

Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga Study Guide

Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga by Hunter S. Thompson

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Plot Summary

Hunter S. Thompson chronicles a two-year period of the Hell's Angels, focusing on the San Francisco and Oakland chapters of the California-wide gang. He discusses their origins and background in general terms, their social significance and their unlikely rise to national fame through media exposure following several violent crimes. Thompson then details a motorcycle run to a particular destination. He followed the Hell's Angels and participated in their revelries. The text concludes with a discussion of the Hell's Angels in a larger social context, as well as a reflection on their nature and essential character.

The Hell's Angels are an infamous gang of motorcycle-riding outlaws. They are one of many such gangs and are based predominantly in Oakland and San Francisco, California, where the weather permits relative comfort while riding a motorcycle. Motorcycle gangs have their roots in post-World War II America, and were initially composed of dropouts and vagabonds who banded together for protection and camaraderie. The Hell's Angels were founded in 1950 near San Bernardino, California. They continued as another gang until roughly 1964, at which time they were composed of perhaps eight-five members scattered among several chapters. Ralph "Sonny" Barger headed the largest and best-organized chapter.

In 1964 the Hell's Angels were accused of a vicious gang rape of two underage girls. Although several members were arrested, the charges were later dropped. However national newspapers and magazines reported the incident. The resulting wave of infamy propelled the Hell's Angels to the forefront of motorcycle outlaw culture. An outraged citizenry demanded police action, and various law enforcement reports summarized the Hell's Angels' activities of the prior few years. Law enforcement began to blame a hugely disproportionate amount of criminal activity on the Hell's Angels, and repetitive news stories of fresh outrages swept through the national media.

By 1965 the Hell's Angels had emerged as the *de facto* leaders of all motorcycle gangs, and even began to transition into an apparently accepted power center within the liberal counter-cultural movement. Still, gang members were not educated intelligentsias rebelling against the war or politics; and within a few months their essentially criminal and vicious nature caused a permanent rift to develop between the motorcycle gangs and the liberal Berkeley crowd.

Hunter S. Thompson wrote a short newspaper article in 1964 about the Hell's Angels. He was later introduced to several Hell's Angels and was also offered a contract for writing a book on the gang. He began to spend more time with the motorcycle gang, eventually buying a motorcycle, spending many hours in the company of Hell's Angels, and even accompanying them on several road trips. Within several months he became an accepted fixture within the notoriously reporter-shy Hell's Angels. His resultant first-hand look at the Hell's Angels is chronicled in the book, which also includes personal experiences, as well as opinions about the Hell's Angels and the role the play within the greater American society.

Part 1 Roll em, boys

Part 1 Roll em, boys Summary and Analysis

Part I consists of Chapter 1 and serves as a flamboyant introduction to the text. It is written in the informal, sensationalist, and personal style used throughout the remainder of the book. This style is often referred to as "gonzo journalism," though that term did not arise until several years after the original publication of the book.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Hunter S. Thompson chronicles a two-year period of the Hell's Angels, focusing on the San Francisco and Oakland chapters of the California-wide gang. He discusses their origins and background in general terms, their social significance and their unlikely rise to national fame through media exposure following several violent crimes. Thompson then details a motorcycle run to a particular destination. He followed the Hell's Angels and participated in their revelries. The text concludes with a discussion of the Hell's Angels in a larger social context, as well as a reflection on their nature and essential character.

The first motorcycle gangs appeared around the mid-1940s in Southern California; they were largely composed of self-identified 'One Percenters', or individuals who proudly saw themselves as the lowest 1% of the dregs of society. Numerous gangs arose over the next two decades, most of them small organizations with perhaps a dozen members that were contained within a certain geographic area. One group, originally formed in 1950 near San Bernardino, was named the Hell's Angels. Unlike most motorcycle gangs, the Hell's Angels semi-successfully organized and recruited new members in different locales. By 1964 the Hell's Angels boasted several 'chapters' in various cities along the West Coast, and was composed of perhaps a hundred members.

Over Labor Day weekend in 1964 members from the various chapters of the Hell's Angels converged on Monterey, California, for their annual gathering. At the annual gathering various gang-related business is conducted. The official business usually focuses on several days of drunken carousing and possible criminal activity. In 1964 the unofficial, but acknowledged, leader of the Hell's Angels, Ralph "Sonny" Barger, was imprisoned on drug-related charges. Nevertheless the various chapters met and caroused in Monterey.

On one early evening of the Labor Day gathering, many gang members spent time in a local bar before heading out to a distant beach to continue the festivities. A pair of young girls with their boyfriends also spent time at the bar watching the hoodlums and then made their way to the beach. At the beach various sexual activities are alleged to have occurred. The girls and their boyfriends characterized the activity as a prolonged and brutal gang rape, while the Hell's Angels characterized it as consensual, typical, and minor. The girls happened to be fourteen and fifteen years old however, and one of them was pregnant. The following day four Hell's Angels, visually identified by the girls, were arrested for rape. The accusations of gang rape by motorcycle gangsters caught the eye of nearly every news editor across the nation. Within a few hours the Hell's Angels transitioned from a relatively obscure West Coast motorcycle gang to an infamous, and supposedly national, menace.

Part 2 The Making of the Menace, 1965

Part 2 The Making of the Menace, 1965 Summary and Analysis

Part 2 consists of Chapters 2 through 8. Part 2 focuses on the origins of the Hell's Angels and details many of the themes, styles, and values common to motorcycle gangs. The section also describes the public reaction to the Hell's Angels—not always negative—and details some law enforcement tactics commonly used to attempt to combat the outlaws.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

All of the charges stemming from the Labor Day, 1964, Monterey rape allegations were dropped. The medical examiner found no evidence of forced sexual activity, no witnesses could be found, one alleged victim refused to testify, and the other alleged victim was deemed wholly unreliable after voluntarily submitting to an examination with a 'lie-detector' machine. Nevertheless, the California Attorney General, Thomas C. Lynch, ordered a complete investigation of the Hell's Angels. His office subsequently produced a brief, but very lurid report that detailed numerous alleged violent crimes. Excerpts of the Lynch Report were reprinted in most newspapers across the country.

Founded in 1950, the Hell's Angels continued through the fall of 1964 as a typical motorcycle gang. Membership varied, but was never greater than 200. By Labor Day, 1964, the membership roles contained only 85 names. Nevertheless, the Lynch Report indicated that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Hell's Angels existed. A slow but steady stream of sensationalist and lurid reports continued to appear in national newspapers and magazines. These reports generally failed to mention that alleged crimes were later dismissed, or that recounted crimes were only alleged events.

Eyewitness accounts of Hell's Angels activities often varied widely from law enforcement accounts or media accounts. Although the gang doubtlessly engaged in extensive criminal activity, the nature and character of the gang largely depended upon the interpretation of the observer. Law enforcement typically characterized the gang as vicious, lawless, and difficult to control. Media reports usually focused on sensational or lurid crimes, without much regard to facts. Other eyewitness accounts ran the spectrum, but were generally less sensational. The subsequent chapters in Part 2 examine the origins and character of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The waves of public attention and notoriety devoted to the Hell's Angels converted the obscure motorcycle gang from a band of bush-league bums into perceived big-time criminals—at least in the public perception. The California public demanded law enforcement step up efforts to curb motorcycle gangs, and the police complied. The extensive media attention converted gang members into a weird form of celebrity. Everyone wanted photographs and stories. Even 'Hell's Angels Fan Club' T-shirts were marketed. Gang members tried to capitalize on this newfound fame by charging, usually unsuccessfully, for photographs and interviews. In general, the gang became notoriously famous but did not garner income from their newfound notoriety.

