Discovering W

by Steven

THE CHATHAM BOOKSELLER, in Madison, New Jersey, resides on the ground floor of a commercial building that once housed the Children's Public Library. The library moved to a larger space in 1969, a fact everyone but me seemed to know at the time. So when I rode my bicycle there one afternoon in 1970, I found something unexpected. I felt as though I'd entered a parallel universe where things are similar but not quite the same. I had entered my own private Twilight Zone episode.

In the space where I'd once found the adventure tales that nourished a closet man-of-action, a used bookstore had opened. This was all new to me. I had never been in a used bookstore. Until that moment I had no idea used bookstores existed; but I was a curious kid at 12 years old and game to discover the workings of the world, so I decided to poke around. I took a deep breath and opened the door. I listened for Rod Serling to announce me.

Inside the cramped shop the tang of seasoned paper and pipe tobacco gave the place a presence, a calm enveloping contemplation. The Mozart seemed to come out of nowhere and the rumpled man sitting at the desk to the right greeted me as a slight distraction before returning to a stack of books. Self-serve only, it was a place to linger and pry, a place to lose yourself. An ambitious reader flush with paper route money, it took me just a few minutes amidst the shelves to learn plenty. The covers were faded but the words weren't. The books had no due date and could be purchased for cheap. My library card saw scant use in the following years.

That day I found a book that spoke the language of a larger world to which I wanted to connect, one full of the newsworthy happenings that *Time Magazine* covered, but never delivered the goods on. The book, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), gave me a front-row seat to what the big kids were up to.

As I thumbed through the book, it seemed to me that author Tom Wolfe had been reading my mind. A teenager who was aware of becoming aware, input from the outside world ricocheted inside my head as I tried to grasp it and make sense of it. Wolfe's prose raced with the same nonstop perceptions that appeared to me out of nowhere, confirming that there were ways of describing the world with information other than facts. The straight-laced buttoned-down progression of names, ranks and serial numbers you might expect in a working-stiff, AP-style journalism piece was nowhere to be found. I wanted more.

Anyway, two things happened to me that day: I discovered New Journalism and I became a book collector. Frank Deodone, proprietor of The Chatham Bookseller, perhaps one day I can repay you.

New Journalism, or what might be called author-centric reporting, has been around in different forms for quite a while. Its most famous practitioners, who

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gained attention in the 1960s—Wolfe, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Truman Capote, Hunter Thompson and Michael Herr—were preceded in the 1950s by Seymour Krim, Terry Southern and Norman Mailer. This pedigree can be traced back through the pages of *Rollling Stone, Esquire* and *The New Yorker* to John Hersey, Lillian Ross and Joseph Mitchell, past George Orwell and Jack London, all the way to Charles Dickens' "Street Sketches" and Boswell's dogged chronicling of Samuel Johnson. And like their predecessors, most New Journalism books started out as magazine pieces.

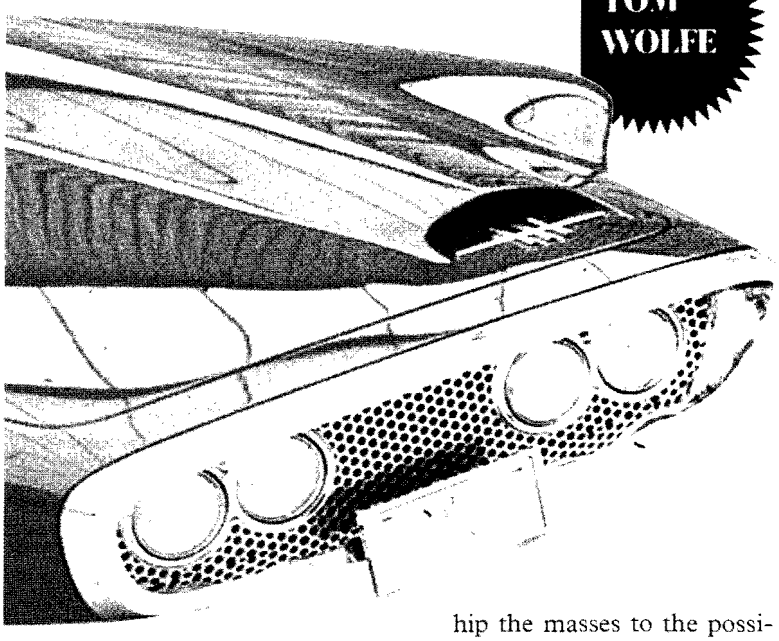
New Journalists went above and beyond the call of mere reporting by setting the scene and filling in the blanks of their subjects' lives. What makes the Sixties crowd stand out from the others is the degree to which they relied upon point of view in their reporting, as well as their liberal use of dialogue, tone, mood and style. They reconstructed scenes and wrote as if the subjects were characters in a novel. *In Cold Blood* was considered so elaborative that Truman Capote announced he'd invented a new genre, "the nonfiction novel." There was a rationale behind this proclamation.

The enormous upheavals of the 1960s and the immediacy television offered demanded a break from traditional journalism. Different methods of reporting were needed to render a vast new cultural landscape in a manner that reflected the changing times, a "medium is the message" kind of vibe. For instance, to represent fully the hippie experience, wouldn't it be better to hear it in their words and from their point of view? Or could we trust the five o'clock news guy to tell us in his reportorial drone what was happening in the crash pads of Haight-Ashbury? Readers, snug in their armchairs, wanted more of the experience than conventional reporting could provide.

