

## A Certain Starting Place

by

John K. Bush

O Henry once observed "that every city has a voice." He found "[e]ach one has something to say to the one who can hear it." Addressing his resident metropolis more than a century ago, he wrote, "New York . . . had better not hand me a cigar and say: 'Old man, I can't talk for publication.'" He insisted that "[n]o other city acts in that way." For example, "Chicago says, unhesitatingly, 'I will;,' Philadelphia says, 'I should;,' New Orleans says, 'I used to;,' . . ."

O Henry continued: "St. Louis says, 'Excuse me;,' Pittsburgh says, 'Smoke up.'" And as for Louisville? According to O Henry, "Louisville says, 'Don't care if I do.'"

For one native son that was an invitation to self-indulgence and excess even beyond the bitter end.

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It began with a big bang, the *New York Times* reported last month. The explosion erupted from a "steel monument" that was "taller than the Statue of Liberty"—"a rocket-like structure embedded with a dagger", "crowned by" his "logo, a two-and-a-half-ton red fist with two thumbs and a psychedelic peyote button pulsating at its center, a Day-Glo sight visible for miles around." At the center were his ashes, "encased . . . with the fireworks in mortar shells."

The Colorado countryside shook with a blast "described as just below the level of a sonic boom." The red, blue and silver pyrotechnics culminated "a highly professional show, staged and choreographed by Hollywood." There was "Academy Award-level" security for a guest list that included aging movie stars and musicians, a *60 Minutes* reporter and the book-ends of three decades of Democratic politics — George McGovern and John Kerry. The display "lasted less than a minute", then "[t]he partying . . . commenced, with jam sessions into the wee hours."

Earlier the deceased man's widow had joined a reporter to ride a construction crane used to erect the spectacle behind the farmhouse where, six months before, her husband had taken his own life. As a *Rocky Mountain News* columnist described it, the sixty-seven-year-old man, alone at his kitchen table, had "stuck a .45 in his mouth while sitting in front of a typewriter that held a blank sheet of paper." His six-year-old grandson played in the next room. Afterwards, "his friends and family gathered around the corpse to sip Chivas Regal and reminisce." During her trip with the reporter, his widow spoke of plans for a tombstone inscription with his favorite saying: "It never got weird enough for me."

The widow stared beyond the red-draped edifice to the valley below. "Hunter just wants to come home," she said. But as McGovern's tribute would concede, "I'm not quite sure where he's going."

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"We've been through a lot together," Anita Thompson told the guests. The thirty-two-year-old widow had not yet been conceived during her late husband's most fruitful writing period. His genesis book, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, would come closest to an *Iliad*. Like others he would have to journey a long way to make his mark.

She should have guessed from his Christian name that he wasn't from Aspen. There were more Hunters where he was born. Hints of that place were hidden in plain sight. "[F]ormally clad waiters held trays of mint juleps, the favorite drink in Thompson's hometown of Louisville," an *LA Weekly* columnist who probably had never been there observed. The man who had personally bankrolled the \$2 million-plus undertaking, the actor Johnny Depp, was a transplanted native of the honoree's home state of Kentucky. The thunderous memorial was conducted by Zambelli, the fireworks company that religiously produces an even more expensive spectacle every April, transforming Louisville into a Mecca that lasts until the first Saturday in May.

"During Derby Week," John Steinbeck wrote, "Louisville is the capital of the world." The rockets there shoot up from a barge in the Ohio River and off the sides of a bridge that, fittingly for the man shot out of the cannon into the Colorado sky, leads away from his birthplace to another state.

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Hunter S. Thompson – the center of the explosion – was the father of so-called "gonzo journalism", the first man to blog without a computer, before anyone even knew what blogging was. He tried to write like Hemingway. He liked asterisks. Sometimes his thoughts went together; sometimes not.

Tonight we meet one floor above a room that figured early in his career. He came here with Ralph Steadman, an English illustrator, after the 1970 Kentucky Derby.

