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Hunter Thompson: Celebrity - but maybe not a journalist

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The response to Hunter Thompson's death may actually say more about us than it does about Thompson's place in the last century's pantheon of writers.

From as far away as Australia, online tributes referring to him as a "genius," "great," "original," "a scholar," were outdone by none other than Tom Wolfe, who in an essay in the Wall Street Journal, declared Thompson worthy of being nominated "as the century's greatest comic writer in the English language." He's been compared to, among others, Mark Twain, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer.

It was Wolfe who, by including a piece from Thompson's 1966 book *Hell's Angels* in the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*, miscast Thompson as a journalist. Thompson himself, Wolfe revealed the other day, said he was "gonzo," and that was that.

Hell's Angels, it turns out, was Thompson's best work as a journalist. It began as a magazine article and was later expanded into a book. Although Thompson writes in the first person, this book is not about him, but his efforts to show that the motorcycle gangs are not the heinous people they're portrayed as in the press. To his credit, he ends by revealing that some of the motorcyclists stomped him almost to death and he wants them exterminated. In other words, Thompson was man enough to admit he was wrong.

After *Hell's Angels*, he became less and less of a journalist and more and more a self-anointed celebrity, his works not just written in the first person, but all about him. His work veered into self-referential and sometimes humorous works such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* (1974), with "fear and loathing" becoming a repeated phrase in other book titles. Readers became entertained rather than informed. What information they got was Thompson's personal reaction to something, which, depending on how much he had abused alcohol and drugs, might not be a useful reaction at all.

Even Thompson's claim to be a "gonzo journalist" deserves another look. Thompson said his first piece of gonzo journalism came about when, suffering from writer's block, he started ripping out the pages from his notebook, numbering them, and faxing them to Scanlan's magazine, which published them as submitted. If ever there was an oxymoron, "gonzo journalism" is at the top of the list right along with "objective journalism," which Thompson himself called a "pompous contradiction in terms." Journalists reflect, choose their facts, and revise, and then their stories are read - and sometimes changed - by editors. Gonzo seems more like a precursor to the thousands (millions?) of Web logs in which people of the world write about anything they want - and what they want to write about is usually themselves.

Journalism, by its nature, is dated, usually having a shelf life of no more than 24 hours. Thompson found a way to have a longer shelf life. That path was not through journalism, but through the redoubtable ways of counterculture celebrity. Thompson was a character in just about everything he wrote, and so it was sadly appropriate that Thompson the writer ended the life of Thompson the character.

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As the hyperbolic reaction to his suicide last Sunday subsides, a scholarly assessment of his work will begin. I'm betting our descendants will learn more about - and from - Mark Twain than they will from Hunter Thompson.

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