Not exactly a cohesive movement, says Marc Weingarten, author of *The Gang that Couldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, Capote & the New Journalism Revolution* (Random House, 2005). Not all who practiced the New Journalism wrote of the Counterculture. But they all covered current events in a creative narrative style. Some played fast and loose with composite characters, but at no time did any compromise factual content at the expense of atmosphere and storytelling. New Journalists, says Weingarten, "got closer to the truth of the times than their more conventional journalistic colleagues."

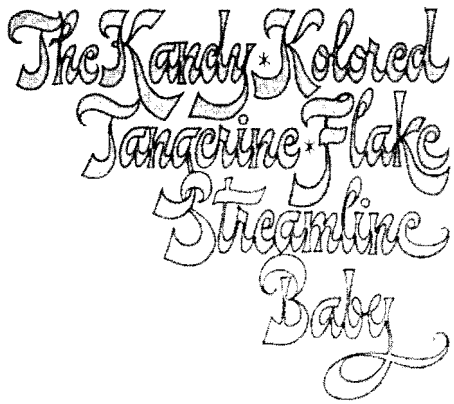
Long before Joe Sixpack grew sideburns and donned buckskin and paisley in search of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll and oneness with the universe, there lived among us true believers. Spiritual enlightenment was waiting if you had time and patience, but some didn't want to go the hermit-on-a-mountaintop route. This being the age of drive-ins and instant mashed potatoes, they wanted a shortcut. Novelist Ken Kesey and his coterie of hangers-on (the Merry Pranksters) were some who sought instant satori with the assistance of LSD.

The mass LSD parties, known as "Acid Tests," that Kesey held at La Honda, his retreat in northern California, and in San Francisco, are now a part of folklore. The legendary cross-country bus trip (to the 1964 World's Fair in Queens, New York) was an attempt to hip the masses to the possibilities of psychedelic drugs. To some it was monumental, the equivalent of Thoreau leaving his cabin in the woods and taking transcendentalism on the road.



Kesey is credited for getting the whole freak show of Sixties Counterculture up and rolling; and as far as I'm concerned, he pretty much invented the hippie. Call him what you will, freak, commie, weirdo, but this I put to you: Only a dyed-in-the-wool can-do consumer patriot would look for spiritual enlightenment in a pill. This golden-haired farm boy and champion wrestler, Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University with a trajectory aimed at success in the establishment chucked it all to become one of the first Counterculture media stars.

What Kesey found during his countless LSD trips turned his Pepsodent smile into an ear-to-ear grin of chemical bliss, and if one hadn't ever dropped acid, one would never understand. For the journalist hot on the bus's trail the challenge was to capture Kesey's story in a manner that didn't diminish its visual, aural and psychological effects.



With a collection of cutting-edge reporting already gathered in book form, journalistic up-and-comer Tom Wolfe parlayed a series of magazine articles into *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968). *Acid Test* is an account of Kesey's travails with drugs, the law, and the creation of the psychedelic movement. Written in a manner that no one in the news business had ever tried before, *Acid Test* was a New Journalism test case of Zen proportions.

Chew on this for a moment: If certain events take place and the journalist who witnessed a few of them intends to recreate them all by imagining the points of view of the participants (who for the most part are stoned on LSD), does objectivity matter any more? Yes and no.

Truth is, Wolfe wasn't on the bus trip. Nor was he with Kesey when Kesey fled to Mexico to escape drug charges in the States. As a matter of fact, Wolfe wasn't with Kesey and the Pranksters for much of the time the book takes place. While the cut-and-dried facts he presents are accurate, there is also plenty of embellishment. What really matters, though, is that Wolfe presents a verisimilitude that allows readers to connect with the subjects and their states of mind.

The time Wolfe spent at La Honda and at the various parties Kesey threw in San Francisco was put to good use. What he didn't witness—the mood, action, dialogue, the "mental atmosphere"—he researched and reconstructed. Wolfe interviewed participants, screened hours of raw movie footage shot during the bus trip, and lent his undivided attention to audiotapes, letters and diaries. And when he sat down at the typewriter, Wolfe induced what he called "a controlled trance," imagining the mental states of the characters. Then he let his fingers fly. So what you have are extended interior monologues, hyperbole, punctuation from another dimension, and a hefty *thh-hhhwak!* of onomatopoeia right across the kisser, all

striving to create the effect of the reader having a head full of acid.

Today Wolfe's prose seems dated at times, but his recounting was state-of-the-art journalism. The risks he took and the rules he broke paid off. He was on the scene and behind the scenes of the Counterculture in its infancy, just before the mainstream media got hold of it and poured its Technicolor debauchery into the living room.

If the thought of hippies spiking the punch bowl with acid wasn't scary enough for Americans in the mid-1960s, picture a horde of filthy motorcycle punks looking to dispense outlaw justice merely because you bug them. In *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (Random House, 1967), Hunter S. Thompson presses the panic button because the Angels are coming to town.

They are not noble savages or misunderstood outsiders. Look at them the wrong way and they'll rip a picket from your little white fence and beat you silly with it. Although plenty of Hell's Angels hung out with Kesey and partook of LSD, peace and love is nowhere to be found in Thompson's book. When I eventually returned to the new Madison Public Library, *Hell's Angels* was one of the first books I checked out. Published over 40 years ago, *Hell's Angels* and Hunter S. Thompson still mean business. The book's ability to raise chills hasn't diminished one bit.

Hell's Angels is written in the tone of a rough-and-tumble newshound barking a story over the phone to the overnight rewrite desk. The prose is vivid, colorful and idiosyncratic, expressing a point of view that is both alarmist and awestruck that nomadic renegades can hold sway in a modern industrial society. From the word "go," Thompson scripts a cinematic news flash as Hell's Angels drop what they're doing and roll out of crash pads and greasy spoons all over the San Francisco Bay Area in search of action. They hit the road "like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given." You get the picture.

