

THE SEARCH FOR HUNTER S. THOMPSON

(Or, if you don't own any of his books by now, forget it.)

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PART I

I have driven all over town, from east side to west side and back to east, in 100 degree weather. The blank looks and dull responses to my queries have been comical. The hopelessness of the situation has created the sort of hysteria in me usually reserved for a bad medical prognosis. Yet I am compelled to press on, the fear of failure too horrible to consider.

The story so far: Last week, after my second viewing of Terry Gilliam's excellent film adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, I decided it was high time that I started reading the good Doctor's books. However, I would soon find that locating an old used paperback was not going to be the walk in the park I imagined. The film seemed to inspire the same determination to obtain and read in the rest of the population that it had in me. There was no other choice but to buy FLLV new and continue my search for used copies as well as several other Thompson books and compilations that I wanted to find.

I easily procured a new edition of *Fear & Loathing* and, arriving home, planned a leisurely read of this classic tale. It took all of a day, including television breaks, telephone marathons, naps, and anything else I could come up with to drag it out. I tried to make it last but, at a slim 200 pages and pace of 200 miles per hour, I couldn't help myself.

More quickly than I had hoped, I found myself back at square one: find an old copy of the book along with a few others, namely *The Great Shark Hunt*, *The Curse of Lono*, *Generation of Swine*, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and whatever else I could get my greedy little hands on. I set off on my journey, checkbook in hand.

The first bookstore I tried should have given me an indication of what was to come. I pulled into the parking lot, probably humming a little ditty, thinking that I'd walk in, find used HST by the score, pay some niggling sum, and walk back to my car - an effort I figured would take 15 minutes tops.

I pushed open the door of the shop and the owner asked if he could help me with anything. "Sure," I replied. "I'm looking for a copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson."

"Sorry, I've been sold out of all Thompson since that movie came out. I used to have a lot. I've had hundreds of people come in asking for that book in the last few weeks."

Now I'm starting to feel embarrassed, like . . . one of the masses! What could I do, except cower my way out of the store with my tail between my legs. Thoughts were racing around my brain: I'm not so special after all everyone wants this wonderful new thing that I discovered what the fuck is the problem? I said thank you to the very nice young man and sulkily drove home.

My mission had begun. I had to find a copy of that goddamned book no matter what it took.

My next step was to get on the internet. Maybe I can find a copy somewhere and order it. I've done this before, I can do it again. No problem.

Do you see a pattern forming here?

Sure, I found original hard cover copies of *FLLV* through online used bookstores. The cheapest was priced at \$375. Holy shit! Looks like I'm way behind the times. The real kicker in all this is that I'm old enough to have bought the thing when it came out new.

OK, so the internet didn't pan out. At least, I didn't want to spend \$375 for a book I'd be terrified to crack open for fear that I'd destroy something worth more than my tv and stereo combined. Back to the used bookstore hunt.

At this point in time, I will reiterate the two most important facts to date:

- a hardcover copy of *FLLV* is out of the question, unless I stumble across it somehow; and
- the film has been out nearly a month, so I can assume that all used bookstores have been completely relieved of any and all HST by now.

Armed with this knowledge, I resumed my search.

My second stop was a shop that I poke around often. They have an enormous selection of books, and I've managed to find nearly everything in numerous quantities. Hopes ran high. But the first and, I was quickly to find out, foremost question of "where is your Hunter S. Thompson" (political science? social commentary? humor?) was going to become the most arduous of my tasks.

I approached the salesperson and enquired.

"Who?"

"Hunter S. Thompson. You know, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*?"

"Where would that be?"

"Um . . . non-fiction."

"Well, let me find out."

While she was calling the owner to find out who the hell this guy was and where his books might be, I began poking around. By the end of this particular sojourn, I was to become very well versed in used bookstore layouts.

"Well, Jeff says that since that movie came out, we're all sold out of Thompson." The look on her face was probably kind, but I still saw that same glint, the one shaming me for taking so long to read Hunter. And now that this movie business was *everywhere*, well, I could just about forget it.

Back to the truck. On to another store. Jesus, it's really starting to heat up. The day I began my search, summer decided to start. It was well over 100 degrees. Getting into a parked, closed vehicle that has been sitting in that heat for awhile does not put me in the greatest mood for driving around town looking for some books that I'm already believing have been secreted away to far-flung planets by aliens who have been monitoring my thoughts and are now out to thwart me.

It's getting personal.

Next stop, further across town into the dreaded west side. I only come over here when I have to. I hold my breath and pull into another used bookstore. This one is rather large and looks promising. But then, they've all looked promising. What the fuck.

The owner. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Hunter S. Thompson." I have vowed not to mention *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* again, lest I be branded the mainstream lemming that I am.

"He's in the adventure section over there."

