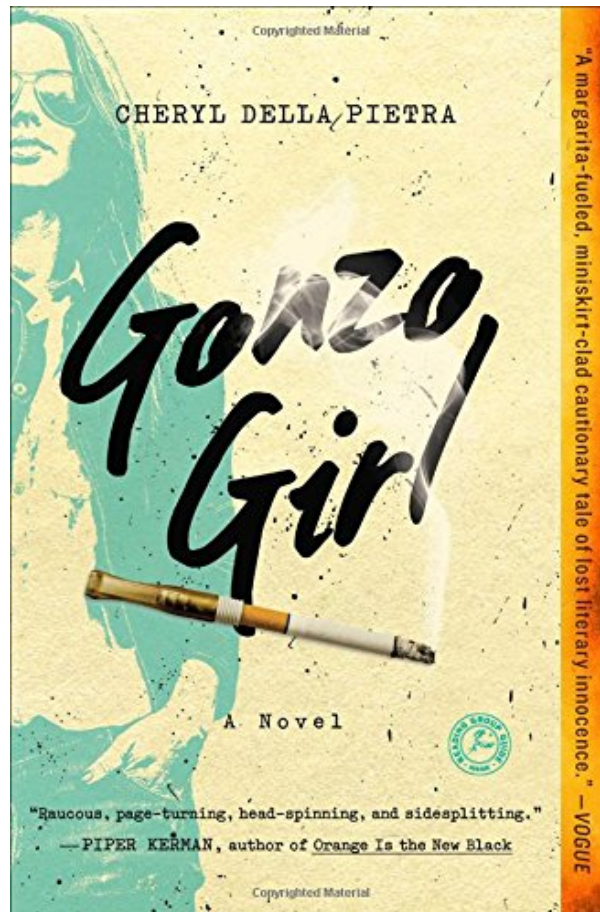
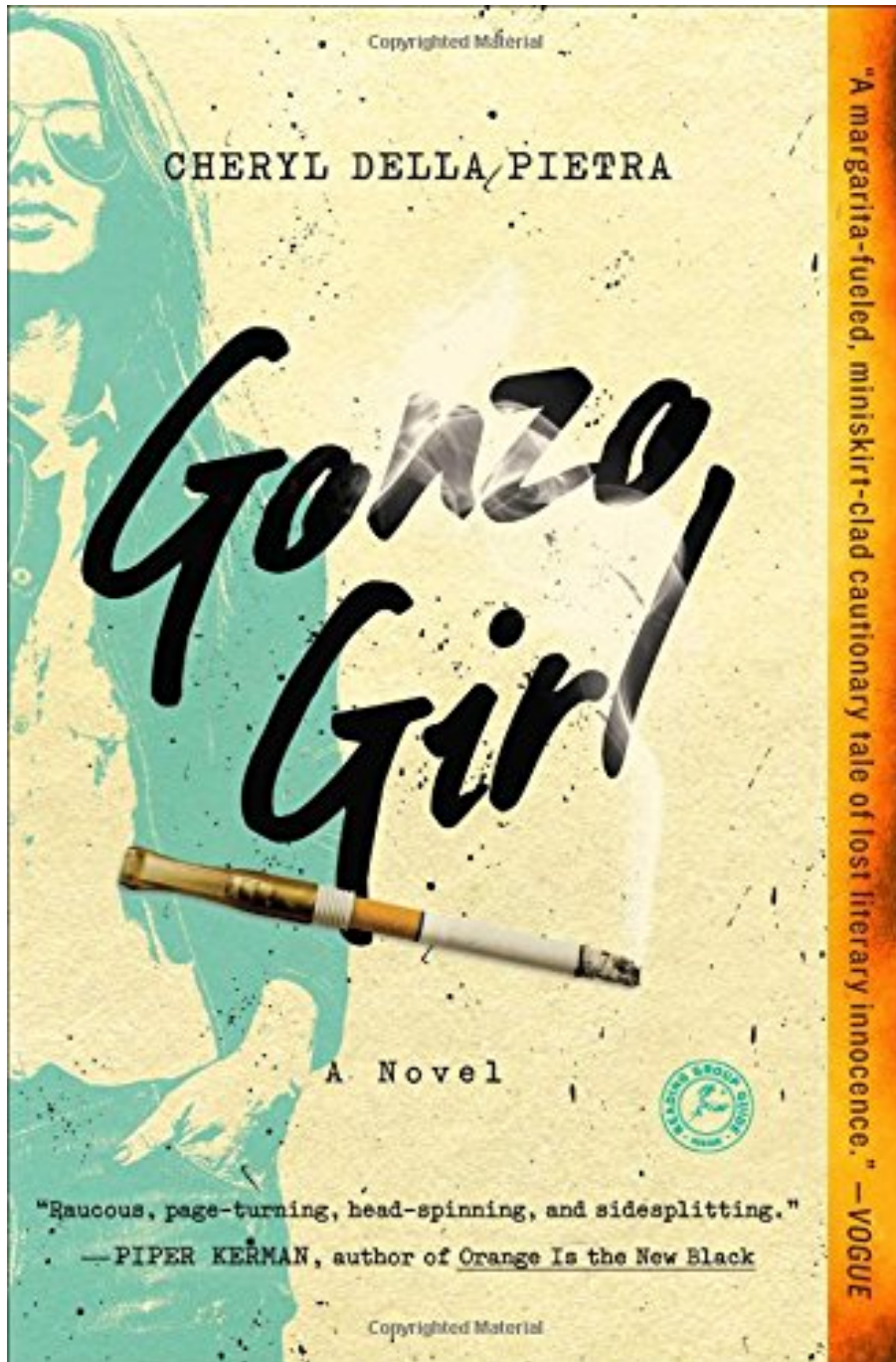