The increased police attention caused most of the smaller chapters to wither away. Even the San Bernardino chapter suffered a marked drop in numbers. Only in Oakland did the Hell's Angels retain their traditional strength. Hunter S. Thompson, the author, first met members of the Hell's Angels in San Francisco. Thompson's initial contact was a member named "Frenchy", from Frisco. Frenchy was a twenty-nine years old, 5'5" tall, 129-pound part-owner of a local transmission repair shop, who was completely fearless. He was an ex-navy man who played guitar and banjo, and was married. From early spring through the summer of 1965 Thompson spent an increasing amount of time in the company of the San Francisco Hell's Angels. His association with them eventually resulted in his eviction from an apartment.

Hell's Angels have the reputation of being unkempt and un-bathed. They do, in fact, usually smell distinctive. This is often because they have not bathed; but it also involves their initiation ritual. New members are dressed in brand-new jeans and jacket and then 'baptized' into the gang. The 'baptism' consists of having a bucket of urine and feces dumped over the new member's body and clothing, which then becomes the official club uniform. New members must wear the uniform until it literally rots away. Jeans are also frequently soaked in oil and allowed to dry out. Thus, Hell's Angels uniforms are uniformly ratty, noisome, and soiled.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

After the initial euphoria of being stars, the Hell's Angels discovered that publicity was not necessarily a good thing. Police would often recognize gang members from published media photographs. Distant law enforcement units would spot photographs of fugitives in national magazines and contact local police. Hell's Angels, who didn't want to be found, could be more easily located. Many gang members lost their jobs after appearing in photographs or having their names listed in news articles. Companies hiring workers would avoid selecting people who looked like Hell's Angels.

The social stigma created by the negative press caused most people, even other criminals, to view the Hell's Angels as losers, who were little more than human trash. This bothered most members, who preferred to think of themselves in more romantic terms. In fact, most Hell's Angels preferred to view the increased news coverage as justly due. They thought they were, after all, romantic outlaws and iron men of extreme action and adventure. This self-image did not mesh well with the media portrayals of violent rapists and degraded perverts, barely more than animals.

Additionally, the fame came without money. Most members initially thought that, with media exposure and national fame, money would somehow come pouring into gang coffers. This did not happen. Magazine and newspaper circulations soared when sensational Hell's Angels stories were displayed on front pages; but the revenues from these increased sales did not reach the gang. Various minor attempts were made to capitalize on the infamy. Some members offered to sell interviews or perform violent activities in front of film crews on a pay-by-crime basis. There were few takers, and basically no payers.

Thus over time, divested of their jobs and without any income, the Hell's Angels began to view their fame from a different angle. It became undesirable. But by then, it was too late to retreat into the shadows. The Hell's Angels had become known as a national menace, firmly entrenched in public awareness. Several rounds of media articles in national magazines and newspapers ensured that every informed citizen knew, feared, and loathed the Hell's Angels.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Most Hell's Angels of the mid-1960s did not care much about the historical roots of their motorcycle gang. To them, the day-to-day operation of the gang was the significant element. Additionally, very few gang members remained in the gang for more than a handful of years. They retired, went to prison, or were killed. However, most people tacitly accept that all early motorcycle gangs, including the Hell's Angels, were heavily influenced by the Hollywood film *The Wild One*. The 1953 film established an entire genre of outlaw biker films. It starred Marlon Brando, as a sympathetic rebel leader of a motorcycle gang, who fought against a criminal-minded gang led by Lee Marvin. The film was loosely based on a motorcycle street party, which took place in Hollister, California, in 1947. Most Hell's Angels identified with the somewhat heroic antics of Marlon Brando.

Although early members of the gang are very difficult to locate, two well-known early Hell's Angels were Frank and Preetam Bobo. Frank was the president of the Hell's Angels from 1955 through 1962. He was a hip and intelligent leader, who established many fashion elements that are still used to distinguish Hell's Angels. He also had a sense of irony. He actually purchased and wore the same shirt won by Lee Marvin during the filming of *The Wild One*. Frank was never arrested during his seven-year tenure as president. He was known to intervene with police and even solicit the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of his gang members.

Preetam Bobo was the vice-president and strongman of the gang during Frank's presidency. Bobo was an ex-boxer, a karate expert and a man of violent temper. He was widely feared until he retired from the gang and took up a more suburban lifestyle aboard a sailboat with his wife. Both Frank and Bobo have stated *The Wild One* heavily influenced them. As would be expected, however, the motorcycle gangs themselves also influenced later motorcycle outlaw films, in an obvious cycle of influence.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

The Hell's Angels moral code is shocking to most people because of its inherent imbalance. They do not believe in the concept of 'an eye for an eye'. They believe in total retaliation. Insults or snubs are responded to with extreme physical violence, and an insult to a single Hell's Angel is viewed as an insult to all gang members. Retaliation is swift, violent, and complete. This asymmetrical response is a difficult and frightening concept for those who believe that human relationships should be based on essential fairness. Additionally, Hell's Angels feel that their point of view is inherently correct. To argue with a Hell's Angel is to be, in their eyes, simply wrong.

The vast majority of motorcycle outlaws belong to a gang. Going solo is a difficult and dangerous method of life. The gang offers protection and street-level credibility. Being in a gang offers a sense of place, established norms (however perverted) and the assistance of others. As outcasts from society, motorcycle outlaws find their sense of place and identity by belonging to a gang. One of the most important aspects of a motorcycle outlaw is of course his motorcycle. Hell's Angels, like nearly all motorcycle gangs, ride heavy and large American-made Harley-Davidson bikes, spurning the lighter Japanese imports and even the British-made Triumph.

The chapter ends with a brief, somewhat out-of-place, analysis of the United States motorcycle manufacturing and import market, complete with dollar figures, unit figures, and trends analyses. Thompson notes that Harley-Davidson lost an enormous amount of market share during the early 1960s due to low-priced Japanese imports of smaller, light motorcycles. Hell's Angels of the 1960s spurned such motorcycles as completely unsuitable to the motorcycle outlaw mystique.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The Hell's Angels often wear leather, but more usually wear denim. The leather-clad look of motorcyclists is entirely practical—leather is durable in a road accident and exposed skin shreds easily on asphalt. The leather-wearing motorcycle outlaw is often confabulated in the public mind, and particularly in the San Francisco area, with the homosexual leather-clad, so-called biker scene. Homosexual bars often feature motorcycle themes and bar patrons dress the part in pristine leathers. Actual motorcycles, though, are rare or non-existent. The public and the media often view these two social phenomena as two sides of a coin. It is common to hear psychology experts discussing the repressed homosexuality or sadomasochism of Hell's Angels. This confusion is simply invalid. It is not true and completely irrelevant. Although a motorcycle is an obviously sexual symbol, the Hell's Angels are no more homosexual or sadomasochistic than the general public.

The confused identification of outlaw motorcycle gangs with homosexual groups was boosted with the 1964 release of Kenneth Anger's avant-garde film, *Scorpio Rising*. The film explores the adventures of Scorpio, a motorcycle outlaw, who outwardly resembles the Hell's Angels. He explores homosexuality and other counter-culture ideas. The film had no dialogue, but was set to contemporaneous rock and roll. The film enjoyed a modest success. It was even viewed by many Hell's Angels, who liked it without feeling any connection to the characters.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Harley-Davidson is an American manufacturer of motorcycles, known to Hell's Angels and others as simply a 'Harley'. Nearly all Hell's Angels of the mid-1960s rode Harleys. Other large motorcycles were noted for their rarity. No matter the brand name, a Hell's Angel's motorcycle must be large, heavy and fast. The Harley model 74 was preferred by nearly all mid-1960s motorcycle outlaws, as well as the police. When a model 74 left the factory it weighed nearly 700 pounds. Hell's Angels would strip the motorcycle to its bare essentials and then heavily customize the remaining machine, resulting in a hard-riding but extremely fast motorcycle weighing around 500 pounds. These motorcycles were capable of reaching 130 miles per hour. The extensive stripping and alterations would frequently cost as much as \$3000 and result in a hard-riding, but personalized, motorcycle known as a chopped hog, hog, or chopper.