"One of my clearest memories of that vicious time," he wrote, "is Ralph being attacked by one of my old friends in the billiard room of the Pendennis Club in downtown Louisville on Saturday night. The man had ripped his own shirt open to the waist before deciding that Ralph was after his wife. No blows were struck, but the emotional effects were massive. Then, as a sort of final horror, Steadman put his fiendish pen to work and tried to patch things up by doing a little sketch of the girl he'd been accused of hustling. That finished us in the Pendennis."

He wrote *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, but his target was the city, not the horse race. "I know this Derby crowd," a guy named Jimbo from Houston confided to Hunter over a glass of double Old Fitz at the airport. "I come here every year, and let me tell you one thing I've learned – this is no town to be giving people the impression you're some kind of faggot."

“What nice people and what ardent hosts they are,” Steinbeck had marveled at the Derby in 1956. But when Hunter later met up with Steadman, wearing a tweed coat and RAF sunglasses, he advised: “Just keep in mind for the next few days that we’re in Louisville, Kentucky. Not London. Not even New York. This is a weird place. You’re lucky that mental defective at the motel didn’t jerk a pistol out of the cash register and blow a big hole in you.”

That weekend at Churchill Downs, he wrote, “was a symbol, in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavist culture.” It was more like a jarring clash of competing culture. There were “[k]ids hauling coolers and blankets” to the infield, along with “teenyboppers in tight pink shorts” and “many blacks” – “black dudes in white felt hats with leopard-skin bands.” On the grandstand side, there were “[p]ink faces with a stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and buttdown collars” – the kind worn by those with whom he and Steadman would almost come to blows at the Pendennis.

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For Hunter S. Thompson, Louisville’s voice was heard not so much in words as in facial expression: “Not much energy in the faces, not much *curiosity*. Suffering in silence, nowhere to go after thirty in this life, just hang on and humor the children. Let the young enjoy themselves while they can. Why not?”

Louisville is a good place to raise children. A good place to grow up, Diane Sawyer and Tom Cruise will tell you, but – Colonel Sanders aside – one usually doesn’t gain fame there. But Louisville is a glorious start – what William Faulkner called that “one simultaneous metallic clash as the gates spring.” For the horses he witnessed at the 81<sup>st</sup> Derby in 1955, that race would “not just symbolize but bear the burden and be the justification, not just of their individual own three years of life, but of the generations of selection and breeding and training and care which brought them to this one triumphant two minutes where one will be supreme and . . . [the rest] supreme failures – brought to this moment which will be supreme for him, the apex of his life which, even countered in lustra, is only twenty-one years old, the beginning of a manhood.”

Fifty years later, much has changed but the essentials remain. Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home” – that “lonesome music in the multitude,” as Steinbeck put it – is still warbled by a sea of people cradling those mint juleps. Like a visitor to an Episcopal Church fumbling for the right page in the prayer book, out-of-towners struggle to sing the words that scroll across an infield screen. And, of course, hats are everywhere, as they were for Steinbeck, who admired “[i]n the stands and boxes acres of lovely women in lovely dresses, and hats – this is fungus year for hats. In shape they go from common mushrooms through toadstools to Amanita muscaria.”

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On Thursday before the big race (schools have a holiday on Friday), children sing along to Dan Folgelberg’s “Run for the Roses” at preschool and elementary Derby celebrations. “It’s

the chance of a lifetime in a lifetime of chance,” he reminds us every year. “And it’s high time you joined in the dance.”

It may be schmaltzy to divine philosophy in a song from the seventies, but the Derby can be a fitting metaphor. Like life, it doesn’t last for long.

Even those who don’t know how many quarters are in a football game are aware of how short – and intense – this race can be. Steinbeck wrote of “the balloon of tension” that “swelled and burst” and with that bang, “it was all over.”

