

“‘[H]e is his Own Most Interesting Character’: Review of *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* written by Barry Miles” by Lilla Farmasi

Call Me Burroughs: A Life
Barry Miles
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2014 is the centenary year of William Seward Burroughs’ birth. He is often referred to as a Beat novelist, but generally the “old junkie priest” (Miles 2014, 630) is remembered as one of the greatest icons of the 20th century American counterculture, influencing writing, filmmaking and the music industry as well. *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* is a new biography of Burroughs written by Barry Miles.

When evaluating a book, Burroughs relied on Matthew Arnold’s idea of criticism; Arnold claimed that a critic ought to ask and answer three questions about a book: what is the goal of the writer, whether or not he succeeds in doing it, and whether or not it is worth doing it (Burroughs 1993, 37). One may have initial doubts about how this tome does on the second and, especially, on the third question, since the Beat Generation is probably one of (if not the) best documented literary movements. Moreover, William S. Burroughs has written nonfiction about himself and his work and several Burroughs biographies have been published already besides a wide coverage on the Internet.

Barry Miles has written extensively on British underground arts, popular and counterculture, and he had known Burroughs since 1965. *Call Me Burroughs* is the final product of a project started by James Grauerholz, a friend, companion and manager of Burroughs, who wanted to write a full-length biography and draw the complete picture of the American author. The project continued with Miles in 2010 when he completed it with further research, taped interviews that he transcribed, letters, and numerous other sources dating long before the birth of the author while also considering the latest material related to him, such as the 2013 movie, *Kill Your Darlings*(John Krokidas, Sony Pictures Classics,

2013). Grauerholz' and Miles' work has amounted to this giant of a volume, containing nine books and fifty-two chapters, tracing Burroughs' life in chronological order. Although his works are widely discussed here, *Call Me Burroughs* is not a critical study on the Burroughs' oeuvre, and it does not seek to be an introduction to his works either — the reader is expected to be already familiar with his art.

The first thing to be acknowledged is that the book contains an incredible wealth of information. It holds the stories and anecdotes of Burroughs' childhood, education, travels, his relationships with his parents, friends, wives, children, and companions. It deploys a plethora of data, from the numbers of the rooms in the houses that his parents owned when he was a child to the exact size of his penis. But while it puts a lot of emphasis on details, *Call Me Burroughs* is more than a long record of the author's life. Due to Burroughs' travels, it incorporates detailed descriptions about twentieth century North and South American, European and North African culture, counterculture and history. Additionally, the topic of the book is not exactly a life, but several ones, since it is also about the lives and works of Burroughs' friends and contemporaries. It includes relatively detailed biographies of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or Joan Vollmer, as well as the origins of great literary works, such as Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957).

On the other hand, as I have indicated, many of Burroughs' works are also integrated into the life story, because there is an unusually strong relationship between his works and their contemporary context on more than one level: there is often little difference between how he lived and what he produced. *Call Me Burroughs* shows that however nonsensical his stories may get, they are often only slightly altered versions of his real life experiences. This biography can be read as a long, Burrovian story written in Miles's style, and indeed, at places it is as engaging as Burroughs' most intense "routines." The description of the Beat Hotel in Paris sounds very much like a few lines from *Naked Lunch* (1959): "The rooms had no carpets or telephones, and the cheapest ones, the

'cells,' one on each landing, were quite dark as their windows looked out onto the stairwell rather than the outside world. The corridors, which sloped at strange angles, creaked and groaned and smelled strongly of garlic, excrement, and cannabis" (Miles 2014, 318).

The interrelations of biography, autobiography and fiction in Burroughs' case are the most apparent in the characters and settings of his novels. His famous Interzone is widely known to have been depicted after Tangier. Some of his characters have real life models, such as the protagonist's landlady, Mme Rachau, in *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), who was modeled after Mme. Rachou, the actual owner of the Beat Hotel. Other characters were "composites or stereotypes mixed with real characters" or dreams (353), for instance Hauser and O'Brien, two policemen from *Naked Lunch*, while yet others, like the notorious Dr. Benway or A. J. had no real life models (353). Miles traces the characters and sites of Burroughs' fiction along with his life for they are inseparable. Robert Palmer notes that Burroughs was "his own most interesting character" (539), supporting the notion that his art and life were strongly intertwined, constantly relating and referencing to each other.

Miles also points out that Burroughs was not only a writer. He did not distinguish strictly either between reality and fiction or between different media. He suspected that cut-ups made of the *Time* revealed what the magazine was *really* saying (363). He wrote the following to Ginsberg about his painter friend, Brion Gysin: "I see in his painting the psychic landscape of my own work. He is doing in painting what I try to do in writing" (341). Burroughs himself was a multimedia artist and a performer. Besides writing, he photographed and painted, he began to experiment with the cut-up method in a wide variety of media, and he soon took the method to a meta-level. "Make collage of photographs, drawings, newspapers, etc. Now take picture of the collage. Now make collage of the pictures. Take-cut-take-cut you got it?" (387). These are significant descriptions, since the methods and techniques he used in creating art were the

underlying rules governing his real life actions, and his world view as well. For instance his Foucauldian distrust (and disgust) of control systems; his idea of deconditioning, reminiscent of Viktor Shklovsky's definition of defamiliarization; or his drug addiction were all essential to his private life and his stories alike.

All through the volume Miles maintains a smooth and objective style. He does not romanticize or moralize any event in Burroughs' life. Although he knew Burroughs personally, he does not write in first person, does not include his own anecdotes about Burroughs, and never points out his personal opinion. The only thing that is unimpressive in this biography is its illustration. There is a small section of glossy pages in the middle of the volume with three to five photos per page, which means the photographs are relatively few and small. There is a large amount of visual documentation about the Beat Generation that is not used here, for example Ginsberg's and Burroughs' own photographs. Moreover, Miles emphasizes Burroughs' role in visual culture, still, there is not a single image of his paintings, or any illustration of his visual art or his performances.

Miles' interest in the author and his expertise are clearly demonstrated in the text. The overwhelming amount of information he worked with is well-researched and well-structured: the tome is an excellent reference for literary scholars. The majority of the information Miles collected is available elsewhere, but the value of the volume lies in its comprehensiveness and versatility. It can be read as a biography, a travel book, a Beat Generation chronicle, and simply as an astonishing story, therefore *Call Me Burroughs* is a book that can satisfy a very mixed audience from non-academic readers to theorists. On the whole, it makes one answer Matthew Arnold's second and third question with a confident "yes." Miles claims that Grauerholz, whose research *Call Me Burroughs* is based on, is "a master of all things Burrovian" (xvii). The same can be said about this volume.

Work Cited:

Burroughs, William S. 1997. *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*. New York:
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