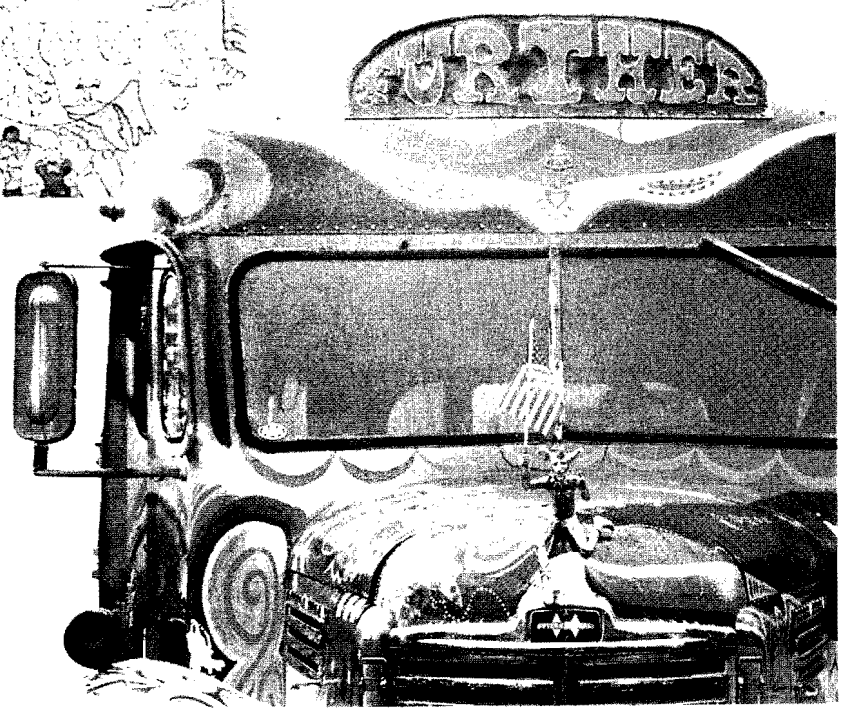
Thompson's angle and methods of reporting are more intense than Wolfe's. Like Margaret Mead in Samoa, he goes native to observe and interact with his subjects. Up to his neck in grease, beer and carburetor swill, Thompson introduces us to Tiny, Frenchie, Terry the Tramp, Zorro, Mouldy Marvin and the rest of the Angels. We learn their likes (beer, chicks, motorcycles) and their dislikes (cops, rules, squares); and we get tips on the art of constructing a righteous motorcycle and the definition of "class," Hell's Angels style. Immersed in Angeldom, Thompson rides with them, drinks with them, and eventually wears out his welcome and gets stomped by them.

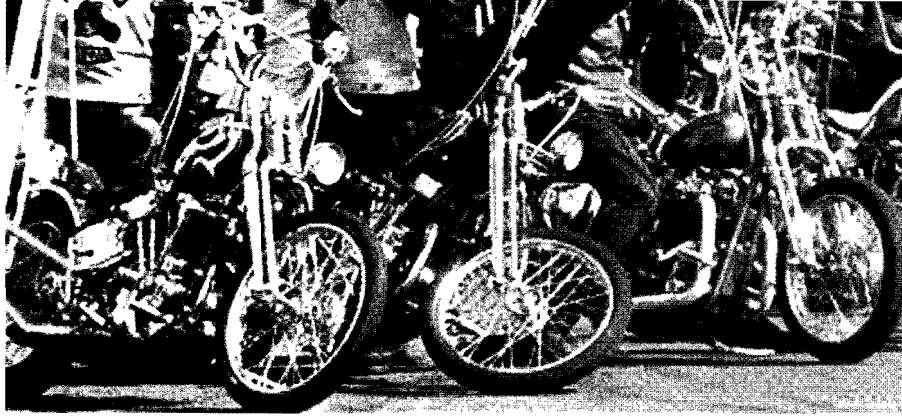
Thompson gets the byline for this book and top billing as well. There's hardly a moment in the narrative when he isn't the main character, but he doesn't rely upon observations and impressions. A thorough researcher, he did his homework and plays the book as a straight reportorial piece, which it pretty much is. He presents police reports, government reports, the California State Attorney General, the American Motorcycle Association, the man on the street and the cop on the beat, all to balance his reporting and prevent anyone taking this book as a hatchet job. He follows the outlaw biker movement back to a bunch of World War Two veterans who chose hell-raising instead of respectability—this is where the stories of marauding gangs of bikers started—then traces the beginnings of the Angels and lists their hagiography.

Thompson, who got to know many of the boys fairly well, is the only guy willing to hear their story in an attempt to give them a fair shake. The only problem is that no one has anything nice to say about the Angels except themselves.

As far as being serious criminals and a menace to society, Thompson finds that much of

Tom Wolfe





the Angels' reputation is hype. There are crimes but the majority are petty, mostly misdemeanor traffic violations and dope dealing. But several accusations of rape over a short period of time along with accounts of drunken behavior in small towns gave them the grimy patina of sociopaths to be reckoned with. Not one rape case ever went to trial, but it was enough to get major media outlets interested in their depravity. Once the flames were fanned it didn't take long for average citizens to whip themselves into hysteria and cringe behind locked doors. With a gun in one hand and a copy of *Newsweek* in the other, they waited for the Apocalypse.