Marginalized from nearly all other aspects of living, a Hell's Angel refuses to be marginalized on the road. Their hard riding is aggressive, fearless, and dangerous. Aggressive riding fast motorcycles lead to frequent accidents, which are often very dangerous. Serious wounds are thus common among Hell's Angels, who view physical pain with disdain.



Part 3 The Hoodlum Circus and The Statutory Rape of Bass Lake

Part 3 The Hoodlum Circus and The Statutory Rape of Bass Lake Summary and Analysis

Part 3 consists of Chapters 9 through 18. Chapter 9 provides background information on a specific motorcycle run destination in 1965. The remaining chapters in the section detail the author's first-hand participation in the trip, and are related in a personal and humorous style. Various facts regarding the Hell's Angels are also interspersed throughout the section, including a description and analysis of the Hell's Angels reported penchant for gang rape.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

The July 4th, 1965, Hell's Angels motorcycle run destination was Bass Lake, California. Although run destinations were closely held secrets, the national media spotlight on the Hell's Angels throughout the mid-1960s ensured that information about the destination would leak out. The press widely reported the destination before the event, along with extensive speculation about the terrors that awaited the sleepy resort area. Most Hell's Angels on a run simply want to have fun, Hell's Angel style. They don't want to cause serious trouble because spending the weekend in jail is not fun. Thus, they are generally scrupulous about observing local ordinances to avoid arrest and legal harassment.

Most police and law enforcement agencies are completely unprepared to deal with the Hell's Angels, particularly when the motorcycle outlaws are massed in the hundreds. The typical police response is fear, bordering on hysteria. The same was somewhat true of law enforcement agencies on the road to Bass Lake during 1965. The citizens of Bass Lake in particular, and California in general, grew increasingly alarmed over the continuous projections of lewd behavior and criminal activities from nearly every media outlet. Thus, the stage was set for the 1965 Hell's Angels run. Thompson, the book's author, attended the run alongside the Hell's Angels.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Thompson arrived at the appointed assembly area driving his car. He discovered most Hell's Angels had already departed; but there were many individuals from another motorcycle gang—the Gypsy Jokers—milling around awaiting departure. Thompson sensed hostility from the group until some familiar Hell's Angels appeared. He was surprised to see them without their girlfriends or wives. They informed him that they were expecting serious trouble on the run and had left their women behind.

Thompson accompanied the run as it traveled through various small rural towns. The motorcycle outlaws were scrupulously observant of local laws. They wanted to avoid legal troubles because spending the weekend in jail is decidedly not fun. The media and California law enforcement had notified all of the towns; and the residents appeared ready and alarmed.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Thompson drove alone in his car, listening to the radio. He heard numerous media news reports regarding the progress of the Hell's Angels throughout the state. The media reported that Bass Lake appeared to indeed be the ultimate destination. Thompson drove faster than the Gypsy Jokers in an attempt to catch up with the main body of the Hell's Angels. He took a complex route of roads, which resulted in saving some time. He arrived at a roadside stand where he took a break. He met Gut and Buzzard, two Hell's Angels. They showed him a restraining order, which had been issued to them by local police, and asked him to interpret the document. However he couldn't make heads or tails of it. Gut, Buzzard, and Thompson sat at the roadside, drank soda and watched traffic until a huge group of motorcycles zoomed over the hill and continued on the journey. The police roadblock apparently thus defeated, Gut and Buzzard whooped with joy and leapt on their bikes to continue their journey.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

The Hell's Angels main body arrived in the Bass Lake area to be met by Tiny Baxter, the local sheriff, along with a handful of police and forest rangers. Baxter and Barger met and held a brief discussion. Baxter advised Barger that the Hell's Angels were not welcome in town, but would find suitable accommodations at a distant campground. Barger agreed to the terms and the Hell's Angels departed. They traveled to the campground and found it without water and completely unsuitable. They returned to town, and once again Baxter and Barger met. The Hell's Angels once again departed for another campground and found this destination to their liking. They took up a collection for beer and entrusted the funds to Thompson, deeming his automobile the best way to transport a huge amount of beer.

Thompson, accompanied by Barger and another Hell's Angel, traveled to the local town to purchase beer. They were met by a man Thompson calls Burr-Head, who informed them they are not welcome in town. The situation began to escalate until Tiny Baxter arrived and sent the Hell's Angels to another store in another town. At the other town a huge group of sightseeing tourists had assembled to stare at the notorious Hell's Angels, the so-called Hoodlum Circus. Thompson found the atmosphere weird and disconcerting, even as he loaded the car with beer and returned to the campground.

Barger managed the situation throughout the next few days with a balance of terror. The Hell's Angels were held in check by Baxter's influence on Barger, and Baxter was held in check by the threat of violence. Meanwhile hundreds of riot-tourists arrived to view the scene. Many actually participated, to some extent, in the drinking and carousing. Thompson found the entire episode bizarre and stressful.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13 focuses on the evolution of the drifter class of Americans and provides a brief interlude in the developing story of the Bass Lake run. Thompson suggests that the original drifters were the indentured servants, who sold themselves into temporary slavery to travel to then-colonial America. Since then, the drifters had been vagabonds, who always seemed to progress west. Around the period of World War II, many drifters settled in California. These were the parents of most of the Hell's Angels who, as a body, are generally shiftless and prone to wandering. They do not have a 'home-town' in the conventional sense and epitomize the culture of mobility and the shirking of work. One of the author's acquaintances, Terry the Tramp, epitomizes the Hell's Angels' drifter attitude. A brief biography of Terry concludes the chapter.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

The tension around Bass Lake rapidly mounted on the first afternoon of the run, after the news of an incident involving a Hell's Angel was reported. Barger and Baxter rushed off together to investigate. Eventually Barger returned to the campground and related the story. Dirty Ed and some other Hell's Angels had been riding around town when several local teenagers had shouted vituperative words. Dirty Ed spun around and headed back to the kids only to be ambushed by one wielding a huge length of pipe. After suffering a beating, Dirty Ed was taken to the hospital where he received stitches in his scalp. The sheriff arrested the local teenagers—an action which mollified the Hell's Angels. Thus, another tense moment was diffused.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Toward the evening of the first day the local police announced a strict ten o'clock curfew. After ten in the evening, nobody would be allowed to leave the campground, which had been accepted as the Hell's Angel's area. In addition, the police would withdraw from the campground at that time. During the day dozens of young girls had frolicked with the Hell's Angels; but moments before the curfew they all departed, sensing that to remain behind was to invite abuse and far more attention than they wanted.

