

KEEP THIS QUIET

My Relationship with Hunter S. Thompson, Milton Klonsky, and Jan Mensaert:

A Memoir

by Margaret A. Harrell

(Saeculum University Press)

It seems Margaret Harrell has kept the lid on her times with Hunter S. Thompson. She knew him from 1968 onwards as he was just beginning to make a name for himself with his book about the Hell's Angels. A book which brought him some acclaim but also a near death experience at the hands (and feet) of some irate Angels. He thought she was a middle aged spinsterish copy - editor at Random House. The impression gained through letter exchanges and phone calls, she didn't bother to tell him she was just 26.

Now, in the wake of Thompson's suicide a few years back, she feels able to tell a little of her relationship with this literary firebrand. Not only Thompson but her close encounters with Milton Klonsky and Jan Mensaert, two figures who while not the international figures that Thompson is, have their place in the great literary scheme of things.

Kevin Ring: I wanted to ask if you would expand on that episode with the two agents on page 8 down in the South. That must have been scary?

Margaret Harrell: That was the most fascinating question because - as your readers might want to figure out - this is the same Oxford as in Dylan's "Oxford Town," same time period - even the same month. Scary? Yes and no. But as in those days - being very young - I didn't feel fear when in the middle of doing something, absorbed in it, it was mostly not fear I was feeling.

The Meredith scene is what Dylan was recording early in December and I went there later in the month. The song lyrics were printed that month, but the album wasn't released till the summer and became immortalized. The undercover agents were guarding Meredith, but that still left open Dylan's question of who was investigating. Well, in a way they were!!!

Oxford Town, Oxford Town
Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down
The sun don't shine above the ground
Ain't a-goin' down to Oxford Town
He went down to Oxford Town
Guns and clubs followed him down
All because his face was brown
Better get away from Oxford Town

Kevin Ring: With these three people who so impressed you, it seems to me you have written a very personal book, written as much with your heart as your head?

Margaret Harrell: You have put your finger on something important. The urge to write it came from my heart. And what might strike some people as purple passages—they came from my heart. How do you capture, in sober terms the first time I saw Hunter in person and stay cool, calm, and deliberate? Especially years later, when he's just committed suicide. And I hadn't seen him since 1991. So my emotions were raw. In that scene in my office where we met, for instance, in the early draft I couldn't remember enough details, but what didn't fade a bit was what my heart had felt. At first, it wasn't a scene. It was all feeling, which was a mistake. When the editor said, "Make a scene," somehow—but accurately—a lot more memories came. Yet I retained some of the unguarded pure-heart lines. I loved those emotions that rose up unguardedly, and perhaps not in the most polished language. My intellectual head has more experience as a writer than my heart.

There is a lot of head too. I wanted to keep the historical, biographical value of the letters intact. That was another motive: to make the letters public. In majoring in history at Duke and writing an honors paper, I studied research with one of the finest history professors. Afterwards, at Columbia, John Unterecker, the definitive biographer of Hart Crane, advised me on my master's thesis. So these lessons about accurate representation were engrained. I couldn't let them go, even for a memoir.

In my heart, I felt Hunter would have been curious to see what I felt and if I had the guts to get it on paper, the way he sweated out his stories. He had never written about me except in code (the snake story). I didn't know till my first conversation with Doug Brinkley, around 2007, that Hunter had told him about me. Doug Brinkley also helped. At one point, I was almost ready to turn the manuscript over to him, for the Estate. I knew the story would be preserved, that way. What did it matter, so much, whether my name was on the

