

Meeting Hank

I guess it wasn't so much the books themselves that were getting to me but the fact that they were imposed on me. With the books, well, you could switch off, let your mind wander and become disinterested of the outside world. Easy and delightful. But the tests and essays, God, they simply ruined them. For as long as I can remember I had to read five or six books each year and then take a test on them. I never finished them. I used to pay about ninety pence each time for the most detailed and precise summary I could find on the internet. It became a personal rebellion. Don't get me wrong, I did enjoy reading, but that enjoyment was taken away from me when I was tested on my knowledge of the book. There's just something about analysing things which completely destroys them. This is mainly the reason why I was amazed when I became intensely captivated by Bukowski's writing.

'For all the fathers'.

These are the first words that I ever read by Charles Bukowski. I had just came back from a five hour bus trip and I had a thirty minute walk ahead of me to get home. It was around four and I only carried five pounds with me. The heat was starting to take effect and drops of sweat were running down my face. I was just ten minutes away from home until I realised there was a book store around the corner, lucky for me. I wanted to get in to get away from the sticky heat and also drink something inside. There is a strange habit which I had been developing throughout the years which involved lemonade slush and a book store. I always used to buy two or three lemonades slushes and drink them while wandering around the book store; looking at the covers, reading the descriptions and at wild times, even reading the first few pages. It just felt good. I used my 5 pounds to buy two of them and then I entered the store. I commenced my routine with one lemonade slush in each hand and a slow walk around the classics' section. I started with a few descriptions of Isabel Allende and even a few pages of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, until I came across Bukowski. I had never heard of the man, and the cover, an American flag next to some palm trees in the middle of nowhere, wasn't promising. I opened the book and the words on that empty dedication page just grasped me. 'For all the fathers' suggested that there would be a story involving a son-father relationship, a complicated one. It yelled sadness, frustration and a kind of desperation which moved me. Little did I know that those words would lead me to read his eight novels, hundreds of poems and four years later,

write about him. I finished my slushes, went back home, asked for money and bought it.

“The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of a tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there, I liked being under there.”

It was called *Ham on Rye*. That was the first paragraph. It intrigued me. It sounded familiar; being hidden, but feeling safe and happy. It was plain yet honest, I enjoyed it and so I read on.

“It must have been Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922.”

God, I was delighted. I could picture little Bukowski feeling joyful under his table, ignoring everyone else around him. Bukowski was more than good. What a writer, I thought. He could play with the language of a kid and the language of an adult. After that, I was completely immersed. I quickly became a Bukowski fan. After *Ham on Rye* it came along *Women, Post Office* and *Factotum*. I couldn't believe what I was reading. The simplicity and candour of the writing and how it accomplished to imbue mundanity at its finest with a philosophical weight; how it helped me to understand that I was being part of the never-ending cycle of ordinary life and that I was being forced into it. I then knew, that the tiniest difficulties of every-day life could become more bearable. Don't ask me why, but I felt relieved after reading him.

I've always found quite intriguing the way Bukowski has been consistently portrayed during his entire career. If you look at the summary written at the back of a Bukowski novel you will probably find a short description which portrays Henry Chinaski, Bukowski's alter-ego, as a drunk obsessed with women, and most important of all; a “born loser”. Neeli Cherkovski, Bukowski's longtime friend and author of his biography, once explained that Chinaski was simply “a young man on a quest for self-definition”. I would say, this would be one of the main reasons for Bukowski's many, many readers; his ambiguous but gradual willingness for growth, his rebellious attitude towards society's system of control and of course, his enduring humour. Bukowski has never been described as a mainstream author despite being a writer who has sold millions of books internationally and has been translated into a dozen languages. Just like Adam Kirsch described him once for *The New Yorker*, Bukowski belongs to that small group of writers “whom each new reader discovers with a transgressive thrill”. Perhaps it's the fact that Chinaski, the American anti-

hero, becomes a relatable character when facing relationships, family and life itself. In most of his novels, probably all of them, Chinaski is presented as a character who views the traditional life projects like marriage and employment as despairing and even shameful. For his readers, he isn't just a rebellious author but the antithesis of the structured-model American man.

Despite selling millions of books, it is on the Internet where the 21st century Bukowski fan generation blossomed. There are not hundreds, but thousands of websites dedicated to him. I once asked a Bukowski reader about his devotion to his writing and he told me: "He was a provocateur poet of his time, he made people think, good or bad. He made me have a reflection on society. He was transparent and didn't hide behind hypocrisy, in that moment of my life, that's what I needed". This is a typical emotion amongst Bukowski's readers. To them, he is the literary provocateur with a writing that throws you around all over the place. On bukowskiforum.com daily debates take place about the poet's language, style and life. A user once explained what he admired the most about him: "It's his fearlessness. That man created everything- past, present, and future with a steady eye. He didn't depend on tradition, custom or culture for his validation. He knew he had what it takes and that eventually he would be appreciated".

Today, fans can no longer phone Bukowski, send him mail or even turn up at his home at Los Angeles where he lived great part of his life. But before his death, in 1994 from leukaemia, they could and often did. In his book *Women* and in several of his poems, Bukowski frequently recounted the numerous times fans would show up at his home. Sometimes, young writers seeking guidance. Others, loyal admirers hoping to drink a glass of whiskey with him. As he wrote in one of his poems *The Secret of My Endurance*: "I still get letters in the mail, mostly from cracked-up men in tiny rooms with factory jobs or no jobs at all who are living with whores or no woman at all, no hope, just booze and madness...I'm 60 years old now and the critics say my stuff is getting better

than ever." It is not only the ease of mixing humour and despair what characterises him, but at times a bitterly vulgar tone and his relentless quest for some understanding of his place in life.