Faulkner described its beginning as a “clump of horses indistinguishable yet, like a brown wave dotted with the bright silks of the riders like chips flowing towards us along the rail, until, approaching, we can begin to distinguish individuals.” Some move ahead, while others hold back. Sometimes a horse stumbles out of the gate and remains behind the whole time. Sometimes last-place gains courage. That was Needles, the horse in Steinbeck’s Derby that “dawdled along trailing the field for two-thirds of the course, then fired himself like a torpedo past the screaming stands and the straining horses to win.”

Sometimes a horse bursts to an early lead, only to fade down the stretch. Sometimes the winner remains in first the entire race, but not usually. More often, he maintains a safe position hidden in the blur of the field until the homestretch, where he finds his opening to surge to victory. That’s how last year’s winner, Giacomo, did it. That’s how Secretariat did it, only that horse did what virtually no other horse could do: his speed *increased* with *each furlong* of the race. That rarely happens with horses, people or cities.

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As glorious as it is in the Derby’s winner circle, the horse must travel East to prove itself. The Triple Crown goes only to the steed that can win two more times – once at a track just outside the Washington Beltway, the second time at a track on Long Island. Sinatra’s philosophy blares from the Belmont loudspeakers before its race: “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.”

But only 11 of the 131 Derby winners have captured the Triple Crown. Derby winners usually are like Hunter S. Thompson: talented and lucky enough to hit it big in that first big race, but lacking what it takes to keep winning, they’re soon turned out to pasture.

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Hunter S. Thompson wasn’t the first to meet his downfall after he left Louisville. Like so many Derby winners who stumble at Belmont, Jay Gatsby suffered his loss after Louisville in New York too.

For those with hazy memory of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist throws lavish parties at his Long Island mansion, all with the singular objective of regaining the affection of his Daisy, who had married Tom Buchanan five years before. Gatsby lacks honesty with himself and others. He tells the story's narrator, Nick Carraway, that he is from "the Middle West." "What part of the Middle West?" Nick casually inquires. "San Francisco," answers Gatsby. "I see," says Nick.

Geography is important in *The Great Gatsby*. Louisville is Daisy's hometown, where she and Tom were wed, and also where Gatsby, while stationed at Camp Zachary Taylor during World War I, met and fell in love with her. Like Zambelli fireworks, hints of the city pop up everywhere. Daisy's friend, Jordan Baker, is also a transplanted native: "Our white girlhood was passed together there," Jordan says.

At the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan, where Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Nick and Jordan park themselves to try and escape the summer heat, Daisy orders Tom to "[c]all up and order some ice for the mint julep."

When Jordan "crie[s] dismally" about how bad it would be to "marry[] anybody in this heat", Daisy recalls, "I was married in the middle of June. Louisville in June! Somebody fainted."

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It is fitting that Daisy and Jordan reminisce of Louisville while at the Plaza. The Plaza's front yard, Central Park, was created by Frederick Olmstead and his associates, who did the same for park after park and lawn after lawn in Louisville. The Plaza also evokes another grand hostelry, built in the same era, which stands two blocks from where we meet tonight. The Plaza transported the characters back to the Seelbach (or the Muhlbach, as it was mistakenly printed in the first edition of *The Great Gatsby*). Jordan described the scene at that Louisville hotel:

*... In June she married Tom Buchanan of Chicago, with more pomp and circumstance than Louisville ever knew before. He came down with a hundred people in four private cars, and hired a whole floor of the Muhlbach Hotel, and the day before the wedding he gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.*

*I was a bridesmaid. I came into her room half an hour before the bridal dinner, and found her lying on her bed as lovely as the June night in her flowered dress – and as drunk as a monkey. She had a bottle of Sauterne in one hand and a letter in the other.*

*'Cratulate me,' she muttered. 'Never had a drink before, but oh how I do enjoy it.'*