I just looked at him, hardly believing my ears. For fun, I went to the adventure section. No Hunter, what a shock. I wandered through the rest of the shop, craning my neck reading thousands of book bindings, trying to get some idea of where these books might be. At some point, I realized that maybe if I mentioned I was also looking for P.J. O'Rourke - who I have been reading for *years* and thus had every right to be asking for - I might get a better response. And I would have, if he'd heard of P.J. either.

After about 20 minutes, I felt this strange sensation. No, I didn't find Hunter, or P.J., for that matter. What I did find was a huge pain in my neck from tilting my head sideways to read all those book bindings. The pain shot up to my head and a raging headache began. This, coupled with frustration and the heat, was turning an ordinarily wonderful day off work into a really, really bad day that had every indication of growing worse.

I left the shop and popped some aspirin after climbing back inside my toaster oven of a truck. There were a few more stops to make on this side of town and I was going to see it through. Just up the street was a huge thrift shop with a decent-sized used book section. I wandered in, immensely grateful that they had air conditioning, found the used books and . . . nothing. But I did locate a copy of *Holidays in Hell*, classic O'Rourke that I hadn't picked up yet. So, all was not lost.

It was steaming hot by now, I had to pee, my head was pounding, I was starving, and moderately pissed off. My God, Hunter S. Thompson! Who hasn't heard of him? Where are all those books he's been writing for 30 years? Did everyone keep every copy they ever bought? Was the population as saavy as that? Was it time to modify my thinking of "the common man" to include everyone I thought was highly intelligent and cool, including myself?

Escaping the dreary west side and speeding towards home, I remembered another bookstore fairly overflowing with everything. I stopped and went in.

"Do you have any Hunter S. Thompson?"

"Who?" she asked.

"Hunter S. Thompson, you know" I was going to have to say it. "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*?"

"Nooo." she drew out. "Where would he be?"

"Well, non-fiction. Political science, social commentary. With P.J. O'Rourke."

"Who? Nooo."

"Well, how about mixed in with the Beat Poets?"

"Who?"

"The Beat Poets, you know, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, or Jack Kerouac." Dull look. "Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, you know, the Beat Generation?!"

"I haven't heard of them."

At this point, I am paralyzed. I have nothing left to say to this girl. If I can't be any clearer than Jack Kerouac, and she can't understand me, then what the fuck is she doing working in a bookstore? And, on top of all this, she's starting to get pissed off at *me*.

"Well, just show me to your non-fiction then."

She says, "You know, the thing is, that stuff might not be in non-fiction."

"Do you know where it might be?"

"It could be anywhere, depending on the opinion of the person who shelved the book."

I am completely distraught. How did I end up having a conversation with this idiot? What am I supposed to do with this perverse turn of events? The only thing left was to physically assault her, but my chances of ever finding a Thompson after that in this store would surely be reduced.

I take a deep breath and say, pretending she's not there, "Show me your non-fiction."

She leads me there reluctantly. I get the feeling that she'd rather have kicked my ass right out onto the street. My only thought is that she is so completely embarrassed by her lack of knowledge of *anything* that she's taking it out on me.

I'm now in non-fiction, and THERE! is a copy of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Success at last - something with Hunter's name on it. I pay the cretin and leave, happy to be heading home, where I can relieve myself, eat, and begin reading this hard-won book. The headache has miraculously disappeared.

I checked out several other bookstores the next day, one of which had a salesperson with vast knowledge of Dr. Thompson, and we had a delightful chat. They had been cleaned out of HST like every other store - by my brethren, the movie crowd - yet one lone softcover copy of *Generation of Swine* remained, which I happily purchased.

And if any of you reading this are sneering, "Why didn't you just go to the bookstore and buy new copies, you asshole cheapskate?" I reply to you that the selection is nearly as skimpy for new books as used; many of Thompson's books are out of print. Besides, there's something special about carrying around a beat up paperback from the era that it was created in. These new, larger "softcovers" don't fit into my bag or back pocket, the print is huge (hear that, P.J.? All your books are softcover!), and for the price I may as well buy hardcover.

My search will continue into the unforeseeable future, because I will not allow little crumpled books with crackly yellowed pages to beat me. Nothing has yet.

PART II

Well, well. I thought this story was over. And I was very, very wrong. Maybe the weekend I described above was an aberration, or perhaps this current weekend is. Regardless, things really began to heat up in the "Hunting for Hunter" race.

Driving home from work the other day, I noticed a small bookstore that I hadn't seen before, even though it's only a few miles from my house. I stopped in and searched around. It was one of those difficult to find bookstores: books stacked two and three deep, in no particular order or category, with dust covering everything, and possessing the largest porn magazine collection I've ever laid my eyes on. Not noticing it at first, I wandered over and all 4 men in the area, including the store owner, saw me and visibly froze. I wondered what was causing this unusual reaction, and looked up into an endless corridor of sleazy magazines. Not wishing to cause any coronaries, I politely backed away. This is a bookstore where you can really get your hands dirty.

