

Not like the others

Hunter S. Thompson's erratic and brilliant life the subject of a friend's new memoirs

BY KEVIN GOPAL
 STREET NEWS SERVICE

Hunter Thompson paid fastidious attention to cultivating his own legend. There were the books and the hell raising, of course, but also the thousands of letters, written on the typewriter he carried everywhere with him and painstakingly carbon copied for the archive.

The legend may well have become a curse by the time the author of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" shot himself four years ago — while talking to his wife on the phone and with his son in the house. But it continues.

Hunter S Thompson: An Insider's View Of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance is published by Lyons Press.

Documentaries and books such as Alex Gibney's film "Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S Thompson" and "Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S Thompson," the oral history by Rolling Stone founder Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour, are revealing but neither has the insight of Jay Cowan's new book, "An Insider's View of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance."

Cowan met Thompson in 1969 during the audacious campaign to get a counter-culture candidate elected as mayor of Aspen, and he went on to be a friend, confidante and caretaker of his ranch. No mean writer himself — nor a poor hellraiser — Cowan's account of their relationship is unusual in its close analysis of Thompson's writing and its combination of affection and unsparing honesty. Thompson's brilliance is laid bare but so too is his poorest work and his cruelty and violence.

Kevin Gopal: *There's no shortage of books and films about Hunter Thompson, especially since he died. Did you set out to explore an angle others had missed?*

J.C.: When I first pitched the book to a friend at Lyons Press, I only did it to get his attention. Hunter was always good for that. And I told him that there were already a bunch of books on Hunter out or planned. I also had other ideas I wanted him to read, but I thought this was a good opener. When they got back to me within half an hour, they wanted Hunter. They were especially interested in the fact that I had lived so close to him for so many years, during the height of his career. And that was the big difference. Except for a few of the women who lived with him or worked for him, no one had the kind of ongoing firsthand experience around him that I did. Not and

survived for long.

That opened up the way for a discussion of his creative processes and craft in a way that no one else had done, nor seemed likely to. Plus there were all those personal details of his life that I think really help define anyone, and had a lot to do with shaping my outlook on some things, for better or worse. We were also grounded in similar experiences during the height of the "revolution years" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even though I was almost a generation younger than Hunter. That gave me a chance to look back at an entire history-making epoch in our times, using Hunter as the lens, and that was a very rare opportunity. It also allowed me to present, I hope, some insights about Hunter that no one else could.

K.G.: *Few people have subjected his prose to the analysis you do in the book. How does it stand up?*

J.C.: Much of Hunter's writing never ceases to grip me, especially the funny stuff and the really poignant big issues that he summarized so beautifully, so often. There was also some very weak writing, and long patches of it at times. I think that it looks more repetitious and self-referencing the more you expose yourself to big chunks of it at any one time — which I unwisely did in preparing to write this book. But I wanted to revisit everything, and I needed to find quotes I'd always admired. It was fun but definitely took on the colors of an overdose.

Read over time and less critically, Hunter's writing is mostly still very good. But held up to its own measure as established by the first three or four books, it can come up lacking. There are many stand-out moments, whole stories, and even most of some books that he wrote after the mid-1970s that anyone else would be thrilled to claim as their best works. But I don't think he would have ever made that mistake. Obviously the two "Fears" books were seminal. Several of his stories for Rolling Stone and others after that were also superior. And "Lono," "Better Than Sex" and some parts of "Hey Rube" were really good. The collections had brilliant stuff, and Rum Diary was remarkable, but largely unchanged from when he first wrote it, making it really his first book.

K.G.: *Being close to Thompson was worth it "up to a point," you write. What did you gain? What did you lose?*

J.C.: In the end, Hunter was probably like any good friend, except, typically, more so. There were many things to admire and enjoy about him, and a few that made me

crazy. I think he felt the same way about me, and I always figured if he could put up with me, I could certainly do it with him. In the end, I lost some of my free will and independence, my ability to live outside his tempers, relationships and schedules. He didn't take it away, I gave it away. That was my decision and nothing I ever blamed him for. In return I gained a lot: a very good friend, vast insights into writing and politics, someone I could talk to about anything at any time, the chance to meet a lot of interesting people, a front row seat at some of the big moments in our shared history, and an insider's look at all kinds of things.

K.G.: *Do you think the circumstances of his suicide were narcissistic, as some have said?*

J.C.: Maybe they all are, of course. Did he kill himself because he could no longer be the person he thought he was, or wanted to be? I suppose that plays a role in many suicides. I know he was very depressed at his ongoing physical ailments, and he never handled pain well, nor was he good at rehabilitating himself following injuries, and that's key to any kind of full recovery, especially as you get older. Hunter was not a patient man, I think we can conclude, and fond of saying he'd already far outlived the age he thought he would reach. But I definitely believe, as I say in the book, that the prospect of one more divorce was the final straw for him.