*'What's the matter, Daisy?'*

*I was scared, I can tell you; I'd never seen a girl like that before.*

*'Here, deares.'* She groped around in a waste-basket she had with her on the bed and pulled out the string of pearls. *'Take 'em downstairs and give 'em back to whoever they belong to. Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mine. Say: "Daisy's change' her mine!"'*

The Seelbach embodied Fitzgerald's Louisville. As the Derby would inspire Thompson to rant, the hotel would move Fitzgerald to write. The Seelbach Bar was his favorite watering hole in those pre-Prohibition days, when Fitzgerald himself was stationed at Camp Taylor and Al Capone held court upstairs at the Seelbach, in the Oak Room. The inspiration for Jay Gatsby was one of those gangsters who holed up there.

As Hunter S. Thompson would be showed the door at the Pendennis, Fitzgerald was kicked out of the Seelbach Bar. He landed at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. Sixty years later, the latter street would be renamed for yet another native son who left Louisville – a boxer they knew as Cassius Clay, but who called himself "the Greatest."

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Sprawled on the sidewalk, Fitzgerald could have hardly guessed that he was near divine revelation. But had he glanced just across the street, he would have seen the location where, some forty years later, in 1958, a Cistercian monk by the name of Thomas Merton would meet a burning bush. With the Seelbach looming in front of him and the block that would house the restaurants and nightclubs of "Fourth Street Live!" behind him, Merton was suddenly transformed in a way Hunter S. Thompson would never understand:

*In Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. The sorrows and stupidities of the human condition can no longer overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

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The Derby is held when the colorful spring flowers blossom in Louisville, but Fitzgerald chose to write of the city in the fall when, lit by harvest moon, it is a "beautiful white." In *The Great Gatsby*, autumn is not a September song, rather, it is a beginning. The season of the end is summer – the time of Daisy's wedding in the oppressive heat and the series of tragic events leading to Gatsby's demise.

In the tea-garden at the Plaza, Jordan waxes nostalgically of “[o]ne October day in 1917” when she was a teenager strolling through an old Louisville neighborhood, “one place to another, half on the sidewalks and half on the lawns.” Walking on the grass made her “happier . . . because [she] had on shoes from England with rubber nobs on the soles that bit into the soft ground.” Jordan “had on a new plaid skirt also that blew a little in the wind, and whenever this happened the red-white-and-blue banners in front of all the houses stretched out stiff and said *tut-tut-tut-tut*, in a disapproving way.”

Daisy’s home had “[t]he largest of the banners and the largest of the lawns.” She “was just eighteen, two years older than me,” said Jordan, “and by far the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville.” Gatsby was one of many “excited young officers from Camp Taylor” who “demanded the privilege of monopolising her,” as Jordan put it, yet Gatsby stood out from the others. “The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time,” said Jordan, “and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since.”

But Gatsby and Daisy’s courtship did not consummate in marriage. Jordan never says why, except to hint: “Wild rumours were circulating about her – how her mother had found her packing her bag one winter night to go to New York and say goodbye to a soldier who was going overseas. She was effectually prevented, but she wasn’t on speaking terms with her family for several weeks.” It was one time a Louisville daughter did not go away, and there would be regret in New York.

In the depths of Gatsby’s despair, all he can do is wish he could to return with Daisy to Louisville – that old Kentucky home which had inspired the verses written by Stephen Foster in a lonely New York boarding house. “I wouldn’t ask too much of her,” Nick ventures. “You can’t repeat the past.” “Can’t repeat the past?” Gatsby cries incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

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The past is repeated every day at Churchill Downs. The tour guide notes that Sir Barton was the first Triple Crown winner, in 1919 – the year Tom gave Daisy the string of pearls. It has been twenty-seven years since the last Triple Crown winner – Affirmed in 1978. The names of all the Derby winners are displayed around the paddock area. Steinbeck’s Needles is there. So is Swaps, who won it the year Faulkner visited. Further down is Dust Commander, the champion that year Hunter S. Thompson saved Steadman from assault in the Pendennis. The guide points out that for thirty-two years, Secretariat’s record time from the 1973 Derby has remained unbroken. A new crop of three-year-olds will try again at the 132<sup>nd</sup> Run for the Roses, to be held in 2006.