Upon the departure of virtually all the women, the mood within the campground decidedly changed. Most Hell's Angels began a bout of hard drinking and drug use. Within a few hours the drug cocktail led to many strange sights. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Hell's Angels classification of women into three categories—old ladies, mamas, and strange chicks. Old ladies are viewed as being in a long-term relationship with a *bona fide* Hell's Angel. As such, they are respected as private property and generally not molested. Mamas, on the other hand, are entirely club property and can be used however and whenever any Hell's Angel desires. They generally stay with the motorcycle gang for only a short period of time, suffering incredible abuse and degradation. All other women are designated strange chicks. Their treatment depends upon the circumstances.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

The party continued throughout the night. As beer ran short, another collection was taken up and Thompson again sent out on a beer run. The police begrudgingly let him drive out and back in, having procured several cases of beer. Other cars and motorcycles arrived throughout the night, adding to the beer and drugs. An occasional young girl was smuggled into the party. Many people wandered out into the woods for sex or to sleep. Thompson remained awake all night, speaking to various drunks and outlaws. The chapter summarizes many of their fragmentary stories, making it an intriguing and disturbing read.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17 considers the subject of rape—forcible sexual intercourse—as practiced by Hell's Angels. According to media reports, Hell's Angels are notorious and habitual rapists, often engaging in gang rape and other sexually brutalizing activities. The Hell's Angels vehemently deny these allegations, asserting that nearly all accusations are false or trumped-up charges. The chapter relates several accounts of alleged rapes, noting that in every case considered, the charges were eventually dismissed. According to Thompson, many rape charges result from women who readily engage in sexual activity with two or three Hell's Angels, but then become upset when they realize they will be required to service dozens of Hell's Angels. Other rape charges stem from women who engage in voluntary sexual activity and discover, later, that they were also robbed of money. Still other charges result from women seeking revenge for perceived wrongs.

Thompson offers statistics which indicate that Hell's Angels are convicted of rape seemingly less frequently than the public at large. The Hell's Angels claim this is because sexual intercourse with a wide variety of partners is already easily available to them. Their outlaw mystique, they claim, makes many women from various backgrounds crave sexual activity with them. Thompson relates one scene at a party, which involved a drunken and drugged woman being held down and sexually engaged by perhaps fifty Hell's Angels. He speculates whether the event would be legally classified as rape, noting that the woman—while apparently delirious—did not attempt to resist and did not appear to feel threatened.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

Thompson finally tired of the endless rounds of drinking. He staggered to his car, where he slept with the doors locked and the windows rolled up. Thompson awoke to discover another reporter taping an interview with Barger. He notes the interview was one of the last free interviews Barger ever allowed. The next morning the drinking resumed and continued into the afternoon, spreading into the nearby town. A freelance photographer became involved in a heated exchange between some Hell's Angels and the police. One Hell's Angel roared away in fury on his motorcycle, only to crash and break his leg. The police refused to summon an ambulance until someone would act as a financial guarantor. The situation escalated and the photographer was eventually arrested, largely because he was a suitable scapegoat—not a local, and not a Hell's Angel.

Thompson agreed to take the photographer's car to the police station so it would not sit idle on the roadside. At the police station Thompson was told that he would be arrested if he returned to the site of the Hell's Angels party. Somewhat bored with the drunken binging and a little reticent of being jailed, Thompson decided to abandon the party and return home. On the way home he listened to news reports and read newspaper headlines at various roadside stops. The country had suffered several youth riots; but notably lacking was anything about the Hell's Angels, as the gathering had proceeded relatively peacefully. There were isolated incidents and some small problems, but the foretold mass rioting and violence never came about.



Part IV "The Dope Cabala and a Wall of Fire"

Part IV "The Dope Cabala and a Wall of Fire" Summary and Analysis

Part IV consists of Chapters 19 through 22 and covers a grab bag of topics related to the Hell's Angels. There is a fair amount of commentary on the Hell's Angels' supposed vast network of drug sales. There is also extensive commentary on the unrelated social upheaval around the country, at the same time the national spotlight focused on the Hell's Angels.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis

Most law enforcement analyses of the Hell's Angels indicate the motorcycle outlaw gang runs over a vast network of illegal drug importation and distribution, primarily marijuana. Thompson argues that the Hell's Angels are far too small and far too unorganized to successfully run any type of drug operation beyond acting as petty dealers or very minor and irregular local distributors. The Hell's Angels are small-time drug pushers and consistently low-key users of marijuana. Generally, however, the Hell's Angels focus on using large amounts of pharmaceutical pills. They take them to wake up, go to sleep, stay alert for days on end, or just to enjoy a different mental state. The outlaws like pills and will take just about anything, often in huge doses. Although they are certainly frequent drug users, they do not constitute a significant portion of the illegal drug trade in the nation.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary and Analysis

An annual motorcycle rally, sponsored by the American Motorcycle Association (AMA), is held each June at Laconia, New Hampshire. There is a mutual antipathy between the AMA and the Hell's Angels. Because of the huge distances between California and the rally and the general feelings of ill will about AMA events, Hell's Angels typically do not attend the rally. In 1963 rioting and violence marred the Laconia rally. The National Guard and police subdued the unruly crowd and the annual rally was canceled in 1964. New facilities, further from town, were constructed; and the 1963 debacle was blamed on the Hell's Angels. These accusations were not substantiated by any evidence.

In 1965 the stage was set for a repeat of violence. Local law enforcement mustered en masse for expected trouble, which was not long in coming. The Laconia "motorcycle riot" of 1965 involved hundreds of arrests, violent response by local law enforcement and the National Guard, and even a few convictions. The riot was blamed entirely on the Hell's Angels, even though no Hell's Angel was present at the event. The town mayor continued to make inflammatory pronouncements, blaming everyone from the Hell's Angels to Mexican-originated Communists.

Although Thompson considers the Laconia riot in some detail, he concludes that the Hell's Angels had no involvement in the affair. Instead, the riot was similar to many riots happening around the country, which focused on a general dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War, the economy, and national politics. The Hell's Angels were simply a convenient scapegoat for the authorities. This chapter does not have much to do with the Hell's Angels directly; but does present an interesting historical summary of widespread social upheaval during the mid-1960s, of which the Hell's Angels were a notable constituent.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21 seeks to place the Hell's Angels within a wider social setting by detailing their interaction with other groups. As their media attention increased, the Hell's Angels found themselves the unlikely heroes of the counter-culture. They were invited to parties, asked their opinions, and featured as guests of many important intellectuals. The Hell's Angels found the free alcohol and drugs appealing, but failed to come to terms with the larger social significance. They remained, essentially, outlaws and criminals.

Thompson relates a series of meetings between the Hell's Angels and Ken Kesey, an important and well-known counter-culture author. Kesey routinely invited the Hell's Angels to his personal home and property. The surrounding rural area was antagonistic to Kesey and the Hell's Angels, but no serious disturbances arose. Things got no worse than cops routinely harassing everyone leaving Kesey's property. The Kesey crowd introduced the Hell's Angels to LSD; and for several months the Hell's Angels staggered around in a hallucinogenic stupor. Most eventually decided the drug was too damaging and returned to alcohol and marijuana. Allan Ginsberg met the Hell's Angels at several of Kesey's events and found them inspirationally rugged individualists. Later, however, Ginsberg's anti-Vietnam War rhetoric would anger the patriotic Hell's Angels. Eventually the Hell's Angels physically attacked some anti-war demonstrators. Their patriotism, in stark contrast to the anti-war intelligentsia of Berkeley, caused a widening rift between the two groups.

The Hell's Angels were typically racist, but not as virulently racist as publicly imagined. They were on speaking terms with motorcycle gangs composed entirely of African-Americans; and several Hell's Angels had close friends who were not Caucasian. Although African-Americans were not allowed to be members, some Hell's Angels themselves were not Caucasian. However, the Hell's Angels were routinely in a state of low-intensity confrontation with local non-motorcycle-outlaw African-Americans.

