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Profile of Hunter S. Thompson on Famous Like Me

Name: [Hunter S. Thompson](#)

Also Know As:

Date of Birth: [18th July 1937](#)

Place of Birth: [Louisville, Kentucky, USA](#)

Profession: [Writer](#)

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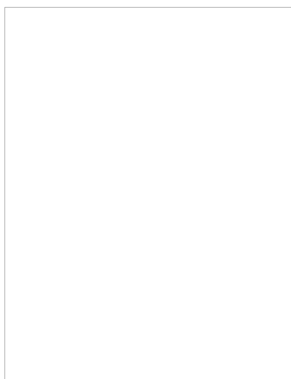
Hunter Stockton Thompson (July 18, 1937 – February 20, 2005) was an American journalist and author. He was known for his flamboyant writing style, most notably deployed in his novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which blurred the distinctions between writer and subject, fiction and nonfiction. It became known as gonzo journalism and was widely imitated.

Early years

A Louisville, Kentucky native, Thompson grew up in the Cherokee Triangle neighborhood of the Highlands and attended Louisville Male High School. His parents, Jack (d. 1952) and Virginia (d. 1999), married in 1935. Jack's death left three sons—Hunter, Davison, and James—to be brought up by their mother, who was a chronic drinker.¹ Thompson's difficult youth, and its influence on his behavior and the development of his misanthropic worldview, has not received significant literary exploration.

After early trouble with the law, including an arrest in 1956 for robbery, he enlisted in the Air Force as part of his punishment. At Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, in 1956, he began working as a sports journalist, writing for the base newspaper. He was discharged in 1958. Thompson worked briefly as a copy editor for *Time Magazine* while maintaining a beat-inspired lifestyle in New York City.

Thompson traveled extensively in the Caribbean and South America, writing freelance articles for a number of U.S. daily newspapers. While in Puerto Rico, he befriended the journalist William Kennedy. Thompson also spent time as a South American correspondent for a Dow Jones-owned weekly newspaper, the *National Observer*. In the early 1960s he lived and worked as a security guard at Big Sur Hot Springs at the time it became Esalen Institute.



In the meantime, Thompson wrote two serious novels (*Prince Jellyfish* and *The Rum Diary*) and many short stories. Despite repeated submissions to publishers, only *The Rum Diary* was ever published—in

1998, long after it was written, and long after he had become a celebrity. Kennedy later remarked that he and Thompson were both failed novelists who had turned to journalism in order to make a living.

He married his long time girlfriend Sandra Dawn Conklin (a.k.a. Sandy Conklin Thompson, now Sondi Wright) on May 19, 1963. The couple had one son, Juan Fitzgerald Thompson, born March 23, 1964. The couple conceived five more times together; three miscarriages, and two which died shortly after birth. In Rolling Stone issue 970, a tribute issue for Hunter, Sandy wrote, " I .. want to acknowledge the five children Hunter and I lost-two full term babies, three miscarriages...I had so wanted more Hunters! One of the most beautiful gifts that Hunter ever gave me...Sarah, our full term, eight-pound baby, lived about twelve hours. I lay there in Aspen Valley Hospital waiting, and when I saw the doctor's face it was unbearable. I thought I might go mad. Hunter leaned over the bed and said, '*Sandy, if you want to go out there for awhile- do that, just know that Juan and I really need you.*' I was back." After nineteen years together, seventeen years of marriage, Hunter and Sandy divorced in 1980, though the two remained close friends until Hunter's death.

Thompson got his big break in 1965 when he was approached by *The Nation* editor Carey McWilliams with an idea for a story based upon his experience with the notorious Hells Angels motorcycle gang. Thompson had spent a year living and riding with the Hells Angels, but the relationship broke down when the bikers suspected that Thompson was making money from his writing, and they demanded a share of the profits. The author ended up with a savage beating, or 'stomping' as the Angels referred to it. After the article was published by *The Nation* (May 17, 1965), numerous book offers on the subject came his way, and Random House published the hard cover *Hells Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* in 1966.

