

collapsing marriage and bed-hopping during the years 1974 to 1977.

You've read all this before: bored faculty wives awash in gin, pert coeds, available menopause babes, etc. It is the exiguous grist of campus Creative Writer Mills, impossible to read but not, alas, to write. Talk about chewing more than you've bitten off; if any American thirsts for one more peek at the couplings of unattractive campus un-deads in their graves of academe, come and get it. But there is more. Side by side with Alf's boring lecheries are fragments of his "historical/psychological, lyrical/elegiacal," as well as highly speculative, biography of his magnificent obsession, President James Buchanan.

Buchanan is the most unlovable doughface. Douglas at least had Lincoln, and Pierce his dead son and his drinking problem, but poor Old Buck seldom gets credit for anything more than "shrewd inertia." To Alf, however, "he projected a certain vaporous largeness, the largeness of ambivalence. . . . [Regarding] Buchanan's mind, people complained he couldn't make it up, and I liked that."

The key to Alf's Buchanan lies in his courtship of Anne Coleman, the fickle daughter of a Lancaster iron magnate. Jimmy Buchanan is a young lawyer, a Federalist, and somewhat of an *arriviste*, and like so many of our eminent forefathers he wants to marry well. Anne, his betrothed, is a volatile pettish princess; she calls off the engagement after a silly misunderstanding fueled by a local doxy. Or so goes the story Alf concocts from the scraps and gobbets of gossip that survive over the years. Sent to Philadelphia for some R&R, the distraught Anne dies—a suicidal overdose of laudanum, goes the whispering—and Buchanan is cursed ever after. "He was scared of the world, Buchanan was. He thought it was out to get him, and it was."

The indeterminacy of history bedevils Alf. Did Anne really dismiss Jimmy because of an unstable tart's loose lips? Did Anne take her own life? How can we possibly know the welter of secret motivations and hidden jealousies that animate the wooden stiffs in the history books? And it's all so random. In one of the novel's many delightful passages, Alf imagines swain Jimmy pursuing Anne to Philadelphia, winning her back, and settling into the blissful domesticity of Lancaster, while President

Stephen Douglas craftily and bloodlessly reconciles North and South.

Young Buchanan, more than Old Buck the President, is Alf's quarry. He broods upon "the curious long wrestle between God and Buchanan, who, burned early in life by a flare of violence, devoted his whole cunning and assiduous career thereafter to avoiding further heat, and yet was burned at the end, as the Union exploded under him. The gods are bigger than we are, was to be the moral. They kill us for their sport."

Scattered throughout the novel are refreshing revisions that give the Buchanan material the character of an amiable, digressive, iconoclastic essay: "He tried to keep peace. That whole decade of Presidents did, Fillmore and Pierce and Buchanan—try, I mean—and they *succeeded*, they *did* keep the South placated, and in the Union, which was important, since if war had come in 1850 instead of 1860, the outcome might have been very different; the South had all its assets in place—the military tradition, the great officers, the down-home patriotism, King Cotton—and the North still needed to grow. And precious little thanks they've got from history for it—the doughface Presidents. History loves blood. It loves the great blood-spillers. Poor Buchanan was ahead of his time, trying to bring mankind up a notch, out of the blood."

Much of Alf's biography of Buchanan affects the euphuistic language of the period's popular prose; there are no leaves in the Lancaster fall, but there is plenty of "arborial foliage." And if it's Updike, there must be sex, although the fornication scenes are detumescent as ever—"as tiresome as an old mortgage," as the novelist Henry W. Clune complains.

Despite the parallels in the lives of Alf Clayton and James Buchanan, the dual narratives are neatly divided. The reader who can overcome his compunctious reluctance to skip pages—dozens of them—will be rewarded with a charming and playful novelette about a little-known President who, for all his difficult dithering, killed 600,000 fewer Americans than did his successor.