Though his last writing produced some good, tight pieces, the work seemed to be getting more difficult and less interesting to him. He wasn't doing the stories he wanted to do, or the novel he hoped for to succeed "Rum Diary," and not living up to the standards he'd set. I think he feared he never would again. And the political situation had become a nightmare.

K.G.: *Was it just the alliteration overload that put you off the title the publisher gave your book?*

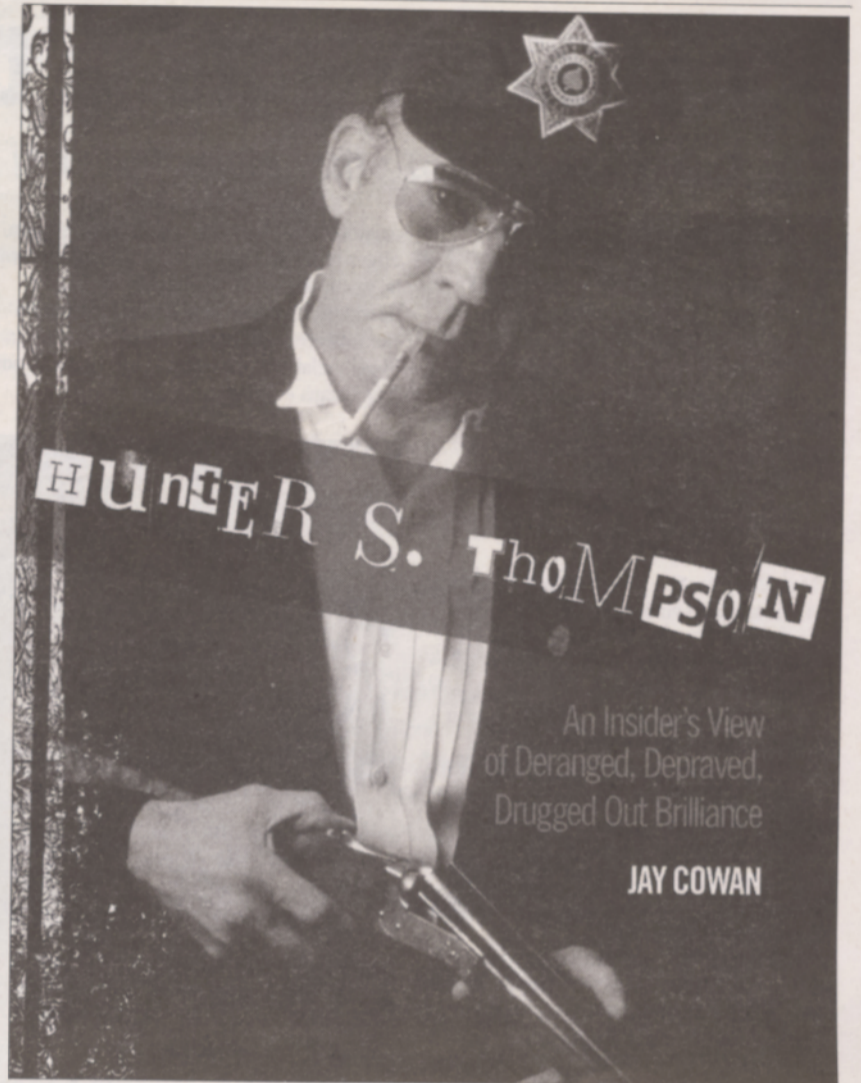
J.C.: I've always been dismayed by people who write about Hunter by trying to write like him and say so in the book. I felt this title was an attempt to sound like something Hunter might have written. And I preferred my idea of calling it "I Am Not Like The Others," one of his favorite sayings and one I mention throughout the book.

K.G.: *What do you think Thompson would have made of Obama and U.S. politics after the Bush era?*

J.C.: I think he would be ecstatic and nervous about Obama's ascent, as are many of us still. Can a good, honest and brilliant man survive in American politics? Can he dig us out of a hole that the last president and his party dug us into, with a purpose that seemed bent on destroying everything except a few large fortunes for a tiny clique of crooks? I think if Hunter could have held on until now, it might have changed everything for him. That's probably naive on my part. But he was so devastated about what was happening in our government and the world that I think it colored all his other moods and made it hard just to get up each day. And the fact that we could finally, as a people, in the depths of the darkest eleventh hour, make a stab at turning the bus around, I believe would have been as tremendously heartening to him as it was, and is, to so many of us.

I think it could have literally given him reason to live. Or killed him partying at the inauguration.

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