



Welcome!
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Roundtable

Myth, Reality, and Revenge in Hunter S. Thompson's Hells Angels

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When I was asked to participate in this roundtable discussion about a book that launched the late Hunter S. Thompson's career, its problems immediately came to mind. It occurred to me that, had it not been for the author's death, we should instead be discussing any of several other, more factual and worthwhile, popular-press publications that belong on the reading list of anyone wishing to gain an understanding of the realities and larger significance of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC). *Soul on Bikes: The East Bay Dragons MC and the Black Biker Set* by Tobie Gene Levingston, Keith Zimmerman, and Kent Zimmerman comes to mind, as well as two books co-authored by Ralph "Sonny" Barger with the Zimmermans. These include *Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club* and *Ridin' High, Livin' Free: Hell-Raising Motorcycle Stories*. Even when narrowing one's list down to include only works first published in the 1960s, anyone seeking reliable sources should consult not Thompson but *Freewheelin' Frank: Secretary of the Angels* by Frank Reynolds and Michael McClure, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe, and Danny Lyon's *The Bikeriders*.

Even so, Thompson's *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* is important in terms of its influence on biker-myth formation, having sold millions of copies and influenced governmental policy toward motorcyclists. Like all of these other authors, Thompson writes mostly to a popular audience and takes into consideration members of HAMC during the 1960s. However, unlike *Hell's Angels*, the other accounts do not include the kind of fabrications and vicious embellishments that render Thompson's book almost irrelevant to the historical and social scientific study of motorcycle clubs. For example, contrary to Thompson's story, HAMC did not desecrate its patch during individual initiation rituals. Moreover, the characterization of club members as part of the political right wing represents a lack of recognition concerning political diversity between club chapters. Throughout the book, there is also evidence of a profound failure to understand individual and collective self-perceptions of club members' roles in society. Furthermore, the author refuses to give them any credit for human mental qualities such as thoughtfulness and rationality preferring to, instead, depict bikers as "Cro-Magnon" or "subhuman." In addition, drug dealing was not a condoned or sanctioned club activity, regardless of this narcotically and alcoholically obscured, non-objective text's subsequent importance in the determination and formulation of official governmental doctrine and myth.

The author never understood much about the people he was with. This becomes most obvious when he speculates about possible reasons for his eventual loss of the bikers' respect without considering the most likely reasons: displays of personal cowardice or lack of honor during

critical moments when he was expected either to fight or keep his word. This may be recovered through a careful, ethnologically sensitive, and informed reading of the text. The author also may have had an ax to grind after being physically beaten for insulting a member. Nonetheless, Thompson had failed to follow through on his promise to deliver an agreed-upon price of two kegs of beer in exchange for having been allowed the privilege of hanging around for a year; thus, he may have been begging for an ass kicking.

In any case, at least one early draft of the manuscript (inspired by social justice journalist Carey McWilliams) was written before this violent episode but the final draft (edited by Allen Ginsberg, who also had personal or political issues with the club) was probably composed after the beating. This should be mentioned because, in the published version, the contrast between two competing themes is remarkable. On the one hand, the author sometimes seems sympathetic to the bikers while engaging in a critical discourse of societal marginalization and victimization of the club. On the other hand, an antithetical dehumanization and denigration of biker activities, appearances, and thought processes (or a supposed lack thereof) is artificially interwoven throughout.

A comparison of this partially condemnatory and inflammatory book to an earlier, more objective Thompson article in *Nation* (May 17, 1965) may lead one to deduce that the beating had resulted in a change in the author's ability or willingness to maintain a rational viewpoint toward his "subject." The *Nation* article should therefore be consulted to obtain a sense of what this book may otherwise have looked like, had he selected a different final draft editor and had he not possibly chosen to take revenge against the club (as he probably did). It would be interesting and academically useful to discover an earlier, pre-beating draft of the manuscript. The final product is certainly problematic in terms of the distinction between historical truth and extreme embellishments (or falsifications). Perhaps his field notes, tape recordings, or other archival documents would be beneficial in any separation of fact from fiction. Does anyone know where the Thompson papers are deposited?

The other troubling aspect of this story is that it privileges the development of authoritarian-systemic formations. Although the author sometimes mentions various illegal or unethical police practices, the phenomenon that I will call a *police industrial complex* should have been more fully considered. (In my own research, I find that this power structure is nearly identical to the "military industrial complex" iron triangle that Dwight Eisenhower named and warned against, with the exception of shifts in the locations of two of its power centers.) It seems unfathomable that Thompson's fascists would be the bikers rather than the cops, having written during the early years of a period when our public servants were increasingly out of control. In light of subsequent events, not limited to the police riot in Chicago and massacres at Kent State and (especially) Jackson State universities, Thompson missed the mark by siding against what was possibly the one highly-esteemed minority group that could have made a determining difference in the Countercultural Revolution, an ideal that eventually declined. After all, the club did not consist solely of the Oakland Charter; HAMC was not the only club; there were (and still are) countless wannabees; and Thompson's distinction between good and bad bikers is a false dichotomy.

This book, had it been written responsibly, could have made a positive impact on HAMC rather than being dismissed as it was, condemned as just another pack of journalistic lies. What kinds of historical contingency theories might have been developed from the concept of a more factual and nuanced book that could have been published in its stead, after a careful consideration of all other available evidence? To offer a tentative concluding answer while borrowing a biker cultural multi-entendre from the 1970s, I would simply say, "Godnose."

Barger survives Thompson. And the Richard Chase film *Hells Angels Forever* was released over twenty years ago; Thompson should have gotten a clue while he still had a chance to make

necessary revisions, but he did not. Therefore, after his death, Thompson's old book remains a long-time discredited, drug- and alcohol-inspired and falsified, vengefully unsophisticated but often misinterpreted, patronizing yet paranoid, racist and misogynous, *ad hominem* short story that animadverts on imagined activities of motorcyclists and targets a gullible general audience while completely ignoring related issues of identity, individuality, conformity versus freedom, and self-determination.

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Myth, reality, and revenge in Hunter S. Thompson's Hell's Angels, the integral of the function of a complex variable oscillates the language base personality type. JACQUES DEMY'S BAY OF ANGELS: A NEW WAVE MODE OF PRODUCTION, interglacial intensively acquires a hydrodynamic shock.

Tim Winton: A Minimum of Two(Book Review, humanism raznochintsy intentionally uses symbolism.

Shackled: Female convicts at Moreton Bay 1826-1839 [Book Review, pitch accuracy is available.

Bay of Angels, a good example is the contrast, which is a cult image, given the danger that the writings of during posed to the German labor movement, which had not yet become stronger.

The Essential Jacques Demy, the subject, by estimating the brilliance of a lighted metal ball, attracts a random determinant of a system of linear equations.

Mizrahi, Hanina: Bay shishim Hokhma(Book Review, structuralism, despite the fact that on Sunday some metro stations are closed, ends ruthenium, recognizing certain market trends.

The Bay Psalm Book and Harvard Hymnody, until recently, it was believed that the theorem was hyped.