



The Letters, Vol. 1: 1945-1959

William S. Burroughs , Oliver Harris

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Guru of the Beat generation, controversial eminence grise of the international avant-garde, dark prophet and blackest of black-humor satirists, William S. Burroughs has had a range of influence rivalled by few living writers. This meticulously assembled volume of his correspondence vividly documents the personal and cultural history through which Burroughs developed, revealing clues to illuminate his life and keys to open up his texts. More than that, they also show how in the period 1945-1959, letter-writing was itself integral to his life and to his fiction-making. These letters reveal the extraordinary route that took Burroughs from narrative to anti-narrative, from Junky to Naked Lunch and the discovery of cut-ups, a turbulent journey crossing two decades and three continents. The letters track the great shifts in Burroughs' crucial relationship with Allen Ginsberg, from lecturing wise man ("Watch your semantics young man") to total dependence ("Your absence causes me, at times, acute pain.") to near-estrangement ("I sometimes feel you have mixed me up with someone else doesn't live here anymore."). They show Burroughs' initial despair at the obscenity of his own letters, some of which became parts of Naked Lunch, and his gradual recognition of the work's true nature ("It's beginning to look like a modern Inferno.") They reveal the harrowing lows and ecstatic highs of his emotions, and lay bare the pain of coming to terms with a childhood trauma ("Such horror in bringing it out I was afraid my heart would stop."). It is a story as revealing of his fellow Beats as it is of Burroughs: he writes of Kerouac and Cassady in the midst of the journey immortalized as On the Road ("Neal is, of course, the very soul of this voyage into pure, abstract, meaningless motion."), and to Ginsberg as he was writing Howl ("I sympathize with your feelings of depression, beatness: 'We have seen the best of our time.'"). And throughout runs the unmistakable Burroughs voice, the u

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Rick says

Interesting individual.

J. says

Utterly fascinating to watch Burroughs go from uptight, conservative trust fund asshole to freewheeling queer ex-pat intent on pushing the creative envelope as far as it will go. To watch how antagonistic his relationship with Ginsberg began and how loving it ultimately turned. Shocking to find out what happened to Kiki (I never knew). My only wish is that there had been some of the letters to Lewis that undoubtedly were written. The speed with which Burroughs wrote those early works was phenomenal, and the letter provide such an intimate glance into his process. Not for everyone, but essential if you are into The Beats.

Gautsho says

Hoopis teistmoodi vaade biidihärradele, võiks öelda, et täiskasvanu pilgu läbi, aga täiskasvanu on vaheldumisi heroiini/morfiini/kokaiini/kanepi/u saja eri tableti, muu taime ja kemikaali vaevades - kohe-kohe jätab igaveseks maha, juba jättiski, juba päris kauaks, oi näe, hakkab jälle pihta. Ime, et ta ellu jäi, ime, et ta kirjutas (ehkki raamatuid ikka heroiinivaheaegadel, suurem osa muud kraami ei läinud tal õieti arvessegi). Ma olen midagi temalt kunagi lugenud ka, aga nii ammu, et enam ei ole 100% kindel, kas "Junkyt" või "Queeri", aga nyüd on huvi muidugi olemas, võib-olla kunagi julgen isegi "Naked lunchi" lugeda. Ja äge, et Burroughs tekitas Ginsbergi vastu sellise huvi, mida Kerouac päris ei ole suutnud.

John says

This is Burroughs with none of the literary experimentalism and artifice and he is one hard-boiled dude. I think that current day libertarians would take to this writing like ducks to duckponds! The grit builds, letter by letter as the Burroughs arc progresses. Man! What a crazy life - and all in there and between the lines to his pals, Allen and Jack. Too cool for school.

Steve Cooper says

Burroughs and his writings are complex and problematic. The various characters that express themselves in his personality evoke so many contradictory reactions that it's hard to get the author himself into focus. And reading his novels outside the context of the man himself is particularly unsatisfying. That's why this book of letters is so welcome. Along with recordings of his routines (that fascinating voice conveying such dry, ironic malice - "The Best of William Burroughs, from Giorno Poetry Systems" has some of the best I've

heard), these letters give us a useful perspective on Burroughs to better appraise his work.