Eventually most Hell's Angels came to believe the press reports and social commentary, and they came to view themselves as heroes defending rugged Americanism. In reality, though, they were dead-enders who had no marketable skills, little or no education, and virtually no future potential. They were self-made dropouts and deliberate foul-ups. They could not function in any prolonged way within constructive society. Their influence and credibility spiked in late 1965, and their slow slide from popularity was well underway by 1966. The Hell's Angels called press conferences to state their opinions and apparently didn't notice that gradually the media came to view them as a cynical joke. Thompson concludes that the national fascination with the Hell's Angels outlaws is a form of "psychic masturbation" (p. 262) ...every loser wants to be a Hell's Angel.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 22 concludes the text. During the winter of 1965 activities of the Hell's Angels slowed down, as they always do in inclement weather. Many of the Hell's Angels that Thompson knew moved or lost activity in the motorcycle club. Barger spent time in prison. Terry the Tramp was divorced and suffered serious burns. Thompson himself drew away and began writing the book. His last noted significant contact with a massed group of Hell's Angels was to attend a funeral of an important local leader who had died in a road accident. The procession to the funeral home was solemn and dignified. The preacher at the funeral was direct and confrontational, stating that God wouldn't tolerate sin and that every Hell's Angel would eventually die. After the funeral the crowd dispersed noisily. Although Thompson stopped spending large amounts of time with the Hell's Angels he did continue to exhilarate in an occasional nighttime motorcycle drive at high speed down deserted coast highways.

Postscript

Postscript Summary and Analysis

On Labor Day, 1966, Thompson had a verbal argument with a Hell's Angel. Within moments, the Hell's Angel punched Thompson to the ground, and then several other Hell's Angels joined the fray and delivered a classic Hell's Angel stomping. A friendly Hell's Angel eventually put a stop to the beating and Thompson staggered from the bar to his car. He evicted one sleeping Hell's Angel from the rear seat and then drove to the hospital, where he discovered a waiting room full of Gypsy Jokers, themselves recent victims of a group Hell's Angels stomping. The Gypsy Jokers vowed vengeance, and the text concludes.



Characters

Hunter S. Thompson

Ralph ("Sonny") Barger

Thomas C. Lynch

Frenchy from Frisco

Frank and Preetam Bobo

Gut and Buzzard

Mr. Williams and Burr-Head

Tiny Baxter

Terry the Tramp

Dirty Ed, Magoo, and Tiny



Objects/Places

The Hollister Riot, July 4th Weekend, 1947

Over the July 4th weekend of 1947 several members of a motorcycle gang known as the Booze Fighters congregated in Hollister, California, and engaged on a public drinking binge. The police broke up the event after some minor violence. What would have ordinarily been a minor criminal event was widely reported in the media and dubbed the Hollister Riot. The event inspired a later short story and the Hollywood film, *The Wild One*, which had an enormous influence on the subsequent development of motorcycle outlaw gangs.

The Monterey Rape, Labor Day Weekend, 1964

Two women claimed they had been gang raped by members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang during a wild beach party near Monterey, California, over the Labor Day weekend of 1964. One of the women was fourteen and one was fifteen. One was also pregnant. One of the alleged victims was white and the other was African-American. Four gang members were arrested the next day after being visually identified by the young women. Medical examination failed to produce evidence of sexual assault. One of the women refused to cooperate with law enforcement, and the police eventually deemed the other woman wholly unreliable. After the initial arrests, all charges were dropped. However, the event garnered national media attention. The subsequent wave of publicity essentially converted the Hell's Angels from an obscure and small West-coast gang to a national phenomenon.

The Wild One

The Wild One is the title of a 1953 Stanley Kramer film, which launched an entire genre of outlaw biker films. It starred Marlon Brando as a sympathetic rebel leader of a motorcycle gang who fought against a criminal-minded gang led by Lee Marvin. The film was loosely based on a motorcycle street party that took place in Hollister, California, in 1947. Most Hell's Angels identified with the somewhat heroic antics of Marlon Brando; and the film has exerted a notable influence on the evolution of motorcycle gangs across the country.

Scorpio Rising

Scorpio Rising is the title of a 1964 Kenneth Anger film. It portrayed the adventures of Scorpio, an outlaw biker who looked like a Hell's Angel. Scorpio explores homosexuality and other counter-culture ideas. The avant-garde film did not feature dialogue but was played against a soundtrack of contemporaneous rock and roll. The film enjoyed only



modest success, but was responsible for strengthening the public's misconception that Hell's Angels were usually homosexual sadomasochists.

Bass Lake, California

Bass Lake is a somewhat rural resort area with a small lake and several surrounding towns. Bass Lake was selected as the destination for the July 4, 1965, Hell's Angels run. The town was braced for widespread rioting, which did not occur due to the skillful management of Tiny Baxter, the local sheriff.

Gypsy Jokers, Satan's Slaves, etc.

The Gypsy Jokers and Satan's Slaves are motorcycle outlaw gangs that sometimes ride with the Hell's Angels. Prior to about 1964, all of the gangs were roughly equivalent, holding as much territory and influence as they could through force of arms. After receiving massive media attention in late 1964, however, the Hell's Angels emerged as the biggest and toughest motorcycle club of all. Many smaller clubs were thereafter hunted to extinction or merged into the Hell's Angels. Some larger clubs, such as the Gypsy Jokers and Satan's Slaves, remained independent; but they developed an understanding or friendly relationship with the local chapters of the Hell's Angels.

Harley-Davidson

Harley-Davidson is the brand name of an American-made line of large and heavy motorcycles that feature huge engines. Hell's Angels have a strong preference for riding Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Their preference is so strong that motorcycles built by other manufacturers are noted for their rarity. The typical Hell's Angel of the mid-1960s rode a stripped-down Harley-Davidson model 74, referred to as a chopped hog.

Chopped Hog

Most Hell's Angels of the mid-1960s rode Harley-Davidson model 74 motorcycles with extensive modifications. The factory-made 700-pound motorcycle was stripped to the bare essentials and heavily customized, resulting in a 500-pound motorcycle known as a chopped hog, a hog, or a chopper. Chopped hogs were capable of making speeds as high as 130 miles per hour. The stripping and alterations required for a first-class chopped hog would cost around \$3000. The result was a hard-riding, but very fast, motorcycle that made a lot of noise and drew a lot of attention.

Old Ladies, Mamas, and Strange Chicks

Motorcycle outlaws generally classify women into three categories—old ladies, mamas, and strange chicks. Old ladies are viewed as being in a long-term relationship with a



bona fide Hell's Angel. As such, they are respected as private property and generally not molested. They are the committed girlfriends and wives of club members and command a certain amount of respect. They also provide the gang with a sort of stability, having drivers' licenses, money, relatively permanent addresses, and (often) jobs. Mamas, on the other hand, are entirely the club's public property and can be used however and whenever any motorcycle outlaw desires. They generally stay with the motorcycle gang for only a short period of time, and suffer incredible abuse and sexual degradation. One gang, Satan's Slaves, requires their mamas to have 'Property of Satan's Slaves' tattooed on their buttocks. All other women are designated strange chicks, and their treatment depends upon the circumstances.

Laconia Riot

In June 1965, rioting erupted at the Weir Beach area near Laconia, New Hampshire, during an annual motorcycle rally. The initial media and police reports indicated that the Hell's Angels and Communists Mexicans principally caused the rioting. Later analysis conclusively indicated that the Hell's Angels were not present at the motorcycle event, which was officially sponsored by the American Motorcycle Association. The AMA is a group the Hell's Angels find entirely distasteful. The Laconia Riot, far from being a random act of violence by the Hell's Angels, was indicative of far larger social issues sweeping the nation. The social upheaval of the times was often confabulated with Hell's Angels activities. The Hell's Angels were thus made convenient scapegoats of social ills of the time.



