

# The Rum Diary: Fear and loathing in the Caribbean

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Written for the screen and directed by Bruce Robinson, based on the novel by Hunter S. Thompson

Set in 1960 in Puerto Rico, *The Rum Diary* is British-born director Bruce Robinson's first film in almost two decades (Jennifer Eight in 1992; Robinson is best known for directing *Withnail & I* [1987]). The new work is roughly based on the novel by Hunter S. Thompson, the writer and journalist who was a much revered figure of the "counter-culture" of the late 1960s and 1970s. The novel, in turn, was based on Thompson's real-life exploits as a journalist working for the (now-defunct) *San Juan Star*, an English-language newspaper, in the late 1950s at the age of 22.

Although the novelist began writing the book in 1959, it was not published until 1998. The main themes of the novel, fear of growing old and being "over the hill," are not given a satisfactory treatment in Robinson's film version. However, the talented cast and crew do manage to convey something about the effort of a journalist to pursue his principles against all odds.

Actor Johnny Depp plays Paul Kemp, a seasoned thirty-something from New York who seeks greener, warmer pastures away from Eisenhower-era America. He begins working for the *Star*, a struggling publication managed by Edward J. Lotterman (Richard Jenkins), whose goal is to provide readers with stories depicting Puerto Rico as the living embodiment of "the American Dream."

Kemp does not want to prostitute himself along those lines and begins drinking rum (a popular pastime it would seem) to excess. He naturally gravitates toward a motley crew of hard-nosed journalists, including Bob Sala

(Michael Rispoli) and another sometimes journalist, but full-time drunk named Moburg (Giovanni Ribisi), whose self-destructive behavior knows no bounds.

Kemp eventually gets involved with an unsavory businessman named Sanderson (Aaron Eckhart) who wants him to write a series of puff pieces that will help sell an unspoiled island off the coast to real-estate developers and casino mafia types. Kemp also has his eye on Sanderson's beautiful mistress, Chenault (Amber Heard). At some point, Kemp will have to decide where he stands in this tropical morass: play ball and ruin the island for the people who live there, or follow his scruples and then ... who knows.

It goes without saying that the best novels don't always translate into the best films. Equally, Hollywood in its golden age turned more than one mediocre novel or play (or even piece of literary trash, in some cases) into an outstanding picture. A good deal, of course, depends on the commitment and artistic skill of the filmmakers in question. In the present case, we are dealing with uneven works, inconsistent talents. Thompson's original book and Robinson's adaptation each has its strength and weaknesses.

The main problem with the novel is that there is no real dramatic force propelling the story along. Thompson was obviously influenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway and it shows in the writing. Thompson does have a real feel for recreating a time and place and the people who reside in a certain universe.

This is from the introduction, "Like most of the others, I was a seeker, a mover, a malcontent, and at times a stupid hell-raiser. I was never idle long enough to do much thinking, but I felt somehow that my instincts were right. I

shared a vagrant optimism that some of us were making real progress, that we had taken an honest road, and that the best of us would inevitably make it over the top.

“At the same time, I shared a dark suspicion that the life we were leading was a lost cause, that 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.”

In another chapter, Kemp’s associate Yeoman pens an article, contrary to Lotterman’s wishes, on Puerto Ricans leaving their island for the US mainland. Lotterman is furious at Kemp, and tells him, “You’re deranged, Kemp! You’ll come to no good end! I knew people like you back in Tallahassee and they all ended up—

“Yeah, they all ended up like Puerto Ricans. ... They heard the word, the rotten devilish word that makes people incoherent with desire to move on—not everybody in the world lives in tin shacks with no toilets and no money at all and no food but rice and beans; not everybody cuts sugarcane for a dollar a day, or hauls a load of coconuts into town to sell for two cent each—the cheap, hot, hungry world of their fathers and their grandfathers and all their brothers and sisters was not the whole story, because if a man could muster the guts or even the desperation to move a few thousand miles there was a pretty good chance that he’d have money in his pocket and meat in his belly and one hell of a romping good time.”

These excerpts are included to give some sense of the better parts of the novel, conspicuously missing in Robinson’s version. However, despite a quantity of good, albeit sparse, social commentary in Thompson’s book, it tends to stumble on from one crazy scene to another until finally tragedy strikes at the very end.

Ultimately, there is something tiresome about the lives that these “drifters” lead. Night after night of heavy drinking not only grows old for the characters in the book, but for the reader as well. Wisely, Robinson does not end his version with a whimper, but, on the other hand, the film sanitizes much of the grime and dirt that gives Thompson’s work its authenticity.

And so the movie departs in many ways from the book,

not that the original source material was hallowed ground and not to be trifled with. In fact, Depp discovered the original manuscript at Thompson’s house in the late 1990s when he was studying for his role as Raoul Duke in the film *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Had it not been for the actor, the book (and film) might never have seen the light of day. In the production notes, Depp states, “Bruce definitely went off page in terms of the book, but Hunter wanted to. He always wanted to. Hunter even talked to me about maybe taking this story to Cuba!”

Robinson justified his rewrite, saying “the whole film is in support of the underdog side of Puerto Rico. It’s critical of the people who have come there to make a fast buck. Sanderson’s approach is almost like the old-time British imperialists, who pillaged a country for what they could get and then moved on.”

Elements in the film are worthwhile and shed some light on the squalor that the inhabitants of the island are forced to live in, despite it being advertised as a paradise. The beaches are blocked off by high-rise hotels and casinos for the “Yankees” and locals are not allowed to trespass on the private property. Small children pick through the garbage because of the grinding poverty.

A scene in which Sala and Kemp watch the John F. Kennedy-Richard Nixon presidential debate on television in 1960 is also amusing. Kemp gets up in disgust and says something along the lines of “the worst part is the inevitability that someone will come around that makes him [Nixon] look like a liberal,” a sly reference to Bush and Obama. Indeed Depp and some of the other performers endow the film with most of its life and humor.

And last but not least, watching a journalist not give up on his goal of getting back at the “bastards” in high places is not something that comes along every day. For all its weaknesses, the film version of *The Rum Diary* does not end in defeated resignation like the novel, but ends on a hopeful note and these days that is not a small thing.



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