

FEAR and LOATHING at ROLLING STONE

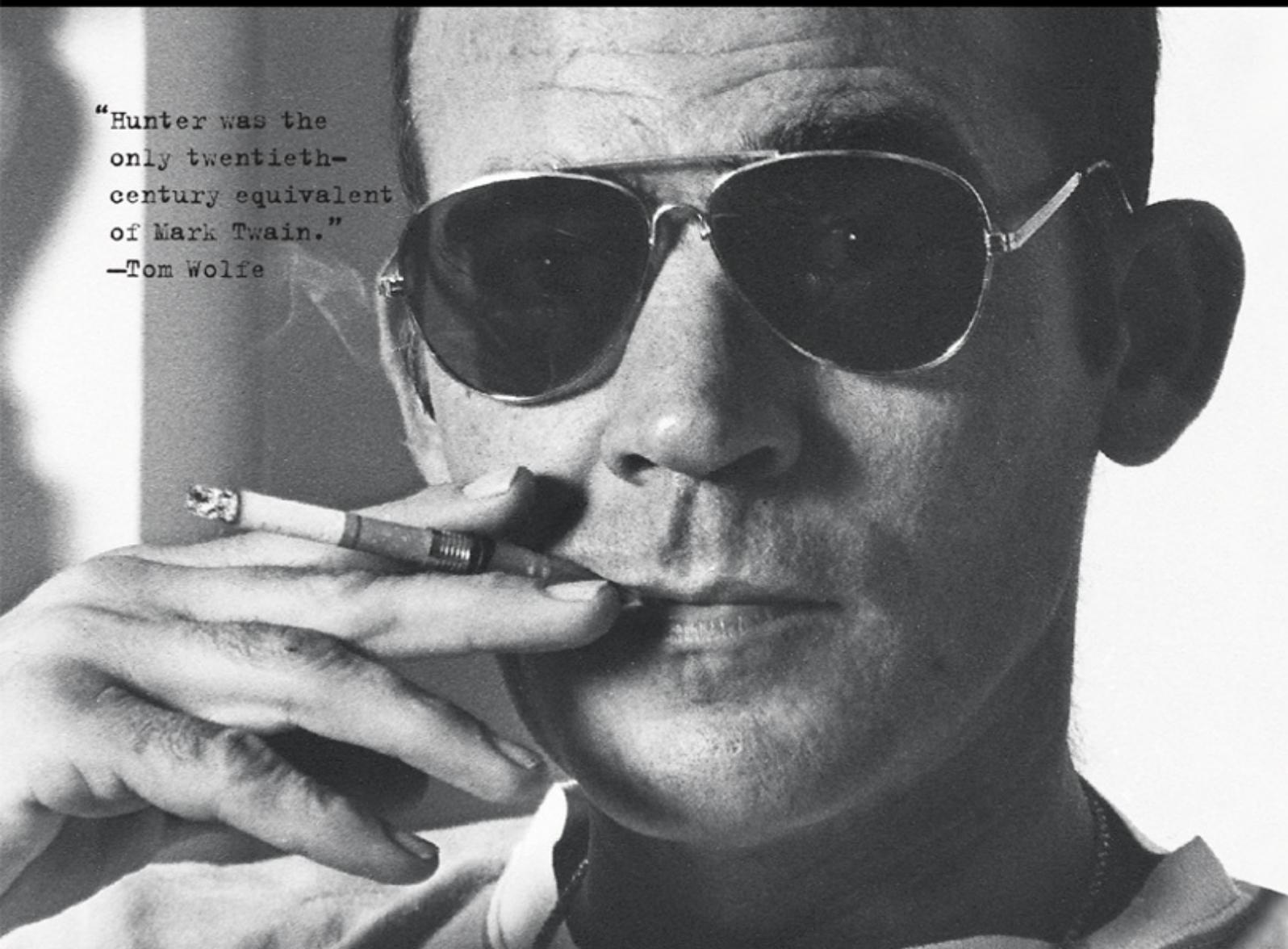
The Essential Writing of

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

Edited with an Introduction by Jann S. Wenner

"Hunter was the
only twentieth-
century equivalent
of Mark Twain."