Yet Bukowski's success has been at times defined as controversial and even incomprehensible, particularly for his attitude towards women. It is

no mystery how Bukowski has referred to women throughout his literary career, especially in his novel *Women*. It was a predictable ticking time bomb. This has always been a subject that has wandered my mind when reading him. I once asked one of my classmates to read one of his novels. She had never heard about the man and after finishing the book she contacted me. She explained : “He writes women as objects rather than people and has a pretty misogynistic view on women in general, look at this quote : ‘ There are women who can make you feel more with their bodies and their souls, but these are the exact women who will turn the knife into in front of the crowd. Of course, I expect this, but the knife still hurts’ he sees gender as an enemy”. I then found a Bukowski facebook fan page, asked another reader and she replied: “he simply was a regular misogynist who lived a life of bachelor, a love for gambling, drinking and smoking. He embraced his vices and found freedom in them”. I thought about it. It made sense what she was saying, but I kept thinking that Bukowski’s comments towards women reflected his despair and desperation in his relationships. His novels have consistently been thoroughly autobiographical and he has written about the weight of his relationships. If you read his novels, you will find out that most of the women he talks about were his partners for a long time of his life. Chinaki’s tempestuous relationship with Lydia Vance in *Women* was actually based on Bukowski’s long term relationship with sculptress and poet Linda King. Have you read *Post Office*? If you have, you know Joyce. Joyce was in fact Bukowski’s wife, Barbara Frye. And of course you had that strange mixture of selfishness and affection when Betty, Bukowski’s partner, dies. Betty was actually Bukowski’s great love Jane Cooney Baker, a widowed alcoholic who died in 1962. There’s brutality and the darkest humour at times, but intensely compelling. It fascinated me.

I wanted to know more about Bukowski’s readers. What they thought about him and his writing. I quickly started talking to a writer. I contacted him after noticing he was a member of another Bukowski fan page. We talked about films, books and journalism. I remember he was the first one to mention Bukowski: “Do you know Bukowski?” I said yes and then asked him what he thought about him and if he considered his writing slightly chauvinistic “You know, I adore that man. Anyone who dismisses Bukowski as a chauvinist may know a lot about political correctness, but knows nothing about women, love or writing. I think he loved women. If you really read his books you’d know he was able to forgive his women for things most men would not be able to handle or swallow. This is

because he understands that the weakness is the most consistent trait of humans”. He was right. Bukowski was able to understand weakness, human traits and most important of all, he was able to forgive. It’s humane, even saintly if you ask me. But what I find fascinating, is how he transformed himself, in the course of dozens of books, into this drunk, gambler surrounded by naked women but yet, manage to bring an environment in which the human animal, in all its emotion and wildness, can flourish. In his novels, his alter-ego was named Henry Chinaski — Bukowski’s full name was Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr., and he preferred to be called Hank by his friends— but since all of his novels and poems are written in first person the fine line between Bukowski the writer and Chinaski the character is blurred. The fact is, that this is one of the things that elevates Bukowski to one of the most successful writers of the 20th century. Its part of his charm. His life and his innate obscenity are a large part of his appeal. His work seems to portray the longing desire of a teenage boy waiting to move out and experience raw life.

Bukowski’s unusual childhood played a significant role when writing his poems and novels, it becomes even more apparent when reading *Ham on Rye*. Born in Germany, to a German mother and an American serviceman father, Bukowski moved to Los Angeles at the age of ten. In the 1930s the writer’s father was unemployed and he often took out his anger on his son and wife. In the book, Bukowski explicitly describes brutal beatings, stemming from minor mistakes like arriving home ten minutes late or staying quiet at the dinner table. Bukowski’s subsequent extreme case of acne during his adolescence triggered a helpless perception of life, believing it was a symptom of constant misery: “The poisoned life had finally exploded out of me. There they were—all the withheld screams—spouting out in another form.” The extreme case of acne helped to make a shy and introverted Bukowski into a friendless apathetic teenager. But there was another element which helped trigger this solitude- an intrinsic insight and intelligence, which led to the start of a literary career. In fact, his keen ambition for literary success led to a conventional education. After graduating in high school, Bukowski attended Los Angeles City College for two years, where he took classes in art, journalism and creative writing. Bukowski soon started to write short stories which he never considered good enough, while drinking and gambling. In *Factotum* we see a Bukowski who struggles to be published and gradually loses faith in himself: “My ambition is handicapped by laziness.” Shortly after that, the legend gave up writing and worked at the post office for more than thirty

years, becoming a full-time drunk. He drifted around America from one rough job to another and from one woman to the next. This alternative low life becomes the essence to Bukowski's poetry. Uncompromising and authentic.

I remember that shortly after I bought *Ham on Rye*, I immediately started reading it. I devoured it that day. I was sat down in the sofa and my grandmother was preparing dinner. She started calling me for dinner but I didn't answer. She walked in and saw me, holding a book with a cover of an American flag and some palm trees. "I called you twice. What are you reading?", I answered "Bukowski". I then looked up and saw the disgust in her face. She turned around and went into the kitchen.

Bukowski has successfully become the hero of the anti-heroes, a drunken Ulysses drifting around the motels of America. It is easy to hate and to love Bukowski. He has this despair towards life, a dark humour and an ability to find a worthy story in the most mundane situations. He dedicated his life to one entire poem, and that is remarkable. It's just what Bukowski does.