

# 1 Brooding

In the frosty hours before dawn in January 1970, Hunter S. Thompson composed a lengthy letter to his editor at Random House. For more than a decade, the 32-year-old Thompson had used confident, razor-sharp correspondence to build and maintain his literary network. Written over several days from Owl Farm, his home near Aspen, this letter was different. Its tone was anxious, even desperate. He needed help.

Thompson owed James Silberman a book. The contract called for a manuscript by August 1967, and Thompson was almost two and half years late. In his letter, Silberman noted archly that the project was now in its second decade. Thompson claimed to welcome the reminder, which “came as something of a relief. I’d been expecting it for months—like a demand note on a long overdue mortgage.”

Thompson’s debut effort, published three years earlier, had come together quickly. It began as a magazine assignment while Thompson was living in San Francisco. After spending several weeks with the Hell’s Angels, he produced a story about the motorcycle gang for *The Nation* magazine. After it ran in May 1965, he received a dozen contract offers for a book on the same topic. Silberman met him at a bar in North Beach, spiritual home of the Beats, before repairing to Thompson’s home near the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Ballantine Books was already planning to produce the paperback edition, but Silberman purchased the hardcover rights for Random House and eventually edited the book. After receiving the first part of his advance, Thompson wrote to Charles Kuralt, a friend who would later anchor *CBS News Sunday Morning*. Thompson confided that he would rather receive a fat advance for his novel; nevertheless, this offer was too good to pass up. Instead of repaying a small loan to Kuralt, Thompson reclaimed the guns and camera gear he had hocked.

Thompson spent the next year consorting with the motorcycle gang and finished the manuscript in a four-day rush fueled by bourbon and Dexedrine. Published in 1967, the book was a critical and commercial success. Still short of funds, Thompson accepted an advance from Random House for a novel and two more works of nonfiction. He had already drafted *The Rum Diary*, a novel based on his stint in Puerto Rico. One of the nonfiction works was supposed to be about the death of the American Dream.

That trope had a patchy history. Shortly after the Civil War, Horatio Alger popularized the rags-to-riches stories that showcased America's promise of opportunity. His first success, *Ragged Dick*, appeared two years after Alger resigned from the ministry following sexual abuse charges. It told the story of a poor boy who parlayed his positive attitude and work ethic into middle-class prosperity and respectability. It also became the template for Alger's young adult fiction, which Ernest Hemingway casually lampooned in *The Sun Also Rises*. But it wasn't until 1931 that James Truslow Adams defined the American Dream as such. The idea, Adams wrote, was not "a dream of motor cars and high wages merely." Rather, it was "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." Hollywood film studios stripped down that bloated formulation, applied some schmaltz, and sold the American Dream to the masses. It was still about opportunity, but the movies added stable families, Main Street virtue, and little guys beating the odds.

Thompson never missed a chance to mention Horatio Alger, but he subscribed to an older version of the American Dream. For him, it was roughly equivalent to what historian Richard Hofstadter called the myth of the happy yeoman. In his seminal 1956 article, Hofstadter argued that early American political rhetoric was "drawn irresistibly to the noncommercial, nonpecuniary, self-sufficient aspect of American farm life." That Jeffersonian ideal, which was broadly accepted in the second half of the eighteenth century, featured independent farmers whose civic rectitude would guide the new nation. The myth's appeal never depended on its descriptive power. "Oddly enough," Hofstadter noted, "the agrarian myth came to be believed more widely and tenaciously as it became more fictional." Even as the United States became more urban, industrial, corporate, and unionized, Americans longed to see themselves as independent agents.

Thompson went to extraordinary lengths to achieve that self-sufficiency. Although he seemed to be a man of the left, especially after the fractious events of 1968, he was no collectivist. From the outset, he cast himself as a

rugged individualist tilling the fields of American culture. He chose not to work for others, he said, because Ernest Hemingway had shown that freelancers could make it on their own. In fact, Hemingway's wives offered him significant financial support, especially in his early years, but his perceived independence was what mattered most to Thompson. His own freelance ethic was fortified by a more practical consideration: he lost every regular job he managed to obtain.

If Thompson's American Dream was mostly about self-sufficiency, it also had to do with a patch of land. Like Hofstadter's yeoman, Thompson preferred to live in close communion with beneficent nature. "My only faith in this country is rooted in such places as Colorado and Idaho and maybe Big Sur as it was before the war," he noted in a 1962 letter. "The cities are grease pits and not worth blowing off the map." Editors would bankroll his enthusiastic descents into urban depravity, but most of his homes were set in bucolic landscapes. In 1966, Thompson left San Francisco for Colorado and eventually occupied an abandoned ranch house ten miles outside of Aspen. He immediately wrote to Silberman: "This is my first letter in the new house, new desk, new writing room, etc. . . . painted red, white, and blue by a dope freak that I hired from the trailer court." Almost three years later, Thompson described Owl Farm as his land-fortress; later still, he called it his fortified compound.

Thompson combined his version of the American Dream with a reflexive pessimism. His first-person narrator in *The Rum Diary* articulated that combination precisely.

Like most others, I was a seeker, a mover, a malcontent, and at times a stupid hell-raiser. I was never idle long enough to do much thinking, but I felt somehow that some of us were making real progress, that we had taken an honest road, and that the best of us would inevitably make it over the top. At the same time, I shared a dark suspicion that the life we were leading was a lost cause, that we were all actors, kidding ourselves along on a senseless odyssey. It was the tension between these two poles—a restless idealism on one hand and a sense of impending doom on the other—that kept me going.

