

**NAKED LUNCH @ 50:  
ANNIVERSARY ESSAYS**

Edited by Oliver Harris and Ian MacFadyen  
Southern Illinois University Press  
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312 pages; cloth, \$34.95; paper, \$22.95

For students of the perplexing dynamic of William Seward Burroughs's imagination, the nature of postmodernism or postcolonial theory, *Naked Lunch @ 50* is an essential work, comparable in importance to the annotated *Howl* or the Viking Press publication of the scroll version of *On the Road*.

I knew *Naked Lunch* (1959) was a classic when I read it, sometime in the early 1960s—hilariously fantastic relief from a surfeit of so sobering Henry James. I had already read *Ulysses* so I had some experience with an encoded text with a dense texture—but even with James Joyce, I had the advantage of explications by Gilbert Stuart and Harry Levin to help me limp along.

*Naked Lunch* is the most arcane, allusive, elusively elliptical fiction since *Ulysses*, and this compendium is now the best source available for deciphering its spectacular hieroglyphics, for mapping it intricately fantastical geography and discovering the roots of its landscape of nightmare in East Texas, Tangiers, or Paris.

As a cultural resource of the first order, Oliver Harris and Ian MacFadyen have provided, with their interstitial commentaries and the scholarly essays they have chosen to include, the most revealing and penetrating analyses of Burroughs's masterwork, enabling its future readers to appreciate it on a more profound contextual level. At the same time, the reader is systematically informed by exact textual observation, by a clinical evaluation of linguistic variables, by probing the compulsive terms of Burroughs's drug and sexual underworld, by considering the parodic implications of song lyrics, film noir, and pulp fiction, and by exploring the biographical and myth projecting potentialities of any great literary work.

Take, for instance, MacFadyen's assertion that "Burroughs's geographical references contain secret, hip connotations," complicating the embroidery of the novel in the manner of T.S. Eliot's allusions in *The Waste Land*, or in the way Joyce's use of Greek myth adds a meaningful dimension to *Ulysses*. Early in *Naked Lunch* Burroughs's junkie protagonist flees towards Mexico City on the Pan-American Highway with a companion. They stop for a fix:

"Thomas and Charlie" I said.

"What?"

"That's the name of this town. Sea level..."

MacFadyen's explication of this seemingly innocent snatch of dialogue is representative of the probing throughout *Naked Lunch @ 50*:

This mysterious, oblique exchange refers to the town Tamazunchale, 220 miles north of Mexico City, pronounced "Thomas 'n' Charlie" are slang expressions related to narcotics. Thomas comes from Tom Mix (signifying a fix), Tom becoming Thomas just as Charlie, a euphemism for cocaine ("C" for cocaine) became "Charles" in Britain. The words have sexual connotations, Charlie meaning cunt, derived from

Cockney rhyming slang (Charlie Hunt "is a right cunt") while Tom means a prostitute, and the term was taken up by homosexuals to signify available trade through its reference to the penis (John Thomas = cock). The interlocutory "What?" is a double take, pointing to the hidden significance of these two words, their multiple coded meanings encapsulating in an extraordinary way the operations of slang in narcotics parlance and sexual euphemism.

MacFadyen's commentaries occur sporadically throughout the volume, a buckshot presentation (like Burroughs's paintings), not consecutive but circular, swiftly moving around a perimeter of rapidly changing perspective.

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My second example of the brilliance of this collection is Oliver Harris's essay "The Beginnings of *Naked Lunch*, an Endless Novel" on the genesis and imposition of the mythology preceding the publication of the novel, the hype provided by Burroughs's Beat compatriots Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac which contained elements of revelation as well as mockery for the untutored and the cognoscenti. "For fifty years the genetic fables at the heart of *Naked Lunch*'s mythology," Harris claims, "have led us around in circles, mystifying the very basis to interpretation by turning fact and fiction, life and legend into a fast revolving door. From this trap there can be no final exit." Harris argues that Ginsberg's 1956 dedication of *Howl* to "William Seward Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, an endless novel which will drive everybody mad," and Kerouac's enigmatic portrayal of Burroughs in *On the Road* the following year launched a publicity campaign which helped to form an anticipatory audience, which would only be compounded by the subsequent censorship trials. Harris's essay, as conjectural as it depends on precisely located textual discoveries, focuses on the accidental and manipulated contingencies of the novel's publication and Burroughs's sometimes carnival intentions.

