

5 Questions for David Calonne, editor of *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook*

1) Describe the contents of *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook*, both where these stories and essays came from and how the volume was put together.

Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook contains both stories and essays which were not collected in book form during Charles Bukowski's lifetime. Many of these works appeared originally in various underground publications. I was able to locate them both through my research in academic libraries throughout the U.S. as well as by purchasing items through various rare and antiquarian book dealers. I was also helped immensely by my friend Abel Debritto who lives in Spain. Abel is working on a complete Bukowski bibliography and has an immense knowledge of Bukowski's oeuvre which he kindly shared with me. My excellent editor at City Lights, Garrett Caples, also painstakingly sifted through with me the 120 works I submitted to winnow the text down to 33 stories and essays. Bukowski was so prolific and fine as a writer that there is enough material for several more volumes.

2) What new light does the collection shed on Bukowski's writing and creative process?

I tried to counterpoint story with essay to illustrate how Bukowski actually went about the writing process. He has frequently been considered an anti-intellectual literary "primitive" piping his native woodnotes wild, but he was in reality an intensely deliberate artist who was extremely well read in world literature: Celine, Artaud, Pound, Li Po, Catullus, Boccaccio, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Saroyan, Tu Fu, Vallejo, Hamsun—he refers to all of them constantly. Furthermore, his literary "manifestoes" (several of which are included in *Portions*) illustrate that Bukowski was quite consciously setting out to create a new school of American poetry which would abide by certain clearly delineated critical principles. He knew the Beats, the Black Mountaineers, the Confessionals, etc., and he was attempting to create a new niche for the clean line, the hammered line devoid of pretense. He wanted to get his suffering down on paper in as clear a way as possible, but his suffering is purified or leavened with laughter. Perhaps like Henry Miller's phrase, a "rosy crucifixion." And like Henry David Thoreau, he wanted to "simplify, simplify," to drive life into a corner, to strip down to the bare essentials and then build up his line from that empty, clean space.

3) How would you characterize the role Los Angeles itself plays in his work?

Los Angeles for Bukowski is a spiritual desert, much in the manner of the Desert Fathers. Bukowski is essentially a religious writer, in search of the sacred, and L.A. is his Fallen World, as the South was for Flannery O'Connor. Like St. John of the Cross, he repeatedly experiences the dark night of the soul, but his place of spiritual confrontation is Hollywood and Western. One should remember that one of his early books of poetry is entitled *At Terror Street and Agony Way*. L.A. is a blasted lonely landscape, bedecked with the phoniness of Hollywood and Disneyland (one of Bukowski's *bête noirs* was Mickey Mouse!). But although he travelled the U.S. in his own solitary "On the Road" journey during the Forties and Fifties, he always returned to L.A., where people left him alone yet could provide company when needed and where he had (as we see in his marvelous cartoons) his bottle, his bird, his typewriter, his sun.

4) What do you think is Bukowski's significance for literary history?

Bukowski, I think, is unique because he combined the post-World War II mood of existential blankness and despair with a hip, ironic, often hilarious style of laughing at the absurdities of life. He is a very hip Hemingway, and I think with a larger range and a finer literary sensibility than Hemingway. This synthesis of the European and American literary tradition makes him unique. Also, like Robert Crumb (who did some wonderful illustrations to Bukowski's work), he was as I have said a very funny, alienated artist. He also combined "popular" or "low" culture with "high" culture in a unique way. He can write of drinking beer and hanging out with very tough customers of various kinds with listening to Shostakovich and Mahler, and reading Celine. He breaks the "class barrier" in cool ways.

5) What do you think is the key to Bukowski's vast following and enduring popularity?

Bukowski is often included in encyclopedias or reference books as a "cult" writer—as one thinks perhaps of W.S. Burroughs, or J.D. Salinger, or Tolkien. I mean writers who have a sort of devoted or quasi-fanatical group of readers. I suppose Bukowski inspires this since he describes so precisely and accurately feelings of alienation, of being an outsider, a loner, a misfit, of someone who does not feel as if he belongs anywhere in the world. The Gnostic feeling described by Jim Morrison in the line "Into this world we're thrown." And he has an utterly limpid, clear, direct style. His unit of energy is the sentence, and he builds sentence upon sentence, like a very musical bricklayer and the cumulative effect is quite powerful. Again like Hemingway, he keeps his emotion in check through a highly controlled style which makes the impact all the more strong. And he writes about love, loss, despair, art, all the great themes in such an immediately gripping fashion that the readers who love him (and some don't) feel a direct connection to him, perhaps a connection which goes beyond the poem, story, essay, novel, to the man himself.