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Return of the Barfly

Charles Bukowski died in 1994, but his tough-mouthed, tender-hearted books just keep coming.

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Featured Author: Charles Bukowski

First Chapter: 'What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire'

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

am not primarily a poet," Charles Bukowski wrote to a friend in 1962. He claimed to hate the "gooey" poets who would push "the smears of their lives against the sniveling world." But few writers have made a more substantial career of acne-scars-and-all self-display than this tough-mouthed, tender-hearted laureate of the American bar, flophouse and racetrack. In 37 books of relentlessly autobiographical verse and prose published before his death in 1994 -- and seven (and counting) published since -- Bukowski carved out a unique position in American letters. He was a cult figure who disdained movements and followers, a working-class autodidact who dared to take himself seriously as a writer but who couldn't stop mocking himself as a subject.

"I don't like most poetry," Bukowski declares again in this big, baggy new collection, "so I write mine the way I like to read it." Fast and funny, these 200-odd pieces, which date from the 1970's up through the 1990's, cover little new ground stylistically or thematically. (As his fictional alter ego Henry Chinaski says in the 1987 movie "Barfly," "Growing's for plants.") The book begins with a handful of vignettes from his hardscrabble Depression childhood and the years he spent traveling the country in the early 1940's, working lunch-pail jobs and trying to write stories but often reduced to pawning his typewriter for food money. It quickly settles into Bukowski's familiar territory of down-and-out, workaday Los Angeles, and he delivers his signature quick takes on squabbling neighbors, off-kilter lovers, would-be hangers-on and the essential loneliness of a man afflicted with acute powers of observation.

For a dissident against American middle-class values, Bukowski lived a remarkably domestic, hardworking life; in these poems he rarely ventures far from his home turf and the kitchen table where he tapped out an increasingly respectable living while classical music played on the radio. In 1965, when John Martin of the newly founded Black Sparrow Press tracked him down, he was a misfit postal clerk and the author of obscure chapbooks living "somewhere between alcoholism and madness." Five years later, the two formalized what would become a lifelong publishing alliance. Martin offered Bukowski a \$100-a-month stipend -- the author figured he needed \$35 for rent and \$15 for beer -- to write full time.

For Bukowski, writing was both an ordinary job and a quasi-sacred vocation. As he explains in a poem called "Bruckner," a meditation on the composer's (and his own) near-misses at genius, "we all need / something we can do well, / you know. / like scuba diving or / opening the morning / mail."

Far from records of sodden insanity, the poems gathered here show this self-described "hunchback of life" maintaining a sunny, cockeyed composure whether he's bantering with a raving van Gogh, playing the drunken fool in yet another burlesque of seduction, fantasizing about tossing a persistent fan under the

hooves of his beloved racehorses or exhorting his readers to "open the curtains / or the blinds / or the windows / to the gentle light. / to joy." In darker moments, Bukowski praises the comforting routines of "the truly sane: the motorcycle cop / in a clean uniform who gives me a ticket and / then rides away on two wheels like a man / who never had an itchy crotch." He can still muster the outsider's contempt for the academics who were always inviting him to give readings. ("Very few of them come to class drunk," he once complained.) But as the book draws to a close he suffers intimations of mortality and has sudden attacks of humility. "I won't be leaving much," he writes in "A New War": "something to read, maybe. / a wild onion in the gutted / road."

A literary garden requires "plenty of manure," Bukowski once said to John Martin, and this collection gathers a good deal of tossed-off fertilizer along with the blooms. But it stands in spite of this -- or perhaps because of it? -- as a testament to outward sloth and a fierce, inverted work ethic, a belief in self-help through unending self-attention, a refusal to waste even the smallest table scrap of world or time. "The word should be like / butter or avocados or / steak or hot biscuits, or onion rings or / whatever is really / needed," he writes in "Christmas Poem to a Man in Jail." "Maybe if we write well enough / and live a little better / life will improve a bit / just out of shame."

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