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BOOKS



Naked Lunch @ 50: Anniversary Essays

Edited by Oliver Harris and Ian Macfadyen

(Southern Illinois University Press, 2009)

Review by Rami Shamir

“**N**aked Lunch @ 50” is a comprehensive and exciting study of varying critical perspectives on all aspects of William S. Burroughs’ masterpiece *Naked Lunch*. Oliver Harris and Ian Macfadyen do an excellent job of providing the reader with an essential handbook to which they both add significant contributions.

Harris’ essay “The Beginnings of “*Naked Lunch*, an Endless Novel”” provides a touchstone for understanding the work in two vital contexts, which are revisited in later perspectives: *Naked Lunch* as the final installment of the Beat Canon triad; and the hype surrounding the novel before its conception as a novel, the origins of which are

Other Reviews This Month:

Questioning the Veil:
Open Letters to Muslim Women
by Marnia Lazreg

situated in Allen Ginsberg's dedication to *Howl*, which when assayed through Harris' analysis is revealed as a coup of underground marketing by Ginsberg, who "had been working at Towne-Oller in San Francisco, the latest position in a five-year career in market research. Ginsberg's dedication was not just mythmaking but an agent's act of marketing" (Harris 2009, 15)

The Second Kingdom
by Ron Singer

Beats at Naropa:
An Anthology
Anne Waldman
and Laura Wright, eds.

Doctor Pluss
Collected Couteau
by Rob Couteau

A Harry Blamires a-la-*The New Bloomsday Book*-style compendium, compacted and divided into five "dossiers" by Ian Macfadyen, provides a quincunx thread of rising narration throughout the intra-and-extra-critical dialogue (Davis Schneiderman refers to the scholarship of Oliver Harris; Jennie Skerl cites postmodern critique of *Naked Lunch* in the criticism of Allen Hibbard, Richard Dellamora, and Marianne Dekoven) that ties the "anniversary essays" together. In providing definition to otherwise esoteric terms, Macfadyen reveals the essentially political nature that lies underneath the superficial "drug narrative" of *Naked Lunch*. In "dossier FOUR", Macfadyen includes a section on some of the novel's most memorable characters - the Mugwumps.

"Mugwump was the term given to Republicans who supported Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, in the 1884 presidential election. Derived from the dialect of the Algonquian Native Americans of Massachusetts, the term signifies an underling who behaves like a panjandrum - a totally untrustworthy and self-important fence sitter, a professional turncoat. Burroughs uses the expression to characterize treacherous, unctuous creatures which slowly undulate and ooze and secrete, caress and sidle and goose, their mug on one side, their wump on the other." (Macfadyen 2009, 162)

This critical analysis of the real politic underlying the high literary metaphor of Burroughs' masterpiece is continuously reaffirmed in the "anniversary essays". Rob Johnson traces the physical highway traveled by William S. Burroughs "in the mid- to late 1940's" on the "*Naked Lunch* inter-American highway," which stretches from Mexico City through Texas into New Orleans. The same highway is traversed early in *Naked Lunch*, spotted with brilliant poetic blasts of symbolic landmarks, which Johnson successfully ties to their real-life counterparts. Johnson's "William S. Burroughs as 'Good Ol' Boy': *Naked Lunch* in East Texas" investigates Burroughs' brief stay in East Texas, deciphering metaphorical allusions throughout *Naked Lunch* and tying them to that period. The end result is cardinal, revealing the influence Burroughs' East Texas experience exerted on one of *Naked Lunch*'s most noted sections: "The County Clerk". In examining the period's impact on Burroughs' work, Johnson commendably reveals the possibility that there was an aspect of "The Good Ol' Boy" in Burroughs himself:

"Beginning in 1945, Burroughs had undergone hypnoanalysis and narcoanalysis with Dr. Lewis David Wolberg, who uncovered multiple personas in Burroughs' psyche. There was a St. Louis aristocrat, a lesbian governess, an inscrutable Chinaman, and "Old Luke" - a tobacco farmer who Allen Ginsberg said had the personality of a "psychotic Southern sheriff." (Johnson 2009, 49)

Johnson concludes his analysis with an autobiographical anecdote. On a research visit he made to Coldspring, Texas for the essay he asks a guide about a hanging tree, and through the conversation realizes "after all, it turns out, me, I'm a good ol' boy, too." (Johnson 2009, 54). This aspect of personal quest as part of literary research is present in many of the essays, attributing them with their own Beatish sense of autobiography, and this demystification of Burroughs as countercultural icon is a goal many of the contributors strive towards and achieve, so that, as Jennie Skerl points out in her discussion "The Book, the Movie, the legend: *Naked Lunch* at 50" attention can be "directed away from the popular icon" to focus on varying aspects of the novel.

Robert Holton delivers a paramount contribution of such scholarship in his “Room for One More”: The Invitation to *Naked Lunch*.’ In it, Holton describes how the novel’s introduction, *Deposition Testimony Concerning a Sickness*, which “has been a part of the text since the 1962 Grove Press edition,” firmly established the novel in the context of outsider culture and Burroughs’ ‘junkie’ in the context of outsider literature of the time:

The “Deposition” presents Burroughs as an exemplary anomic, and while this can hardly be considered adjusted, neither is it a position of resistance in any straightforward manner. Rejected as useless by capitalism, anomics contribute no revolutionary potential to socialism.” (Holton 2009, 29)

And:

“From J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield to John Updike’s Rabbit Angstrom and beyond, literature presented characters fleeing from the compromising homogeneity of the center in search of some more-authentic centrifugal experience.” (Holton 2009, 31)

The anomic, or outsider, argument pervading Holton’s essay explains why *Naked Lunch* has endured for fifty years, and as a new generation of outsiders has begun to “tune out” of the normative system, whether by taking the means of production into their own hands in the growing embrace of DIY movements, the conscription to political apathy, or the full detachment from the status quo by a decision to accept a genuine contemporary form of Bohemian detachment, Holton’s essay indirectly points to an alienated breeding ground similar to that anomic wasteland of the fifties, many of whose denizens are avid readers of *Naked Lunch*.

These critical treasures alone would ensure the importance of the “anniversary essays,” but the multi-faceted, full meal provided by Polina MacKay’s profile on the history of *Naked Lunch*’s cover art, Jed Birmingham’s discourse on collecting editions of *Naked Lunch* (focusing primarily on the 1959 Olympia edition), R. B. Morris’ essay on the influence of *Naked Lunch* on Bob Dylan, and many other culturally innovative discussions make “*Naked Lunch @ 50*” a necessary part of any library. Readers interested in Burroughs, American literature, *Naked Lunch*, or The Beats should consider this beautifully crafted book to be as essential as an English Dictionary, to which they will return continuously over the years.