Thompson's day of reckoning with the Angels came much sooner. After he'd ridden with them during the summer of 1964, they'd had their fill of him. A disagreement escalated into an argument that quickly turned violent when a group of Angels beat Thompson to the ground and literally put their boots to him. A shaken and bruised Thompson had his story, and his association with the Angels was all over except for the writing. *Hell's Angels* put Thompson squarely on the map of New Journalism, but it wasn't until he wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (Random House, 1971) that the legend of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson, gonzo journalist, became a literary brand name.

Say the line "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert..." in a room of hipsters and jaded English majors, then wait. The room will fall silent. Heads will turn and eyes will dart conspiratorially as people of a certain generation and inclination look for their own kind. Then in an "I am Spartacus" moment they will continue the sentence: "...when the drugs began to take hold." *Fear and Loathing* has an effect on people, whether they're writers, readers or bohemian dilettantes. It's the type of book that inspires an intense following, but it's not a book for everyone.

Written in the declarative prose of reportage, *Fear and Loathing* is the account of a nonstop drug and alcohol binge Hunter S. Thompson and his lawyer pal, Oscar Acosta, undertook while assigned to cover two separate stories back-to-back in Las Vegas. Thompson took the assignments as a way of shirking other writing responsibilities and for the adventure of a good old Kerouacian road trip in search of America. Renaming himself Raoul Duke, Thompson and his sidekick, now Dr. Gonzo, wandered the Strip and its casinos while maintaining an intense regimen of booze, hallucinogens and everything in between.

Beneath the wild-man act, Thompson was a scrupulous and conscientious journalist, taping every conversation or at least taking notes. Tom Wolfe imagined tripping on LSD, and his prose challenged the rules and conventions of grammar and imagination to make it seem real. But when it comes to recording hallucinations, nothing is more harrowing than Thompson at the typewriter, playing it straight with sentence structure.

LSD induces an intense euphoria that makes one as high as a kite; the hallucinations it sometimes produces are so real and magnified they can be debilitating. In Thompson's case, hotel clerks turned into Moray eels and the district attorneys he was hired to chat up turned into lizards. Barely functioning at times, he soon realized that it wasn't so much the drugs that made him unhinged—it was the location and its populace.

With enough practice, Thompson says, "acid fanciers" such as himself can handle things like "watching your dead grandmother crawling up your leg with a knife in her teeth." But the flash and freakishness of Vegas while tripping was another matter entirely. The reality of a gaudy casino city as representative of the American Dream was mind-bending, says Thompson, almost to the breaking point. Dope just made it scarier.

Fear and Loathing is not about Thompson covering the Mint 400 Motorcycle Rally, which he did not; nor is it about him covering the National District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, which he also did not. What this book is really about is the state of America in 1971. The idealism of the Sixties had died. The hippies had lost, the squares had won, and the promise of the Counterculture

revolution, Thompson admitted, had withered into one huge babbling dope-fest, in which he was a participant. Loutish and crude in victory, the *hoi polloi* celebrated en masse in Las Vegas in search of drinking, gambling and "humping the American Dream." Even without LSD, Thompson was appalled by what he saw.

The social schisms in America were deep and profound. Sometimes the enemy couldn't be identified, even if you were standing next to them. Thompson was an anarchist and a libertarian redneck. Yet with a balding pate, cigarette holder, shooting shades and basketball sneakers, Thompson, may he rest in peace, resembled a sleazy gym teacher who moonlighted as a pimp. A quick first impression would tell you that Vegas was his town, for crying out loud. He was the busted one-armed bandit player who checked the change slots on pay phones on his way out the door, hoping for another chance, not the literary patriot appalled at the current state of the union. The few times he did hear a district attorney address the drug menace in America, Thompson was close enough to have the cuffs slapped on him. The irony of the book is that the cops couldn't even identify the drug takers. In the confusion of those tense times, no one knew who the enemies or the allies were.

Thompson didn't take LSD for spiritual reasons like Kesey and Leary and their acolytes. For him, it was about hubris. Thompson liked getting wasted and cavorting on the edge, just a synapse away from insanity. But by 1971, reasoned Thompson, LSD had become the Studebaker of the drug world, antiquated and out of favor with the majority of users. Those involved in the acid culture thought it could help them attain a higher level of consciousness. This fallacious reasoning was based on "the assumption that somebody—or at least some force—is tending the light at the end of the tunnel." Everybody else who ingested it just liked getting high.

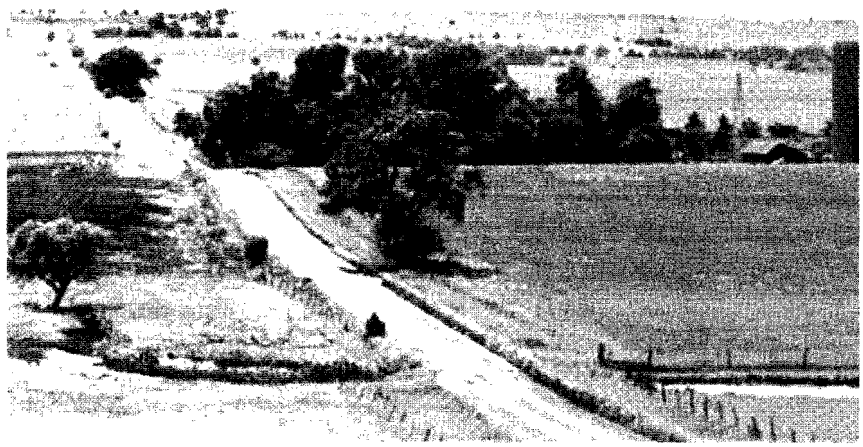
The book ends on a note of optimism and hope, albeit the variety mustered by Thompson. After arriving home in Colorado he flashes his phony Doctor of Divinity card in the airport pharmacy and fast-talks a hapless clerk into selling him prescription medicine. This further builds on the irony of the drug culture and the incompetents who are charged with policing it. Then, feeling like "a monster Horatio Alger," Thompson skips off to the bar and presumably to his typewriter later on where, with the heart of a Grub Street hack, he relents to turn the death of idealism into a fast buck.