—Tom Wolfe



The definitive collection of
the king of gonzo journalism's
finest work for ROLLING STONE

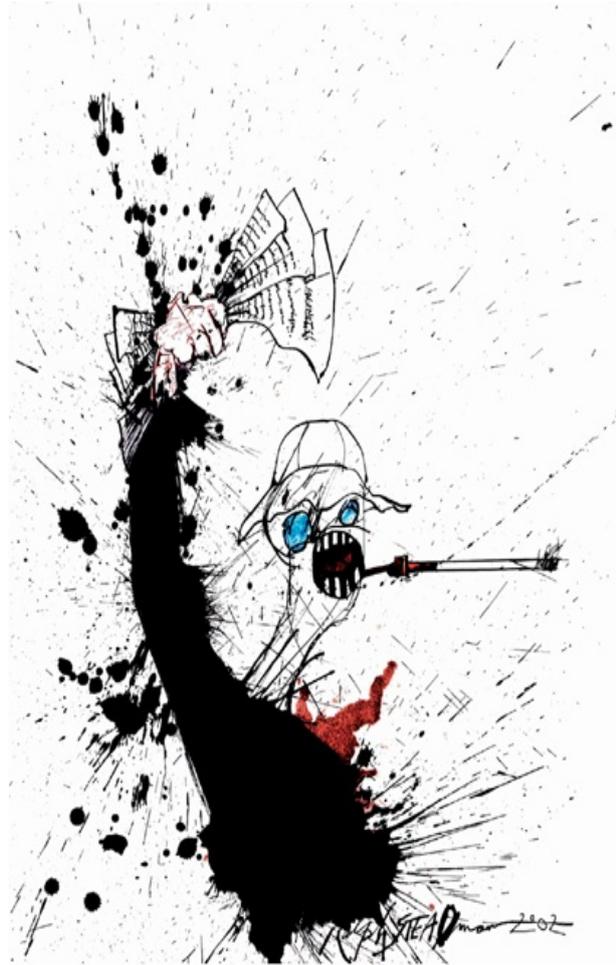
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"Buy the ticket, take the ride," was a favorite slogan of Hunter S. Thompson, and it pretty much defined both his work and his life. *Fear and Loathing at Rolling Stone* showcases the roller-coaster of a career at the magazine that was his literary home.

Jann S. Wenner, the outlaw journalist's friend and editor for nearly thirty-five years, has assembled articles that begin with Thompson's infamous run for sheriff of Aspen on the Freak Party ticket in 1970 and end with his final piece on the Bush-Kerry showdown of 2004. In between is Thompson's remarkable coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign—a miracle of journalism under pressure—and plenty of attention paid to Richard Nixon, his *bête noire*; encounters with Muhammad Ali, Bill Clinton, and the Super Bowl; and a lengthy excerpt from his acknowledged masterpiece, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Woven throughout is selected correspondence between Wenner and Thompson, most of it never before published. It traces the evolution of a personal and professional relationship that helped redefine modern American journalism, and also presents Thompson through a new prism as he pursued his lifelong obsession:

The life and death of the American Dream.



HUNTER S. THOMPSON

was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky.

His books include *Hell's Angels*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, and *The Rum Diary*, which will be released as a feature film starring Johnny Depp in October 2011. He died in 2005.

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“Thompson is a genuinely unique figure in American journalism, a superb comic writer and a ferociously outspoken social and political critic.”

—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*

* * *

“Mr. Thompson, the flamboyant apostle and avatar of gonzo journalism, still exerts a powerful hold on the American psyche. . . . He was first and foremost an original, vivid prose voice.”

—*The New York Times*

* * *

“Some of the finest political and social writing of our times.”