GONZO GIRL: A NOVEL BY CHERYL DELLA PIETRA



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Review

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"Gonzo Girl is good, fast fun, like a thrill ride in a red convertible. A 1973 Chevy Caprice Classic, to be exact. You know the one." (Newsday)

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head-spinning, and side-splitting as it depicts a boss and mentor who is both devil and angel, and a young heroine who finds herself tested in the chaos that surrounds him. An intense story, Della Pietra's tale about writing, firearms, psychotropics, and the pros and cons of hot tubs will suck you in and take you on ride. *Gonzo Girl* is a ticket you want to buy." (Piper Kerman, author of *Orange Is the New Black*)

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Gonzo Girl

CHAPTER 1

Everybody is laughing except for me. I'm scanning the faces, trying to remember names, as they listen to Walker Reade recite from his novel in progress. To my right sits Devaney Peltier—that's how she introduced herself to me, first and last name, like she's kind of a big deal. She's Walker's full-time girlfriend, and she's braying like a donkey, the act made more absurd by the rings of white powder encircling her nostrils like two tiny powdered doughnuts. Claudia Reynolds, the aging assistant, is curled up across from me, gazing at Walker in adoration, laughing the hardest. To my left sits Rene Wang—or enfant terrible artist Rene Wang, as he's been described, without fail, in the New York City media since the day in 1983 when he famously set dozens of roosters loose in Times Square in a performance-art piece he called *Koch's Cocks Can*. He's chuckling lightly, his lips pursed, eyebrows up—his "hysterical" look, I will later learn—as he taps a long ash from his Davidoff cigarette into the mermaid-shaped tray on the table before him. I don't have to work to recall the names of the other two people here. They're undeniably famous. Crushed up beside Rene, almost sitting in his lap, is former vice-presidential candidate George Stains, his head thrown back, lips glossed with scotch, a small drop of blood dried at the bottom of one nostril. And next to Claudia is Larry Lucas, former teenage heartthrob, now Oscar-winning actor, doubled over like a man passing a kidney stone. Everyone is in hysterics. The only problem is, I'm not sure what they're laughing at.

Devaney passes a large tray of cocaine to me—if it were flour, it would be enough to bake a small cake—and I smile and nod, as if she were handing me a plate full of mini-*quiche*. I have, to this point in my life, done exactly two lines of coke, with an ex-college boyfriend. He was filthy rich, and coke is what the filthy-rich college boys did when it was time to do drugs. I did those lines to try to fit in with his crowd—the same conundrum I'm weighing right now. To stall, I daintily perch the tray on my knee and listen politely. A notebook sits on the table in front of me. I brought it here to Colorado from New York City. It's a reporter's notebook, the kind I sometimes use for my own writing. I think it will be good for taking notes. I think it will show I am serious about wanting this job.

