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Ellen Gerl

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The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson

Ellen Gerl, Ohio University
gerl@ohio.edu

Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson. William McKeen. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. 428 pp. \$27.95 hardback.

Guns. Drugs. Beautiful young women. Readers expect such stories in a biography of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. William McKeen offers a deeper look at the man behind the madman persona. He tells the story of a writer serious about his craft who was burdened by self-doubt and fame.

Thompson, who took his life in 2005, wrote *Hell's Angels*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and other works chronicling the wildness of the sixties and seventies. His writing style was acidic and hyperbolic, his attention to journalistic fact questionable. Yet, in tributes after his death, friends and colleagues called Thompson the 20th century's greatest comic writer, a literary icon, the nation's greatest patriot.

This alone is a good reason for students, teachers, and scholars of literary journalism, history, and magazine writing to read this book. Another is the fascinating times in which Thompson wrote. In his research McKeen interviewed editors and writers from *Rolling Stone's* early years, journalists on the bus covering the 1972 and 1976 presidential campaigns, and Thompson's many friends among the literati. He also interviewed dozens of childhood friends and family members.

Thompson, born in Louisville, seemed destined from an early age to deny the role of Kentucky gentleman. His first experience with the law, the FBI at that, came at age nine when he destroyed a mailbox. Later pranks sent him to jail. "Life as Hunter Thompson's mother was no weenie roast," McKeen writes. The death of his father when Thompson was 14 fueled his rebelliousness.

The juvenile delinquent was also a scholar. Friends described the young Thompson's reading H. L. Mencken and George Bernard Shaw. Others remember him retyping *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*. McKeen writes that Thompson told a friend, "I just want to feel what it feels like to write that well." The teenage Thompson was invited to join

Ellen Gerl is an assistant professor of journalism at Ohio University's E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, where she teaches courses in the magazine sequence. She also advises the student-produced regional magazine Southeast Ohio. A former freelance writer, Gerl wrote about food, travel, and science topics for a variety of magazines and is the author of two trade books about small business incubation.

Louisville's prestigious Athenaeum Literary Association. The group would later vote him out, then reinstate him. Apparently, even in the fifties, the establishment didn't know what to think about Thompson.

While many of his friends went off to Ivy League colleges, Thompson enlisted in the Air Force. The armed forces and Thompson were a bad fit. Fortunately, no one checked his claims of writing experience when he applied to transfer to information services. As the base newspaper's sports writer, he embraced action verbs, sports lingo, and the chance to make up words. His "Spectator" column hinted at what would become trademarks of Thompson's style: the fake editor's note that allowed anonymous commentary and the casting of himself into epic roles in the story.

After an honorable discharge, Thompson began a string of low-rent newspaper and freelance jobs. He struggled to find a publisher for his novel *Prince Jellyfish*. He lived paycheck to paycheck. Thompson found steady money and receptive readers writing for the *National Observer*, *The Wall Street Journal*'s experiment to attract young readers with narrative features. McKeen describes a piece for the *Observer* in which Thompson wrote about his Puerto Rico to Columbia trip with smugglers: "After three paragraphs of Hemingway-esque introduction, the story turned into a comic misadventure." As usual, Thompson was the story's central character. Thompson's letters to his *Observer* editor, some of which were published, showed his gonzo style evolving, in particular his conspiratorial tone and obsession with getting the story.

As with many great writers, Thompson had the gift of making his work appear easy. "His legions of stoned admirers probably really thought he took a hundred hits of acid before sitting down to write," McKeen writes. But colleagues told of Thompson hunched over his IBM agonizing about each word.

Thompson published *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1972. Critics praised it, calling it an epitaph to the sixties. Some likened it to *The Great Gatsby*. However, Thompson found writing difficult at the end of the seventies. His fame depressed him. So did Gary Trudeau's Doonesbury cartoon caricature of Thompson as the drug-addled Uncle Duke. His wife, Sandy, blamed cocaine for his writer's block and other problems and moved out in 1978. "Hunter in the mid-nineties was adrift, believing that his writing had been of the first rank but was not as respected as it should be," McKeen writes.

There is a body of literature that looks at Thompson's work. A recent documentary boasts the star factor of Johnny Depp and Bill Murray, plus the sounds of rock 'n' roll. But *Outlaw Journalist* adds much by looking at his work in the context of his life and the times.

It's also a fun read. McKeen mixes scholarly analysis with excerpts of Thompson's works and anecdotes from his life. One moment, the text takes readers into a Monterey motel room where a drug-and-alcohol-fueled Thompson writes the second half of *Hell's Angels* in one hundred hours. A paragraph later, McKeen steps back from the narrative to

discuss the book's disparate halves. And while some stories are repeated more often than necessary, McKeen makes this work.

The author's note explains that McKeen, a professor of journalism at the University of Florida, Gainesville, wrote a "semi-scholarly" book on Thompson in 1991. McKeen writes that Thompson gave helpful answers to questions for the book and "his unique seal of approval by writing me a note threatening to have my eyes gouged out for writing it." The note is framed on his office wall. It's clear that McKeen admires Thompson. But here he lets readers consider for themselves where on the spectrum Thompson's legacy falls—lunatic journalist whose promise was never fully realized or American literary genius.