



The Mucker

Edgar Rice Burroughs

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The Mucker is one of the best books ever written by Edgar Rice Burroughs, with the opening chapter vividly recreating the city of Chicago early in the twentieth century. Known as "a virtual catalogue of the pulp genre," this is a must-read for anyone who enjoys action tales of courage and adventure.

The Mucker Details

Date : Published March 1st 2001 by Quiet Vision Publ. (first published 1914)

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Author : Edgar Rice Burroughs

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From Reader Review *The Mucker* for online ebook

Johnny says

Inspired by the relatively new anthology of short stories, *The Worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs* (in turn, inspired by the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs), I found an Ebook copy of *The Mucker* by the aforesaid ERB. *The Mucker* does not age well. Like some of the classic Robert E. Howard works, it is full of racial epithets (some of which, placed in the slang of the eponymous “Mucker,” were new to me) that often served to jar me out of my suspended disbelief. I think I was truly blind to just how racist mainstream society was in the earliest part of the 19th century. The protagonist in *The Mucker* even deliberately uses an anti-Italian epithet as an anti-Hispanic and anti-Native Mexican slur: “It ain’t never a mistake to shoot a Dago, ... (Location 4603).

Perhaps, outside the plot in general, the most useful lesson in *The Mucker* is about the premature judgments we make on the basis of appearance and language. To be sure, this is a volume about personal transformation by an extreme effort of will (else there wouldn’t have been two additional books with the main characters), but it underscores the class consciousness of its generation in a very vivid way.

In the midst of the crudeness depicted within the dialogue and class prejudice, I truly enjoyed the use of unusual words and phrases within the volume. Devotees of Strunk & White would be horrified at the use of vocabulary such as “contumely” (Location 1294) and “avoirdupois” (Location 176, a term for weights and measures in English-speaking countries with which I was unfamiliar). Indeed, who could resist a line referring to the “supposititious purpose of the cruise” (Location 571). I enjoyed the biblical reference to the “evening and the morning were the third day” (Location 1545), quotations from cowboy poet Henry Herbert Knibbs (“‘It’s overland and overland and overseas to—where?’ ‘Most anywhere that isn’t here,’ I says. His face went kind of queer. ‘The place we’re in is always here. The other place is there.’” –Location 3656) My favorite line in the book is “...the eye-light of love and lust are twin lights between which it takes much worldly wisdom to differentiate.” (Location 846) This is an ideal phrase to use in discussing the main conflict in the book (indeed, judging from the Max Collins story in the anthology, it is the main conflict in all three books—though I’ve only read this one). The male protagonist is a tough from Chicago’s Grand Avenue gang culture of the early 20th century. His hostile, pugnacious nature gets him in trouble and he ends up aboard a ship of toughs in the midst of a piratical kidnapping scheme. The subject of the scheme is a New York City socialite named Barbara. Although street tough, mucker, “coward” as Barbara calls him, Billy Byrne initially despises Barbara and all her family and social class represents, it isn’t a spoiler to suggest that, in the course of the narrative, Billy will fall in love with her and save her life on many occasions.

The kidnapping leads to a shipwreck which allows for a mix of ERB’s jungle survival prose combined with an unexpected “lost oriental” theme. The latter was a surprise to me and I hope I haven’t spoiled it for potential readers.

Well, since the book is only halfway complete when the principals are rescued from the island (and this doesn’t quite work out the way one would expect), it is clear that this isn’t the end of the saga. Billy tries to make a life without Barbara, but even though he rejects her because it is the right thing to do (two different worlds, ya’ know, and also, apparently, a recurring theme), their paths cross again in a foreign country. Once again, Billy is thrust into the position of rescuer and would-be suitor, but he must intern for a time with a Pancho Villa rival in order to do so.

It was this latter part of the novel that offered the most incredulity to me as a reader. At one point, the *bandito* chief is convinced that Billy isn’t a gringo because his Chicago argot is practically a foreign

language. At another point, Billy who only speaks a modicum of Spanish is able to negotiate a fine deal with his new “El Jefe” (the latter *not* ERB’s word). Yet, the entire section was a lot of fun because Billy was parsing rather precisely between his good intentions of going straight and his service of Mexico under command of this “general.” It’s an intriguing inner dialogue and more credible than some of the action scenes. Nonetheless, the action scenes are strung together like beads and, even though one knows largely what will happen, it is still interesting to see the beads come full circle.

Eventually, I’ll read the other two novels about these characters. As of now, I don’t feel any real urgency. My ERB appetite has been (probably because of the racism and classism) temporarily quenched and I’ll wait till I’m in another pulp adventure mood to trace down the other stories.