—*The Seattle Times*

* * *

“Thompson should be recognized for contributing some of the clearest, most bracing and fearless analysis of the possibilities and failures of American democracy in the past century.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

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by Jann S. Wenner
and with an Introduction
by Paul Scanlon

SIMON & SCHUSTER
NEWYORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

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First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition November 2011

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Designed by Joy O'Meara

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thompson, Hunter S.

Fear and loathing at Rolling stone : the essential writing of Hunter S. Thompson / edited and with a foreword by Jann S. Wenner and with an introduction by Paul Scanlon.

p. cm.

I. Wenner, Jann. II. Rolling stone (San Francisco, Calif.) III. Title.

PN4874.T444F43 2011

070.1'7—dc23

2011032312

ISBN 978-1-4391-6595-9

ISBN 978-1-4391-7023-6 (ebook)

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Acknowledgments

Foreword

Jann S. Wenner

The record shows that in 1970 we published Hunter S. Thompson's "The Battle of Aspen"; in 1971 he wrote about the stirrings of Mexican unrest in East Los Angeles, featuring a fiery lawyer named Oscar Zeta Acosta, who later that year emerged as Dr. Gonzo in "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

In 1972, we began nonstop coverage of the Nixon-McGovern presidential campaign. Hunter took over my life then—and for many years after that when he was reporting (long, nocturnal telephone calls and frequent all-night strategy sessions), and especially when he was writing.

After "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," everything else he wrote was a full-on siege. Setting up the assignment was easy—Hunter was pretty much welcome everywhere and had the skills and instincts to run a presidential campaign if he had wanted. But then came the travel arrangements: hotels, tickets, researchers, rental cars. Later in the process, finding a place for him to hunker down and write—The Seal Rock Inn, Key West, Owl Farm, preferably isolated and with a good bar. Flying in IBM Selectric typewriters with the right typeface; booze and drugs (usually he had this part already done); arranging for a handler-assistant at his end. Back at *Rolling Stone*, I had to be available to read and edit copy as it came in eight-to-ten-page bursts via the Xerox telecopier (the Mojo Wire), a primitive fax using telephone lines that had a stylus that printed onto treated, smelly paper (at a rate of seven minutes per page). I had to talk to Hunter for hours, then track and organize the various scenes and sections. He would usually begin writing in the middle, then back up or skip around to write what he felt good about at the moment, reporting scenes that might fit somewhere later, or spinning out total fantasies ("Insert ZZ" or "midnight screed") that would also find a place—parts that were flights of genius. Generally the lede was easy, describing the invariably dramatic weather wherever he was writing from. Then a flurry of headlines and chapter headings and the transitions he had to produce on demand to create the flow and logic, and always, sooner or later, the conclusion, which we always called "the Wisdom."

He liked to work against a crisis, and if there wasn't a legitimate one, he made one. We never had a fight about the editing. I never tried to change or "improve" him, but since I had a pretty deep understanding of his style and his motives, I could tell where he was going and sit at his side and read the map to him. If I didn't personally supervise everything he wrote for *Rolling Stone*, he wouldn't finish. It was a bit like being a cornerman for Ali. Editing Hunter required stamina, but I was young, and this was once in a lifetime, and we were both clear on that.

We were deep into politics and shared the same ambition to have a voice in where the country was going (thus the "National Affairs Desk"). We became partners in this as well, as mad as it may have seemed at the time—a rock-and-roll magazine and a man known for writing about motorcycle gangs, joining forces to change the country. We used to read aloud what he had just written, get to certain phrases or sentences,

and just exclaim to each other, “Hot fucking damn.” It was scorching, original, and it was fun. He was my brother in arms.

. . .

Now those days are gone. I still feel deeply in debt to him, and I never seem to stop working for him. And so it goes. And here we are publishing yet another volume of his work.

After Hunter’s death, we produced a special tribute issue of *Rolling Stone* based on memories and vignettes from nearly a hundred of his friends, colleagues, and coconspirators. It took ten days, with a half-dozen editors working around the clock against a hellacious deadline, and once again we were in service to Hunter S. Thompson, busting our asses on his behalf. He had again touched us in some magical, unforgettable way, even affecting those on our staff who had never met him.

