in order to tell an intelligible story" (Bookrags).

Originally the book was inspired through Thompson's research for a *Rolling Stone's* article titled "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan." The article was based of 1970's killings of Mexican-American journalist Ruben Salazar (Gonzo). One of Thompson's sources for the story was Oscar Acosta, a Mexican-American attorney. The two found themselves needing to escape the radically intense atmosphere of Los Angeles so took advantage of an opportunity to cover the Mint 400 for *Sports Illustrated*. What was supposed to be a short captioned piece, turned into a 2500 word story that was rejected by the magazine. When *Rolling Stone* discovered the story, Thompson became inclined to keep working on it and turn it into an actual book publication. This book sealed Thompson's reputation as an outlandish stylist successfully straddling the line between journalism and fiction writing (The Paris Review).

From the starts of his career he transformed the idea of telling a journalistic story by putting himself into it and describing his experiences. One of the first pieces he did this way was on the Kentucky Derby. "The resulting rambling first-person story, *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, which was more about the experience of watching the race rather than the actual race, was published in *Scanlan's Monthly* in June 1970" (Open Culture). At the time, the new style was very accepted because of its fresh storytelling, the piece was hailed as a breakthrough in journalism. From that point on he officially adopted the Gonzo style and fueled by alcohol and drugs, Thompson was on the lookout for stories that would depict America's hypocrisy.

“Thompson always had a way of finding something even more interesting in exactly the opposite direction from whatever he’d initially meant to write about” (The Paris Review). In 1965 Thompson published an article in The Nation, titled “The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders,” based on the motorcycle gang, Hell’s Angels. In the article he states, “The difference between the Hell’s Angels in the paper and the Hell’s Angels for real is enough to make a man wonder what newsprint is for. It also raises a question as to who are the real hell’s angels” (The Nation). Perhaps this quote was meant to foreshadow the fact that he was soon going to write the book, *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (Open Culture).

“When you get in an argument with a group of outlaw motorcyclists, you can generally count your chances of emerging unmaimed by the number of heavy-handed allies you can muster in the time it takes to smash a beer bottle. In this league, sportsmanship is for old liberals and young fools” -Hunter S. Thompson. Once again immersing himself into his stories Thompson joined up with the Hell’s Angels in the Mid- 1960’s. Thompson spent roughly two years cruising the coast with the controversial gang. While interacting with them he revealed the anarchic spirit of the clan and joined in the hell raising that gave them their name. “His book successfully captures a singular moment in American history, when the biker lifestyle was first defined, and when such countercultural movements were electrifying and horrifying America” (Hell’s Angels).

There is no doubt that Thompson is a prime example of someone who has mastered the craft of transforming the craft of journalism into the art of fiction. He

used his life experiences and observations and incorporated them into his stories. The vivid portrayals in his books draw you in, in a way that makes you think the story is completely true. His work makes readers beg the question, with so much detail how can he be making it up? The best fiction is often the kind that makes the audience believe the story and allows them to relate to or feel for the characters. Thompson does a wonderful job intertwining fact and fiction in a way that creates a colorful and captivating story, no matter the topic or concealed theme.

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