

ARTS & ATTITUDE

Searching For Uncle Duke

Three Biographies Track The Twisted, Paranoid Saga Of Hunter S. Thompson

By Matthew Budman



Though Hunter S. Thompson has never appeared in a film, seldom pops up on TV and rarely sticks around anyplace long enough to have his picture taken, his bald head and mirrored sunglasses are part of our national psyche.

But the image of Thompson most of us carry around isn't that of Doonesbury's Uncle Duke or Bill Murray in *Where the Buffalo Roam*; it's those hallucinatory Ralph Steadman drawings from "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," especially the cover shot, depicting Thompson at the wheel of a careening convertible, his O-shaped mouth mirroring black-hole sunglasses, and his tortured face reflecting a mind addled by a cache of "two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker

half full of cocaine ..."

Somehow, for a number of years, the journalistic writings of this "Gutenberg Bible of '60s excess" were not only publishable but influential. Other New Journalists took the reader inside the minds of their subjects—killers, astronauts, race-car drivers—but Thompson's medium was *action*. And that action, which more often than not included his own dangerous and illegal antics, is the subject of three biographies: "Hunter" by E. Jean Carroll (Dutton, \$25), "Fear and Loathing" by Paul Perry (Thunder's Mouth Press, \$22.95) and "When the Weird Turn Pro" by Peter Whitmer (Hyperion \$21.95).

In "When the Weird Turn Pro," Whitmer writes that Thompson's "approach to life was somewhere between that of a barely guided missile and a leather punching bag." His peers occasionally inserted themselves into their work by making themselves characters, but HST was the first to insert himself solidly in the *center*, often creating a story where there often was none and, as these biographies show, even inventing material altogether.

He would explain how he had missed the event he was sent to cover because he had passed out in his hotel suite after Mac-ing the hotel restaurant's headwaiter. Then he would spell out how much that suite had cost and the lies he had told to get it put on his expense account. Then he would tell how Sports Illustrated had rejected his article and refused to pay his expenses, and how he had to go begging to Rolling Stone.

"True gonzo reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor," wrote Thompson in 1971. It's far from clear that he has anything left but the last.

This embellished nonfiction, author-participatory style was dubbed "gonzo journalism."

So was Hunter S. Thompson ever any good? Is there any reason for his continued fame and even popularity? Well, yes. Many of his early articles break new stylistic ground and cast light on previously unseen sides of issues, people and places. His first book, "Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga," remains a readable and insightful sociological study; the frenzied novel "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" is still a scream; and "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72" remains one of that season's better campaign books.

But that was about it. These books and the highlights of 1979's uneven collection "The Great Shark Hunt" were written before 1974, and his lack of creativity can be seen in the fact that the titles of 26 of his 38 Rolling Stone articles began with the words "Fear and Loathing."

His writer's block became legendary. For "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson just sent Scanlan's Monthly pages from his notebooks, which the magazine printed "word for word even with the pauses, thoughts and jagged stuff like that."

"The Curse of Lono," published in 1983, became a Ralph Steadman book of drawings after Thompson failed to write enough intelligible pages. The last several years saw him write a more or less insight-free column for the San Francisco Examiner, with writings collected in two books published to critical and popular shrugs.

"True gonzo reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor," he wrote in 1971. It's far from clear that he has anything left but the last.

Twenty-five years after New Journalism burst onto the scene, many of his peers, from Jimmy Breslin to Gay Talese to Tom Wolfe, continue to contribute mightily to American literature. But it's inconceivable that three publishers would release major biographies of any of them within the same couple of months.

Perhaps we're all a little tired of waiting for Thompson to die. Now 53 and possessing few brain cells (let's not even *talk* about his liver), he surely can't hold on much longer. Of course, that's been said about him for years. "The man is a legend in successful self-abuse," Norman Mailer said in 1987.

Anyway, all these HST biographers are guilty of overstating their subject's relative importance, which is forgivable—no one wants to admit they've spent years researching the life of someone who, in the grand scheme of things, is largely irrelevant. E. Jean Carroll actually calls HST "the greatest stylist in the English language since Jane Austen," with an apparent straight face, and Whitmer says, "Thompson's writing was to political coverage ... what cubism was to turn-of-the-century contemporary art."

In "Hunter," Carroll invents an alter ego—a naive ornithologist who

partakes in sexual debauchery—for brief interludes between oral-history reminiscences from dozens of HST's friends and acquaintances. The fictional attempts to out-gonzo her subject can safely be skipped, but the anecdotes prove the best format to explain him.

The variety of viewpoints, from Thompson's beaming supporters to his frustrated editors to his affronted subjects, paints a multidimensional portrait of "the Doctor," often with varying views of episodes. We're told of HST's legendary scrapes with Colorado politics, rifles and, of course, seas of alcohol and drugs—if not quite the oceanic quantities famously catalogued in "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

Carroll's contributors give us the real story behind HST's first groundbreaking scoop, his getting "badly stomped" by "a swarm of stoned, crazy-drunk bikers" in his postscript to "Hell's Angels": "It wasn't a whole bunch of Hell's Angels like the book said," insists an Oakland Angel. "Maybe it felt like it was a bunch to Hunter ... after George beat up Hunter and put the boots to him, Hunter got up, and he ran."

By contrast, Paul Perry and Whitmer simply relate Hunter's inflated version.

In "When the Weird Turn Pro" Whitmer comes up with a great deal of information about HST, some of which doesn't hold together, particularly lengthy digressions on Henry Miller, Joan Baez and George Plimpton. But the book contains wonderful descriptions of futile attempts to get a story in Saigon, and of a blind-drunk

"The Curse of Lono," published in 1983, became a Ralph Steadman book of drawings after Thompson failed to write enough intelligible pages.

HST wearing tucked-out Hawaiian shirts to hide his distended liver.

Paul Perry's "Fear and Loathing" regales the reader with 288 pages of profanity, gunplay and drug abuse, in the process getting the names, dates and highlights of HST's life down in order.

Perry gives us all the relevant data, but never says why readers might have found Thompson's work interesting. We're told that the editors of Rolling Stone were thrilled with one article and that those at Playboy were appalled by another—but almost never *why*. Perry reprints snatches of others' criticism, but reserves any judgment of his own. Similarly, Carroll prints bits of book reviews in an appendix. Outside of this, none of the authors attempts a critique of HST's work.

All three authors are slaves to their sources: Carroll makes extensive use of HST's quotable ex-wife discussing their 15-year marriage and home life;

Whitmer scarcely mentions her, and neither he nor Perry quote her at all. Perry, with Ralph Steadman's cooperation, gives more complete descriptions of the artist's escapades with HST—most notably the acid-crazed pair's venture in a dinghy to spray-paint "Fuck the Pope" on the Australian America's Cup yacht.

So which to read?

Too much is left out of Perry's spare, "unauthorized" book to draw an appropriately inspired picture. But it has by far the best cover of the three. Whitmer's "very unauthorized" biography provides by far the most honest portrait of Thompson's decline. And though Carroll's biography is hardly as "irreverent, shocking, wanton and outrageous" as she had intended, it's thoroughly entertaining, which is the best that one can expect. "Hunter" is the book that fans should grab; those needing names and dates can pick up one of the others.

For die-hards who have yet to OD on HST, Random House will publish "Better Than Sex: Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail 1992" next month. Will it be the book that re-establishes Thompson's rep? The odds aren't good—but don't count Uncle Duke out entirely. □