"That is so . . . fucking . . . funny, Walker," says Larry, as I try to keep my face from flushing. Larry Lucas, it's worth noting, played the leading man in several of the teen comedies of my adolescence and, suffice to say, played a leading role in more than a few of my teenage NC-17 fantasies. Under other, less

overwhelming circumstances, I might be breathless about the fact that I can reach out and touch him.

“Y’all’re’ funny, Walker, baby,” says Devaney, threatening to turn an entire sentence into a contraction.

When, after several more seconds of collective howling, my gaze drifts back to Claudia, I notice something: her eyes are open wide, unblinking, pleading. I can be a little dense in moments like these—too caught up in processing my surroundings—but I sense that she might be signaling me to do something. She’s smiling at me wide and crazy, like some kind of insane puppet. Then it occurs to me a second too late.

I’m supposed to be laughing, too.

“Hey, new girl.” My head snaps toward Walker, and I reach for my notebook, still balancing the enormous tray I’ve yet to partake from.

Rene, sensing opportunity, reaches for the coke. “Let me help you out with that, honey,” he says, his face entirely too close to mine. He snorts two quick lines and passes the tray to George, barely looking at him. The room is eerily quiet as I scan the faces once more. We’re in Walker’s living-room-cum-kitchen, the six of us arranged on his perfectly circular couch like numbers on a leather clockface. A round coffee table is at the center of the couch, and it holds the group’s detritus: George’s scotch glass and bottle of Dewar’s, Rene’s pack of Davidoffs, Claudia’s Dunhill blues, Devaney’s Newport, Larry’s Heineken, an enormous unsmoked joint, the aforementioned mermaid ashtray, a matching dolphin ashtray, my highball of Wild Turkey, Claudia’s glass of red wine, Rene’s Metaxa sidecar, which I helped him mix in an effort at chumminess, and Devaney’s vodka and cranberry. The tray of coke never really settles on the table. It just keeps getting passed around like it’s crowd-surfing at a Hole concert.

The only way to get on and off the couch is by climbing over the back. The only person not on the couch is Walker, who is perched behind us on a barstool tucked into a long counter. There’s little doubt about the message the seating arrangement sends: he’s the captain on this ship of fools.

“Hello? Is she alive?”

“Yes, Walker, sorry,” I say.

“What are you sorry about?”

I look around the room for another cue. Claudia is now focused on rolling a piece of lint between her thumb and forefinger.

“Go easy on her, Walker. She’s just getting the lay of the land,” Larry says.

Walker ignores Larry completely and fixes his aviator sunglasses on me. “Speak, for Christ’s sake!”

My heart begins pounding so hard I can feel it in my ears. The strangers here probably wouldn’t offer me more than mildly detached concern under normal circumstances. But now that everyone is coked up and drunk, I am little more than a buzzkill. I knew this outburst was coming one way or another. I knew from the books, the articles, the interviews. I have done my homework. Walker Reade does not suffer fools, and no one—not presidents, CEOs, law enforcement—gets a pass. I also know from said research that caving is worse. I square my shoulders to him and try to remain calm. “I was just listening, Walker. If I’m going to be your assistant, I need to know the story.”

Walker stares at me now from over his sunglasses. His eyes are a pale steel blue. “That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it, too.”

“But I was enjoying it. Very much.” Walker worries his Zippo around in his hand. I can make out the skull and crossbones on the front of it every other turn. He grabs a Dunhill red from the pack in front of him; the room is so quiet that the schk of the lighter visibly startles Rene, who appears to run at two speeds: aggressively engaged or disconcertingly spaced-out.

“Then crack a smile, dumbhead.”

George clears his throat and passes the tray of coke to Claudia, who immediately passes it to Larry. Everyone is quiet, waiting to see what’s going to happen next, including me.

“I’m not dumb,” I stammer back, sounding far less convincing than I had hoped.

“Oh, that’s right,” Walker says. “Alessandra here went to an Ivy League school.” Devaney shifts uncomfortably on the couch. I can actually hear her teeth grinding. “It says so right here, on her thin résumé.”

Walker pulls a piece of paper from a folder on the counter in front of him, and I visibly recoil. I’m a year out of college. The last thing I want is a staged reading of my résumé in front of this crowd.

“I thought it was great,” I say.