My father was a fairly constant reader and our house was full of books. Any one that sat on the table by his chair in the den was a book to be reckoned with. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* was one such book. *Portnoy's Complaint*, (quickly hidden when I began to thumb through it) was another. *In Cold Blood* (Random House, 1965) was one of those books, too.

When serialized in *The New Yorker*, it broke sales records. Published in book form, it made Truman Capote rich. Were he to have one title chiseled onto his tomb to trumpet his name to the ages, *In Cold Blood* would be it. It brought him the type of fame that is many an author's undoing. Without a doubt, it was the last good book he wrote.

In the inestimable vastness of western Kansas, what natives call "out there," a family of simple wheat farmers settled into bed one cold November night in 1958 only to be awakened and executed by a pair of inept jailbirds. Because of Capote's curiosity and talent, this crime stayed news for years.

His account of the Clutter family's death, and the capture, trial, and execution of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith was a thorough piece of reporting and an eerily empathetic story of two small time hoods who



hit the big time with murder. The inner workings of the murderers' lives and the lives they touched, along with the FBI agents, townsfolk, family and friends of all those involved, are peered into and revealed with perception and understanding—or perhaps invention, one of the many complaints about the genre in general and this book in particular.

Owing nothing to trend and everything to the rules of grammar and good writing, *In Cold Blood* is lucid and unadorned of literary artifice, as polished and fine a book as one could ever read. Capote is an invisible narrator and he adheres to a writing style that one would expect from a *New Yorker* staff writer: polished prose, balanced arguments, understatement, and a seeming reliance on facts that is beyond question. The story had to filter through several floors of the renowned and tenacious *New Yorker* staff fact-checkers before it hit the newsstand, and it is here

that Capote seems at odds with a magazine that prides itself on editorial integrity. Even though fact-checkers could find no discrepancies, printing a story that included the thoughts of individuals which Capote could never have been privy to was a deci-

sion, says Marc Weingarten in *The Gang that Couldn't Write Straight*, that legendary editor William Shawn could never reconcile himself with. Yet the technique worked.

Like Wolfe with Kesey and the Pranksters, Capote recreates dialogue and situations between the Clutter family and Hickock and Smith. He describes how the Clutters spent their last day alive, and he seems to have traveled with Dick and Perry during their six weeks on the lam. And like Wolfe, he put in plenty of research—almost five years in his case—before the article was completed.

While Wolfe "channeled" his subjects, Capote claimed to posses nearly total recall. Accompanied by old friend and fellow writer Harper Lee, who played stenographer as he interviewed, after a day's work Capote transcribed and indexed his findings. Certainly he couldn't have entered the minds of those he spoke with and then recreated their thoughts—but somehow he did, while at the same time retaining a mood of distance and poise.

The fey and diminutive Capote, a world-class reporter in fop's clothing, won over the minds of a small town against all odds to become the fly on the wall and, in the process, says Weingarten, took a small-time murder and "turned it into the stuff of operatic tragedy."

Norman Mailer is the Iron Man of New Journalism. He made his name in 1949 with a war novel in a bid to take his place next to Hemingway and Tolstoy, but he was beholden to no genre. Despite periodic bouts of fiction writing over the years, Mailer returned to reporting for much of the 1960s, producing six books in all. The polemical hammering he delivered to make his point felt from every angle was relentless. To some, it bordered on sophistry, but one thing it couldn't be called is dull. An extremely sensitive and self-aware person, no matter what topic he reported on—the moon shot, the woman's movement, Vietnam, politics or protest—the subject revealed with even the most casual reading was always Norman Mailer.

When I discovered Mailer after college he legitimized to me the belief that as long as the camera is recording, or as long as the reporter is taking notes and recording impressions, he or she doesn't have to be subsumed and hidden by the news. Sometimes, with the right tweak, the reporter can be an integral part of the story. As a small-town newspaper reporter this helped me endure the numbing Planning Board sessions and Board of Education meetings I was required to cover. After a year or so my editor thought differently of my techniques, and that was that.

Mailer was brash on the page and combative in person. When books could not contain him and the issues of the day became too important to merely muse upon, he was compelled to act. It didn't hurt that he loved the sound of his voice as dearly as any operatic divo; nor did the attention of center stage cause him discomfort. Toss in a bellyful of bourbon and he was ready for anything.

In *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New American Library, 1968), Mailer's conscience and ego, at the goading and behest of liberal intellectuals, delivered him to Washington, DC in the spring of 1967. There he and others—thousands, in fact—planned to lend moral aid to young men who had marched to the Pentagon to return their draft cards in protest of the Vietnam War. It sounded pretty simple to Mailer. Over three days he planned to give some speeches, get arrested as a citizen of conscience, endure a slap on the wrist, then make it back to Manhattan in time for a Saturday night party. The detours began as soon as his plane landed.

In terms of thorough introspection and the unmitigated chutzpah to record it for the edification of others, Mailer has no peer. Acting as his own Boswell, he kept the subject of Norman Mailer squarely framed while writing of himself in the third person, making *Armies of the Night* a very personal and impressionistic account. Baroque and profane, he strays continuously, checking the temperature, likening it to another day, recounting memories, minting a perception or quip, then continuing the sight-seeing trip through his psyche before arriving at the destination.

