

Gonzo Journalism: A Hybrid *M. Brett Gaffney*

“We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold,” starts the wild and harrowing ride into a revolutionary form of journalism (Thompson 1). Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has been categorized in various genre sections in bookstores since its appearance in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971. While I searched for the book I found that Barnes and Noble slots it with “Journalism” but Half-Price Books throws it on the fiction shelf; even scholars and critics do not agree as to where the work belongs in literature. Thompson’s story teeters on the edge between traditional journalism or non-fiction and realistic fiction, but the work is a composition of both genres, creating a new form of journalism, “Gonzo” journalism.

Thompson’s narrative spans his coverage of the Mint 400 motorcycle race and the Narcotics Convention in Las Vegas with his attorney, Oscar Acosta. He writes about his radical drug- and alcohol-induced experiences in the persona of the character Raoul Duke and refers to his attorney as Dr. Gonzo. The two of them are traveling in Las Vegas for journalistic purposes, but are mostly searching for the American dream in a haphazard and permanent state of delirium. At points in Thompson’s story, the two of them become so inebriated with drugs and liquor that the events they are experiencing can seem unbelievable to most readers. This is one reason why some scholars categorize this as a fictional novel but they cannot ignore the fact that Thompson and his attorney did attend some of the events described in the book. With Thompson writing about his own

experiences, his story should be classified amongst the non-fiction or journalism genres. These points relate the fact that there is a sincere difficulty in defining “Gonzo” journalism because of the acknowledgement of the existence of both genres in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Some have attempted to define “Gonzo,” and those who have mostly relate the style to a mix of truth and fiction. Though these people have attempted to define the new journalistic style, the book itself still has an ambiguous spot in literature. My trips to the bookstores have proven that much.

The controversy of the book’s genre is the significance of this book. The debate flourishes among all types of readers and poses the question as to whether Thompson’s novel is a new breed of journalism or just a stretch of either traditional genre. Its true identity is a hybrid of realistic fiction and traditional journalism because it incorporates true events with fantastical happenings. This different brand of journalism has typically been indefinable by most critics and scholars who usually end up slotting the book into one genre or another based on their opinion of the truth of Thompson’s words. The real answer lies in the fact that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* does not belong in any other genre but its own, gonzo journalism. This form takes characteristics of journalism and fiction to create a story with the bare bones of truth and the flesh of creativity.

Merriam-Webster states the traditional definition of journalism is “writing characterized by a direct presentation of facts or description of events without an attempt at interpretation.” This was the kind of journalism that *Sports Illustrated* sent Thompson to write but instead he took it upon himself to comment on his own lucid experiences, not to mention his search for the heart of the American dream. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is clearly not devoid of interpretation, quite the contrary, the novel is bursting at

the seams with Thompson's own opinion of America, specifically Las Vegas, and his ability to continuously wander through the city in a drugged stupor, harassing all that cross his path. The actual events of the Mint 400 and the Drug Conference seem very pale in comparison to Thompson's thoughts on his *Savage Journey*.

While the book is obviously not a piece of pure journalism, it cannot be grouped with other fiction works. The same dictionary defines fiction as "something invented by the imagination or feigned; *specifically*: an invented story." Thompson did indeed attend the race and the conference; that much is clear. He includes those effects of journalism but the way in which he describes his actions throughout the novel is exaggerated and some of the other events that take place in Las Vegas may be fabricated. The fact that we do not know how far from the truth Thompson traveled concludes that the book would have fictional tendencies but cannot be exclusively labeled as fiction.

Dr. John McDermott, head of the Creative Writing Department at Stephen F. Austin State University argues that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is "creative non-fiction, or really, a new journalism—gonzo journalism." He goes on to explain that "if it were fiction, he'd be changing names." Even a professor of creative writing rules out fiction as a plausible genre for the book because the people, places and events are too true. "Most of what he writes is probably exaggerated," says McDermott, "but not enough to make it fiction." After further conversation, McDermott finally settled on the description of Thompson's writing as "reporting with an opinion." Here is a critic, an expert in fiction, who excludes Thompson from fiction on the basis that there is too much truth to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. While McDermott rules out fiction as an appropriate genre for the book, he also concedes that the novel does not fit the traditional

definition of journalism at second glance either, but is rather the new gonzo journalism.

Gonzo uses the exaggeration and creativity of fiction but keeps reality, for the most part, intact within the story.

I received a different opinion from Dr. Michael Martin, an English and Literature professor, also from Stephen F. Austin State University. When asked about his viewpoint on the genre of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Dr. Martin categorized the novel with the fiction genre because “the excessive drug and alcohol use pulls it too far away from the straight line.” For Martin, the fact that Thompson’s writing is exaggerated is the exact reason why the book belongs in fiction. An example of this overpowering use of drugs and alcohol can be found within the first few pages of the novel: “We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half-full of cocaine...also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether, and two dozen amyls” (Thompson 4). While all the narcotics and booze listed were still in the trunk of Raoul Duke’s car, he and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, would use almost every ounce of the “uppers, downers, screamers, laughers” and alcohol (4).