“Which part?” He blows a cloud of smoke directly in front of him, seemingly unaware that it wafts directly onto Devaney’s head.

In truth I cannot recall a single coherent passage from what has just been read to me, and I briefly wonder what superman at Burch Press is tasked with making this book readable. “All of it, Walker. It’s really funny.”

“All right. What does it remind you of? Which of my works does it remind you of?” He takes off his Tilley hat and sunglasses and downs the rest of his Chivas and water. Without his signature armor—aviators and hat—he’s suddenly transformed from iconic writer/drug-addled playboy to unexpectedly sexy middle-school math teacher. He’s only in his early fifties; I didn’t expect him to be almost completely bald.

I can feel the clock ticking. What does it remind me of? I’ve read all of Walker’s books many times over, except the last two—the penultimate one a collection of political essays regurgitated from various magazines, and the most recent one so poorly reviewed that I couldn’t justify allocating even a fraction of my meager financial resources toward it. The previous five were so fluid and tight that nothing about what he’s just read reminds me of any of them.

I glance back at Claudia. She’s trying—and failing—to subtly mouth something to me. I look to Larry, who simply scrunches up his face and runs his hand through his thick, dark hair, winking, a gesture that I assume is intended to convey that this drill is somehow par for the course. Larry passes the tray of coke to Walker, trying to distract him.

“Here you go, big guy. Let’s have some fun. When does the game start?” The crowd is ostensibly here for an NBA play-off game.

“Half an hour,” Walker says shortly, passing the tray to Devaney while still staring at me. Rene lights up the joint, choking mightily on the first drag.

“Am I in a time warp here? Is time standing still for anyone else? I asked a goddamn question. What does it remind you of?”

“The second half of *The Wake*?” I say halfheartedly, referring to Walker’s fourth novel.

Walker actually ponders this for a moment—surprised, I think, that I’ve answered him. After a long pause, he says, in overly dramatic fashion, “Why, oh why, can’t I find someone with half a brain in her head to fucking help me? It’s not like I’m trying to find a neurosurgeon with a pretty face. . . . You would think I was looking for someone to take notes in Mandarin . . . or separate water into its hydrogen and oxygen atoms. But I don’t need any of that, do I?” Although this seems a rhetorical question, several people are, in fact, shaking their heads. “I just need someone who knows my books and has working index fingers to press a few buttons on my fax machine. Why on earth is this so hard . . . ?” He trails off before barking, “Try again!”

“I’m sorry, Walker. I don’t know.”

“What in the fuck do you mean you don’t know?”

“It’s very . . . unique.” My mouth goes dry.

Rene cringes when I say the word. He passes the joint George’s way.

“Well, looks like I have another moron on my hands. Where does Hans find these people?”

“Excuse me?” I say.

George pours himself another three fingers of scotch and takes the joint from Rene. It’s jarring to watch George consume drugs like a cracked-out nickel whore. I mean, the man was once the state of Ohio and a heartbeat away from running the free world.

“Have you even read anything I’ve ever written, missy? You and your stupid notebook.”

“Of course I have.” Not only have I read all of Walker’s early work, I have studied it extensively. You don’t come of age in the 1980s as an aspiring writer without at least a passing familiarity with the oeuvre of Walker Reade. There had been a time, not long ago, when Walker Reade was not just a writer—Walker Reade was a *Writer Who Mattered*. Regardless, I sense that this is perhaps the wrong moment to tell him *Liar’s Dice* is what made me want to write, or that his radical social commentary altered my worldview. I tuck the notebook behind my back and try to casually hold my drink. Every move I make now feels conspicuous.

“You hate it,” says Walker.

“I don’t.”

“If you’re going to be out here, you have to tell me the truth. That’s what you’re getting paid to do!”

I briefly consider reminding him that I’m not getting paid anything until he officially hires me. This is my

three-day trial period. Even if I survive this, I won't get paid until he delivers some real pages. That is what I've been told the deal is.

"Walker, go easy. It's her first day," Claudia says.

"Walker, baby, let's go do something fun," says Devaney, popping up from the couch like a character in a musical. She passes the tray of coke to me.

Walker ignores her, goes into the other room, and emerges with his seven books, every one a hardcover. He stacks them on the counter. *Biker* . . . bam! *Liar's Dice* . . . bam! *Ship of Fools* . . . bam! *The Wake* . . . bam! *Crossroad* . . . bam! *Rabbit Hole* . . . bam! *Traffic* . . . bam!