In the late 1960s, Thompson received a "doctorate" in Divinity from a mail-order church while living in San Francisco.

Middle years

He went on to work for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and Ron Shen, where his next two books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail 1972* were first serialized.

Published in 1971, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* is a first-person account by a journalist (Thompson himself, under the pseudonym "Raoul Duke") on a trip to Las Vegas with his "300-pound [136 kg] Samoan" attorney, "Dr. Gonzo" (a character inspired by Thompson's friend, Chicano lawyer Oscar Zeta Acosta) to cover a narcotics officers' convention and the "fabulous Mint 400" motorcycle race. During the trip, he and his lawyer become sidetracked by a search for the American dream, with the aid of copious amounts of LSD, ether, adrenochrome, marijuana and other drugs. Ralph Steadman, who collaborated with Thompson on several projects, contributed surreal pen and ink illustrations.

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72 is a collection of *Rolling Stone* articles he wrote while covering the election campaigns of President Richard M. Nixon and his unsuccessful opponent, Senator George McGovern. The book focuses largely on the Democratic Party's primaries and the breakdown of the party as it splits between the different candidates; McGovern was extolled while Ed Muskie and Hubert Humphrey were ridiculed. Thompson would go on to become a fierce critic of Nixon, both during and after his presidency. After Nixon's death in 1994, Thompson famously described him in *Rolling Stone* as a man who "could shake your hand and stab you in the back at the same time" and said "his casket [should] have been launched into one of those open-sewage canals that empty into the ocean just south of Los Angeles. He was a swine of a man and a jabbering dupe of a president." Returning the favor after Thompson's death, Henry Kissinger said, "Nixon didn't shoot himself like that unstable buffoon who could not even string a correct grammatical sentence together."

Thompson debuted in *Rolling Stone* with an article describing his 1970 bid for sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado on the "Freak Power" ticket. Thompson narrowly lost the election, although he ran on a platform promoting decriminalization of drugs and the sale thereof, tearing up the streets and turning them into bike paths, and renaming Aspen, Colorado to "Fat City", amongst other things. The incumbent Republican sheriff whom he ran against had a crew cut, prompting Thompson to shave his head bald and refer to his opposition as "my long-haired opponent."

Later years

Thompson's last book, *Kingdom of Fear*, is an angry commentary on the passing of the American Century. Thompson also wrote a Web column, "Hey Rube," for ESPN. He had at times also toured on the lecture circuit, once with John Belushi.

Thompson was fond of firearms and was known to keep a keg of gunpowder in his basement.

His brother, James Garnett Thompson (born 1949), died from AIDS complications in 1994. James reportedly believed that his brother was offended by his homosexuality. He also resented how Hunter treated him during childhood, and the two were never close. When his much older brothers moved from home, James was left to cope with his mother's perpetual drunkenness, sometimes having to take a taxi to pick her up off the pavement where she had passed out.

Thompson was married to Anita Bejmuk, his long-time assistant, on 24 April 2003.

Death

Thompson died at his fortified compound in Woody Creek, Colorado, on February 20, 2005 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. He was 67 years old.

Thompson's son (Juan), daughter-in-law (Jennifer Winkel Thompson), and grandson (Will Thompson) were visiting for the weekend at the time of his suicide. Will and Jennifer were in the adjacent room when they heard the gunshot. They reported to the press that they do not believe his suicide was out of desperation, but was a well-thought-out act resulting from Thompson's many painful medical conditions.² Thompson's wife, Anita, who was at the gym at the time of her husband's death, was on the phone with Thompson when he, unbeknownst to her, ended his life.

Artist and friend Ralph Steadman wrote:

"...He told me 25 years ago that he would feel real trapped if he didn't know that he could commit suicide at any moment. I don't know if that is brave or stupid or what, but it was inevitable. I think that the truth of what rings through all his writing is that he meant what he said. If that is entertainment to you, well, that's OK. If you think that it enlightened you, well, that's even better. If you wonder if he's gone to Heaven or Hell – rest assured he will check out them both, find out which one Richard Milhous Nixon went to – and go there. He could never stand being bored. But there must be Football too – and Peacocks..."³

Seven months later, *Rolling Stone* released what was claimed to be Thompson's final written words, written with a marker four days before his death, The title was "Football Season is over":

"No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun -- for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax -- This won't hurt."