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Gatsby “talked a lot about the past” to Nick. “[H]e wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy.” Since those days with her in Louisville, “[h]is life had been confused and disordered”, “but if he could once again return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was . . .” It was a Louisville bathed in moonlight, in the crispness of fall:

*. . . One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned towards each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were burning out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees – he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.*

*His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.*

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“Reversing judgements is a matter of infinite hope,” Fitzgerald wrote on the first page of *The Great Gatsby*. The *Times* reported that “[a]t the entry to what could only be called the set,” Hunter S. Thompson’s “portrait was hung at the center of his personal literary solar system, surrounded by the planets of Samuel T. Coleridge, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, John Steinbeck and Mark Twain.” The publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine proclaimed that “Mr. Thompson was ‘the DNA of Rolling Stone’” and insisted that he was “one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

The producer of the movie version of Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* gave a reading of a poem not by Homer entitled, “I think continually of those who were great.” But would temporary enshrinement in a makeshift Mount Rushmore of great book authors, or writing an ending to life like Hemingway’s, really make him one of them? Though they are both Derby winners, Dust Commander will never be a Secretariat.

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An impressive list of eloquent observers have testified as to Louisville’s character. Though some found little to say – Charles Dickens judged that “the city present[ed] no objects of



sufficient interest to detain us on our way" – Louisville has been important enough at least to warrant attention. It attracted Tom Buchanan and his four private cars from Chicago. It drew Mark Twain in 1885 – the year *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published – who gave a reading of "How He Ceased to be an Editor."

Twain's Louisville was sophisticated and no fool. Levi Bell – "the lawyer who was gone up to Louisville" early in Huck's story – would later arrive in a Mississippi river town to expose the fraud of the "duke" and "king" imposters who had hijacked Huck and Jim's raft.

Twain's Louisville was one of the original cities of the National League when it was founded in 1876. It was the place where the Louisville Slugger baseball bat was born.

Louisville had been smart enough to play both sides of the fence before the Civil War and chose the winning team once the fighting began. The result was that Louisville was spared the destruction of other cities in the South and ruled that region when Twain visited. It was in Louisville where Grant and Sherman planned the latter's march to the sea (and destruction of Atlanta) from the old Galt House, that "splendid hotel," as Dickens described it, where he and his companions "were as handsomely lodged as though we had been in Paris."

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In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Louisville was one of the great cities in what Fitzgerald called that "warm centre of the world, the Middle West." But by the twenties it had become part of the "jagged edge of the universe," as Fitzgerald wrote. Within a few decades, the great writers had stopped writing about Louisville altogether. Hunter S. Thompson chose to ridicule the city, but Kentucky's Pulitzer Prize winner, Robert Penn Warren (who left Kentucky for Vanderbilt, then Yale), paid it the greatest insult: he wrote nothing at all. He found inspiration for *All the King's Men* in Huey Long's Louisiana.

Is there nothing left to say about Louisville? Although they call Louisville home, Karen Robards and Sue Grafton set their stories elsewhere.

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Hunter S. Thompson is now, to use his own words, "Gonzo" – part of the acid rain that will eventually drift over the Ohio River valley. Thomas Wolfe was wrong. You can go home again, sometimes even against your will. Acid rain attempts to eat at the façade of the Pendennis – call it Hunter's revenge for getting bounced – but to no avail. If made of strong enough material, cities and the edifices and literature that define them can endure long after their visitors are gone.

The fitting tribute to Hunter S. Thompson is not Zambelli's blasting of his remains over the Rockies. For anyone who has experienced fear and loathing on the Watterson Expressway lately, it is those bumper stickers on late-model cars that urge us to "Keep Louisville Weird."