"To the cabin," he demands, pointing my way out the door. "And don't come back over here till you've read these—no, memorized these. . . . And are you going to do that fucking line or what?" I stare down at the tray of coke I've been holding entirely too long for this crowd. I've been a bartender for three years. I'm a drinks girl, not a drugs girl. I'm horribly ambivalent about the tray in front of me. Too ambivalent, I think, for this place. I pass the tray to Rene and attempt to scuttle over the back of the couch, thinking I've just fucked this whole thing up in less than an hour. My shot. I grab the books, feeling hot down my neck, as I hold my head high—as if my literary hero hasn't just called me an idiot—and retire to my quarters.

GONZO GIRL: A NOVEL BY CHERYL DELLA PIETRA PDF

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The road to hell is paved with good intentions...and tequila, guns, and cocaine in this “rambunctiously entertaining” (Teddy Wayne) debut novel inspired by the author’s time as Hunter S. Thompson’s assistant.

Alley Russo is a recent college grad desperately trying to make it in the grueling world of New York publishing, but like so many who have come before her, she has no connections and has settled for an unpaid magazine internship while slinging drinks on Bleecker Street just to make ends meet. That’s when she hears the infamous Walker Reade is looking for an assistant to replace the eight others who have recently quit. Hungry for a chance to get her manuscript onto the desk of an experienced editor, Alley jumps at the opportunity to help Reade finish his latest novel.

After surviving an absurd three-day “trial period” involving a .44 magnum, purple-pyramid acid, violent verbal outbursts, brushes with fame and the law, a bevy of peacocks, and a whole lot of cocaine, Alley is invited to stay at the compound where Reade works. For months Alley attempts to coax the novel out of Walker page-by-page, all while battling his endless procrastination, vampiric schedule, Herculean substance abuse, mounting debt, and casual gunplay. But as the job begins to take a toll on her psyche, Alley realizes she’s alone in the Colorado Rockies at the mercy of a drug-addicted literary icon who may never produce another novel—and her fate may already be sealed.

“A margarita-fueled, miniskirt-clad cautionary tale of lost literary innocence” (Vogue), *Gonzo Girl* is a loving fictional portrait of a larger-than-life literary icon.

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Gonzo Girl

CHAPTER 1

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“What are you sorry about?”

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Walker actually ponders this for a moment—surprised, I think, that I’ve answered him. After a long pause, he says, in overly dramatic fashion, “Why, oh why, can’t I find someone with half a brain in her head to fucking help me? It’s not like I’m trying to find a neurosurgeon with a pretty face. . . . You would think I was looking for someone to take notes in Mandarin . . . or separate water into its hydrogen and oxygen atoms. But I don’t need any of that, do I?” Although this seems a rhetorical question, several people are, in fact, shaking their heads. “I just need someone who knows my books and has working index fingers to press a few buttons on my fax machine. Why on earth is this so hard . . . ?” He trails off before barking, “Try again!”

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“What in the fuck do you mean you don’t know?”

“It’s very . . . unique.” My mouth goes dry.

Rene cringes when I say the word. He passes the joint George’s way.

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heartbeat away from running the free world.

“Have you even read anything I’ve ever written, missy? You and your stupid notebook.”

“Of course I have.” Not only have I read all of Walker’s early work, I have studied it extensively. You don’t come of age in the 1980s as an aspiring writer without at least a passing familiarity with the oeuvre of Walker Reade. There had been a time, not long ago, when Walker Reade was not just a writer—Walker Reade was a Writer Who Mattered. Regardless, I sense that this is perhaps the wrong moment to tell him *Liar’s Dice* is what made me want to write, or that his radical social commentary altered my worldview. I tuck the notebook behind my back and try to casually hold my drink. Every move I make now feels conspicuous.

“You hate it,” says Walker.

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“If you’re going to be out here, you have to tell me the truth. That’s what you’re getting paid to do!”

I briefly consider reminding him that I’m not getting paid anything until he officially hires me. This is my three-day trial period. Even if I survive this, I won’t get paid until he delivers some real pages. That is what I’ve been told the deal is.

“Walker, go easy. It’s her first day,” Claudia says.

