Disgusting as he usually was, Hunter Thompson writes in this, his 1959 novel, on rare occasions he showed flashes of a stagnant intelligence. But his brain was so rotted with drink and dissolute living that whenever he put it to work it behaved like an old engine that had gone haywire from being dipped in lard. Surprise! Thompson isn’t writing about himself, but one of the other, older, aimlessly carousing newspapermen in Puerto Rico, a guy called Moberg whose chief achievement is the ability to find his car after a night’s drinking because it stinks so much. (I can smell it for blocks, he boasts.) The autobiographical hero, Paul Kemp, is 30, trapped in a dead-end job (Thompson wound up writing for a bowling magazine), and feeling as if his big-time writer dreams, soaked in Fitzgerald and Hemingway, are evaporating as rapidly as the rum in his fist. In fact, Thompson was only 22 when he wrote The Rum Diary, but his fear of winding up like Moberg was well founded. What saved him was the fantastic conflagration of the 1960s, a fiery wind on which the reptilian wings of his prose style could catch and soar to the cackling heights of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Puerto Rico in 1959 doesn’t have bad craziness enough to offer Thompson--just a routine drunken-reporter stomping by local cops and a riot over Kempsfriends’ temptress girlfriend, a scantily imagined Smith College alumna who likes to strip nude on beaches and in nightclubs to taunt men. Thompson’s prose style only intermittently takes tentative flight--compare the stomping scenes in this book with his breakthrough, Hells Angels--but it’s interesting to see him so nakedly reveal his sensitive innards, before the celebrated clownish carapace grew in. Its also interesting to see how he improved this full version of the novel from the more raw (and racist) excerpts found in the 1990 collection Songs of the Doomed (available on audiocassette, partly narrated by Thompson). - -Tim Appelo

My Personal Review:
This is the lost novel by Hunter S. Thompson, a book that he started writing in 1959 to make a quick buck. He struggled all through the sixties to
get this thing rewritten and published, but because of its quality and Thompsons legendary shakedowns with agents, publishers, and contracts, it died on the vine - until a few years ago. This quasi-fictional account of a New York reporter drifting into a job at the San Juan Daily News is somewhat based on Thompsons experience on the Carribean island in the late 1950. Trying to put Puerto Rico on the literary map like Hemingway did for Paris, he spells out a story of corruption, boredom, and alcohol in a more simple San Juan, before the big booms of the travel booms and technology of the sixties. Paul Kemp, the fictional narrator, describes the coworkers, women, natives, and insane government, riddled with syndicates and kickbacks. The writing here isn't like Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas - its more of the Orwell/Mailer/Miller genre, and does a good job of painting memorable scenes of the insanity, camaraderie, poverty, and drunkenness on top of the tropical backdrop. Its not bad stuff, and I wonder if it recently went through heavy rewrites, or if there just wasn't a market for it back in the sixties. Either way, its a light, fast read at just over 200 pages, and made me wonder if Thompsons other unpublished work would be as satisfying in a trade hardcover. Maybe someday?

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