Themes

Motorcycle Gangs

The text is fundamentally a book-length journalistic report about the Hell's Angels, a motorcycle outlaw gang. The overarching theme of the book is the culture and priorities of motorcycle gangs. The text seeks to answer basic questions by examining the origins of the motorcycle outlaw culture: their development over a period of perhaps twenty years; their goals, aims, and activities; and their significance in a larger social context. The Hell's Angels are the specific focus of the text; but various other motorcycle gangs are mentioned, and some detail on several other gangs is provided. The Hell's Angels' particulars are noted so that they can be isolated from the larger phenomenon.

The text features numerous chapters that discuss the predilections and standard activities of any motorcycle gang. These usually include binge drinking, occasional but heavy drug use, routine violence, and regular expressions of perverse sexuality - including rape. Thompson presents all of these lifestyle components of a motorcycle gang in theoretical practice, as well as providing concrete examples. His prolonged eyewitness experiences with a motorcycle gang give the text an undeniably gritty and authoritative feel. This ensures that the theme of motorcycle gangs is well developed and successfully presented.

Society in Turmoil

Thompson presents the Hell's Angels in the greater context of the social paradigm in the mid-1960s. Numerous chapters deal with contemporaneous movements and sociological ideals that formed the times and resulting experiences of the Hell's Angels. Thompson considers the social bugaboo of rape. He notes why the Hell's Angels' much-publicized and presumed penchant for gang rape struck such a responsive chord in the American middle classes of 1964. More than any other aspect of the motorcycle outlaws, their supposed predilection for gang-raping young girls drove them from relative obscurity into the national spotlight. Thompson analyzes the likelihood that the Hell's Angels were, in fact, habitual rapists; but determines to his own satisfaction that the alleged offenses were wildly inflated and often completely spurious.

Thompson also details the initial stages of an emerging complicity between the Hell's Angels and the Berkeley liberal intelligentsia during early 1965. Sonny Barger, leader of the Hell's Angels, often met with Ken Kesey and Allan Ginsberg, two prominent counter-cultural thinkers. The Hell's Angels, for a time, often partied with the liberal elite. Both Kesey and Ginsberg initially found the Hell's Angels to be representative of the individual fight against the constraints of society, and both admired their apparent rugged individualism. The Hell's Angels appreciated the free alcohol, the introduction to LSD, and the attractive women. The situation deteriorated rapidly, however, once the Hell's Angels super-patriotism collided with the liberal left's anti-Vietnam War



demonstrations. The apparent friendship dissolved nearly immediately, and the national fascination with the Hell's Angels cooled.

The expansive troubled society theme developed by Thompson places the Hell's Angels within a sociological and historical context. This helps modern readers better appreciate the motivations exhibited by, and the constraints imposed upon, the Hell's Angels of the mid-1960s.

Being a Motorcycle Outlaw is Fun! ... Maybe

Thompson undeniably admires and, to a certain extent, emulates the Hell's Angels' blatant disregard for the law and social mores of society. He often enthuses over their purposefully intimidating appearance, their deliberate breaking of the law and their casual disregard for the welfare of others. He finds in the Hell's Angels a certain plan and enthusiasm for the current moment of life. Devoid of a meaningful future, the Hell's Angels focus on the moment at hand and seek to extract maximum enjoyment from what experiences are available to them. They drink hard, fight dirty, seek physical pleasure, avoid philosophical thinking, shirk responsibility, and have kinky sex as frequently as possible. Unlike total epicureans, they also worry about cultivating their outlaw image and projecting a tough, masculine front to the world at large. These two pursuits rarely conflict.

Thompson relates many stories of drinking, driving, fighting, and drug use. He sprinkles the text with anecdotes of sexual escapades, escapes from the law, spectacular road accidents, and riotous living. There is no doubt that Thompson characterizes this all as good fun; and the resultant impression is one of a merry band of do-good outlaws living the life of Riley. Buried in the subtext, however, are crushing poverty, arrests, jail terms, savage beatings, debilitating injuries, horribly abusive sexism and a life of punishing vagrancy.

The Hell's Angels demand respect, but they receive fear and loathing; they claim to live for fun, but their future prospects are, at best, bleak. This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in Thompson's own Postscript. After two years of living with the Hell's Angels as their supposed accomplice, Thompson finds himself suddenly on the floor and on the receiving end of many Hell's Angels' boots. The apparent endless fun and debauchery has drawn to a close for at least one reporter.

Style

Perspective

The book is written from the first-person, limited, point of view. This is atypical of reporting memoirs of this type, but is usual for the work of Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson's scandalously informal and personalized reporting styles are clearly evident. Thompson provides a solid research basis upon which to spin his first-hand tale of adventure with the Hell's Angels. Not content to simply interview them or rely upon law enforcement after-action reports of Hell's Angels activity, Thompson met and engaged the Hell's Angels on their own turf and terms. For nearly two years he spent time with them, drank with them, used drugs with them, and rode motorcycles with them. He never joined the club and always remained an acknowledged outside element; but he was eventually accepted as a routine fixture at various gatherings. This first-hand insight, coupled with a fairly thorough understanding of their origins and philosophy, allowed Thompson to present the Hell's Angels in a somewhat sympathetic light. He characterizes them as simultaneously misunderstood and criminally minded.

Parts I, II, and IV of the text are generally related in a cool and authoritative voice, which demonstrates a typical journalistic mastery of the subjects covered. This ranges from contemporaneous politics to historical appreciation of society. Part III and the Postscript vary notably from this pattern and are related as personal experiences in more intimate detail. Many chapters in Part III read nearly like a diary; and the immediacy and gritty details are entertaining, engaging, and definitively truthful.

Tone

The text is written in a personal and informal tone, which belies its serious nature. Thompson does not use difficult language or dwell upon erudite concepts. He tells it like he sees it. The result is a portrayal of Hell's Angels as rarely sympathetic, sometimes likable, often criminal, and always filthy. There is no doubt that Thompson knew and liked several angels, just as there is no doubt that the same angels always viewed him as an outsider with an agenda. The text is festooned with slang and frequently interrupted by topical quotes from a wide variety of news sources or contemporaneous popular songs. The resulting tone is engaging, interesting, and particularly accessible.

Thompson's language is often offensive and, by modern standards, repugnant. The text often refers to African-Americans as 'spades' or 'niggers', and a woman is likely to be termed a 'ginch' or, if young and particularly attractive, 'fine pussy'. While this might be journalistically correct within dialogue or in a discussion of attitudes, it is somewhat jarring when used in authorial commentary. Thompson considers the crime of rape at some length and relates several episodes involving the gang rape of underage girls. One prolonged gang bang sex scene, detailed in a closing chapter, is both graphic and distasteful.

Structure

The 273-page book is divided into four sections and twenty-two enumerated chapters. Part 1 is composed of a single chapter and provides a concise and sensational introduction to the Hell's Angels. It successfully sets the tone, pace, and subject for the remainder of the book. Part 2 details the decades-long rise of motorcycle outlaw gangs in general, and notes specific events in the formation of the Hell's Angels. It goes on to detail several spectacular, but disgusting, crimes allegedly perpetrated by the Hell's Angels. The crimes discussed were widely reported in the national media; and the resulting media frenzy propelled the Hell's Angels from relative obscurity into the national spotlight.

Part 3 details a particular motorcycle 'run', or excursion, to a resort area. Thompson, the author, accompanied the Hell's Angels on the run and detailed the events to which he was an eyewitness. He remained somewhat objective, but also participated tangentially in many of the club's activities. The section also includes a few introspective chapters on some of the more pronounced aspects of the Hell's Angels. Part 4 concludes the text with several chapters on related, but not cohesive chapters, each chapter dealing with a specific topic of interest. It places the Hell's Angels in a larger social paradigm and examines their brief, intense interaction with the liberal intelligentsia of Berkeley, California. The text ends with the Postscript where Thompson remembers his own stomping, or beating, at the hands of some angered Hell's Angels.