The several days Mailer spent socializing, drinking,

orating, marching, listening to speakers, chatting with fellow intellectual celebrities and then finally getting arrested and spending the night locked up gave him plenty of material. What the reader sees is Norman Mailer attempting to reconcile his life and his art with a historical event. There are gems and there are clinkers, profundity and tedium. At times Mailer sounds like Dickens' Micawber, but he always has something to say.

Mailer's two companions for most of the long weekend were poet Robert Lowell and critic Dwight Macdonald who, along with Reverend William Sloane Coffin and others, are portrayed with the insight and brevity of a novelist. In the crush of those offering themselves to police and federal authorities for arrest, Mailer loses his companions. Arrested and carted off to detention where he spends the night, Mailer becomes ambivalent about his actions, wavering between the resolve to endure whatever punishment is meted out and the desire to return home to his family. He made no pronouncements that the march would do any good for the cause of peace, but it did plenty of good for Mailer, winning him the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Author Joan Didion is a descendent of an old California family that settled the fertile Central Valley around Sacramento before the Civil War. For industrious people willing to sink roots and possessing a will to build it was an agricultural Eden. The American West portrayed in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (Random House, 1968) is no longer the Promised Land. It's the place where dreamers and pioneers of a different variety—con-men and hippies, the desperate, the plague of runaways in the 1960s—wander, only to be stopped cold at the Pacific Ocean. Very few, it seems, make it to the 90210 Zip code.

Mistakenly labeled "hard-boiled" and compared to noir novelists and conventions by the facile, Didion covers Los Angeles, Hollywood, San Francisco and the barren country in between. Out there the lonely subdivisions that dot the wasteland like desert outposts are the catch basins for "the flotsam of a New California." The wanderers who made the journey west in search of their dreams find only desert and desolation. In this new American West parents are drifters and their children delinquents. California is a place to where people scatter, she says quoting Yeats, because "the center cannot hold." The values and morals that gave unity to communities were left behind.

This collection starts in San Bernardino, with an essay titled "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream." A place of bargain basement consumerism and layaway plans, it's "the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else." An overwhelming quality of cheapness pervades. Religion is served like fast food and in Didion's hands it's a "country in which the literal interpretation of Genesis has slipped imperceptibly into the literal interpretation of *Double Indemnity*."

The essay is constructed around a crime, a murder that occurred in 1965. A woman immolated her husband in the back of their Volkswagen to collect the insurance money and start a new life. It was done badly, with the impetuousness of desperation, and she was charged with murder within 24 hours.

Like Thompson, Didion follows her subjects and covers the trial like a reporter on the beat, and like Capote she remains for the most part in the background, setting a mood with description and allowing the action and the characters' speech to do the dirty work. Unlike Capote, she doesn't allow herself the liberty to recreate events unseen. Her prose is spare and ironic and at the core there's hollowness.

A poet of the implied and unsaid, her sentences drift off. Things seem omitted. Rather then obscure, her ellipses illuminate. Hope and virtue and the stamina to see out another loser of a day with no expectations of improvement—these are left unsaid but are confirmed by their absence. In a scant 30 pages a mini-noir epic of lost dreams and the crime of passion one person commits to regain them plays out.

Of the 20 essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, the title essay is the centerpiece. The themes of transience and lost values that run through the collection come to fruition here. It was a time of economic prosperity in America and while there seemed to be a sense of purpose something was not right. "The signals between the generations," Didion tells us, "are irrevocably jammed."

In the summer of 1967, the so-called Summer of Love, Didion visited the Haight-Ashbury section of

San Francisco and spent time befriending and trailing a number of young people—hippies, runaways, drug dealers, oracles—most of them teenagers. San Francisco was where the "social hemorrhaging" had appeared. Dispossessed adolescents migrated westward in droves.

Their mission wasn't so much to build a society based on youth, drugs and doing their own thing, says Didion. It was a symptom of a national problem, a collective lack of values and history. There's plenty to be said for children listening at the feet of their grandparents as the elders dispense family history and folklore and how it was done back in the day. But thanks to a mobile post-war culture that was in the midst of a collective self-evaluation, its children were ignorant of any past or value system. For these lost children, San Francisco was just the place to start over among their own kind.

In a series of episodes characters and situations are introduced, sometimes briefly, other times in detail. They speak, they act, and sometimes judgment is passed. Didion begins with meeting the first of her guides, a former biker now a youth activist known as Deadeye. Despite his good intentions, Deadeye isn't too much different from the others who've made the trip west, and is indicative of American culture at large. "Deadeye has a clear evangelical gaze and the reasonable rhetoric of a car salesman. He is society's model product."

Didion pops into hippie apartments as her acquaintanceships grow, arranges meetings with runaways with the promise of food, meets young couples who play house and live as "unconscious instruments of values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level." That is, domestic roles are pretty much the same in the Haight as they are in Peoria.

The essay ends on ominous notes of doom and self-perpetuating ignorance. Didion has a conversation with a five-year-old girl who has already been initiated into the LSD drug culture. She tells Didion she attends "High Kindergarten." The young son of a hippie couple Didion has come to know starts an apartment fire with the lighted joss sticks he is so fond of playing with. Not much damage is done, but it gets worse. No one seems to notice the boy later on as he chews on an electrical cord. They're too busy searching for hashish in the remains of the fire.

