

BOOK REVIEWS

GOOD WILL HUNTING

Regina Weinreich

**JUNKY: THE DEFINITIVE TEXT OF "JUNK,"
50TH ANNIVERSARY DEFINITIVE EDITION**

William S. Burroughs
Edited with an Introduction by Oliver Harris

Penguin
<http://www.penguin.com>
203 pages; paper, \$14.00

**WILLIAM BURROUGHS AND THE
SECRET OF FASCINATION**

Oliver Harris
Southern Illinois University Press
<http://www.siu.edu/~siupress>
302 pages; cloth, \$45.00

No one expects a junky to live till 50, let alone a book with "Junky" as its title. As far as literature goes, everything about this book was unsuitable in the early 50s, its time of creation, starting with the subject matter. And there is every reason to think that a book today on this subject is simply dated. But, as it should surprise no one who first read it in those heady years, this Junky has legs.

Junky, in its new incarnation with a reinstated chapter and Oliver Harris's brilliant introduction, should spearhead a new appreciation of its riches as a work of art, not merely a pulp novel on a "hot" subject. As Oliver Harris points out, Nelson Algren's *Man with the Golden Arm*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1950, made its author an instant celebrity when, in fact, he barely knew any actual junkies. Burroughs's book, on the other hand, remains a precise eyewitness report to essential changes as America in the McCarthy era became increasingly more paranoid about drugs and addiction. Cutting through the official position on drugs was important to Burroughs, as he has written: "official propaganda opposes any factual statement about junk, so that almost nothing accurate has been written on the subject."

No one expects a junky to live till 82. While he was alive, Burroughs lent a mystique to this, his first book, the allure of a man who would go to a place most men feared to tread. *Junky* becomes more compelling, however, seen in its political context as a statement of a particular time and place—and the beginning of Burroughs's record of consciousness in its staggering array of discontinuities.

In playing the character of William Lee in David Cronenberg's movie of *Naked Lunch* (1991), the actor Peter Weller said that to portray a character on drugs, you don't go out of control. Quite the contrary, your effort is to walk a straight line.

Junky is Burroughs playing straight, telling it straight. "Straight" of course meaning with the lucidity of regular, traditional, linear prose. It is handy to consider his career in three stages, beginning with *Junky* and *Queer* (1985) at its initial, what he called factual, phase, followed by the period inaugurated by *Naked Lunch* (1959) and the literary experimentation of the cut up and the cut-up texts: *The Wild Boys* (1971), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), *Nova Express* (1964), *The Soft Machine* (1961); and then the stage of the final *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy

(1981), back to linearity, but different. No, you can't go home again.

Any junky will tell you: you can get off junk, but it's not the same head as before. Burroughs's later linearity would have him create a persona, a writer living in a boxcar terrified of being trapped in his own clichés. Like any true artist worthy of that name, he kept on looking for his way out, his next moment. Burroughs's linearity in *Junky* is deceptive. He may have called it factual, but it is more art than true. Look at the language. Check out the glossary. Burroughs provides a scenario for a language that he did not have to invent. Look at the metaphoric resonance of a term like "pusher." When it comes to the Word, Burroughs is the ultimate commodities broker. You can read *Junky* as instruction manual or cautionary tale.

Rereading *Junky* now reminds me what a great storyteller Burroughs was in the most fundamental way. Intrigues, set ups, cons, frames. Seeing around corners, he predicted a mysterious recurring virus before AIDS had a name. He forewarned us how the cruel and hysterical necessities of our fragile bodies might impair our progress into the future, sometimes echoing the wierdo quackery of Dr. Benway. But as time goes on, the logic of *Junky* makes the most sense. Yes, it has aged, but it has aged well.

But still, the sordid, criminal milieu of the junky underworld is not for everyone.

Before he died in 1989, the essayist and critic Seymour Krim often needled me about my literary leanings. Krim had his own list of American classic writers to which he'd not yet added Burroughs—he's not in the central, masculine tradition, he would say, thinking of the line going back to Hemingway, chief macho American modernist. Burroughs, I would reply, was the most fascinating writer around.

This Junky has legs.

And I was not alone in my tastes. Burroughs had in fact fascinated many artists in many fields. Among the famous, Patti Smith and Frank Zappa come to mind, performing in the 1978 Nova Convention. A celebration of *The Third Mind* (1978), an instruction manual in cut ups and collaboration by Burroughs and Brion Gysin, the conference was hip and edgy and attracted all of downtown New York to its wild theories. Rethinking the relationship of time to space, a junky consideration to be sure, *The Third Mind* eschewed Aristotelian cause and effect, discarding conventional notions of chronology. "The Future of Time Is in Space" became the cry, a slogan-cum-mantra. Rushing in, déjà vu, coincidence, dreams, and chance dominated, providing unpredictable structures. For artists it was a freedom call, an irreverent call to arms, very open and very American. Artists as diverse as David Bowie, Dennis Hopper, and Gus Van Sant—who dedicated his Academy Award-winning *Good Will Hunting* (1997) to Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg—all recognize a kinship to Burroughs.

The *je ne sais quoi* drawing artists to Burroughs, the "fascination," if you will, is demystified in a new critical study by *Junky's* editor and compiler of Burroughs's letters before that. Oliver Harris is assuredly the most inventive of the Burroughs critics, and those attracted to Burroughs are a formidable group. Of course, Burroughs's work lends itself to deconstructions of all sorts. Focusing on his fascination, Harris begins his study with the ways in which



Burroughs was a catalyst for the beat generation writers and how his appearance in their books preceded his own literary debut.

The incipient beat literati came into Burroughs's orbit in the mid-to-late 1940s, even before his books began to fascinate/repulse a knowing readership. Much as he denied affiliation with the beats, he was at the very least their guru, introducing them to a vast array of literature, including the writings of Count Korzybski and Oswald Spengler. In *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, Oliver Harris begins with the image of Burroughs preceding the actual publication of his writing: his appearances in Jack Kerouac's *The Town and the City* (1950) and John Clellon Holmes's *Go* (1952) as the character of Will Dennison, before becoming Old Bull Lee in *On the Road* (1957) and Doctor Sax in the novel by that name (1959). In fact, there may be several Burroughses to consider in various degrees of visibility, spectral with a cold blue stare, as well as none at all; that is, the very real consideration of taking him as the Moroccan boys did, as El hombre invisible. In which case, will the real William S. Burroughs please stand up!

Harris's study goes deeply into its subject, providing the valuable service of untangling the manuscripts, repositioning events in chronological time, and drawing sound implications and conclusions from myth and legend. Escorting the reader through the many Burroughs personae and voices, Harris is good at illuminating Burroughs's satiric vision, unmasking his trickery. Writes Harris, "Since we can neither take Burroughs's word on trust nor simply ignore it, we are forced to adopt a critical method whose generic paradigm *par excellence* is the detective's mission—trawling for clues and throwing back the epistemological red herrings." This surely must have been daunting. It is a credit to Burroughs's art that such an astute and original critic would take him on to explain the complicated nature of his "fascination," complete with the philosophical scaffolding.

In short, and if you will excuse an irresistible glibness, I find this book fascinating.

Regina Weinreich, the author of Kerouac's *Spontaneous Poetics* and editor of Kerouac's *Book of Haikus*, has written widely on William S. Burroughs.