*Bill Kauffman of Genesee County, New York, is author of the novel Every Man A King (Soho Press).*

## Truth in Self-Advertisement

by Gregory McNamee

**Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson**

by Paul Perry  
New York: Thunder's Mouth Press;  
288 pp., \$22.95



Hunter S. Thompson does not suffer fools gladly. For that matter, he seems to suffer no one at all, gladly or not. A survivor of the 1960's, he has deemed his contemporaries "a whole subculture of frightened illiterates" and those younger than they "a generation of swine." (And these are the people he professes to like; never mind those he despises, such as George Bush and Charles Keating.) Still, he has carved out a niche for himself as the most beatifically foolish journalist working in America today, a practitioner of inspired lunacy in the name of truth-seeking inquiry. No believer in so-called reportorial objectivity, he has become far better known than most of his subjects. How many people remember Thomas Eagleton (a sideshow character in Thompson's savage book of 1972, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*) these days?

The Acid Era has left its scars on the man. For one thing, he is now incapable of speaking a coherent, un-whiskey-slurred sentence, an odd condition for a man who makes much of his living on the college lecture circuit. (The kiddies want only to see this legendary man, we must suppose, not to hear what he has to say.) For another, he has never recovered from the paranoia of the Nixon years, and his reclusiveness is legendary. For that reason, Paul Perry warns us early on, his life of Thompson "is a violently unauthorized biography."

Perry himself is no detached observer. As editor of *Running* magazine in the early 1980's, he commissioned Thompson to attend an Ironman Competition (a grueling athletic contest comprised of swimming, bicycling, and running) in Hawaii. Thompson, fueled by all sorts of chemical compounds and incentive-reducing beverages, never delivered the manuscript Perry expected, but the all-

expenses-paid trip later yielded Thompson's disappointing book *The Curse of Lono*. Perry's hours spent trying to coax a printable text from Thompson had results, too: they gave him an up-close look at the writer, as well as a means of discovering—burst by incoherent burst—a few details about the man behind the druggy mask, the man who refused to cooperate with Perry while providing abundant material.

Born to genteel poverty into an old Louisville family, Thompson was a young golden boy, popular in school for his athletic prowess, good looks, quick wit, and gift with a pen. As a teenager, however, the now fatherless Thompson took to drinking and hell-raising; he failed to graduate from high school and, as an enlistee in the Air Force, managed to rack up nearly every punishment duty short of time in Leavenworth for myriad acts of rebellion. (His unit commander called him "totally unclassifiable . . . one of the most savage and unnatural airmen I've ever come up against.") Dismissed from the service in 1957, Thompson wandered into New York, promptly found a series of plum journalistic jobs and just as promptly was fired from them, married and divorced and married again, and then took up the life of a beatnik in Puerto Rico and, later, at Big Sur.

Only after a few years of poverty—the real thing this time—did Thompson give up the bongos-and-Chianti life and find meaningful work. He made his way to Latin America and began to submit pieces on speculation to the newly founded *National Observer*, a newspaper of opinion. The editors liked what they saw, especially a story that Thompson filed from Caracas, Venezuela, in which he described a British diplomat who practiced his golf game on his penthouse terrace, driving golf balls far out into the city below; "Where they fell," Thompson wrote, "neither he nor I nor anyone else on the terrace that day had the vaguest idea."

Still, Perry reminds us, straight journalism and Thompson never quite seemed to coincide. When in need of a colorful anecdote to enliven a story, Thompson would cheerfully invent one and never mind the consequences, whether a libel suit or a bullet. His unlikely tales of ever-uglier Americans south of the equator finally came under editorial scrutiny, and Thompson was invited to contribute his work elsewhere.

Finding a new home at *Scanlan's* magazine, Thompson relocated to San Francisco, where he found the subject that would make his reputation: the nation's most vicious motorcycle gang, his study of which led to his first book, *Hell's Angels*. He also discovered, in those heady days of 1964, other matters that would carry his reputation even farther: chemicals with names like LSD, STP, and DMT.