The structure of the text is obvious and clearly accessible. The sections and chapters are organized in more-or-less chronological fashion, and the chapter divisions mark generally clear topics within the text. The overall structure aids materially in reading the book and organizing the material. The interspersed quotes, lyrics, and poetry add alternative points-of-view, serve as corroborating opinions, and place the text within its time period.



Quotes

"Filthy Huns Breeding like rats in California and spreading east. Listen for the roar of the Harleys. You will hear it in the distance like thunder. And then, wafting in on the breeze, will come the scent of dried blood, semen and human grease ... the noise will grow louder and they will appear, on the west horizon, eyes bugged and bloodshot, foam on the lips, chewing some rooty essence smuggled in from a foreign jungle ... they will ravish your women, loot your liquor stores and humiliate your mayor on a bench on the village square ..." (Chapter 3, p. 36)

"Motorcycle outlaws are not much in demand on the labor market. With a few exceptions, even those with saleable skills prefer to draw unemployment insurance ... which gives them the leisure to sleep late, spend plenty of time on their bikes, and freelance for extra cash whenever they feel the need. Some practice burglary, and other strip cars, steal motorcycles or work erratically as pimps. Many are supported by working wives and girl friends who earn good salaries as secretaries, waitresses and nightclub dancers. A few of the younger outlaws still live with their parents, but they don't like to talk about it and only go home when they have to—either to sleep off a drunk, clean out the refrigerator, or cadge a few bucks from the family cookie jar. Those Angels who work usually do it part time or drift from one job to another, making good money one week and nothing at all the next.

"They are longshoremen, warehousemen, truck drivers, mechanics, clerks and casual laborers at any work that pays quick wages and requires no allegiance. Perhaps one in ten has a steady job or a decent income." (Chapter 4, p. 52)

"Another of Hollywood's contributions to the Hell's Angels is the name. The Angels say they are named after a famous World War I bomber squadron that was stationed near Los Angeles and whose personnel raced around the area on motorcycles when they weren't airborne. There are others who say the Angels got their name from a 1930 Jean Harlow movie based on some scriptwriter's idea of an Army Air Corps that may or may not have existed at the time of the First World War. It was called *Hell's Angels* and no doubt was still being shown in 1950, when the restless veterans who founded the first Angel chapter at Fontana were still trying to decide what to do with themselves. While the name might have originated before any Hell's Angel was born, it was lost in the history of some obscure southern California military base until Hollywood made it famous and also created the image of wild men on motorcycles—an image that was later adopted and drastically modified by a new breed of outcasts that not even Hollywood could conceive of until they appeared, in the flesh, on California highways.

"The concept of the 'motorcycle outlaw' was as uniquely American as jazz. Nothing like them had ever existed. In some ways they appeared to be a kind of half-breed anachronism, a human hangover from the era of the Wild West. Yet in other ways they were as new as television. There was absolutely no precedent, in the years after World War II, for large gangs of hoodlums on motorcycles, reveling in violence, worshiping mobility and thinking nothing of riding five hundred miles on a weekend ... to whoop it up



with other gangs of cyclists in some country hamlet entirely unprepared to handle even a dozen peaceful tourists. Many picturesque, outback villages got their first taste of tourism not from families driving Fords or Chevrolets, but from clusters of boozing 'city boys' on motorcycles." (Chapter 5, pp. 66-67)

"The outlaws take the 'all on one' concept so seriously that it is written into the club charter as Bylaw Number 10: 'When an Angel punches a non-Angel, all other Angels will participate.'" (Chapter 6, pp. 69-70)

"One night in the winter of 1965 I took my own bike—and a passenger—over the high side on a rain-slick road just north of Oakland. I went into an obviously dangerous curve at about seventy, the top of my second gear. The wet road prevented leaning it over enough to compensate for the tremendous inertia, and somewhere in the middle of the curve I realized that the rear wheel was no longer following the front one. The bike was going sideways toward a bank of railroad tracks and there was nothing I could do except hang on. For an instant it was very peaceful ... and then it was being like shot off the road by a bazooka, but with no noise. Neither a deer on a hillside nor a man on a battlefield ever hears the shot that kills him, and a man going over the high side on a motorcycle hears the same kind of high-speed silence. There are sparks, as the chromed steel grinds down on the road, an awful jerk when you body starts cartwheeling on the first impact ... and after that, if you're lucky, there is nothing at all until you wake up in some hospital emergency ward with your scalp hanging down in your eyes and a blood-soaked shirt sticking to your chest while official-looking people stare down at you and assure each other that 'these crazy bastards won't learn.'

"There is nothing romantic about a bad crash, and the only solace is the deadening shock that comes with most injuries. My passenger left the bike in a long arc that ended on the railroad tracks and splintered his thigh bone, driving the sharp edges through muscle and flesh and all the way out to the wet gravel. In the hospital they had to wash the dirt off the bone ends before they put his leg back together ... but he said it didn't hurt until the next day, not even when he was lying in the rain and wondering if anybody on the road would call an ambulance to pick us up.

"There is not a Hell's Angel riding who hasn't made the emergency-ward scene, and one of the natural results is that their fear of accidents is well tempered by a cavalier kind of disdain for physical injury. Outsiders might call it madness or other, more esoteric names ... but the Angels inhabit a world in which violence is as common as spilled beer, and they live with it as easily as ski bums live with the risk of broken legs. This casual acceptance of bloodletting is a key to the terror they inspire in the squares. Even a small, inept street-fighter has a tremendous advantage over the average middle-class American, who hasn't had a fight since puberty. It is a simple matter of accumulated experience, of having been hit or stomped often enough to forget the ugly panic that nice people associate with a serious fight. A man who has had his nose smashed three times in brawls will risk it again with hardly a thought. No amount of instruction in any lethal art can teach this—not unless the instructor is a sadist, and even then it would be difficult because the student's experience would be artificially warped and limited." (Chapter 8, pp. 96-97)



"For many years the Angles made their July Fourth Run to Reno, but after a dozen Angels destroyed a tavern in 1960, the 'Biggest Little City in the World' passed a law making it illegal for more than two motorcyclists to ride together inside the city limits. There are no signs proclaiming this along the many approaches to town, and the law would surely be knocked down in court if a trio of touring cyclists from the East was ever clapped in jail for simply riding together through the city, but that isn't likely. The law was designed to give Reno police a legal weapon against the Hell's Angels. And even the Angles could probably beat it in court if any one of them were willing to (1) spend a holiday weekend in jail, (2) post a minimum of \$100 in bail money, (3) return to Reno several weeks later, with a lawyer, to plead not guilty and be advised of a trial date, (4) make another trip to Reno, again with a lawyer, to argue the case in court, and (5) in all likelihood return for a third appearance in either Reno or nearby Carson City to appeal the conviction to a higher court, and (6) come up with enough money to pay a lawyer for the time and effort it would take to prepare a brief with enough impact to convince a Nevada state court that one of Reno's local statutes is unconstitutional, irrational, and discriminatory.