Among the remaining twenty-two pieces, the reader will find an abundance of compelling curiosities, a plethora of esoteric instruction, and moments of considerable insight into the cultural contexts of Burroughs's writing and its process. I especially liked Rob Johnson's account of a cracker barrel folkloristic element reflecting the period when Burroughs lived in East Texas (when he unsuccessfully tried to grow



Detail from cover

opium), particularly the lynching, the parodied racism, the grotesque versions of Southern mob justice. Johnson alleviates a certain Eurocentric bias in this collection which reminds me that interest in Burroughs's work has always been more international than provincial.

I also liked both Allen Hibbard's and Kurt Hemmer's essays on the impact of a Tangiers emerging from colonialism in the mid 1950s while Burroughs was working on *Naked Lunch*, distorting the nationalist riots in the Arab quarter into some of the hysterical pandemonium of the novel. I responded as well to Andrew Hussey's essay on the revolutionary praxis of Paris when Burroughs was living there in 1958–59, in the wake of the Algerian War and avant-garde critical theory; R. B. Morris's lively version of some of the cultural consequences of *Naked Lunch* (affecting, in his view, even Bob Dylan's lyrics); and Davis Schneiderman's piece on the ways in which *Naked Lunch* resists co-option into the American literary mainstream.

I've exposed several thousand undergraduate and graduate students to *Naked Lunch*, and they still respond to the explosive violence of its bizarre fantasies, sometimes to its morbid burlesque, often queasy with its rapacious sexuality. If I show them some of Howard Brookner's documentary, they usually chuckle when Mortimer, Burroughs's older brother, testifies (in short pants) that the novel repels him, that the objectionable language and depiction exists just to shock.

My own report from the Bunker is that *Naked Lunch* continues to offend most of its readers which I take as a sign of its continuing vitality. In another fifty years, scholars will still be talking about it.

John Tytell's *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* is now published by Ivan Dee His *Passionate Lives* just appeared in a South Korean incarnation, published by Achimisul.

Michael Hemmingson on William T. Vollmann; Allison Block on Robin Messing  
Dinda L. Gorlée on Françoise Sagan; John Tytell on Oliver Harris & Ian McFadyen

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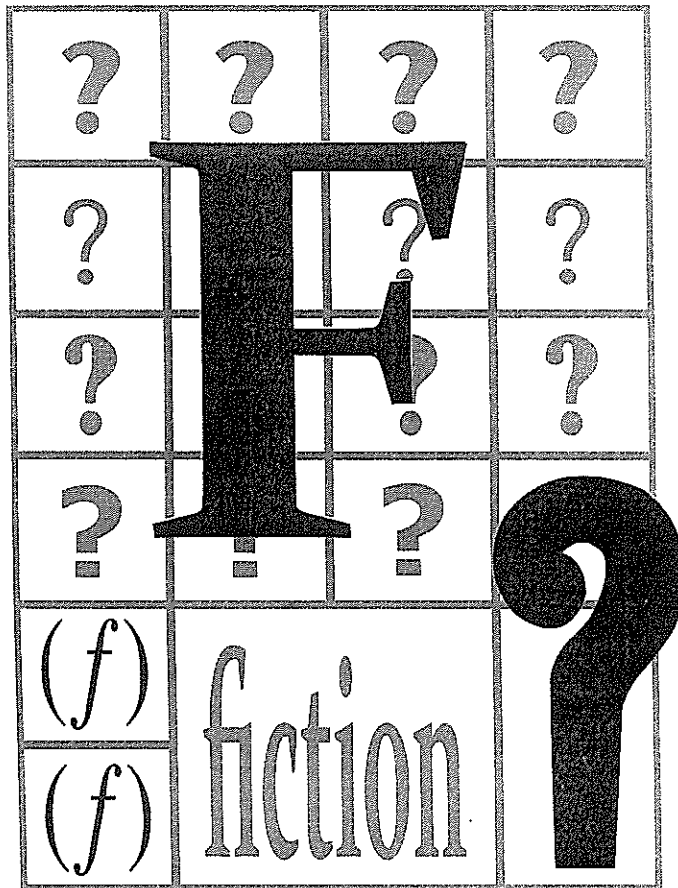
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