

# The House of Horrors

by CHARLES BUKOWSKI

AS A POET OF THE STREETS, BUKOWSKI RAGED AND OUTRAGED, BUT HE ALWAYS TOLD THE TRUTH—ESPECIALLY ABOUT OTHER WRITERS

**T**alking about writing is like talking about love or love-making or love-living: Too much talk about it can kill it off. Without seeking them out, I have, unfortunately, met many writers, both successful and unsuccessful—I mean at their craft. As human beings they are a bad lot, a distasteful lot, bitchy, self-centered, vicious. One thing they almost all have in common: They each believe their work great, perhaps the greatest. If they become successful they accept it as their normal due. If they fail, they feel that the editors and the publishers and the gods are against them. And it's true that many bad writers are pushed and manipulated to the top, whatever the reason may be. It's also true that many great writers have starved to death, or almost starved to death, or killed themselves or gone mad and so forth, and were later discovered as fine (though dead) talents. This historical fact gives heart to the writer who is truly bad: He likes to imagine that his (her) failure is caused by any number of things besides simply being a poor talent. Well, so we have all that.

Also, when I think of the writers I know, mostly poets, I notice that they are supported by others—wives, mostly mothers carry the economic load of those I know. And they are quite comfortable with TV sets, loaded refrigerators and apartments or houses by the sea—mostly in Venice and Santa Monica—and they sun themselves in the day, feeling tragic, these male

PHOTO COLLAGE BY JAMES IMBROGNO





TOP:  
BUKOWSKI  
LIFTING  
WEIGHTS  
IN HIS  
HOLLYWOOD  
APART-  
MENT, 1976.  
BOTTOM: THE  
AUTHOR AND  
HIS WIFE, LINDA, IN  
1996.

friends (?) of mine, and then at night, perhaps a bottle of wine and a watercress sandwich, followed by a wailing letter of their penury and greatness to somebody somewhere. Anything but writing, working, getting it done, getting the word down. Well, I guess it beats working a punch press. The wives and the mothers will work the punch press, don't worry about that. And the poets, having not lived in the outside world in reality, they will then really have nothing to write about, which they do with great ego and much dullness.

It is almost impossible to write about writing. I remember once after giving a poetry reading I asked the students, "Any questions?" One of them asked me, "Why do you write?" And I answered, "Why do you wear that red shirt?"

Being a writer is damning and difficult. If you have a talent it can leave you forever while you are sleeping one night. What keeps you going in the game is not easy to answer. Too much success is destructive; no success at all is destructive. A little rejection is good for the soul, but total rejection creates cranks and madmen, rapists, sadists, drunkards and wife-beaters. Just as too much success does.

I too have been misled by the Romantic concept of writing. As a youth I saw too many movies of the great Artist, and the writer was always some tragic and very interesting chap with a fine goatee, blazing eyes and inner truths springing to his tongue continually. What a way to be, I thought, ah. But it isn't so. The best writers I know talk very little, I mean those who are doing the good writing. In fact, there is nothing duller than a good writer. In a crowd or even with one other person, he is always busy (subconsciously) recording every goddamned thing. He is not interested in speech-making or being the Life of the Party. He is greedy; he saves his juices for the typewriter. You can talk away inspiration, you can destroy God-given genius with your mouth. Energy will only spread so far. I too am greedy. One must be. The only juices that can be given up, the only time that can simply be given away is the time for Love. Love gives strength; it breaks down inbred hatreds and prejudices. It makes the writing more full. But all other things must be saved for the work. A writer should do most of his reading while he is young; as he starts to form, reading becomes destructive—it takes the needle off the record.

A writer must keep performing, hitting the high mark or he is down on skid row. And there's no way back up. For after some years of writing, the soul, the person, the creature becomes useless to operate in any other capacity. He is unemployable. He is a bird in a land of cats. I'd never advise anybody to become a writer, only if writing is the only thing that keeps you from going insane. Then, perhaps, it's worth it.

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# BUKOWSKI: THE LEGEND AND THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

BY BARBET SCHROEDER

## THE DIRECTOR OF *BARFLY* PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTHS



SCHROEDER AND HIS FAVORITE SUBJECT ENJOYING A LAUGH DURING THE PROMOTION OF *BARFLY* IN 1987.