The effects of those drugs upon a mind already given to inventing tales and presenting them as fact soon led to the formulation of Thompson's now-famous style. The origins of the term "Gonzo Journalism" are shrouded in time—Perry traces it to an editor at the *Boston Globe*—but you will now find it in Webster's third: "bizarre, unrestrained, specifically designating a style of journalism so characterized." Whether it can fairly be called journalism at all is an issue Perry chooses not to address; if I were a bookseller or a librarian, I would shelve Thompson's work in the fiction stacks. Certainly his purportedly fly-on-the-wall encounters with J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, and more recently Clarence Thomas, published as straight fact in *Rolling Stone* magazine (for which Thompson is "sports editor"), qualify as some of the funniest lies since Mark Twain's.

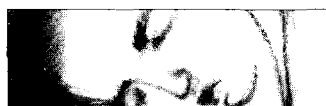
And a good lie, as we all know, can convey a world of truth.

After drawing on interviews with more than a hundred friends and confidants of Thompson's, Perry devotes a bit too much of his book to considering Thompson's published work. Anyone who has read Thompson—an acquaintance I highly recommend, with a grain-of-salt caveat—will find Perry's reading a bit pedestrian; thankfully, he steers clear of lit-crit while offering his *précis* of Thompson's seven books and countless articles. Still, *Fear and Loathing* is strong enough work to transcend this modest shortcoming.

*Res ipsa loquitur*, Thompson is fond of saying. The thing speaks for itself. Paul Perry's useful—and enormously entertaining—book surely does. This candid biography may reduce the admiration many people feel for the man, whose fame derives from some, if not all, of the wrong reasons. *Fear and Loathing* gives us a tantalizing look into the mind of our foremost chronicler of the death of the American Dream. Read it and weep.

Gregory McNamee is the editor of *Named in Stone and Sky*, a literary anthology recently published by the University of Arizona Press.

## LIBERAL ARTS



### DYNA-MIGHTY

Amid much pomp and celebration, the ruthless leader of one of the Midwest's largest and most violent street gangs was released from prison last winter after serving only half of his seven-year sentence for two weapons convictions. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported, five limousines and over a dozen young men and women dressed in leather, fur, gold, diamonds, and alligator shoes came to Logan Correctional Center, 30 miles north of Springfield, Illinois, last December 30 to retrieve 42-year-old Willie Lloyd, self-proclaimed national boss of the Chicago-based Vice Lords.

Dressed in black and white leather and sporting a mink coat, which his "deputies" had delivered to the prison, Lloyd stepped outside Logan's steel doors, raised his right hand at his followers, and shouted, "Mighty! Mighty!" Lloyd's top deputies immediately crowned him with a black skull cap trimmed in gold like the ones they wore, and Lloyd exchanged passionate kisses with his fiancée Renee, who was wearing a matching mink and a hot-pink miniskirt.

Jailed on two counts of unlawful use of a weapon by a felon, Lloyd had previously been convicted of killing an Iowa police officer in the 1970's; while he had not been convicted of a serious crime in Chicago before the two weapons charges, he has been arrested at least 19 times since 1968.

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Capture the Flag, Part II



We have it on good authority that the peacemakers are blessed, and that's only fair, because we sure catch hell in this world. Not long ago I suggested that most Southerners who display the Confederate flag are not bigots and got some hate mail to the effect that only a bigot could believe that. Last month I observed that there's something to be said for state symbols less divisive than that one and concluded that if I were a Georgian I'd probably favor taking the Southern Cross off the state flag. Now I find myself being chastised by folks who apparently believe that *this* is not a matter on which decent people can disagree. Political correctness comes in a variety of flavors, doesn't it—or maybe I just wasn't clear. Let me try again.

We're going to be hearing a lot more about this flag business. So far the Georgia flap has received the most attention, partly because of the Olympic tie-in, partly (I suspect) because most of the national press has regional bureaus in Atlanta. But you may also have heard that next door in Alabama the flag's opponents recently went to court to get an order forbidding the state to fly it over the capital where Jefferson Davis took his oath of office. As it happens, I'm writing this month from Mississippi, where yesterday Aaron Henry told an audience at Mississippi College that if Martin Luther King were alive today changing the state flag would be one of his top three priorities. (I forget the other two.) Obviously the winds of change are starting to blow.