Michael Herr was a gadabout reporter for *Holiday* covering general interest stories from around the world when he found his calling. While observing Army basic training at Ft. Dix in the mid-1960s, he decided he had to travel to Vietnam. He possessed no

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Michael Herr

reportorial instincts and no journalistic training but, as Weingarten relates in *The Gang that Couldn't Write Straight*, Herr was determined to penetrate the boilerplate of press releases and government information sessions that passed for war reporting and find the real story. So, with the slimmest of press accreditation and a little advance money from his agent, he hitched a ride on the next chopper buzzing deep into the Heart of Darkness.

Herr's pieces were published in *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* in the late 1960s and, when the smoke had cleared, six were collected in *Dispatches* (Knopf, 1977) to immediate acclaim. *Dispatches* was a dead-on post-mortem for the larger reading audience of what really went on in the lives of the infantrymen—the grunts—who fought and died in the jungles of Indo-China.

Herr doesn't make war or war-reporting glamorous. He wrote home of a conflict so murky at times that it seemed the United States was at war with itself.

The ground level view Herr presents is horrific and realistic. War is chaos at full blast, a friend who

fought in Vietnam once told me. One moment the world is calm and the next thing you know you're hanging on to dear life and your sanity as you empty your M-16 into the darkness of the jungle just as fast as you can, hoping to hit the guy who's shooting at you. Then, as abruptly as it started, it stops. That's how Herr's pieces feel; they move fast, whip around to take a shot, then run and duck for cover.

The narratives that comprise *Dispatches* are dense, rhythmic, and highly impressionistic, verging on stream-of-consciousness. Sentences at times demand that the reader make the connection between the information presented and what it implies. Here's the evidence, Herr seems to say, connect the dots yourself.

The prose can be nuanced, cryptic, and ambiguous—appropriate for describing a war where the good guys were hard to tell from the bad guys. "Breathing In," the opening piece, is a poetic head rush of images and speech, a jabbering introduction to Vietnam that sounds as if the tour guide is racing on an amphetamine high—the drug of choice for G.I.s heading into the nighttime jungle on patrol—and that's just the beginning.

What follows are incidents and conversations, campaigns and battles, R and R spent floating in a bottle, imaginative visions of war and a writing style unfettered by convention. For the most part, it's a cynical view of a war fought by cynical people and it shows on every page. Instead of detailed reporting on every battle and firefight, it's the impressions of soldiers that Herr relates. While he's admitted the book is a mixture of fact, fiction and composite characters, it's through his skill and imagination that the grunts constructed from the shards and shrapnel of battle tell stories as meaningful as the real ones. The reporter as an interpreter and amplifier of reality is the hallmark of New Journalism.

There are plenty more examples of New Journalism than just the volumes written by the five previous writers. All are well worth reading and some, for the sake of integrity and appreciation of fine writing, must be noted, even though they preceded the 1960s.

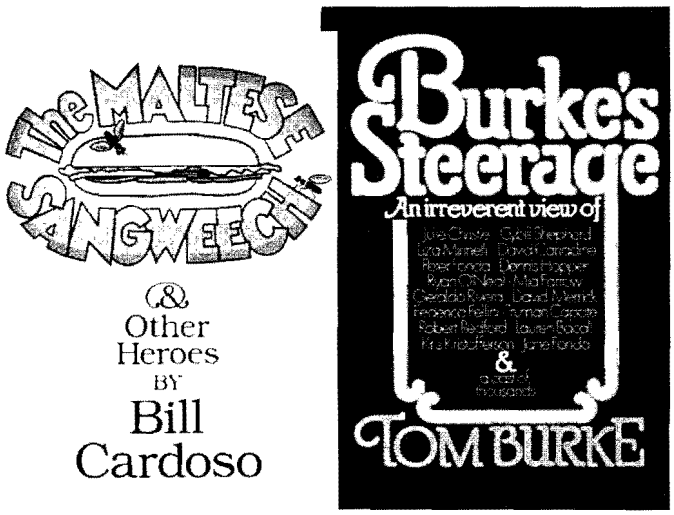
For a quick but thorough introduction to the genre, *The New Journalism* (Harper and Row, 1973) is a compilation edited by Wolfe and E. W. Johnson. The book contains essays by Barbara Goldsmith, Terry Southern, Joe Eszterhas, John Gregory Dunne and Garry Wills, among others. Aside from the excellent introduction by Wolfe, *The New Journalism* includes abridgements of the works of several of the writers featured here.

Bill Cardoso has the distinct fame of being remembered as the guy who coined the phrase "gonzo journalism," which Hunter S. Thompson gladly adopted as the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for his over-the-top reporting style. Cardoso was an accomplished journalist in his own right and *The Maltese Sangweech & Other Heroes* (Atheneum, 1984) collects pieces of his, both published and unpublished.

For a while, Cardoso was known as the "king of the kill fee." He'd get the assignment, write the story, and have it accepted. But for various editorial reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of the piece, it was returned with a consolation check—the kill fee—and never published.

His pieces range from celebrity profiles (who can forget hairdresser Monti Rock III's run for stardom in the late Sixties?) to Tong wars in San Francisco to Evel Knievel jumping the Snake River Canyon. Long out of print, this book is well worth tracking down.

Celebrity chronicler Tom Burke gave the actors of 1960s Hollywood and other media standouts the comeuppance they unwittingly asked for in the many sly profiles he wrote for *Esquire*, *GQ* and *Rolling Stone*. A hipper kind of Rex Reed, Burke mocks and deflates in his many-paged collection, *Burke's Steerage* (Putnam, 1976), another fine book interested readers will have to track down. Fresh out of college, I was briefly acquainted with Tom Burke in the early 1980s. He allowed me and several other aspiring types to read his copy when it was still wrapped around the barrel



of his manual Smith Corona. It was like looking at a fresh kill, the body still warm.