Leothefox says

I was attracted to this book because I read it was unusual among Burroughs' work and in pulp in general. For me, it did strongly echo aspects of “The Monster Men” and of course “Tarzan of the Apes”, although it does have the unique distinction of hanging multiple genre types on a single characters' arc. Billy Byrne, “The Mucker”, starts out as a street hooligan, becomes a sailor, a pirate, a jungle survivalist, and goes from there.

For Burroughs the sci-fi/fantasy element was strangely subdued. In the midst of various adventures, our protagonist and company encounter a lost civilization, but it's almost realistic and sober enough to be outside the realm of fantasy altogether.

Like everything in the vast Burroughs library, “The Mucker” is a romance. Byrne's relationship with highborn hostage Barbara Harding is the source of transformative torment and hope for our hero, who learns to be a decent person thanks to his experiences but is left wondering what his place is. It's a lot like Tarzan except with a hero from the mean streets instead of the jungle.

I got what I paid for: melodrama, steady adventure plotting, a good body-count, and dependable variance of setting. Two sequels are coming and I'm not skipping them.

John says

Of the dozen or so ERB novels I've read thus far, THE MUCKER is my favorite. Where else can you get pirates, shipwrecks, Malaysian headhunters, Japanese samurai, and championship boxing all in one book? In its opening chapters, THE MUCKER is actually quite literary and brilliantly written, though Burroughs can never keep that up for very long before reverting back to the purely escapist fiction he was famous for. However, the characters in this book are actually given arcs for a change, and there aren't nearly as many outrageous coincidences as you'd find in a John Carter novel.

The one thing that bugs me--REALLY bugs me--is the romantic dialog. I mean, talk about painful! Thank God it doesn't start coming into play until near the end.

Also, if you're big on political correctness and cultural sensitivity, you might want to take a pass on this one.

Jack says

ERB put many elements of his other books into this one adventure yarn: pirates, fights with natives in faraway jungles, swordplay, chivalry, boxing, etc. One of ERB's better novels. Recommended for his fans and fans of pulp adventure fiction in general.

Stephen Brooke says

Following up on the success of his first novels, 'The Mucker' represents Edgar Rice Burroughs's attempt at a more mainstream adventure-oriented book, written in two parts from 1914 through 1916 (this edition contains both). The more fantastic elements of the Tarzan and Barsoom efforts do not appear here. The result is a bit of a mess — but an entertaining mess — of pretty much straightforward 'pulp fiction.'

The first chapter is essentially setup/info dump, mostly all telling and little doing — a prologue, essentially. I have seen worse, I'll admit, and the story definitely picks up steam over the next couple chapters. Burroughs knew how to write adventure and didn't mind having some fun in the process — both creating compelling pulp adventure and poking a little fun at it (one of the things that sets him aside from his competitors in the genre). There is a progression of episodes, almost short stories in themselves, and a quick unfolding of the plot(s). Plenty of action and exotic settings! The Samurai headhunters alone are worth the price of admission.

Ultimately the novel (or two novels, maybe) is about the transformation of Billy Byrne, the 'mucker' of the title, from a thug to a more or less decent human being. In a way, it is the same story idea as Tarzan going from jungle beast to civilized man — except Billy's jungle was the streets of Chicago and his apes were petty gangsters and prize fighters.

"The Mucker" is certainly not ERB's best work and, admittedly, the second half is not as good as the first, becoming a bit of a run of the mill Western (if I went just by the first book, I might have given a higher ranking here). The need for at least token realism keeps his inventiveness from taking full flight and there isn't much that is truly original. Never the less, a more than decent read.

And I do have to ask why this book was never made into a movie. I mean, Samurai headhunters, after all!

David Meiklejohn says

This was in my collection of classic sci-fi. I'm not sure why as there's nothing sci-fi about it, except perhaps the superhuman strength of the hero. A ruffian brought up on the streets of Chicago, he gets kidnapped and put on a ship, helps plunder another boat, but is left on an island. A girl they captured from the boat turns his life around as she shows integrity and courage dealing with her situation, and we follow the two of them as their on-off affair takes them on separate paths that ultimately end with the two of them together, of course.

A good, old-fashioned adventure story, it does read as a bit racist in places, though you can sometimes excuse that as a product of our hero's upbringing. But it's good to get a fairly strong female character for a change, though she does need rescuing on the odd occasion.

Greg Frederick says

I just love old pulp fiction adventure books. This was no exception, though at first I thought it might be. I can't really get behind a story if the heroes are jerks, and in this story the protagonist starts out as a jerk, but through his experiences becomes more refined and likable. The only fault I find in this book is that the ending was a bit more realistic than I would have preferred. However, that's just my preference, so others may be happier with the ending.

