

Naked Lunch

By William S Burroughs
Harper Perennial 2005

Naked Lunch. If ever a title raised confusion, conjecture and controversy it's this one. William S Burroughs's amoral pathological genius wordwork has been scrambling brains and cutting up linear methods of literary composition for nearly half a century, with no sign of this literary sedition tradition slowing down. How many other books can you say *that* about?

The seminal work came about in a chaotic fragmented word-jumbling way that is mirrored in its pages. In December 1953 Burroughs fled to North Africa after accidentally shooting his wife in a now-notorious act of criminal irresponsibility and literary notoriety, the 'William Tell act'. Haunted by the fear of being repossessed by the so-called 'Ugly Spirit' that he believed had prompted him to kill his wife, the homosexual scribe set about writing his way out of a lifelong internal struggle, 'trying to get to a place that doesn't exist' as Scottish writer Mark Gilroy put it.

That 'place' was total freedom from flesh and fear and spirit-puppetry in 'Interzone', a confabulation of the decadent 'International Zone' area of Tangier in Morocco. The Harvard-educated Burroughs poured his heart and head out in letters to his lover Allen Ginsberg, renowned Beat Poet (a movement Burroughs was ostensibly a tangential 'elder statesman' of) back in the bad old repressive 1950s USA, and it's from this epistolary affair that *Naked Lunch* was both conceived and born. El Hombre Invisible's letters often took the form of serio-comic, obscene-cum-poetic sketches riffing amongst other things on *noblesse oblige*, democracy, politics, homo and hetero sex, racism, misanthropy, misogyny, the Cold War, homophobia and ways to 'normalize' 'deviant' gays, well hung (i.e. lynched) teenage boys, doctors (as represented by the symbolic Burroughs alter-ego Dr Benway, the writer having trained briefly in medicine) ... and drugs and drugs and more drugs.

Musing on a potential follow-up to his first book, the 1953 part-fictionalised memoir *Junkie*, Burroughs noted, 'Maybe the novel is the letters to you' in a letter to Ginsberg in 1954. Three years later Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac would be in Tangier sorting through thousands of food-encrusted typewritten pages, retyping some of them, trying to assemble a vaguely linear manuscript from the endless reams of Burroughs's existential psychescream material they were presented with – an editorial/secretarial task that Kerouac confessed gave him nightmares.

But it wasn't until 1959 that *Naked Lunch* was published. Several hundred copies of the first edition were seized by the US Postal Service in Chicago on grounds of obscenity. This seizure sparked an American Civil Liberties Union protest case whose press coverage was noticed by infamous French literary agent and provocateur Maurice Girodias (who had already rejected the work as not sexy enough!). Girodias was keen to capitalise on the case's notoriety and *Naked Lunch* was finally published in France by his visionary/exploitative underground erotica-publishing imprint Olympia Press, which put out works like *Lolita* and *Tropic of Cancer* when nobody else would touch them. And thus a literary legend was breech birthed. One further *Naked Lunch* court case would follow, this time a 1965 Boston obscenity trial. People such as Ginsberg and Norman Mailer testified as to the work's literary worth, it was acquitted, and this case effectively ended literary censorship in the United States – quite an achievement.

On the book's publication, opinions ranged from confused to disgusted to exalted, reactions whose echoes still reverberate today throughout the literary establishment. *Naked Lunch* is like a Rorschach blot test, where a reader can often read whatever he wants into much of it; after all, as the old aphorism goes: people don't read books, books read people. And it's this ever-shifting image and meaning kaleidoscope that has kept me

obsessively going back to the book for many years, seeing new things in it with every new reading, like some sort of deranged smackhead James Joyce wordbuzz.

The language the book is written in is by turns sickening, brutal, paranoid, parodic, pseudoscientific, incredibly beautiful and poetic, and incomprehensible: a knowing deranged carny huckster world of art-atrocity philosophy and far-slung vision where a line like ‘Western man is externalising himself in the form of gadgets’ can predict a large part of what the current western world now looks like ... half a century before it happened. Much of *Naked Lunch*’s reputation as a work of drugged-out madness doesn’t bear weight. Burroughs was *not* wrecked out of his head when he wrote it, or at least not *most* of it; that’s just writer-legend and illusion. Many of the book’s more incomprehensible, hallucinatory passages actually come from the overwhelming tsunami-rush of emotion and images occasioned by the thawing-to-straight-reality of a shivering, sweating junkie *kicking opiates*.

One segment of the text that was written under the influence of drugs, however, is ‘The Market’. It dates back to a trip to South America Burroughs had undertaken in the early 1950s in a search for the drug Yage, a compound used by medicine men to foretell the future. ‘The Market’ section of beautiful prose poetry is included in *The Yage Letters* (a book of faux letters to Ginsberg), and was written when Burroughs was high on Yage, which explains its strange, otherworldly use of phrases like ‘Followers of obsolete, unthinkable trades doodling in Etruscan ... A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum’. Only Burroughs could have written this stuff, and it’s lovely.

Naked Lunch is a book written without constraint, without sanity, without civility, without thinking about publishers or a reading public ... and it shows. It’s capital-w Writing and any writer will feel Burroughs’s love for words in lines like ‘stone generals like frozen lunatics advocate liberty under the iguana’s eye’ (from the excellent 2001 restored text of the book). It’s certainly not a book for everybody, and I’m surprised there hasn’t been some sort of furore from Muslims about the nasty parodic Islamic riffs in the work. I suppose they just haven’t got round to it. But anybody meeting it halfway on its own terms will find it a very refreshing, interesting (and yes, disturbing) experience of a type they will never forget. The 1991 film by David Cronenberg wasn’t half bad either.

Burroughs’s work is undergoing a sort of recent revisionist revival, with varying-in-quality critical works like *Wising Up The Marks* and *Retaking The Universe* popping up like mushrooms everywhere. 2006 even saw a two-day Burroughs conference in Mexico City, where scholars and admirers of the writer’s literary legacy met to debate the far-ranging (or deranging) theoretical strands in his work. As long as new generations of readers come along looking for something new and revolutionary and revelatory and super-intelligent and rebellious to read, Burroughs will be smiling back at them from the opaque opiate dark, needle in arm and treason in mind.

And long may it continue.

Graham Rae