That special issue was commissioned as a full-length book, *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson*, a one-hundred-fifty-thousand-word oral history. For now it stands as the definitive Hunter S. Thompson biography, and an essential companion to any understanding of his work and life; I edited it word by word, with much devotion.

I’ve always thought that Hunter had, in a sense, written his own autobiography in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, and that if there was a way to take his collected work and edit it properly, there would emerge a narrative of Hunter’s great and wild life, a story about himself, who was, after all, his own greatest character.

This notion was among the things I discussed with Paul Scanlon, who was my trusted right-hand man and managing editor for many of our San Francisco years, when we sat down to edit this book. Paul knows the *Rolling Stone* lore thoroughly, was a tasteful and meticulous editor, and was a natural to work with me on this comprehensive look at Hunter’s years with the magazine.

We’ve also included some correspondence between Hunter S. Thompson and me (actually a very small sample), as well as a couple of thoughtful—and hilarious—memos to the staff that bring yet another subtext and flavor to the arc of his work. Hunter lived a great life of genius, talent, and righteousness. It is reflected in these pages.

**FEAR and LOATHING
at ROLLING STONE**

Introduction

Paul Scanlon

When I first met Hunter S. Thompson in 1971, I didn't know what to expect. I was familiar with his work, of course, and had read the wonderful account of his campaign to become sheriff of Pitkin County (Aspen), Colorado, in the pages of *Rolling Stone*. He had been in Los Angeles working on a piece about the murder of newspaperman Ruben Salazar. There had been talk—very vague talk—about his writing something about Las Vegas. Then, one fine spring day, he appeared in *Rolling Stone's* San Francisco office. For me, and the magazine, nothing would ever be quite the same.

. . .

If you were a progressively minded college student in the 1960s, certain books were required reading: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* and *Trout Fishing in America* by Richard Brautigan, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe, and *Hell's Angels* by Hunter S. Thompson.

As an undergraduate majoring in journalism, I was drawn to the writing of Wolfe and a few others who were practicing what was not yet being called the “New Journalism.” It's funny, but even at an überliberal school like San Francisco State, there was a schism—what was known in the day as a “generation gap”—between faculty and students over this new kind of writing. Our professors considered Wolfe and his ilk poseurs, inspiring some kind of journalistic vaudeville by applying fictional techniques to reporting. We thought our instructors intended to mold us into drones, destined to carve out careers at small-town dailies.

I guess it was my junior year when I pulled a copy of *The Nation* from the student lounge magazine rack and had my first encounter with the writing of Hunter Thompson. It was the first of his two-part report on traveling with the Hells Angels. The outlaw motorcycle club's Oakland chapter was a fixture in the Bay Area. Encountering a group of Angels was not uncommon, especially after they embraced LSD and began hanging out at dance-rock concerts in places like the Fillmore Auditorium and Winterland. Big Brother and the Holding Company became their “official” band. The rule of thumb was simple if you were nearby: keep your distance and try not to make eye contact. Even in their brief, acid-drenched benign phase, the Angels were downright scary, clearly capable of unpredictable violence.

So it was a revelation to me that there was a writer who could figure out a way to win their trust and run with these characters. Hunter Thompson clearly had the smarts and the courage to do so. Or he was a hell of a salesman and a little bit crazy. Whatever. That early installment in *The Nation* convinced me he was the real deal. Later that day, I wondered aloud to my fellow campus newspaper staffers what our faculty advisers would make of *him*.

. . .

Rolling Stone in the early 1970s was an exciting place to be. Social, cultural, and

political unrest was in the air and we tried to cover that turbulence in ways that newspapers and newsweeklies did not. I was the managing editor for many of those years and was fortunate to work with some of the finest journalists in the land, including several on the magazine's masthead. My colleagues were a gifted bunch of renegades who had served apprenticeships in places like the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Post*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Two of our most talented staffers came from the creative writing programs of San Francisco State and Stanford. Our first copy chief, who kept the place from coming unglued every two-week publishing cycle, was a Middle East scholar who had once roomed with Owsley Stanley III. We all shared a disdain for traditional, mainstream journalism and a penchant for hard work.

