

And the Monkey Lets Go: Memoirs Through Illusion and Doubt, by Scott Hunter, Herndon VA, Mascot Books, 2020. 337 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN-13: 978-1-64543-121-3

Review by Tom Fels

Tom Fels is an independent curator and writer based in southern Vermont who has written extensively on the period of the 1960s.

To start, let's see what the volume has to say for itself:

“Scott Hunter should be dead: Alcohol. Pot. Mescaline. Acid. Cocaine. You name it, he did it to excess. Like many young Americans who came of age in the 1960s, he told himself it was all part of life's grand adventure. In actuality, he couldn't face the secrets that were consuming him.

“Beginning with LSD and study at two Christian seminaries, Hunter searched for an awakening. His journey took him to Thailand, where he taught English as a second language and studied Vipassana meditation. He became an attendant at a Massachusetts state school for developmentally-challenged children, drove tractor trailers, farmed organically on a hippie farm, lived in a teepee, and studied mantra meditation. Later he became a vagabond (in today's language, homeless) exploring politics and poetry while on the move.

“Eventually, he found recovery from drugs and alcohol in the AA and NA programs, and uncovered the reasons for his addictions. In *And the Monkey Lets Go*, Hunter writes about his life with clarity and humor, each milestone serving as an ultimately revelatory story about what it means to unearth the truth about yourself.”

This is the description offered by Hunter's publisher. It is largely correct.

Hunter was a college classmate of mine, and a fellow communitarian in the extended "hippie farm" community cited above. We have friends and acquaintances in common, and so I read this account of his years – first lost, then found, as the famous hymn has it – with particular interest.

Certainly this is a sixties story, larded as it is with alcohol, drugs, transitory relationships, and itinerant travel. It differs from many others, though, in the author's exceptionally lengthy efforts to extricate himself from these distracting forces, making it really more a voyage into psychology and self-management than one purely reflective of the particular era to which it owes its origin. A striking feature of this journey, however, is the availability of sixties-generated opportunities and attitudes that enable it to continue relatively unquestioned over a lengthy period of time. Undoubtedly, self-delusion was one of the characteristics of that era. But, in the end, Hunter's courage, persistence, and willingness to learn triumph over this dubious generational trait.

What might this bring to mind? Hunter's slow, painful evolution toward a more functional, satisfying life echoes, consciously or unconsciously, something he may have encountered, as I did, in the cyclopedic courses in English literature offered at Amherst College: *The Pilgrim's Progress*. While his delineation of the influences buffeting him over the years may not be quite as distinct as Bunyan's Christian, Flatterer, Ignorance, and other characters, such archetypes are surely in evidence here in their modern forms; Hunter's Slough of Despond is every bit as deep, and his gratitude to the Hopefuls and Faithfuls he finds along the way equally profound.

It's amazing how many Hills of Difficulty and Valleys of Humiliation resilience, resolution, and a positive attitude will help get you through. It is Hunter's direct

recounting of such trials, making up the largest portion of the book, that lend his memoir its authentic, and ultimately hard-earned, insightful tone. As with Bunyan's Christian (and Hunter did dutifully earn Christian *bona fides* of his own), it takes a visit to the Valley of the Shadow before an answering prayer can be heard.

Before dismissing these 17th century parallels, consider that, as scholars tell us, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has gone through some 1300 editions, been translated into more than two hundred languages, and never been out of print. This is a story with legs. In its current 1960s-related form, Hunter encounters the jovial college alcohol-fraternity scene, the ever-present later immersion in marijuana, graduating to LSD and other illicit substances, and various misguided businessmen, public servants, and other hostile types. Assistance in the form of a helpful Hopeful or Faithful comes only near the end of the tale.

Ultimately more consuming than even chemical culture is the author's lengthy period of social incompatibility. It is this theme that really underlies his story and provides its final redemptive conclusion. Why is Hunter so distant from his parents? Why do his relationships, even good ones, end so precipitously? Why do clear wins (finding his way in his big rig through Boston) so often end in galling losses (backing the truck over a small car)? Why does he allow his boss to stiff him under the guise of respect and trust? Why, he finally asks himself, is a graduate, years out of one of the nation's best colleges, making only five dollars an hour? Eventually, events conspire to lift the scales from his eyes, and motivate him to take corrective action.

As Hunter says in a recent interview, with a nod to Amherst's own Robert Frost, his determination to work through years of difficulties, and his successful exit on the farther side, should "inspire others to take roads less traveled." Through it all, he explains, "I was an optimist, always believing that life would get better." In the end, he concludes, a view to "strength and hope gave me the courage to explore my emotions and discover what made me tick."

“When I was studying Vipassana meditation,” Hunter continues, citing his time working in Thailand, “my teacher gave me a koan: ‘When the monkey lets go of the branch, and falls into the pool of water, the whole world will shine with dazzling brilliance.’ “ Fifteen years later, on a beautiful New England morning, he recalled those words. “I was happy, exceedingly happy. The Koan popped back into my mind, which exploded into Samadhi, the experience of absorption, an awakening,” and a new, redemptive path finally opened before him.

And the Monkey Lets Go constitutes an object lesson in the era of the 1960s and its later denouement. It also offers insight into the scenes inhabited by the author: the milieu of college towns, the aura of back-to-the-land farms, the vagaries of foreign travel, life on the road when hitchhiking was a viable way of life, the promising but occasionally unsavory aspects of New Age commerce, and many others. Most importantly, though, it is a memorable tale of exploration and perseverance through adversity, set in an uneasy time when such trials could often go unnoticed, a compelling personal story viewed in the context of the current era. Hunter’s success at self-deliverance enabled him to move on to satisfying relationships and a later career, a timeless lesson in a contemporary setting well worth passing on.

END

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