It was nice to read a pulp adventure from so long ago that actually gives the character the flexibility to grow as a human being throughout the adventure. In most of the other stories of this type I've read, the protagonist is either well developed but very set in his ways (Conan, John Carter), or is just one-dimensional (all too forgettable).

The story-line is just over the top in a great way. There's ghetto brawls, high-seas pirating, boxing, and even samurai headhunters! It is definitely a story of it's time, which means racial slurs and stereo-types abound, but if you are refined or blunt enough to get past that, you'll have a great time. I look forward to rereading this someday, and also can't wait to read *Return of the Mucker*!

Charles says

I really like the development of the character here, Billy Byrne, a kid from the mean Chicago streets who learns a bit about heroism.

Larry Piper says

My dad said his favorite book as a child was *The Warlord of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Burroughs is most famous for his Tarzan books. I read the first two of those. The first one was quite good, the second got a bit silly. My son, Zach, read further into the series, and said the silliness got rather out of hand—"jumped the shark", he said. Whatever, *The Mucker* came out in 1914, and deals with a young hoodlum who came from the tough parts of Chicago. My dad was born in Chicago and was eight when the book came out. So I thought perhaps in reading it, I might learn something about the environment in which my dad spent his early years. At some point, his family moved to a small town in southwestern, Michigan, undoubtedly not much like Chicago at all. Still, the early years in Chicago likely had some effect on his personality. Fortunately, my dad didn't grow up to be a thug, he was rather more of an intellectual than Billy Byrne, the protagonist of *The Mucker*, and had a professional career, as is appropriate for a college graduate, a class of people despised by Billy Byrne, but not at all by yours truly.

Well, the above is all mostly irrelevant. While the protagonist was born and grew up in Chicago, most of the book takes place in other venues. This is an amazingly silly book, geared primarily toward 12-year old boys I would guess. It's full of thrilling, but completely implausible and off-the-wall action. It reminds me a bit of the Hardy Boys, lots of exciting action that wouldn't make sense to one who had a shred of grounding in the workings of the real world.

So, we begin with a kid who grows up a thug in Chicago. He is what's known as a mucker:

[Muckers] were pickpockets and second story men, made and in the making, ... ready to insult the first woman who passed or pick a quarrel with any stranger who did not appear too burly. By night they plied their real vocations. By day they sat in the alley behind the feed store and drank beer from a battered tin pail.

He skips town to avoid a trumped-up murder charge, hopping a train to San Francisco. There he is shanghaied by pirates. The pirates kidnap a beautiful heiress from her father's yacht and carry her off to the south Pacific where they are shipwrecked on an island inhabited by samurai headhunters. Yup, you read it right. Some 16th century samurai landed on this island and intermingled with headhunters, and nothing changed for 400 years except the blood lines. Eventually, Billy and the heiress get saved, but not until after she has taught him to be able to speak in an educated and refined manner.

Then, the mucker, finds himself on the lam once again, in company of a poetry-spouting hobo. Of particular note is the spouting of the poem, *Out There Somewhere* by Henry Herbert Knibbs. Their ramblings and adventures closely mirror this poem. They end up in Mexico dodging bandinistas (revolutionarios?), sometimes collaborating with them. You guessed it, the beautiful heiress' father owns a ranch down Mexico way; she and her father decide to leave New York for a quick visit; they have problems with bandinistas; and Billy rides to the rescue, winning the heiress in the doing. Something like that.

So, if you like a dose of *bizarrité* with your adventure, and don't mind a lack of any semblance of realism, this is likely to book for you. If you're an adolescent male, or sometimes think like one, you're likely to find this book entertaining.

Joey says

I had to quit reading this book, not because the story was bad but because the publisher was so bad. It was published by 1st World Library and there were so many spelling errors that it became a nuisance to read. And then after I got about 50 pages into the book another Billy (the main character is also named Billy) enters the story. So there's one Billy on one boat carrying on a conversation and then there's another Billy on a different boat carrying on his conversation at the same time. I had had a hard day at work so I said screw it and reread *The Jungle Book* instead. I wonder if there are really two Billys or is that another publishing mistake?

Kent says

Billy Byrne, who grew up on Chicago's West Side, among the low-brow hoods and gangsters there, and is taught to idolize the same, and to wantonly beat up anyone not of his gang or class...including women, children and the "better" social classes...the educated and wealthy.

Along the way he has to skip town to avoid a frame-up by a fellow-crook, and ships out (gets shanghaied) aboard a tramp steamer. He rises above all the other crooks on the ship, and gets insulted by a young socialite who becomes a prisoner of the Captain and his Mates, as her "friend" sets out to rescue her and win her hand.