Some critics have attempted to define gonzo journalism and pin down its style. After Hunter Thompson’s death in 2005, a longtime friend of Thompson, Loren Jenkins, was interviewed on two occasions to discuss the life of the writer. The day after Thompson’s suicide, Jenkins met with Steve Inskeep on National Public Radio to talk about Hunter and his unique writing style. Jenkins explains:

Well, I mean, his whole style of journalism, that he pretty much invented, what he used to call gonzo journalism, was an offshoot of the new journalism movement of the '60s that was pioneered by him and authors

like Tom Wolfe—it was really about personal involvement of the writer with the subject, and using the tools of literature to address reality.

(Jenkins)

Jenkins addresses “Gonzo” as an invention of Thompson’s in which he fuses truth with fiction in order to create a commentary on life in America through his experiences in Las Vegas. He later goes on to say in the second interview concerning Thompson’s “blast-off” funeral that Thompson was “one of the few people who actually had achieved total freedom: freedom to write as he wanted and be published; felt freedom to speak as he wanted and be heard; freedom to live as he wanted and be admired or condemned” (Jenkins). Not only was Thompson’s work a new form of journalism but he wrote it freely and without boundaries. In fact, that is the mindset in which he goes about traveling in Las Vegas. Thompson and his attorney both show up to the Narcotics Convention already drugged up, but neither had given their sobriety a second thought.

Hunter Thompson flourished in his new tagged genre and proved to be a rebellious journalist. However, that was only after the “media critics came along and decided that we were in the midst of new journalism. And then, of course, Hunter went his own way and found his own alley and that was gonzo journalism” (Fong-Torres). Even though Thompson’s work was recognized as a new wave of journalism, it is still being debated today amongst readers and scholars. Most acknowledge the fact that what Thompson did was engaging and different, however, not all can agree as to what it is exactly. Hunter was still writing a form of journalism, because *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* still has elements of truth, but he “simply took it another 350 or '60 degrees and went into the story, spinning into the center of it, making himself part of it...and then

adding fictional elements to it as he saw fit to make the story truly engaging” (Fong-Torres). Again, Thompson’s work is proven to be that exact hybrid of truth and fiction which evolves into not only something never before seen but also something that can be very significant and groundbreaking.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is “crazed, angry, and funny, and not at all pretty” (Gilmore 44-47). While gonzo journalism is revolutionary, it can also be a bit too much for an author or his reader. When one unites fiction and creativity into true events, the result can often be disturbing. While Raoul Duke’s attorney checked them into the Mint Hotel, Duke himself, still suffering from his dose of acid, was in fear of the lizards quickly surrounding him:

Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman’s neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge—impossible to walk on it, no footing at all... ‘We’re right in the middle of a fucking reptile zoo! And somebody’s giving booze to these goddamn things! It won’t be long before they tear us to shreds!’ (Thompson 24)

The reality is that Duke is experiencing hallucinations from his use of drugs but the fictional aspect is how exaggerated his “lizard” attack is. Thompson did stay to cover the Mint 400 but the extent to which he loaded up on countless drugs and alcohol is highly debatable. This is why the book is its own gonzo classification.

The same reason applies to Thompson’s freedom to comment on his experiences while in Nevada. His job was to cover the events of a motorcycle race and a cop convention but the facts surrounding those two proceedings are hardly mentioned when compared to the rest of the piece. The subtitle to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a

Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream, and that is the kind of trip Duke, and consequently Thompson, takes throughout the novel. “In a dark time, he sought to understand how the American dream had turned a gun on itself. Nobody in modern literature has come closer to answering that question, and perhaps Thompson came closer than anybody should” (Gilmore 44-47). Thompson’s assignment was to stick to the journalistic facts but instead he made his book a commentary on a decade in America; “[he] was giving a voice to the mind-set of a generation that had held high ideals and was now crashing hard against the walls of American reality” (Gilmore 44-47). While *Fear and Loathing* could have been a mere magazine sports article, Thompson took it upon himself to smash through classical literary boundaries and play with society’s taboos and morals.

As Thompson begins to peruse the newspaper headlines, he comments on Las Vegas and its tiny but lethal society: “This place is like the Army; the shark ethic prevails—eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody’s guilty, the only crime is getting caught” (Thompson 72). One would think for a journalistic piece, Thompson, while in Vegas, would comment on the scenery, the tourists, or even where to find the best sushi bar. He does quite the opposite, writing out his opinion of the dog-eat-dog world that is sickeningly blossoming in the desert. This example is yet another reason why Hunter Thompson’s novel is suited as gonzo journalism as opposed to any other genre. It contains real events, with characters tightly based on real people alongside exaggerated fictional elements, commentary and often times fantastical and unsettling hallucinogenic sequences.

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: a Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream* is a prime example of a cross-breed of genres.

Thompson stumbled upon his own new form of journalism, going by the name gonzo journalism, and incorporated elements from the novel's assumed genres: journalism and fiction. Though readers will continue to debate the novel's rightful place among literature, it is in my opinion that Thompson created his own niche in journalism, right between fact and fiction. He succeeded in breaking traditional literary boundaries and creating a style all his own which continues to influence journalists and novelists today.

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