“Walker, baby, let’s go do something fun,” says Devaney, popping up from the couch like a character in a musical. She passes the tray of coke to me.

Walker ignores her, goes into the other room, and emerges with his seven books, every one a hardcover. He stacks them on the counter. *Biker* . . . bam! *Liar’s Dice* . . . bam! *Ship of Fools* . . . bam! *The Wake* . . . bam! *Crossroad* . . . bam! *Rabbit Hole* . . . bam! *Traffic* . . . bam!

“To the cabin,” he demands, pointing my way out the door. “And don’t come back over here till you’ve read these—no, memorized these. . . . And are you going to do that fucking line or what?” I stare down at the tray of coke I’ve been holding entirely too long for this crowd. I’ve been a bartender for three years. I’m a drinks girl, not a drugs girl. I’m horribly ambivalent about the tray in front of me. Too ambivalent, I think, for this place. I pass the tray to Rene and attempt to scuttle over the back of the couch, thinking I’ve just fucked this whole thing up in less than an hour. My shot. I grab the books, feeling hot down my neck, as I hold my head high—as if my literary hero hasn’t just called me an idiot—and retire to my quarters.

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

and it adopts a style very much like Hunter S

By Stephen Nathaniel Dethrage

Cheryl Della Pietra's "Gonzo Girl" is, by her estimation, 60 percent true, and it adopts a style very much like Hunter S. Thompson's own to tell the story of how Pietra once spent several months as his writing assistant at his cabin in the mountains. Like Thompson, Pietra tells her own story by telling another. Thompson becomes Walker Reade, Pietra becomes Alley Russo, and some of the facts of the time she spent with him become fictional embellishments. All this is done masterfully well, as Pietra tells a story that stands well on its own but also sheds light on the Thompson's private life.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

7.5

By Ms. Wood

Enjoyed this book. Lots of drug references. Main character was difficult for me to identify with, but well written and worth the time.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Don't waste your time.

By A. Rock

I had to go back and check to see if this was listed as a YA novel-- it would have made more sense to me, heaps of coke notwithstanding.

It was the most predictable, boring novel. A thinly-veiled memoir.

The main character is so naive, it seems hard to believe that this book had an editor. She is constantly whining about how no one cares about her novel, or that she likes a movie star, or that this movie star that she likes brings some other girl out to visit. She is always huffing, and puffing, and saying "so not fair! how could you do this to me?!" like she is a teenager-- not an Ivy League grad from a blue collar family.

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GONZO GIRL: A NOVEL BY CHERYL DELLA PIETRA PDF

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Review

"Gonzo Girl is a thrilling fictionalized (just barely) account of working with a true genius—until the celebrity-filled, drug-fueled partying becomes too much." (Entertainment Weekly (Must List selection))

"A margarita-fueled, miniskirt-clad cautionary tale of lost literary innocence." (Vogue)

"Gonzo Girl is good, fast fun, like a thrill ride in a red convertible. A 1973 Chevy Caprice Classic, to be exact. You know the one." (Newsday)

"Full throttle from page one, this bildungsroman is a unique and mesmerizing tale about a young woman who must test her own limits and find her own voice to actualize a certain version of the American dream." (Elle.com)

"Gonzo Girl shares an LSD-like flashback of the margarita-infused chaos of working with an unpredictable literary genius—without the hangover." (Self.com)

"A lighthearted page turner that has the reader constantly trying to differentiate between fact and fiction . . . Gonzo Girl offers a glimpse into the wonderful and weird world of Thompson—or something like it." (The A. V. Club)

"Fascinating." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Pietra blends amusing imagery, outrageous pranks, and snappy dialog into a lively read. . . . For readers curious about Thompson's lifestyle and fans of eccentric characters and meandering journeys featuring copious amounts of illegal substances." (Library Journal)

"While the novel dishes out plenty of illicit good times, Della Pietra also manages to bring moments of poignancy to the narrative. . . . Della Pietra ultimately steers her story to a believable, satisfying, and moving conclusion." (Publishers Weekly)

"Long after the last drink is poured and the final gunshot fired, Cheryl Della Pietra's novel inspired by her time as Hunter S. Thompson's assistant will linger in your mind. This debut novel is raucous, page-turning, head-spinning, and side-splitting as it depicts a boss and mentor who is both devil and angel, and a young heroine who finds herself tested in the chaos that surrounds him. An intense story, Della Pietra's tale about writing, firearms, psychotropics, and the pros and cons of hot tubs will suck you in and take you on ride. Gonzo Girl is a ticket you want to buy." (Piper Kerman, author of *Orange Is the New Black*)