I searched the place for about an hour for pretty much everything I was interested in, having more or less given up hope of finding anything by Thompson. However, on a whim, I walked over to the owner and asked if he had any.

"Well, I've only got the 2 titles left," he said and began walking towards the books.

I leapt into action. Two titles left? Two! I'd never had anyone tell me they had even one title! My Thompson radar must have been down, because I followed him to a stack I had just walked by. There

were 3 copies of *Shark Hunt* and 2 of *Campaign Trail '72*. But these weren't just any paperback copies. Although these copies of *Shark Hunt* dated from 1982, they looked brand new. The spines had never been cracked; they had not been read. These were not used books. I asked him about them.

"About 6 years ago, I bought a slew of Thompson remainders from a publisher. These are all that's left."

I felt like I had wandered into an alternate universe; one where anything you wished for came true. Since I already have *Campaign Trail*, I opted for 2 copies of *Shark Hunt*, the extra for a friend whose well-read copy was in 5 pieces. In a million years I never thought I'd find spanking new 18-year-old paperbacks.

I began to wonder to myself: if such gems do exist, perhaps I should do a little more digging? Maybe return to those places who said they had no HST and see if other miracles awaited discovery? So I did, and the payoffs were remarkable.

Bookstore #1, the place where the salesperson had to call the owner to find out who Hunter Thompson was, became my first stop on the success run. After all the searching and researching on my subject, I was more familiar with where I should be looking for his books. I wandered into the biography section, and lo! and behold, there it was: a well-worn paperback copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I just stood there and stared at it. I already had a softcover copy, but this little blue-covered gem was destined to become my reading copy, something I could carry around, read on planes and trains, and not worry about destroying. At 75 cents, I couldn't lose.

Fueled by my recent good luck, I kept browsing and noticed a familiar name peeking out from a slim binding. Again, I froze. The name was Ralph Steadman, and the book was the US publication of *Sigmund Freud*. Steadman is the extremely famous artist who has illustrated many of Thompson's work, among others. His books are not easy to find. As a matter of fact, I didn't even intend on looking for any, that's how difficult they are to locate.

I paid a measly pittance for my purchases and decided to head for home. However, on the way was Bookstore #2, herein referred to as "Home Base," as it is 2 blocks from my house. This is the place where I was told "hundreds" of movie brethren had descended, intent on clearing out all known and unknown copies of anything with Hunter S. Thompson's name on it. But, what the hell, I was on a roll, so I stopped in.

Home Base was as rich as Leadville, Colorado, in the 19th century. There were several softcover and paperback books by Dr. Thompson, but the real stunner was yet to come. I mentioned to the owner of Home Base that I was trying to locate a Thompson bio, and he led me to an area on a large shelf. These were hardcover books, the big boys. From 20 feet away I noticed a Thompson that set my heart racing. Although a 3rd printing, *Fear and Loathing: on the Campaign Trail '72* is a very difficult book to find in hardcover. And at \$15, it was ridiculously affordable. There were some newer titles as well: *Generation of Swine* and *Songs of the Doomed*, both first editions. I do believe I cleaned Home Base out.

But it wasn't over.

The owner and I began a long, animated conversation about Thompson, finding rare books, and their value. Somehow, Ralph Steadman came into the discussion, and he said he had something to show me. We walked over to the art section, and from the top shelf he pulled down a large book entitled *America*. This is, I believe, the rarest and most valuable of Steadman's works. Mint copies can fetch up to \$800 or so. This copy was priced at \$10, because the previous owner kept this particular copy next to her jacuzzi. The back of the dust jacket was melted to the book. The front of the jacket had minor tears. But the pages were good and whole, with no staining. Although probably the deal of the century, I really had no desire to own it. However, a friend in Canada later said something to the effect of giving her left nut for it, so I returned that afternoon and purchased it for her. To my surprise, they also had a copy of Steadman's *Sigmund Freud*, which she also wanted. When it rains, it does pour, desperately and absolutely.

Now, the time has come for reflection. I glance over at my bookshelf, where I've made a place of pride for Dr. Thompson, between P.J. O'Rourke and Oscar Wilde. I have a very nice selection of his books now, and they should keep me busy for some time to come. I've nearly finished *Campaign Trail* and, although I'm by no means the political junkie Thompson appears to be, find it a compelling and interesting read. I vaguely remembered the names and incidents surrounding the 1972 presidential campaign, and this book not only solidified my knowledge, it took me back to that time in lush, vivid detail. I remembered everything about the house I lived in, the school I walked to, and the general atmosphere of the time. I

was 14 again. It's been awhile since I'd thought about any of it, and Hunter took me back. I just love how this guy writes.

Although the obsessive hunt for Hunter has now waned, Home Base has been instructed to contact me whenever any new Thompson/Steadman graces their doorstep. It's been an intense, wild ride finding these books, but the journey has just begun. The real joy comes in the reading. In this case, the end definitely justifies the means.