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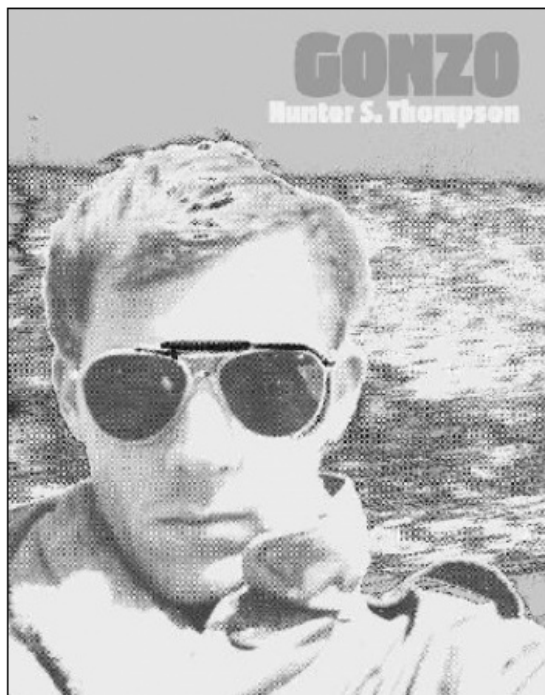
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Local writer Ben Corbett discusses Hunter S. Thompson's legacy

By Dale Bridges



It has been more than four years since the literary powder keg known as Hunter S. Thompson exploded off this mortal coil with a defiant shotgun blast. He was a figure of great controversy who served as America's national conscience during one of the most tumultuous periods in our country's history, and he left behind an enormous collection of written material that will be studied and debated for generations to come.

However, like so many cultural supernovas of that era who burned hot and bright, Thompson's artistic legacy is in danger of being overshadowed by his iconoclastic persona. If you ask the average fanboy about Thompson, he will most likely wax poetic about the trippy sensationalism of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas or the satirical revulsion of "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," but he won't know a damn thing about the larger canon. It's a shame in more ways than one. Thompson was a gifted wordsmith and philosopher who represented everything that is pure about the American way of life. He was not just some stoner in a safari hat.

At the height of his career, it seemed that Thompson would never run out of energy or idealism. If there was an important event, he was there, wielding his typewriter like a sniper rifle, picking off the bad guys one at a time. In Thompson's hands, words were more dangerous than bullets. A noun could pierce a blackened heart. A verb could blow a hole clean through a man's head. He never slept. He never ate. In the public mind, he became a mythical figure, indestructible and omniscient, a cross between Billy the Kid, Prometheus and Superman. He ceased to be a human being and was transformed into an idol.

Of course, this is mostly bullshit. If Thompson possessed any extraordinary quality, it was that he was more human than the rest of us, a fact he made abundantly clear at the end of his life. Yes, he fought the good fight, but he battled almost entirely alone, a general without an army, and eventually the counterculture he loved so much traded in its revolutionary fantasy for a suburban wet dream.

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Thompson spent the last years of his life in Woody Creek, Colo., on his “fortified compound,” Owl Farm, where naked women in rubber Nixon masks abounded and high-powered explosions often pierced the night. Although his own career had slowed to a crawl, Thompson frequently entertained young artists and writers who came to his house seeking inspiration.

One of those writers is a good friend and colleague of mine named Ben Corbett.

“I met Hunter after I wrote an article on him for Boulder Weekly,” said Corbett. “I talked to him on the phone, and he invited me out to Owl Farm. We hit it off really well. Over the years, I probably interviewed him about 12 or 14 times.”

Thompson and Corbett were starting to develop a personal friendship at the time of Thompson’s death. In fact, at the exact moment that Thompson committed suicide, Corbett was sitting at home composing a letter to the famous Gonzo journalist.

“It sounds strange, but I sensed that time was short,” said Corbett. “I just had this feeling that he wouldn’t be around much longer, and I should see him while he was still with us. I found out later that he died at the exact time I was writing the letter, down to the minute. It spooked me.”

At the time of his death, Thompson was working on a new book with editor/publisher Steve Crist. Corbett met Crist at a memorial service for Thompson at Aspen’s Hotel Jerome, the venue that served as campaign headquarters when Thompson ran for Aspen sheriff in 1970.

They hit it off, and Crist asked Corbett to contribute to Thompson’s final book, **GONZO**, which features a lifetime of Thompson’s personal photography, notes and memorabilia.

The new “Literary Edition” of GONZO hit the shelves recently, with an introduction by Johnny Depp and a biography by Corbett. It is a book about the man behind the legend, and it was created by the people who knew him best and loved him. GONZO attempts to peel back the layers of celebrity that haunted Thompson and return to the true meaning of his work. It reads like a final love letter to his friends and fans, a colorful diary of musings and pictures that originated from inside the man’s head. Appropriately, there are no page numbers in GONZO, and it ends with the quote, “It never got weird enough for me.”

I spent several years editing Corbett’s insane scribbles at Boulder Weekly, and I can’t think of a better person to write about Thompson’s legacy. They are kindred spirits — the same nave bravado, the same crooked smile.

Thompson and Corbett are my favorite type of people: clinically insane but with a lot of heart. If anyone can rescue Thompson’s image from the media cranks and Hollywood hacks, it’s Corbett and Crist. Of course, this book won’t do it, not really. The myth has grown too large, the Memory Hold too powerful. But GONZO will serve as a type of Rosetta Stone for the select few who really want to understand the man behind the mystique. It is an important cultural artifact.

“Hunter was a romantic deep down,” said Corbett.

“He really believed in the goodness of humanity. He valued things like truth and virtue. That’s what his readers should be focusing on. Hunter wanted to inspire people to fight for a better world. That’s his legacy.”

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