Misunderstandings and opposing opinions about Charles Bukowski never cease. In Germany he is considered one of the great writers of our time, and his collected works have sold more there than those of any other

sense of decency and respect for the Other. He could often be cruel in his blunt comments about people, but otherwise, he would literally not have hurt a fly.

In my DVD *The Charles Bukowski Tapes* (50 of his improvised monologues filmed in 1983-84) there is a very revealing moment in the segment entitled "Nature":

"People are indifferent. They don't get themselves in with the spider and the fly. I got myself in. I am the fly," Bukowski confesses.

This is the Bukowski you discover when you read his most beautiful poems, for instance, the ones from the collection *Love Is a Dog From Hell* (one of his 25 books of poetry). His admirers are divided equally between those who prefer his poetry and those who prefer his prose. For many, he completely changed the nature of poetry in the United States. As for his prose, he was condemned to follow Hemingway but had a darker and funnier voice. One of the best of his six novels, *Women*, the prose complement to *Love Is a Dog From Hell*, starts like this: "I was 50 years old and hadn't been to bed with a woman for four years." In the next 300 pages, using his newfound celebrity, he catches up at a rapid, hilarious pace to end up in a durable relationship with the only woman who at first refused to sleep with him.

When I think of Bukowski, the title of a book by Sartre keeps popping into my head: *Saint Genet, Poet & Martyr*. I also find myself thinking of the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes and the images of his hundreds of followers who in repudiating Plato and his idealizations, in holding fast to Cynicism, nature and extreme asceticism flourished for over 500 years until the triumph of Christ. Using his madness, Bukowski was forever trying not to be seen as a Wise Man, although that impression often stayed with those who met him. A consistently dark and devastating humor was his armor

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writer. The American East Coast literary establishment, however, has yet to take him seriously. One common misconception about him is that he was one of the Beat poets. Nothing could be further from the truth. Los Angeles has produced very few great men; Charles Bukowski is one of them. A product and chronicler of the world of the workingman, he was far too shy and proud to have joined a bohemian movement—which he could not have afforded anyway. Instead, he submerged himself in the working/drinking class, all while reading authors who had written honestly about what he, himself, was also witnessing: Dostoyevsky, Celine, Hemingway, Knut Hamsun, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, etc.

He created a legend around him based on his weekly columns: "Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness" in the *L.A. Free Press* and "Notes of a Dirty Old Man" in *Open City*, which were based on his own "improved" reality. This legend-making is not uncommon for an artist, especially for a writer who avoided using third-person narration and wrote mostly about himself as a combative and often antic drunk. But in Bukowski's case it hides one of the most important elements of his personality: an extreme, almost feminine sensitivity, accompanied by a great



BUKOWSKI AT WORK, HOLLYWOOD, 1976.

against anyone who chose to take him too seriously, and yet he was very serious and lucid about his talent.

Even in his drinking there was a form of wisdom that kept his writing fresh and allowed him to continue to sidestep his own destruction. Slowing down the drinking, for example, was done in a graceful way. I saw him in East Hollywood as he was starting to come down, at the age of 58, from hard liquor to white wine—albeit wine in very large quantities. During our early days working on the film *Barfly*, 12 empty bottles of cheap German white were often lying on the ground by three A.M. A year later, he never drank before sunset. Later still, he switched to red wine, and then, much later, drank only one bottle every other day.

He went back to hard liquor on rare evenings—once at a fancy dinner party for a music industry event at the Beverly Hills Hotel. At a table behind us sat Arnold Schwarzenegger, whom Hank tried to provoke into a fight. “If you’re really so tough,” he said to him, “come outside and show us.” In a panic, Schwarzenegger’s press agents were discreetly signaling Arnold not to respond. Later, Hank stole a carving knife from the kitchen and “went after the rich” with it, spitting on arriving Rolls-Royces.

For his chemotherapy, of course, he had to stop drinking altogether, even the reduced form. First, though, the doctors checked his liver to see if it could withstand the chemo. The test revealed he had the liver of a young man. He was a force of nature. He used a short remission to finish his last novel, *Pulp*, and in the midst of his pain, kept on laughing until the end about the human comedy he was sharply observing in the hospital around him.

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