"Justice is not cheap in this country, and people who insist on it are usually either desperate or possessed by some private determination bordering on monomania. The Hell's Angels are not of this persuasion—not even when it means giving up the pleasures of Reno. They try to avoid places where the odds are stacked against them, legally or otherwise ... and they are usually pretty shrewd about knowing what the odds really are. Runs are primarily parties, not war games, and small-town jails are dull." (Chapter 9, pp. 104-150)

"Seconds later, a phalanx of motorcycles came roaring over the hill from the west. Both Gut and Buzzard rushed toward the highway, waving and shouting happily. The road was dense with bikes. The hot dog stand was on the crest of a hill above Bass Lake; it was the last geographic barrier between the Angels and their destination. The police, in their wisdom, had managed to pile up at least a hundred bikes at the roadblock—where the restraining orders were ceremoniously handed out—and then release them all at once. So instead of arriving in quiet knots, the outlaws crested the hill in a great body ... howling, hooting, waving bandanas and presenting the citizens with a really terrifying spectacle. The discipline of the highway had broken down entirely; now it was madness. The sight of Gut and Buzzard cheering beside the road caused Little Jesus to fling his hands in the air and utter triumphant screams. His bike veered off the right and nearly collided with Charger Charley the Child Molester. An Angel I had never seen came by on an orange three-wheeler, kicking his feet straight out like a rodeo rider. Andy from Oakland who has no driver's license, came riding by with his wife sitting in front of him on the gas tank, ready to grab the handlebars at the first sight of the fuzz. The noise was like a landslide, or a wing of bombers passing over. Even knowing the Angels, I couldn't quite handle what I was seeing. It was like Genghis Khan, Morgan's Raiders, *The Wild One* and the Rape of Nanking all at once. Both Gut and Buzzard leaped on their bikes and roared off to join the pack." (Chapter 11, p. 128)

"[T]he ten-o'clock curfew had a drastic effect on the action. By driving all the fringe elements out of camp, it forced the Angles to fall back on their own entertainment



resources. Most of those who left were girls; they had seemed to be enjoying things until the deputies announced that they would either leave by the deadline or stay all night. The implications were not pleasant—at ten the law was going to pull out, seal off the area and let the orgy begin.

"All afternoon the scene had been brightened by six or ten carloads of young girls from places like Fresno and Modesto and Merced who had somehow got wind of the gathering and apparently wanted to make a real party of it. It never occurred to the Angels that they would not stay the night—or the whole weekend, for that matter—so it came as a bad shock when they left. The three nurses who'd picked up Larry, Pete and Puff earlier in the day made a brave decision to stay—but then, at the last moment, they fled. 'Man, I can't stand it,' said one Angel as he watched the last of the cars lurch off down the trail. 'All that fine pussy, just wasted. That wiggly little thing with the red shoes was all *mine*! We were groovin! How *could* she just split?'

"It was a rotten show by almost any standards. Here were all these high-bottomed wenches in stretch pants and sleeveless blouses half unbuttoned ... beehive hairdos and blue-lidded eyes ... ripe, ignorant little bodies talking all horny all afternoon ('Oh, Beth, don't these bikes just drive you kinda wild?'). Yeah, baby, wild for the open road ... and off they went, like nuns hearing the whistle, while the grief-stricken Angels just stood there and watched. Many had left their own women behind, fearing trouble, but now that the trouble was dissipated, there was not going to be any strange ginch either.

"Among the hardest hit was Terry the Tramp, who immediately loaded up on LSD and spent the next twelve hours locked in the back of a panel truck, shrieking and crying under the gaze of some god he had almost forgotten, but who came down that night to the level of the treetops 'and just stared—man, he just looked at me, and I tell you I was scared like a little kid.'" (Chapter 15, pp. 165-166)

"If the *News* had put two and two together they would have know who caused the great power blackout that autumn. It was a Hell's Angels plot to take over the subway system and triple the fares. After weeks of intricate sabotage and recircuiting the power rails, the outlaws were attempting a final tie-off under the Yale Club when one of their number, afflicted with bad hives, was overcome by abulia and wired the mail subway voltage to the root of the Empire State Building's lightning rod. The resulting explosion killed them all, but their bones were carried off by water rats and there was no other evidence. As usual, the Angels beat the rap. And the *News* missed a hell of a story." (Chapter 20, p. 216)

"By late summer of 1965 the Angels had become a factor to be reckoned with in the social, intellectual and political life of northern California. They were quoted almost daily in the press, and no half-bohemian party made the grade unless there were strong rumors—circulated by the host—that the Hell's Angels would also attend. I was vaguely afflicted by this syndrome, since my name was becoming associated with the Angels and there was a feeling in the air that I could produce them whenever I felt like it. This was never true, though I did what I could to put the outlaws onto as much free booze and action as seemed advisable. At the same time I was loath to be responsible for their



behavior. Their pre-eminence on so many guest lists made it inevitable that a certain amount of looting, assault and rapine would occur if they took the social whirl at full gallop." (Chapter 21, p. 226)

"On Labor Day 1966, I pushed my luck a little too far and got badly stomped by four or five Angels who seemed to feel I was taking advantage of them. A minor disagreement suddenly became very serious.

"None of those who did me were among the group I considered my friends—but they were Angels, and that was enough to cause many of the others to participate after one of the brethren teed off on me. The first blow was launched with no hint of warning and I thought for a moment that it was just one of those drunken accidents that a man has to live with in this league. But within seconds I was clubbed from behind by the Angel I'd been talking to just a moment earlier. Then I was swarmed in a general flail. As I went down I caught a glimpse of Tiny, standing on the rim of the action. His was the only familiar face I could see ... and if there is any one person a non-Angel does *not* want to see among his attackers, that person is Tiny. I yelled to him for help—but more out of desperation than hope.

"Yet it was Tiny who pulled me out of the stomp circle before the others managed to fracture my skull or explode my groin. Even while the heavy boots were punching into my ribs and jolting my head back and forth I could hear Tiny somewhere above me, saying 'Come on, come on, that's enough.' I suppose he helped me more than I realized, but if he had done nothing else I owe him a huge favor for preventing one of the outlaws from crashing a huge rock down on my head. I could see the vicious swine trying to get at me with the stone held in a two-handed Godzilla grip above his head. Tiny kept him mercifully out of range ... and then, during a lull in the boot action, he pulled me to my feet and hurried me off toward the highway." (Postscript, p. 272)



Topics for Discussion

Thompson asserts that, deep inside, everyone would like to be a Hell's Angel and swagger around displaying blatant criminality. Do you think this is accurate?

Thompson states that the films *The Wild One* and *Scorpio Rising* heavily influenced later motorcycle gangs. Describe how the media often appears to create a complex feedback-loop with society.

Before national media reports the Hell's Angels were just another motorcycle gang. After the media reports they emerged as the principle motorcycle gang. Thompson suggests that other gangs, like Satan's Slaves, could just as easily become the national phenomenon. What features about the Hell's Angels predisposed them to capture the national attention?

Thompson's account of the Hell's Angels draws heavily on personal experience. Do you think his subjective treatment of the motorcycle outlaws invalidates his journalistic presentation of the material? Why or why not?

Are you offended when a Hell's Angel refers to an African-American as a "nigger" or a woman as a "ginch"? Discuss how slang pejorative terms develop over time to have specific social meanings.

Thompson describes numerous gang-rape charges brought against Hell's Angels and notes that—nearly without exception—they are dismissed. Thompson apparently feels this is generally because the allegations lack credibility. What other reasons could you propose for this phenomenon? In Chapter 17 Thompson relates a gang-bang scene in considerable detail. Would you consider the event described to be consensual group sex? Or would you consider it to be a gang-rape?

Thompson mentions that numerous homosexual bars feature a 'motorcycle theme', complete with leather-clad patrons. Why do you think so many homosexual men of the mid-1960s found the motorcycle outlaw scene so sexually intriguing?

Thompson seems genuinely sympathetic toward the Hell's Angels. Do you think you would find them as friendly, honest, and approachable?

The book relates numerous spectacular events involving Hell's Angels, from parties to riots to funerals to fights to gang-bangs. Would you like to participate in any of these kinds of events? Why or why not?

If your automobile broke down on the side of a deserted roadway would you rather see the police or the Hell's Angels arriving in the distance?