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'Gonzo' under glass

By R. Thomas Berner

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The response to Hunter Thompson's death may actually say more about us than it does about Mr. 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 Mr. Thompson worthy of being nominated "as the century's greatest comic writer in the English language."

It was Mr. Wolfe who by including a piece from Mr. Thompson on "Hell's Angels" in a book on new journalism miscast Mr. Thompson as a new journalist. Mr. Thompson himself, Mr. Wolfe revealed the other day, said he was "gonzo" and that was that. And Mr. Thompson had it right. 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. He has been compared to, among others, Mark Twain, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer, who at his excessive worst could not match Mr. Thompson's ego.

Even Mr. Thompson's claim to be a "gonzo journalist" deserves another look. Mr. 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 Mr. 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 weblogs in which people of the world write about anything they want -- and it's usually about them.

Mr. Thompson's best work as a journalist was "Hell's Angels," which began as a magazine article and was later expanded to a book. Although Mr. Thompson does write in the first person, the 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 the book by revealing that some of the motorcyclists stomped him almost to death and he wants them exterminated. In other words, Mr. Thompson was man enough to admit he was wrong.

But after that his work veered dramatically away from journalism and into the self-referential -- 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 Mr. 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.

Journalism, by its nature, is dated, usually having a shelf life of no more than 24 hours. Mr. Thompson found a way to have a longer shelf life, although it wasn't through journalism, but by making himself a counterculture celebrity. Mr. Thompson was a character in just about everything he wrote, and so it was sadly appropriate that Mr. Thompson the writer ended the life of Mr. Thompson the character. 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 Mark Twain than they will about Hunter Thompson.

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