Incidentally, Mississippi put the Southern Cross on its state flag in 1894, long before Georgia, not hesitating to resort to the kind of subterfuge that would later give literacy tests a bad name. Here's a part of the description: "It [the state flag] incorporates the na-

tional colors and has 13 stars of the original colonies. It has a union square with a ground of red and a broad blue saltier thereon, broadened with white and emblazoned with stars." Just coincidence, we are to suppose, that the result happens to be the Confederate battle flag.

Anyway, Ernest Renan once observed that the existence of a nation requires that some things be forgotten, and he was obviously right about that, as we're seeing in the breakup of alleged nations around the world today. But the Southern nation somehow has to surmount two facts: that Southerners won't forget any time soon what the Confederate flag means to them and that unfortunately it means different things to different Southerners. As I say, the South must surmount these facts—that is, if it's to have a future as well as a past.

In earlier letters I've mentioned some studies of what the flag means. All show that to most Southern whites it means one of two things. For some, like my correspondents, it conjures up a variety of worthy Memorial Day sentiments, having to do with tradition, duty, honor, valor, sacrifice, and so forth. For a growing number of others, less historically minded, the flag's specifically Confederate associations are muted. For them it connotes simply a hell-raising, good-timing, outlaw kind of Southern pride. The songs of Hank Williams Jr., for instance, often "brag on that rebel flag," and his fans wave it at his concerts, but he doesn't mean any harm by it and they don't either. (It's a white Southern thing. You wouldn't understand.) If you expect either group—the filiopietistic or the boogie-till-you-puke—to renounce or abandon its orientation, you've got a long wait coming.

But neither of these views is shared or even understood by most non-Southerners or, more importantly, by most Southern blacks. The same studies show that most black Southerners (and a small minority of white ones) see the flag as a sign of the Ku Klux Klan or, more generally, of resistance to the civil rights movement. And, of course, they're not always wrong about that.

Last year I paid a visit to the new civil rights museum in Memphis. Located in the old Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King was shot, this has to be

the world's *wordiest* museum—wall after wall of text to read. I was skimming my way through the place when I came across a quotation from James Jackson Kilpatrick, back when he was still a Richmond newspaperman and no friend of desegregation. Kilpatrick wrote then that he was taken aback by the sight of a flag once carried into battle by brave and honorable men, waved by a hateful rabble who turned out to bully black schoolchildren. It gives one pause, he wrote. It still should.

That association is not merely a leftover from the 1950's and 1960's, either. There's no mistaking the meaning of the rather grim householder in my hometown who flies the battle flag once a year—on Martin Luther King's birthday. When the Klan sent a few dozen outside agitators to march down Chapel Hill's main street a few years ago, they carried that flag. And ads for biker regalia in *Easy Riders* magazine sometimes offer the choice of the swastika or . . . that flag.

The jackals who deploy the flag this way are in a perverse collaboration with the flag's opponents to make the symbols of the Confederacy stand for white supremacy and nothing else. Those who want to defend the flag might give some thought to defending it against *them*. Last spring I read a news item from Montgomery reporting that a racist skinhead group had announced its intention to decorate Confederate graves. The usual crowd of antiracist groups turned out to protest the skinheads' very existence, but my question was: where were the Sons of Confederate Veterans? I wish that they, too, had turned out—to protest this desecration.

We need more stories like that, and like a recent one from Roanoke reporting that the S.C.V. there joined with the city's black mayor and its oldest black Presbyterian church to celebrate the anniversary of a stained-glass window honoring Stonewall Jackson. The window was installed by an early minister whose parents had attended a Sunday School for slaves, established by Jackson when he was a professor at VMI. *That* is the kind of story that shakes up preconceptions, that suggests history's not as simple as the textbooks paint it.

I hope it's not too late to redeem the