Funeral

On August 20, 2005, Thompson's ashes were fired from a 150-foot cannon of his own design (in the shape of a double-thumbed fist clutching a peyote button) to the tune of Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man". Red, white, blue and green fireworks were launched along with his ashes. The ashes were fired in a private ceremony. As the city of Aspen will not allow the cannon to remain for more than a month, the cannon will be dismantled and put into storage until a suitable permanent location can be found. There is talk of a public party sometime in the summer of 2006. Johnny Depp, close friend of Thompson (and who portrayed Thompson in the movie adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), financed the funeral, according to widow Anita Thompson. Depp told the Associated Press, "*all I'm doing is trying to make sure his last wish comes true. I just want to send my pal out the way he wants to go out.*" Other famous attendees at the funeral included US Senators John Kerry and George McGovern, 60 Minutes correspondent Ed Bradley, actors Bill Murray and Josh Hartnett, singers Lyle Lovett and John Oates as well as numerous other friends of Thompson. An estimated 280 people attended the funeral.

The plans for this impressive monument were initially drawn by Thompson and Ralph Steadman, and were shown as part of an "Omnibus" program on the BBC, titled "Fear and Loathing in Gonzovision". It is included as a special feature on the second disc of the Criterion Collection DVD release of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The video footage of Thompson drawing the plans, and outdoor footage showing where he wanted the cannon constructed were played prior to the unveiling of his cannon at the funeral.

"If that's what he wanted, we'll see if we can pull it off," said Douglas Brinkley, a friend and now the family's spokesman, of the ceremony as it was being planned.⁴

Legacy

Writing Style and Persona

As a writer, Thompson is remembered most for his flamboyant and humorous style, employing what he called "action verbs" to comically spin outlandish tales that were completely unbelievable, yet provided

a unique viewpoint to accurately describe the underlying reality at hand. Thompson almost always wrote in first person narrative, and his stories became so colorfully contrived that they easily slipped into the realm of fiction; however, the basic framework of the story he told was very often true.

Thompson's writing style has been widely imitated, and he is sometimes considered to be among the most influential American Writers of the 20th century.

In his writing, he cultivated the persona of a dangerously absurd, drug-crazed journalist bent on comic self-destruction. While his fictional persona largely mirrored his actual life, during the aforementioned BBC interview, Thompson noted that he sometimes felt obligated to live up to the fictional self that he had created.

Popular slogans

A slogan of Thompson's, "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro," appears as a chapter heading in *Kingdom of Fear*. He was also quoted as saying, "I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence or insanity to anyone, but they've always worked for me." Another one of his favorite sayings, "Buy the ticket, take the ride," is easily applied to virtually all of his exploits. "Too weird to live, too rare to die", a phrase applied to Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, has been widely used to qualify the Good Doctor after his death.

The Hawaiian word "mahalo" also frequently appears in Thompson's works and correspondence. Loosely translated, it means "may you be in divine breath." On more than one occasion, "mahalo" would follow Thompson's usage of "buy the ticket, take the ride."

Letters

Thompson was a prolific letter writer. Letters served as Thompson's prime avenue for personal conversation. Beginning in his teenage years, Thompson made carbon copies of all his letters, which were almost always typed. Thompson's letters include all of his noted flamboyancy, and were sent to both dear friends and unsuspecting public officials and reporters.

Some of his letters have begun to be published in a series of books called *The Fear and Loathing Letters*. The first volume, *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955 - 1967*, is over 650 pages, while the second volume *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist* passed 700. Douglas Brinkley, who edits the letter series, said that for every letter included, fifteen were cut. Brinkley estimated Thompson's own archive contains over 20,000 letters. The last of the three planned volumes of Thompson's letters has yet to be published, and according to Amazon.com will be released in January 2006 as *The Mutineer : Rants, Ravings, and Missives from the Mountaintop 1977-2005*.

