



The Rum Diary: The Long Lost Novel

Hunter S. Thompson

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The Rum Diary was begun in 1959 by then-twenty-two-year-old Hunter S. Thompson. It was his first novel, and he told his friend, the author William Kennedy, that *The Rum Diary* would "in a twisted way...do for San Juan what Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* did for Paris." In Paul Kemp, the novel's hero, there are echoes of the young Thompson, who was himself honing his wildly musical writing style as one of the "ill-tempered wandering rabble" on staff at the *San Juan Daily News* at the time. "I shared a dark suspicion," Kemp says, "that the life we were leading was a lost cause, we were all actors, kidding ourselves along on a senseless odyssey. It was the tension between these two poles -- a restless idealism on one hand and a sense of impending doom on the other -- that kept me going."

The Rum Diary is a brilliantly tangled love story of jealousy, treachery & violent alcoholic lust in the Caribbean boomtown that was San Juan, Puerto Rico, in the late 1950s. "It was a gold rush," says the author. "There were naked people everywhere and we all had credit."

Puerto Rico was an unspoiled tropical paradise in those years -- before Castro, before JFK, before civil rights & moonwalks & flower power & Vietnam & protests & even before drugs -- but the *San Juan Daily News* was a vortex & a snakepit of all the corrupt new schemes & plots & greedmongers who swarmed in. Paul Kemp, *The Rum Diary*'s narrator, speaks for the unfocused angst of those times: "In a sense I was one of them -- more competent than some and more stable than others -- and in the years that carried that ragged banner I was seldom unemployed. Sometimes I worked for three newspapers at once. I wrote ad copy for new casinos and bowling alleys, I was a consultant for the cockfighting syndicate, an utterly corrupt high-end restaurant critic, a yachting photographer and a routine victim of police brutality. It was a greedy life and I was good at it. I made some interesting friends, had enough money to get around, and learned a lot about the world that I could never have learned in any other way."

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Luther Brown:

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