

On Writing by Charles Bukowski

written by John Yohe | September 30, 2015



On Writing by Charles Bukowski (edited by Abel Debritto)

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On Writing by Charles Bukowski, edited by Abel Debritto, is a book Bukowski himself probably wouldn't have approved of. In everything I've read by Bukowski—with joy, and over and over—in all the poems and stories and essays, and in all the documentaries featuring interviews with him, he's never much for talking about writing, nor the idea that writing can be 'taught' or even learned other than by doing it *all the time*. Or, as he says in one interview, "It's like a beer shit. You just do it." It comes out of you, it's kind of painful "and then you look down, smell the stink of it, and you think, 'I'm good, I did that.'"

And if you don't like that quote, you probably won't like Bukowski, in any form, neither this collection of letters nor his other work, because the thing about Bukowski is his irreverence. Towards everything. Including himself. But that's why writers, and other creatives, might very well *need* to read *On Writing*: as a reminder to not take themselves too seriously, and to have fun and enjoy the process of creation, which is in evidence here.

I'm not usually a fan of collected letters by writers—I prefer to read their 'real' writing, the writing they intended for publication, though some, including Bukowski "think the letter itself is important as a form." Certainly he wrote hundreds, thousands, over the decades. That's kind of the secret about Bukowski: he cultivated the 'myth' (as in mythic figure) of the drunken Bacchus poet, whose poetry came inspired by the gods, and he *did* drink, *but* he also wrote obsessively, all the time, in all genres (poetry, short and long fiction, essays, screenplays, *and* letters). And when he wasn't writing he was reading. He may not have been a college graduate, but he was well read, and 'learned.'

All that said, the premise of *On Writing* is that these letters, and excerpts from letters, selected and edited by Debritto, over decades of correspondence, only deal with writing—either the *process* of writing, or the 'biz'—the dealing with editors, and giving readings, and giving advice to other writers. Which works better for me than having to wade through the personal details of full letters, like in *Screams From the Balcony* and *The Captain Is Out To Lunch*, two other 'regular' collections of Bukowski letters. Having a 'theme' unites the whole book.

And too, the one interesting thing about a writer's letters is seeing him or her in 'raw' form, un-revised and improvisational. This is especially true with Bukowski, who is already considered raw and edgy to begin with. But here

we really get to see him, at least at points, in full raving, and *funny*, form, like this early (1960) letter to James Boyer May about small literary magazines, now called zines, but then called "littles":

[...] yes, the "littles" are all an irresponsible bunch (most of them) guided by young men, eager with the college flush, actually hoping to cut a buck from the thing, starting with fiery ideals and large ideas, long explanatory rejection slips, and dwindling down, finally, to letting the manuscripts stack behind the sofa or in the closet, some of them lost forever and never answered, and finally putting out a tacked-together, hacked-together poor selection of typographically botched poems before getting married and disappearing from the scene with some comment like "lack of support." Lack of support? Who in the hell are *they* to get it? What have they done but camouflage themselves behind the façade of Art, think up the name of a magazine, get it listed and wait for submissions from the same 2 or 3 hundred tired names that seem to think they are the poets of America because some 22 year-old jackass with a bongo drum and a loose 50 dollar bill accepts their worst poetry.

Most interesting in *On Writing* are the letters by Bukowski to, and about, his editor at Black Sparrow Press. I had read before, mostly by disgruntled (but loyal!) fans at bukowski.net, about John Martin's potential re-writing of Bukowski's writing, especially in the posthumous books of poetry—the main complaint being that Martin may have taken out all the 'edgy' stuff, including especially any lines referencing drinking so as to have Bukowski's work be more acceptable to mainstream readers, both for artistic, and maybe financial reasons (i.e. he could sell more books). And there's some evidence that that was Martin's intent: He refused to allow Bukowski to be included in the (great) anthology *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, which was considered blasphemy by all Bukowski fans: Bukowski is the *king* of outlaw poetry in America.

And I have to say that before I even read others' complaints about this that I too had noticed a certain change in tone in the posthumous works. They're still *good*, they're still Bukowski, but not as good as his books in his last decade of life, like *The Last Night of The Earth Poems* (1992). There's perhaps a certain blandness that I attributed to maybe these being the 'leftovers' and/or Bukowski's having achieved middle-class-ness. Now, I'm not so sure.

Some of the posters on bukowski.net share the same feeling, and point to the original versions of some of these poems in literary magazines, which are different than the versions that ended up in the posthumous publications. So, who was making the changes? Has to be Martin, right? All plausible, but I wasn't willing to get on board, seeing as how Bukowski loyally remained with Black Sparrow his whole life. And, I mean, that's what editors do, too, is tweak manuscripts to make them better, sometimes without the agreement of the author. Example: Kerouac's 'original scroll' version of *On The Road* isn't as good as the edited and popular version. I'm sorry, call me a blasphemer, but it's true.

In *On Writing* though, many of these letters show the frustration Bukowski

sometimes felt with Martin, including Martin's attempt to re-write the novel *Women*, leaving me now thinking that, much as I think that may be his best novel, it could have been *better* if Martin hadn't meddled. Or, anyways, I'd like to read the original manuscript. Plus, according to Bukowski, Martin might be sitting on hundreds of more poems. The last posthumous collection, *The Continual Condition*, came out in 2009. I think we're past due for another round, bartender!

I can't help thinking that Debritto is one of those who thinks Martin is doing Bukowski a disservice, for whatever reason, financial or ego. He doesn't ever say it, but the inclusion of many letters by Bukowski complaining about Martin (both to Martin himself and to others) certainly adds up to, at best, a love/hate relationship. Which, is probably a good thing for other writers to read, know, and think about.

Which leads also to the question of audience, and who might really like to read this book. Obviously, fans of Bukowski. And, I'd put writers, or students of writing. I wouldn't assign this book to an undergraduate creative writing class, though I might to a graduate level course, just to start some shit and get writers questioning and thinking about how they feel about writing, and themselves as writers. That is, do you think writing is a 'calling,' and a high Art, and that you could (and should!) be a famous writer? Well, maybe you need a wake up. Maybe your writing is just like a beer shit. And that that's not a bad thing.

Part of me would like to believe that *On Writing* might be a good introduction to Bukowski for the general reader, if only for the wildness and humor. But, I think he might come off, without the context of his 'real' published work, as a bit too raucous. For them I'd recommend *The Pleasures of the Damned*, a selected works of poetry (edited by John Martin! Hopefully without rewrites!) Or if you prefer fiction, then *Women*.

But for writers and aspiring writers, and creatives of all sorts, this is a good, fun, and (again) irreverent read. Above all, Bukowski returns again and again here (and elsewhere in other work) to the importance of writing for writing's sake. For the process, and how writing/creating makes one feel in the moment:

there is nothing more magic and beautiful than lines forming across paper. It's all there is. It's all there ever was. No reward is greater than the doing. What comes afterwards is more than secondary. I can't understand any writer who stops writing. It's like taking your heart out and flushing it away with the turds. I'll write to my last god damned breath, whether anybody thinks it's good or not. The end as the beginning. I was meant to be like this. It's as simple and profound as that. Now let me stop writing about this so that I can write about something else.