While Thompson did not write an autobiography, his letters serve that function. Since his early days in the US Air Force, which he claimed discharged him as "totally unclassifiable", Thompson's letters contained comic "asides" to "his biographers" that would presumably be "reading-in" on his collected letters. Some of these letters, poured into a story by narrative passages, were already bundled into Thompson's *Kingdom of Fear*, though it is not considered an autobiography. Three biographies have been written about him.

Accolades

A new journalism contemporary of Thompson's, Tom Wolfe, has called Thompson the greatest American comic writer of the 20th century.

Hunter Thompson showed up frequently as Uncle Duke in *Doonisbury*, the Garry Trudeau comic strip, to loud protests from Thompson himself, though he supposedly took a liking to the character in later years.

Similarly, Spider Jerusalem, the gonzo journalist protagonist of Warren Ellis's *Transmetropolitan*, is (more lovingly) based on Thompson.

Outre columnists Ed Anger of the *Weekly World News* and Matt Brock of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* show a clear Thompson influence.

Political Beliefs

Although letters from Thompson to his friends note that he had taken an early interest in Ayn Rand's school of Objectivism, he eventually drifted away from Rand's version of anti-establishment politics into his own field. While distinctly embracing the notion of democracy and its virtues as evidenced in his

political writings in both the 1972 and 1976 elections, Thompson was acutely aware of the flaws in such a system and regularly advocated radical approaches to politics that veered between libertarian, anarchist, and even some aspects of socialism. In the documentary "Breakfast With Hunter", Thompson can be seen wearing a Che Guevara shirt, while his son Juan Thompson acknowledges that his father never had any respect for property.

Said Thompson's longtime friend Douglas Brinkley:

"He's both a kind of old-fashioned believer in democratic virtues, but also an anarchist. There's always that unpredictable element with him. In any given situation, as soon as he feels there's a system closing in, he'll destroy it."

Regarding contemporary politics, in 2004 Thompson wrote: "Nixon was a professional politician, and I despised everything he stood for—but if he were running for president this year against the evil Bush-Cheney gang, I would happily vote for him." (Fear and Loathing, Campaign 2004, *Rolling Stone*)

Movies

The film *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1980) depicts Thompson's attempts at writing stories for both the Super Bowl and the 1972 U.S. presidential election. It stars Bill Murray as Thompson and Peter Boyle as Thompson's attorney Oscar Acosta, referred to in the movie as Carl Laslow, Esq.

The 1998 film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was directed by Monty Python veteran Terry Gilliam, and starred Johnny Depp (who moved into Hunter's basement to 'study' Thompson's persona before assuming his role in the film) as Raoul Duke and Benicio Del Toro as Dr. Gonzo. Thompson appeared in the scene at the club "The Matrix", sitting at a table. The film has achieved something of a cult following.

The film *Breakfast With Hunter* (2003) was directed and edited by Wayne Ewing. It documents Thompson's work on the movie *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, his arrest for drunk driving and his subsequent fight with the court system.

A new film is currently (2005) in production, based upon Thompson's novel *The Rum Diary*. Both Depp and Del Toro will be starring in this new Thompson film. Del Toro was supposed to have directed, but he withdrew in January 2004. Bruce Robinson is directing.

Articles

- **The Nation**
 - *The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders* — May 1965
- **Scanlan's Monthly**
 - *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy* — 1970
 - *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* — 1970
- **Playboy**
 - *The Great Shark Hunt* — 1974
- **Rolling Stone**
 - *Freak Power in the Rockies* — 1970
 - *Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan* — 1971
 - *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* — 1971
 - *The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat* — 1972
 - *Memo from the Sports Desk & Rude Notes from a Decompression Chamber* — 1973
 - *Fear and Loathing at the Watergate* — 1973
 - *Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl* — 1974
 - *Jimmy Carter and the Great Leap of Faith, An Endorsement With Fear and Loathing by Hunter S. Thompson* — 1976
 - *A Dog Took My Place* — 1983
 - *Fear and Loathing in Elko* — 1992
 - *He was a Crook* — June 1994
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