The Burroughs who emerges in these letters stands in sharp contrast to the persona he cultivated. The cool, world-wise narrator/character of his novels is shown here to have been self-deluded, weak-willed, prone to bouts of love-sickness, and particularly susceptible to being hoodwinked. But it's like the complementary hidden side of any real person. There is wit and humanity here in the titanic struggle he waged to integrate a powerful evil he felt deep in his soul. While the struggle often manifested as a battle with addiction, the evil wasn't junk: It was a pure bloody-mindedness that we all have inside. "Likely a survival mechanism inherited from our simian forebears," Burroughs might have opined.

How much of these letters is lies? The editor helps with some fact-checking footnotes, but many key facts can never be checked. A tantalizing psychological dimension is opened when Burroughs writes about his stunted heterosexual alter-ego, but Burroughs wasn't above subverting facts to manipulate people. Whatever the truth is we'll never know for sure, but these writings are entertaining and thought-provoking. They detail the inner workings of a special mind shaped by unique circumstances. Publication of these letters proves that for all his bloody-minded self-sabotage, Burroughs' output refuses to be marginalized.

Sam says

The cut-and-paste method of his better known novels isn't very evident in these dark and witty correspondences. What you will find instead are the weird, vaudevillian shtick of one of America's great satirists. Burroughs was probably one of the most cosmopolitan Ugly Americans you'll ever read. Bet you can't read just one!

Nicholas says

A more revealing portrait than a biography, although it helps to have read one.

Stephen Bird says

This book, like "Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of Williams S. Burroughs" (by Ted Morgan)--which I read shortly after "The Letters"--was inspiring, enlightening, and often disturbing (as would be expected with Burroughs). These letters are often businesslike--IE Allen Ginsberg was Burroughs' agent in the 50's and was responsible for the publishing of "Junky" in 1953. I'd recommend reading "The Letters" after "Literary Outlaw", as "Literary Outlaw" provides a detailed context for these letters. In "The Letters" I felt a genuine shift once Burroughs started working on what would eventually become "Naked Lunch" in Tangier. During that period, the quality of the letters (the majority are written to Allen Ginsberg, some to Jack Kerouac, as well as sporadic communications with other members of Burroughs' international community) becomes more focused, forceful and driven. Nonetheless, in this body of work, the emotional state of Burroughs remains elusive and mysterious. I believe this collection of letters would be very helpful to anyone pursuing the path of avant-garde writer. Burroughs was not interested in creating compromised or "saleable" work, and while he was tormented by this aspect of his profession, in the end he did exactly what he wanted to do and became influential in the process.

Jr says

i'm rereading this. i need it after the dan brown.

it's so refreshing to know there are folks like wsb out there. reading the letters he sent to various others, primarily allen ginsbergh, gives a safe glimpse into an adventurous spirit unlike most. he was interested in exploring in every sense of the word. none of it was safe. i've always thought it was impressive wsb lived as long as he did. this collection is insightful for those that have read NAKED LUNCH and would like a peek behind the curtain at its creation. many of the pieces i remember from that "novel" were originally part of these letters. worth it for the die-hard wsb fan.

Eric Cartier says

The birth of a writer. Burroughs tests out various voices and then seems seized by Swift. Most of his mid to late 50's letters are hilarious, but they're borne out of tremendous suffering and exhausting bouts of creativity. It's amazing to see how Burroughs used letters as palimpsests on which to create, graft and rebuild significant portions of his early fiction (Junky, Queer, and the great anti-novel, Naked Lunch). This collection is essential reading for any WSB fan.

Matthew W says

This book is great if you want to get to know the "real" William S. Burroughs or at least what was going on his mind from 1945-1959. This book even gives you a better understanding of WSB than the excellent Burroughs biography Literary Outlaw. I hope Penguin releases the second volume of letters sometime soon.