When Hunter entered our ranks he quickly became, in many ways, our team leader. He had already established his credentials as an outlaw journalist, and the Salazar piece would demonstrate his investigative zeal.

You had to like the guy. I think some of it came from his innate Southern charm and the contradictory fact that he was, well, a little shy. He was in town that spring to work on "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Part I," and had set up shop in the basement of Jann Wenner's house. His visits to the office, a converted downtown warehouse with lots of exposed brick and wooden beams, were infrequent, but always memorable. Hunter was a big, hulking but graceful guy who clearly had charisma, and we responded to it.

Standing about six-foot-two, usually clad in khaki shorts, high-topped sneakers, a baseball cap, and either a parka or a safari jacket, he'd amble into the office with a bowlegged quickstep, making the zigzagging, seriocomic, dramatic entrance we had come to expect. There was a big, round oak table in the middle of the editorial department, a sort of central gathering spot, where he'd plop down his leather rucksack, open it, and wordlessly proceed to remove the contents, which varied, but usually included something edible, like a grapefruit, a carton of Dunhills, a large police flashlight, a bottle of Wild Turkey, and a can of liquid Mace.

Next, he'd open his mouth and speak. I called it "Hunter-ese." His delivery was something akin to a lawn sprinkler or a Gatling gun, a rapid-fire baritone mumble that was hard to understand at first. But once you caught on to the rhythms, you realized he was spitting out perfect sentences.

Late one morning, Hunter came in and handed some manuscript pages to a couple of editors and me, then turned and motored out with nary a word. He had given us copies of the first section of "Vegas," and by late afternoon most of the staff had read and digested them. We were flat knocked out. Between fits of laughter we ran our favorite lines back and forth to one another: "One toke? You poor fool. Wait until you see those goddamned bats!" Delivered in Hunter-ese, of course.

Between bouts of serious writing there was the usual goofing off and troublemaking. There were evenings of drug-fueled adventures that left more than a few staffers dazed and worn out. There were interesting characters who were part of his—and subsequently our—orbit, including Oscar Zeta Acosta, who was the model for the "three-hundred-pound Samoan attorney" in "Vegas," and his sometimes sidekick, a fellow named Savage Henry.

Early on we became familiar with Hunter's penchant for fright wigs, bizarre

recordings of animals in their death throes that would somehow find their way onto the office public address system, and novelty store pranks. One evening Jann invited a few of us over to his place on some pretext or other. We walked in and saw Hunter standing there in a torn tie-dyed T-shirt covered in red splotches. Brandishing what looked like a giant horse syringe, he announced that he was going to inject 151 proof rum directly into his navel. He then jammed the “needle” into his belly and doubled over as he let out a series of wails and groans. One of my companions almost fainted.

But the fun and games—for Hunter and for the rest of us—always took second position to the work. We loved what we were doing, and none more than he. Once, reflecting on the scrambling years of his early career, he stated that he had “no taste for either poverty or honest labor, so writing is the only recourse left for me.” His tongue, of course, was firmly in his cheek. He was serious about his craft and was an ongoing student of correct grammar and syntax, and enjoyed sharing that knowledge. One of our staff writers was quite talented but often taunted for the sloppiness of his copy. I stood by one day as Hunter patiently lectured him on the necessity of producing a clean manuscript and how it would complement his writing skills (Hunter was right). In fact, he went out of his way to be friendly and helpful, even solicitous, about our work. Hunter would somehow get wind of what I was assigning and often I’d find on my desk a note in his distinctive scrawl suggesting a source or a contact. The notes were always signed: OK/HST. He had a gift to inspire, and he lifted everybody’s game.