Truman Capote, for example, resembles a "ruined Puck." Peter Fonda takes Burke for a ride in his pickup and with his youthful looks and rich kid insouciance comes off as a "prepschool junior with his first driver's license." Burke's recounting of Fonda's justification to a disgruntled fan of his purchase of an oceangoing yacht is hilarious. Of Kris Kristofferson he observes, "though he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, his speech is Brownsville bowling alley." Burke captures celebrities being themselves, when the cameras are off and the dialogue, unfortunately, is their own. His sarcasm has a tone of the familiar, as if a friend was talking about another friend out of

school. To be upbraided by Burke is very funny, but it can hurt.

When I knew Burke he lived in a bungalow in South Hampton, New York, and it was nothing like Nick Carraway's cottage in the fictional East Egg. Burke's place was the last residential holdout in a down-at-the-heels commercial strip far from the mansions by the sea. The liquor store was within walking distance and the fumes from a rundown clam shack next door were the only intimations that the ocean was near. I'd fanned through his book while he taught my friends and me how to drink scotch, and my appetite was whetted. After that summer Burke disappeared, but it didn't take me long to find his book.

Where else but The Chatham Bookseller, believe it or not, for a whopping two dollars, in the condition any respectable booksellers would call "good." With just a tiny stain on the end board and a touch of wear on the wrappers, it's a surprisingly tight copy. In an era that worships celebrities more than ever, this book is a hidden gem that one doesn't hear much of anymore but deserves to be read. Burke is very hip, very sophisticated, and unlike Rex Reed, doesn't gush so much as watch his subjects wriggle on pins of their own devising.

I'd never heard of Seymour Krim until I read Dan Wakefield's memoir *New York in the Fifties* (Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1992). You know how it is when you're hot on the trail of knowledge as one book leads to another—in this case, bohemia and working writers in New York—you just can't get enough. And by the time you've put the light out you've got a list of books a mile long.

Some you get to quickly, others have to wait. It took me 10 years to get to Krim, and I found him in a compilation of his three previous collections, all of which are worth finding, *Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer* (Excelsior, 1961; expanded version, Dutton, 1968) being the first and foremost. I wished I hadn't waited so long.

Seymour Krim was a critic and intellectual who published essays and book reviews in *Partisan Review* and other highbrow journals. To pay the rent he edited men's magazines such as *Nugget, Swank* and *The Evergreen Review*, where he championed New Journalism writers such as Terry Southern. Not so much the type of journalist who sought out stories to cover, Krim was a self-focused essayist and a complicated personality who, like Mailer, found his inner self as fascinating as anything he saw in the outside world. For a while he and Mailer were literary competitors of sorts, but Mailer was able to achieve fame and recognition as a novelist and journalist, something that Krim, mired in ideas and ideologies, desired but never attained.

Around too early to find the hippie movement relevant, age-wise Krim was closer to the Beat Generation, but he really belongs to neither group. His expansive and celebratory prose style brings excitement and humor to his work, whether he's describing a failed suicide attempt or his casual friendship with aging Hollywood bombshell Joan Blondell. An intellectual craving an outer life, Krim watched and read with joy and jealousy as idol Jack Kerouac thumbed his nose at T.S. Eliot and ate the peach, then helped found the Beat Generation.

His prose contains the energy of Kerouac. It also stops and digresses, turns asides into mini-road trips, and encompasses a Fibber McGee's closet stuffed with learning, which he uses to his illuminate, not impress. He makes the fruits of his mental life sound fun, but it was never easy being Seymour Krim.

He came of age and achieved some repute as a Jewish intellectual in the hothouse environment of Manhattan in the 1940s and 1950s. Krim found the one-upmanship, the continual search for the "abstract recipe for profundity," a never-ending quest. In his essay "What's this Cat's Story?" Krim admits that he "sounded and wrote like a bastard encyclopedia." Drained of the time and mental ability to write fiction—his first love—Krim was stuck and he knew it. His self-reflecting, though, the story of his life as a book-loving kid who missed the boat as a novelist, is gold.

To fiction he aspired, but as a thinker he was hobbled, for "to be brilliant meant that natural flashes of illumination had to be hardened, and that the posture of abnormally high intelligence had to be maintained at all costs if you were to hold your head high to self or others." In other words, the fiction he might create would never stand up to his expectations or those of his peers.

Except for "Chaos," a previously unpublished prose poem excerpted in the posthumous *What's this Cat's Story?: The Best of Seymour Krim* (Paragon House, 1991), fiction eluded him. This collection is worth seeking out. It's an excellent introduction to Seymour Krim, and makes rummaging through used bookstores in pursuit of him a more adventurous pastime than scrolling through websites.

As for *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, the book that got me started, if only my 401k kept pace with it I'd be in great shape. Though the value of my $3.00 purchase has grown at a rate of almost 15 percent a year, the book remains priceless. The prose that caused my eyeballs to pop has lost none of its energy and, after almost 40 years, the social satire seems eerily relevant. Stock car racing, the Upper East Side nanny Mafia, Las Vegas and Phil Spector all seem still to be in the news, but none have been written about with the accuracy and pith of Wolfe.

New Journalism has yet to lose its relevancy, and its methods are standard operating procedure among journalists today. As an example of imagination bringing readers as close or even closer to the truths of their times as newsprint, facts, or even television, New Journalism has no peers.