

American Decadent

David Tully

NOW DIG THIS:
THE UNSPEAKABLE WRITINGS
OF TERRY SOUTHERN, 1950-1995

Edited by Nile Southern
and Josh Alan Friedman

Grove Press
263 pages; cloth, \$25.00

At a memorial service for Terry Southern held in 1995, Kurt Vonnegut, Southern's old friend and fellow veteran of the Black Humor Wave of the early 60s, told the crowd: "Terry had two speeds: legal family man, 55 miles an hour, perfectly civilized; and the wildest sort of maneuvers and outlawry at supersonic speeds." Reading a collection of Southern's work, such as the 1967 anthology *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*, can be a jarring experience: from the gentle, understated realism of his Texas memoir "Red-Dirt Marijuana" to the grotesque, surreal farce of "The Blood of a Wig," the reader is left with no solid ground to stand on, not sure what's coming next. Moving from genre to genre, medium to medium, style to style, Southern could only be relied upon to be unpredictable. One suspects that the dearth of critical (and public) attention that has been brought to bear on his work is due to this quicksilver nature, difficult to label or pin down.

That being the case, the new Southern anthology, *Now Dig This*, edited by Southern's son Nile and Josh Alan Friedman, performs an admirable service, in that it chooses to focus on only one of Southern's speeds, the "supersonic." The reader is clued in by the second half of the collection's title, "The Unspeakable Writings of Terry Southern, 1950-1995." The emphasis here is on outrage.

In the era of *South Park* and the Farrelly Brothers, this is a shrewd commercial move;

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gross-out humor is more likely to find a receptive audience right now than fragile, Hawthorne-influenced lyricism, which is the other half of the Southern equation, the yin to this collection's yang. By choosing the more shocking aspect, *Now Dig This* finds a tone and keeps to it, making this a more unified and cohesive, and far less disorienting, reading experience than the earlier *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*.

A consistent tone is desirable, because the selections here still manage to veer from medium to medium, even within subheadings such as "Tales," "Letters," "Behind the Silver Screen," or "New Journalism." Form never dictated content with Southern, and within a given short story he may shift suddenly from prose to screenplay format. Also helpful is a revealing 1986 interview from, appropriately enough, the pornographic magazine *Puritan*. Serving as the volume's introduction, it provides an excellent overview of Southern's entire career, allowing him the last word on that subject, as well as the first word on the selections from that career that follow. As a user-friendly introduction, then, *Now Dig This* is more likely to win Southern new fans than any of his other writings currently available.

And there is plenty to admire here, for when it came to "sick humor" (as the variety was known back in the 50s, in the heyday of Lenny Bruce and *Mad*), Southern has few peers. What sets his work apart is the skill, technique, and intent whereby he sets out to offend. As he told *Life* in 1964, "The most important thing in writing is the capacity to astonish; not shock—shock is a worn-out word.... Where you find

smugness, you find something worth blasting. I want to blast it.”

A decorated demolitions expert in World War II, Southern continued this work after the war ended, carrying it over into the field of writing. The period covered by the selections here was of course one of tumultuous, incessant change in America, and *Now Dig This* demonstrates that Southern stayed attentive to what was happening, egging on the change through his “capacity to astonish.”

There is a common perception that Southern ceased writing after his novel *Blue Movie* was published in 1970, and the debacle of *Easy Rider* profit-sharing that same year. Another valuable service that the new anthology provides is to correct that view. By bringing together stories, sketches, and articles from publications as diverse as *Grand Street* and *Oui*, and by bringing even more selections into print for the first time, the final quarter-century of Southern’s career stands revealed as one of undiminished output and creative wit.

It is the wit that takes center stage here, and the die-hard Southern-head may pine for a few examples of the serious “family man”

speed, so elegant and so astonishing itself, especially in contrast to the raunch and absurd farce of the other pole in Southern’s spectrum—though the chill menace of a tale like “Heavy Put-Away,” or the quiet outrage of “A Run of Dimes,” offers a variety of “unspeakable writing” that threatens to bridge the gap, as do several of the other selections included here. For despite the varying styles and media, close reading will reveal that Southern kept to a

consistent theme: the vitality of nature, and of natural behavior, in contrast to the deadening lies of culture.

A true American Decadent, Southern sought a culture of liberation and used his writing as a corrosive agent to eat away at the rigid aspects of a culture of conformity. *Now Dig This* displays Southern’s vision at its earthiest. Since his basic message was that nature is more powerful than any culture’s morals and laws, writings redolent of the earth are probably the best place for Southern’s new readers to start.



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