“Gonzo Girl is as rambunctiously entertaining as the badly behaved famous journalist who inspired the creation of Walker Reade. Cheryl Della Pietra writes with wit and an eye for the bizarre detail worthy of her former employer, and her debut novel spins, at a cocaine-fueled pace, a moving and insightful coming-of-literary-age story.” (Teddy Wayne, author of *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine*)

About the Author

Cheryl Della Pietra is a longtime New York City magazine editor, writer, and copy editor. She has published numerous stories in such magazines as *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *POV Magazine*. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, she lived with Hunter S. Thompson in Woody Creek, Colorado, for several months in 1992, where she worked as his assistant. She currently lives in Branford, Connecticut, with her husband and son.

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Gonzo Girl

CHAPTER 1

Everybody is laughing except for me. I’m scanning the faces, trying to remember names, as they listen to Walker Reade recite from his novel in progress. To my right sits Devaney Peltier—that’s how she introduced herself to me, first and last name, like she’s kind of a big deal. She’s Walker’s full-time girlfriend, and she’s braying like a donkey, the act made more absurd by the rings of white powder encircling her nostrils like two tiny powdered doughnuts. Claudia Reynolds, the aging assistant, is curled up across from me, gazing at Walker in adoration, laughing the hardest. To my left sits Rene Wang—or enfant terrible artist Rene Wang, as he’s been described, without fail, in the New York City media since the day in 1983 when he famously set dozens of roosters loose in Times Square in a performance-art piece he called *Koch’s Cocks Can*. He’s chuckling lightly, his lips pursed, eyebrows up—his “hysterical” look, I will later learn—as he taps a long ash from his Davidoff cigarette into the mermaid-shaped tray on the table before him. I don’t have to work to recall the names of the other two people here. They’re undeniably famous. Crushed up beside Rene, almost sitting in his lap, is former vice-presidential candidate George Stains, his head thrown back, lips glossed with scotch, a small drop of blood dried at the bottom of one nostril. And next to Claudia is Larry Lucas, former teenage heartthrob, now Oscar-winning actor, doubled over like a man passing a kidney stone. Everyone is in hysterics. The only problem is, I’m not sure what they’re laughing at.

Devaney passes a large tray of cocaine to me—if it were flour, it would be enough to bake a small cake—and I smile and nod, as if she were handing me a plate full of mini-*quiche*. I have, to this point in my life, done exactly two lines of coke, with an ex-college boyfriend. He was filthy rich, and coke is what the filthy-rich college boys did when it was time to do drugs. I did those lines to try to fit in with his crowd—the same conundrum I’m weighing right now. To stall, I daintily perch the tray on my knee and listen politely. A notebook sits on the table in front of me. I brought it here to Colorado from New York City. It’s a reporter’s notebook, the kind I sometimes use for my own writing. I think it will be good for taking notes. I think it will show I am serious about wanting this job.

“That is so . . . fucking . . . funny, Walker,” says Larry, as I try to keep my face from flushing. Larry Lucas, it’s worth noting, played the leading man in several of the teen comedies of my adolescence and, suffice to say, played a leading role in more than a few of my teenage NC-17 fantasies. Under other, less overwhelming circumstances, I might be breathless about the fact that I can reach out and touch him.

“Y’all’re funny, Walker, baby,” says Devaney, threatening to turn an entire sentence into a contraction.

When, after several more seconds of collective howling, my gaze drifts back to Claudia, I notice something:

her eyes are open wide, unblinking, pleading. I can be a little dense in moments like these—too caught up in processing my surroundings—but I sense that she might be signaling me to do something. She’s smiling at me wide and crazy, like some kind of insane puppet. Then it occurs to me a second too late.

I’m supposed to be laughing, too.

“Hey, new girl.” My head snaps toward Walker, and I reach for my notebook, still balancing the enormous tray I’ve yet to partake from.