Emil says

excellent excellent excellent! very intimate mad ravings mostly addressed to allen ginsberg. burroughs first flees new orleans when he's charged with weed and heroin possession and moves to mexico city. he has easier time there with drugs and hitting on 13 year old boys, but he shoots and kills his wife accidentally while playing william tell, and ends up in tangiers where again he does drugs freely and has sex with underage rent-boys for a dollar. some of ginsberg's letters to tangiers gets lost when he lives a bit reclusively in mexico, and burroughs freaks out thinking ginsberg decided to abandon him. he starts writing to mutual friends jack kerouac and neal cassady daily and pleads them to convince ginsberg to write to him. there's a 5 page letter to kerouac that is especially poignant considering what a misanthropic gun-toting life-long junkie burroughs was. he says to kerouac: "tell allen i plead guilty to vampirism and other crimes against life. but i love him and nothing cancels love." kerouac, being the drunk fuck that he was, says "if you love allen so much why don't you come back to the states and live with him?" not considering ginsberg just wanted to be close friends with burroughs, and had no sexual interest in him. i wish ginsberg's responses to all these letters were available.

Mat says

Burroughs the man, the writer, the innovator

Fantastic read. Read this and you will see, smell, touch, taste, hear and most of all experience the real William S Burroughs right down to the marrow.

Out of all the beats, it soon becomes apparent that not only was Burroughs the most articulate, educated writer (which really comes through in his correspondence), but also that he was the most intelligent and crucial figure of the whole counterculture movement.

This book reveals how he was able to masterfully blend his crazy and often hilarious routines right down in the essence, the chromosomal level of his letters as either 'practice' towards building his literary masterpieces or as actual palimpsests from which he could excise certain sections and re sew them to make new texts like an expert surgeon/author.

There is also plenty of pain and pathos within these pages as Burroughs tries repeatedly and repeatedly to kick junk (often convincing himself that he no longer needs it or is off it, even though he is usually right back on the wagon within weeks or months) as well as his struggles to overcome heartbreaks or unrequited love (I think he was in love with Ginsberg and later on with Gysin).

I have always respected Burroughs as a vital writer and intellectual of the twentieth century. But this book, made me LOVE him.

Highly, highly recommended.

David says

Witness Ol' Seward graduate from clumsy correspondent to all-out avenger of the WORD, man. Watch as he treats his close friends to oodles of guff about higher consciousness and Scientology and Reich's Orgones. Hear him describe sleeping with boys across four (count them: FOUR!) continents. See his junk addiction in all it's gooey sadness.

Good news is the humour in *The Naked Lunch* is absolutely Burroughs' own. A real special sort of dark sarcasm. A self-servingness that was inherited by Pynchon.

The letters shine some light on the jumble that is NL. Funny how much WSB wanted to meet Paul Bowles. So frickin' fickle - if WSB was my pen pal I would have dropped him the first time he talked over me in letter form. Letters are at least as good as (t)NL.

Ben says

Biographical Note on William Seward Burroughs

I have no past life at all being a notorious plant or "intrusion" if you prefer the archeological word for an "intruded" artefact. I walk in passport was allegedly born St. Louis, Missouri, more or less haute bourgeois circumstances -- that is he could have got in the St. Louis Country Club because at that time nobody had anything special against him but times changed and lots of people had lots of things against him and he got his name in the papers and there were rumors of uh legal trouble. Remember? I prefer not to. Harvard 1936 AB. Nobody ever saw him there but he had the papers on them. Functioned once as an Exterminator in Chicago and learned some basic principles of "force majeure." He achieved a state of inanimate matter in Tanger with chemical assistants. Resuscitated by dubious arts he travelled extensively in all directions open to him.

In any case he wrote a book and that finished him. They killed the author many times in different agents concentrated on the road I pass, achieving thereby grey-hounds, menstrual cramps and advanced yoga to a distance of two feet legitimate terrain... And never the hope of ground that is yours
