

Naked Lunch
1959, William S Burroughs

{Quotes are from the cover of the edition I read, I do believe...}

“A masterpiece.” Newsweek

“(Burroughs is) the only American novelist today who may be conceivably possessed of genius.” Norman Mailer

Naked Lunch is... um, strange.

Look. It's like this. Every publisher gets a thousand unsolicited manuscripts every year. Half of them read like Naked Lunch and none of them get published. A good question to ask is why? And if no one is publishing those pieces of self indulgent drivel, why did someone publish Naked Lunch?

I don't have the definitive answer to either of those questions, and I don't know how or why Naked Lunch ever got published. My personal assumption is that it has to do with history and context, but before we get into that, let's back up and start from scratch. Back in the 80's I had the pleasure of listening to a televised parole board hearing starring none other than Mr. Charles Manson. At the time Mr. Manson was in fine form. He was clear, lucid, and articulate, but he did have a penchant for jumping from topic A to topic B without warning, and although the link between A & B was never expressly indicated by Mr. Manson, it was there if you wanted to look for it. Following along, puzzling out the links, watching Mr. Manson's mind at work was--to say the least--mesmerizing, captivating, almost bewitching. Of course, no faster had I figured out the link from A to B than the man was on to point C... and then D, E, F, and all points beyond--all in rapid succession. And if you didn't happen to catch the proceedings, take it on faith that the high point of the Manson parole board hearings was when he explained how he knew that he wasn't going to be paroled and that it was a bit of hypocrisy on the part of the parole board to even

be having the hearings. Granted, it was a bit self defeating to outline this to the parole board, but Manson's point was well made. He wasn't going to get paroled, he knew it, so why was everyone bothering with the charade? But whatever the reason was for the parole hearing, the bottom line is that it was mesmerizing

But Genius? Not if your goal was to get out of jail.

The same corollary holds true for Naked Lunch--or at least while reading it the Manson parole hearings came rapidly to mind. For awhile the novel is fun and it is enjoyable to watch as Burroughs hops from point A to B just like Manson, but most of the hops aren't explained, and well, since I lack most--if not all--of the cultural context that a self confessed heroin addict with a fifteen year habit might have, most of Burroughs references, metaphors, allusions, and what not are lost on me. Basically what I am saying is, if this piece of shit hit an editor's desk today he would throw it in the garbage... unless it was penned by a rock star turned heroin junky, or better yet, the media savvy Charles Manson himself.

And therein, I think we find the true literature value of Naked Lunch. Not the story, because please, if you want to understand the plot you'll need to get the Cliff Notes or hit Wiki, because you won't get it from the book. Rather, far more central to the true meaning of Naked Lunch is the realization that it was first released in 1959. Think Cold War, McCarthyism, and uptight squares. The world was a different place. Using the phrase homosexual was a bit dirty and writing a story--and trust me I'm using the term loosely--but writing a story that revolves around fags, Vaseline, ectoplasm ghosts, and an endless need to get high... well, yes. I imagine back in 1959 that was all cutting edge stuff, perhaps even genius, and Naked Lunch might actually be the first novel written in stream of consciousness format. As such, the publication of Naked Lunch may well have been a turning point for modern literature, but stream of consciousness is now passé, and what's more, I can say, fag, faggot, queer, queen, scrotum licking penis breath, and so on and so forth until I'm blue in the face and rather

than facing obscenity charges as Burroughs was, or having lawsuits filed to block release of this book (or article, blog, or whatever), folks will just ignore me when I say those sort of unpleasant phrases... Or worse! They'll send me a letter indicating that the term fag is derogatory and would I please use homosexual or whatever the preferred phrase is now. Don't ask me, you know how those faggots are always moving the line and changing the names you're supposed to call them damn queers. Give 'em an inch and they beg for the whole foot and a half, the fucking perverts, but no matter.

The point is, we have moved on. Hunter S Thompson did the stream of consciousness, endless drug use thing much better than Burroughs and in the end in a far more readable format. He may have been influenced by William S Burroughs. And if not directly influenced by, Burroughs work certainly paved the way for Thompson, but now, thirty, forty, fifty years later do we care about Burroughs. Is his work a masterpiece? Do we think he is genius?

Not me. I listened to a tape of Lenny Bruce not long ago and as near as I can tell his act revolved around saying, "Fuck!" Decades later, Richard Prior--or was it Eddie Murphy--did it much better. But maybe Bruce paved the way for using the word FUCK in standup comedy and maybe--by the same token--we owe a nod to Burroughs for fighting the good fight and pounding the death nail into the obscenity laws, allowing me to say, "Fucking! Goddamn faggot homos!" with boring repetitiveness, while I pretend that it is somehow artistic.

But beyond that, more central to the whole issue of literature: Is Naked Lunch worth reading?

I have started to read it twice over the years. And I did not finish it either time. I won't pick it up again. I think that says it all.

A masterpiece? Maybe, if you can slough through it. A bit of writing genius to last the ages? Most decidedly not. Try Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, by Hunter S Thompson instead. At least the fucking, goddamn thing is readable, and believe it or not it

makes sense, because I'm kind of slow and I need all the help I can get switching from A to B to C to D and so on down the line.

If you really must pick the thing up, skim the intro, read the appendix, and then spend a half hour with the main text. The story doesn't change much. If you enjoy the read, by all means keep on keep on, but if you're not having a good time, just remember it's not going to change, and it's basically never going to make any more sense than it does now--which as I have said, isn't all that much. Not surprising when you remember that the thing is a piece of fucking ectoplasmic junky insectizoid opium inspired drivel.

I guess what I'm saying is if you want to be a writer, maybe forgoing that fifteen year opiate binge might not be such a bad idea. There are worse thing than actually enabling your readers to make sense of your story... or essay.

Capiche?

God, I hope so. Now if you'll excuse me. I need to reduce some cough syrup over an open flame, gouge a hole in my leg with a piece of broken glass, and use an eye dropper to mainline the shit.

{Ah, the things we do -- and say -- in pursuit of our muse...}

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