Rene, sensing opportunity, reaches for the coke. “Let me help you out with that, honey,” he says, his face entirely too close to mine. He snorts two quick lines and passes the tray to George, barely looking at him. The room is eerily quiet as I scan the faces once more. We’re in Walker’s living-room-cum-kitchen, the six of us arranged on his perfectly circular couch like numbers on a leather clockface. A round coffee table is at the center of the couch, and it holds the group’s detritus: George’s scotch glass and bottle of Dewar’s, Rene’s pack of Davidoffs, Claudia’s Dunhill blues, Devaney’s Newport, Larry’s Heineken, an enormous unsmoked joint, the aforementioned mermaid ashtray, a matching dolphin ashtray, my highball of Wild Turkey, Claudia’s glass of red wine, Rene’s Metaxa sidecar, which I helped him mix in an effort at chumminess, and Devaney’s vodka and cranberry. The tray of coke never really settles on the table. It just keeps getting passed around like it’s crowd-surfing at a Hole concert.

The only way to get on and off the couch is by climbing over the back. The only person not on the couch is Walker, who is perched behind us on a barstool tucked into a long counter. There’s little doubt about the message the seating arrangement sends: he’s the captain on this ship of fools.

“Hello? Is she alive?”

“Yes, Walker, sorry,” I say.

“What are you sorry about?”

I look around the room for another cue. Claudia is now focused on rolling a piece of lint between her thumb and forefinger.

“Go easy on her, Walker. She’s just getting the lay of the land,” Larry says.

Walker ignores Larry completely and fixes his aviator sunglasses on me. “Speak, for Christ’s sake!”

My heart begins pounding so hard I can feel it in my ears. The strangers here probably wouldn’t offer me more than mildly detached concern under normal circumstances. But now that everyone is coked up and drunk, I am little more than a buzzkill. I knew this outburst was coming one way or another. I knew from the books, the articles, the interviews. I have done my homework. Walker Reade does not suffer fools, and no one—not presidents, CEOs, law enforcement—gets a pass. I also know from said research that caving is worse. I square my shoulders to him and try to remain calm. “I was just listening, Walker. If I’m going to be your assistant, I need to know the story.”

Walker stares at me now from over his sunglasses. His eyes are a pale steel blue. “That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it, too.”

“But I was enjoying it. Very much.” Walker worries his Zippo around in his hand. I can make out the skull

and crossbones on the front of it every other turn. He grabs a Dunhill red from the pack in front of him; the room is so quiet that the schk of the lighter visibly startles Rene, who appears to run at two speeds: aggressively engaged or disconcertingly spaced-out.

“Then crack a smile, dumbhead.”

George clears his throat and passes the tray of coke to Claudia, who immediately passes it to Larry. Everyone is quiet, waiting to see what’s going to happen next, including me.

“I’m not dumb,” I stammer back, sounding far less convincing than I had hoped.

“Oh, that’s right,” Walker says. “Alessandra here went to an Ivy League school.” Devaney shifts uncomfortably on the couch. I can actually hear her teeth grinding. “It says so right here, on her thin résumé.”

Walker pulls a piece of paper from a folder on the counter in front of him, and I visibly recoil. I’m a year out of college. The last thing I want is a staged reading of my résumé in front of this crowd.

“I thought it was great,” I say.

“Which part?” He blows a cloud of smoke directly in front of him, seemingly unaware that it wafts directly onto Devaney’s head.

In truth I cannot recall a single coherent passage from what has just been read to me, and I briefly wonder what superman at Burch Press is tasked with making this book readable. “All of it, Walker. It’s really funny.”

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“Am I in a time warp here? Is time standing still for anyone else? I asked a goddamn question. What does it remind you of?”

“The second half of *The Wake*?” I say halfheartedly, referring to Walker’s fourth novel.

Walker actually ponders this for a moment—surprised, I think, that I’ve answered him. After a long pause, he says, in overly dramatic fashion, “Why, oh why, can’t I find someone with half a brain in her head to fucking help me? It’s not like I’m trying to find a neurosurgeon with a pretty face. . . . You would think I was looking for someone to take notes in Mandarin . . . or separate water into its hydrogen and oxygen atoms. But I don’t need any of that, do I?” Although this seems a rhetorical question, several people are, in fact, shaking their heads. “I just need someone who knows my books and has working index fingers to press a few buttons on my fax machine. Why on earth is this so hard . . . ?” He trails off before barking, “Try again!”

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