He could have played the star, but the really good ones never do. *Hells Angels* brought notoriety, and his Kentucky Derby piece for *Scanlan’s* as well as the early *Rolling Stone* appearances received attention. He chose to be a friend and colleague, and we responded in kind. When the sloppy manuscript guy heard that Hunter used swimming as a way to relax, he escorted Hunter to a scuba school a couple of blocks away where he could do laps when the pool was free.

When he was in town, Hunter became a low-key regular at Jerry’s Inn, the staff watering hole across the street. He was very much at home there at the bar, and would love to engage us, one-on-one, in everything from his heroes, Scott Fitzgerald and Joseph Conrad; to classic sportswriters such as Jimmy Cannon or Red Smith; to the fortunes of the Oakland Raiders, the scruffy, mean-spirited pro football team on which he had a few friends. He also loved to talk shop, about articles we would read in *Esquire* and elsewhere, which I like to think validated a few of the hours we spent in Jerry’s instead of in the office.

When Hunter embarked on the 1972 campaign trail, it signaled the end of one chapter and the beginning of another for both him and the magazine. At first there was no real blueprint other than establishing a presence with an office in Washington, D.C. But he quickly found himself reinventing the mission statement almost issue by issue, and pretty soon the assignment had become an endless road trip. He was always writing against extreme deadline and filing copy at the last possible minute, which became a crucible for both him and the magazine. I was mercifully out of the direct line of fire, with too many other things on my plate. But I was close enough to feel the terrible weight borne by Jann, associate editor David Felton, copy editor Charles Perry, and a heroic production staff. The now legendary Mojo Wire sat just a few feet from my office door. Night after night, in the midst of deadline frenzy, that infernal

thing would be beeping away, signaling Hunter's presence at the other end, while Jann or Felton stood by, waiting for the copy to be slowly ejected. It was as if he was always in our midst. And in the final accounting, those articles solidified *Rolling Stone's* commitment to political coverage, made Hunter a true celebrity (for good and ill), and eventually resulted in a great book. It was a miracle of journalism under pressure, and only Hunter could have pulled it off.

A few months after the election we were sitting in Jerry's. Hunter looked like hell and was clearly not in great spirits. For reasons that will ever elude me, I decided to give him a helpful lecture. Retire your alter ego Raoul Duke, I said. Or send him on a long vacation. Go back to being the journalist who wrote *Hells Angels*. Cut back a little on the drugs and the booze. He turned toward me as he reached into the pocket of his safari jacket. He gave me a look; nothing nasty, just *a look*. He extracted a tab of Mr. Natural blotter acid from the pocket, stared me in the eye, and swallowed it. I got the message. Our conversation resumed.

. . .

The last time I worked with Hunter was on his "interdicted dispatch" from a rapidly falling Saigon in 1975. We pretty much lost contact after that, although I'd occasionally run into him in New York. The last time I spoke to him was at a 1996 celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the simultaneous publication of a Modern Library edition, an acknowledgment of his work by the literary establishment of which he was justly proud. It was a splendid evening. A lot of *Rolling Stone* alumni were there, and among the guests was Johnny Depp, Hunter's great friend who would portray Raoul Duke, Doctor of Journalism, in the movie version of *Vegas* in 1998.

One of my favorite memories of Hunter goes back to the spring of 1973, and it's actually on video tape. He had been sequestered at the Seal Rock Inn, on the western edge of San Francisco, finishing the final edits on *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. A group of video journalists who had been assigned to do a documentary on *Rolling Stone* for public television had taped him at the hotel as he was preparing to leave, and he obliged them with a few minutes of classic Hunter S. Thompson gibberish and shtick.

But when he got to the office to say his good-byes before heading home to Colorado, the video crew had preceded him and closed in, peppering him with stupid questions. Hunter and I tried to ignore them by poring over his fan mail, which in itself was something to behold. Finally, Hunter gave up. He started moving down the hallway, looking back over his shoulder at me, saying, "I have to meet a guy across the street!" By the time he reached the exit, he was shouting, "I HAVE TO MEET A GUY ACROSS THE STREET!" Across the street was Jerry's, naturally. The guy was me.