Billy can't account for the reasons, but he soon sets out to change his ways from that of a "Mucker" to one of

the class that Barbara would respect. It's a tough challenge, and lots of adventure along the way, and the story is continued in the following books: "The Return of the Mucker" and "The Oakdale Affair", which introduces Billy to a hobo (with a love of the poetry of Knibbs and Service), a gallant heart, and one who becomes Billy's best friend!

Frank says

Read this one in the 70s

wally says

read this one...a few years ago. 1981-82 thereabouts. decided to read it again.

update 10/13: billy bryne, a product of the streets and alleys of chicago's west side....nothing about parents or siblings, just the ruff and tumble world of back alleys, a kindergarten that lasted from age 6 till 10 when he "commenced 'swiping' brass faucets from vacant buildings, his schooling a time of carrying a bucket of beer from the pub to the alley.

still though, he holds to a code of ethics...then he is shanghaied in frisco...the description of him waking up, at sea, is neat-o, the floor moving, a lamp swinging, the slow realization of where he is and a nice turn-of-phrase when the first mate puts him in his place--he'd never been spoke to before--"at least not since he had put on the avoirdupois of manhood."

another interesting phrase, "The Big Smoke"--I take it to mean ole Satan. Ha!

update:done:10/15...and that phrase, the big smoke, is actually some kind of allusion to either another work of burroughs and a character therein, who happens to be some sort of heavyweight boxing champion, as the phrase recurs later in the story

interesting story, billy bryne, from the mean streets of chicago's west side, shanghaied, a kind of reluctant pirate, shipwrecked...a girl is involved...heh heh! it's curious, that relationship that develops...was it mic and the boys? "she'd make a dead man come-om-om!" though that seemed to be the furthest from billy's mind...head-hunters and japanese that merged on the shipwreck island....trouble galore...eventual rescue...the girl changes billy.

once or twice, whuddayahcallit, the deuce coupe machina? descends and the head-hunting japanese samuri give up the chase, things of that nature...HA HA HA!

entertaining and yeah, even thought-provoking...as in, well, this was written in 1914, an engaging story...but i can't help but think if a horse had been involved, the horse would be tied to a tree, embarrassed by all the ricochets and the chariots of the gods, unable to turn tail to the camera and swat flies.

R.G. says

This book definitely is a bit different from Burroughs norm when it comes to the hero of the tale... normally the men are perfect gentlemen... men of honor and loyalty and integrity... even Tarzan had somehow come out of the jungle knowing exactly how to act as Lord Greystoke... but Billy is a thug... he's coarse and vulgar and thinks beating a man up for no reason is good fun... yet he's accused of a murder he actually didn't commit and goes on the run for it... which lands him in with a bunch of sailors that kidnap him and force him to work for them... they being no better than the gang he left behind... which is one of the things that makes this book a nice change of pace for Burrough's characters and an interesting look at a man changing gradually and sometimes without really knowing why... and then watching his old self and new self struggle within... it's as exciting and adventurous as all his stories are and leaves you wanting to know what happens to the poor Mucker next... but perhaps I just like my men a bit more gentlemanly and so it could only manage a 4...

Jim says

I remembered this fondly & should have kept that vague memory. I didn't really remember much of the story, just bits here & there. Overall, it wasn't a bad story, but some elements of it were tough to take. While it was very well narrated, hearing the Mucker's (Billy) mangled version of American was tough to understand. Thankfully, there wasn't a lot of dialog nor was it terribly important.

A person's physical appearance is super important to their type of person, morals & such. I'm reading The Last Man by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley & it has a similar theme. Actually, there's a lot of similarity in the writing. ERB just makes his points a LOT faster, thankfully.

The Mucker has been raised where the worst actions (hitting or tripping women, stealing, & other violence) are the best. Once he is in the company of 'decent' people, he just naturally sees the error of his ways & becomes a sterling-hearted character very reminiscent of Tarzan (black hair, gray eyes, big, strong, etc.). His head is shaped well, with a high brow, & the lines of his physique are 'clean'. Obviously, a good guy who was just raised wrong & the whole story sets out to prove this.

The female, while a fragile ingenue, was surprisingly tough at times. Threatened with rape (view spoiler) Other times, she's carried when she should be walking. It is she who melts men's hearts & makes them good no matter how badly they've sinned in the past, if there is any good in them whatsoever.

ERB is known for his racism, but that wasn't a big deal here. The black cook got the same treatment as the other sailors. The headhunting Samurai were referred to as Chinamen by Billy, but he was a crude character. They weren't the most brilliant foes anyone faced, but bad guys are generally brutish &/or stupid in the ERB universes.

The romantic thread was just nauseating & ridiculous, but definitely sets up for the next book, The Return of the Mucker. I don't think Librivox has that recorded yet nor do I feel like digging it out to read it. I'm sure being able to skim the text is far better than any narration.