As was frequently the case, Thompson's narrator spoke for him. Despite his sense of impending doom, Thompson clung tenaciously to the American Dream as he understood it.

The income from his writing sustained Thompson's independence, and in his letter to Silberman, his immediate concern was the \$5,000 installment he would receive for submitting a partial manuscript for the nonfiction book. Although he had generated hundreds of manuscript pages, he admitted that

his draft was “a heap of useless bullshit.” He envisioned a narrative that blended fiction with straight journalistic scenes, but he was struggling with that formula and plainly hoped to scotch the project. “I loathe the fucking memory of the day when I told you I’d ‘go out and write about The Death of the American Dream,’” he told Silberman. “I had no idea what you meant then, and I still don’t.” The concept, he said, was too broad and pretentious to address directly. Anything he wrote, he told Silberman, was about the death of the American Dream, but that wasn’t the same as writing a book with that working title. Like many dreams, Thompson’s subject lay tantalizingly beneath or beyond consciousness. “You might as well have told me to write a book about Truth and Wisdom,” he complained to Silberman the previous summer. Now he was even more irate. “Why in the name of stinking Jesus should I be stuck with this kind of book? Maybe later, when my legs go. Fuck the American Dream. It was always a lie & whoever still believes it deserves whatever they get—and they will. Bet on it.”

Thompson’s frothing might have rattled some editors, but Silberman was a seasoned veteran. After serving in the Second World War, he graduated from Harvard and landed a position in Boston at Little, Brown and Company. By that time, the firm’s editor-in-chief was the target of a campaign led by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Liberal and staunchly anti-communist, the Harvard historian was furious that Angus Cameron had passed on George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the anti-Soviet fable that Schlesinger called to his attention. In 1947, Schlesinger sought a release from his own contract with Little, Brown. Four years later, Cameron was forced to resign after a right-wing organization called the publishing company a Communist front. That same year, however, *Time* magazine described Cameron as the nation’s foremost book editor after he published J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Schlesinger also targeted Cameron’s authors. He called one of them, Carey McWilliams, a Typhoid Mary of the left; he and his friends weren’t Communists, Schlesinger wrote in the *New York Post*, but they carried the disease. It was an unworthy dig against an accomplished author and editor. In 1929, McWilliams published his first book, a biography of Ambrose Bierce, after H. L. Mencken mentioned the need for a good one. At the time, McWilliams was a 24-year-old Los Angeles lawyer and Mencken acolyte. The Great Depression radicalized McWilliams, and his history of California farm labor, *Factories in the Field* (1939), became a bestseller. He wrote eight more books, including five for Cameron, over the next eleven years. They focused on racial and ethnic discrimination, the Japanese evacuation and internment, and the dangers of rabid anti-communism. Decades later, Schlesinger conceded that McWilliams’s books were first-rate, but he

maintained that *The Nation* magazine, which McWilliams edited, was insufficiently critical of the Soviet Union. McWilliams deflected the attack and eventually led *The Nation*, founded by abolitionists in 1865, through its most difficult decade. As the magazine celebrated its centennial, McWilliams offered Thompson the Hell's Angels assignment.

By the time Thompson's article appeared, Silberman had moved to New York City, worked his way up to executive editor at Dial Press, and switched to Random House. There he rejoined Cameron, who had been blacklisted before Knopf, a division of Random House, offered him an editorial position. In 1960, Cameron passed on Thompson's novel, *Prince Jellyfish*, but Thompson was grateful that Cameron offered helpful criticism instead of a canned rejection letter. Shortly after signing a contract with Ballantine for the Hell's Angels book, Thompson wrote to Cameron that he wanted to "get this cycle book out of the way" and return to his novel, *The Rum Diary*. He also mentioned his reasons for identifying himself primarily as a novelist. "Fiction is a bridge to the truth that journalism can't reach," he told Cameron. "Facts are lies when they're added up, and the only kind of journalism I can pay much attention to is something like *Down and Out in Paris and London*." Now classified as fiction, not journalism, Orwell's classic is so autobiographical that it is frequently considered a memoir. For Orwell as well as Thompson, the lines between participatory journalism, autobiography, and fiction were vanishingly thin.

Midway through his already lengthy letter to Silberman, Thompson paused to review the galleys of a forthcoming article. *Playboy* magazine had rejected his profile of Olympic skier Jean-Claude Killy, but Warren Hinckle quickly agreed to run it in the premiere issue of *Scanlan's Monthly*. Thompson had met Hinckle in San Francisco, where he presided over *Ramparts* magazine. After running blockbuster stories on Vietnam and other topics, *Ramparts's* circulation soared, but the magazine was never solvent, and Hinckle resigned when it filed for bankruptcy in 1969. He quickly cofounded *Scanlan's*, where he hoped to reproduce his editorial success. "God only knows what kind of magazine he has in mind," Thompson told Silberman, "but if he can drum up anything like the old, high-flying *Ramparts*, I know I look forward to reading it." After reviewing the galleys of his article, however, Thompson denounced the *Scanlan's* crew. "The swine have lopped off the whole end of my original ms.—about 25 pages of high white prose that I thought was the best part," Thompson wrote. "Goddamn the tasteless pigs."

For all his venting, Thompson knew he had to produce more than rambling letters. Returning to the problem at hand, he outlined several options