Hunter was a terrific writer whose unique talent and enthusiasm helped propel *Rolling Stone* forward at some crucial points in its early history. He was a swell drinking companion, a hell of a salesman, and yes, a little bit crazy. Crazy like a fox.

. . .

It's been forty years since Hunter Thompson embarked on the presidential campaign

trail and almost seven years since he passed away, but somehow he still manages to consume many of us to this day. When I began work on this book, I figured his total output for *Rolling Stone* exceeded four hundred fifty thousand words. The main text, after some pretty serious editing, is still about two hundred ten thousand words.

The selection process was easy: practically everything. Only four articles were omitted; they simply weren't up to par with the other material. But this meant that cutting would be that much more difficult.

The campaign trail material was the least difficult to work with. It was specifically geared to the moment, and much of it had simply ceased being topical. But there were plenty of vignettes and colorful incidents, and the overall reporting has held up remarkably well.

A characteristic of Hunter's writing is the long digression, or the shorter but carefully designed tangent. If a digression got in the way of the main narrative, out it came. The best example is "Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl." Almost half the article was a world-class digression on the Oakland Raiders, which had nothing to do with the contest itself. Of course if a digression or tangent was outrageously funny, it had to stay in. It would have been a crime to cut Hunter's adventures riding the Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle. Such is also the case with "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." The excerpt presented here is a stand-alone section from Part II in which Duke and his attorney have their way with a hapless delegate to the district attorneys' conference.

Curiously, the hardest article to cut was Hunter's first piece for the magazine, "The Battle of Aspen," which details his efforts to unseat the sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, through the use of "Freak Power." I made a moderate initial cut, but the second time around I struggled and finally gave up. The damn thing was too intricate and dense.

* * *

The arc of Hunter's relationship with *Rolling Stone* is pretty clear looking at the table of contents. His output from 1970 through 1972 was amazing, and Watergate and all things Nixon kept him involved through 1974. But when he was dispatched to the Ali-Foreman heavyweight championship fight in Zaire that year, he returned empty-handed. His trip to Saigon as the Vietnam War wound down yielded an abbreviated, unfinished piece. A later excursion to Grenada yielded nothing. In the meantime, he had become—and would continue to be—a popular speaker on college campuses. The money was good and the appearances were plentiful. The writing just wasn't there, for long periods.

When he would reappear in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, the results were often first-rate. In 1977, "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat" was a paean to his friend and sometimes nemesis Oscar Acosta, who had apparently perished in a drug deal gone bad. His two-part profile and interview with Muhammad Ali the following year was insightful and hilarious. Who else would leap into Ali's hotel room wearing an African fright mask, sending the Champ into gales of laughter?

Another five-year absence ended with Hunter's last great piece of reporting when he was sent to cover the sensational Roxanne Pulitzer divorce trial. "A Dog Took My Place" features Hunter at his best, exploring the sex-and-drugs culture of well-heeled

Palm Beach denizens in wide-eyed amazement and disdain.

The 1990s would produce two late masterpieces. “Fear and Loathing in Elko” is a sustained fantasia of nightmare imagery featuring Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas and a cast of weirdos. It is mordantly funny and dark—in fact much darker than “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.” “Polo Is My Life” would prove to be his last great piece of lyrical, expansive writing, involving his observations on a sport for the wealthy, the lost world of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and sex dolls. It should be noted that these two articles, like his first for *Rolling Stone*, were extremely difficult to cut.

The correspondence between Hunter and Jann starts with their very first exchange in 1969. There are backstage looks at the writer as he works, how “Vegas” came to be, the evolution of the 1972 campaign coverage, story ideas (mostly discarded), and the push-me, pull-you faxes required to produce Hunter’s later work. Taken as a whole, the letters and memos are a kind of additional biography of the writer who did his signature work for *Rolling Stone*.