

Q & A

Does a relationship exist between the creative personality and the desire to use drugs or alcohol? If so, why?

Charles Bukowski: Writers are mostly dissatisfied with life as life and with people as people, etc. Writing is an attempt to explain, escape and change the outrageous forces which make us more than unhappy. Drinking is a chemistry which also rearranges our horizons for us. It gives us two ways to live instead of one.

Tom Clancy: I don't know. I frequently describe writing as "a self-induced form of mental illness" because of the mechanics of writing fiction. That is, you create an artificial world populated with imaginary people, and live in that world; you then try to describe it in terms so convincing that your reader will think that your "world" is real. Such an operation seems close to schizophrenia. Writing is also quite intense, and the "ups" of good days and the

"downs" of bad days can put you in a manic state. Perhaps alcohol or drug use is for many writers a means to escape from that artificial world. Certainly I feel that you must "turn off" your work every day. But everyone knows not to "bring work home." The problem here, and its solution, are not particular to writing, are they?

John Fowles,

Elmore Leonard: I think a relationship exists in the minds of creative people who want to believe it exists and that it's expected of them. If a writer's role model is Hemingway or Faulkner, he's liable to play it to the hilt: the macho hard drinker, or the tragic figure when the writing isn't going well.

Joyce Carol Oates: Human beings are naturally addictive, whether "creative" or otherwise.

John Gardner: There is little doubt that the creative personality is one of obsession. One lives out days devoted to characters and events which exist purely in your own mind and, in many cases, these become the reality of life while reality becomes the fiction of

one's life. This being the case, the creative personality probably does require some kind of escape. I

self-destructive, narcissistic and it turns brilliant people into self-pitying bores. . . . P.S. If you don't have the

Joyce Carol Oates

smoke (which is now a sin), I also need a very mild sleeping sedative when I work. This means, I suppose, that insofar as I have a creative personality, I turn to a mild, prescribed drug, and another anti-anxiety drug. Neither of these, however, are mind-altering drugs. Alcohol, and the harder drugs, are mind-altering, and to me anything that puts you out of your own control is asking for trouble in the long term.

Do you believe a large percentage of writers are alcoholics, or is that a myth?

Charles Bukowski: I have known any number of writers and I am the only alcoholic I know. In fact, I am drinking as I answer these questions.

Elmore Leonard: Raymond Carver believed there are no more alcoholics in the field of writing than there are in any other profession. I'll go along with that. It's a matter of notoriety. The alcoholism of the well-known person is revealed. The dentists and doctors who drink to excess remain out of the news.

Joyce Carol Oates: Certainly, it is a myth. Celebrity writers and artists generally are simply more visible. Writers as diverse as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman did not drink; and writers as diverse as William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter did. There is no scientific general principle to be drawn.

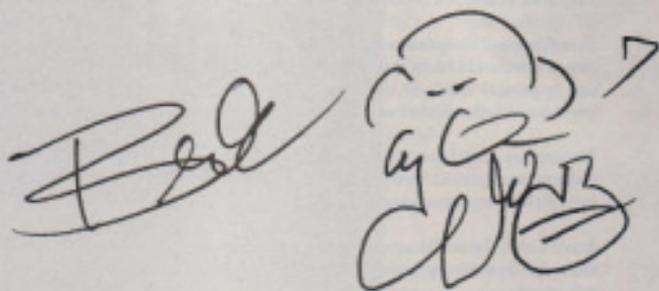
Rita Mae Brown: Male writers are more alcoholic than women. Drinking, the ability to hold your liquor, is perceived as butch/masculine. Since the arts are perceived as "feminine," I think they drink unconsciously, to prove they are "real" men. . . . I have never used drugs nor alcohol and I never will. It is

guts to write cold sober then turn to another profession. Writing is not for sissies.

John Gardner: I do not believe that a very large percentage of writers are alcoholics. I know many who are heavy drinkers, but that is a far cry from the state of being an alcoholic. In short, I think the idea that a large percentage of writers are alcoholics is a myth.

Do you think some writers believe that while on alcohol or drugs they experience greater insight or a greater ability to see "truths"? Do they delude themselves?

Charles Bukowski: Drinking oils the machinery but I doubt if it gives us any insights or truths. It just gets us going off our dead asses. It whirls the winds behind the gods. Besides, I drink when I don't write but, in a sense, I think I am writing then. The mind spreads to gather new surfaces, small imprints.



Tom Clancy: There is the old saw, *In vino veritas* ["In wine there is truth"], but that probably results from the lowered inhibition level that results from the use of depressants. Intoxication degrades intellectual performance. Therefore, the impression that great insights are possible in an intoxicated state could well be a delusion. Certainly I would not trust such an idea.

Joyce Carol Oates: If the delusion works — that is sufficient.

Elmore Leonard: You may feel more creative under

the influence and what you believe are brilliant ideas flash in your mind; but if they still sparkle the next morning, it's pure luck.

Kurt Vonnegut: Rarely does a writer believe this.

John Gardner: I firmly believe that they are deluding themselves. There is an old saying about alcohol (which can equally apply to drugs) — First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a man. There is a proven, diagnostic truth in that saying, and while there must always be some exceptions, on the whole I believe the “seeing of truths” theory is often the excuse of the addict.

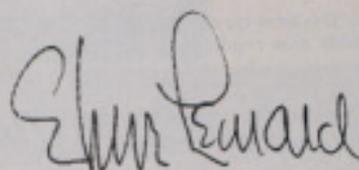
Does living in a world dominated by technology require drugs as a door to perceive mythical levels of existence?

Charles Bukowski: A drunk will use any excuse to drink: bad luck, good luck, boredom or maybe too much technology. Is drinking a disease? Is eating? So many things are needed to get us through. And if they aren't there, we invent them.

Tom Clancy: This question is, I think, senseless. Who says the world is “dominated by technology”? What are “mythical levels of existence”? How does one perceive a myth whether drunk or sober?

Elmore Leonard: I don't have a word processor or try to perceive mythical levels of existence. Every morning I pick up my pen and go to work.

Joyce Carol Oates: “Drugs” are used by all societies, from the so-called primitive to the technologically advanced.



Kurt Vonnegut: Drugs are simply more technology.

John Gardner: It is rubbish to believe that in a world of technology one requires drugs to perceive mythical levels of existence. Under the influence of drugs or alcohol, what is perceived, in most cases, is a warped perception.

Would you agree that addicted writers write well in spite of their addiction, as it has been said that Van Gogh was a genius in spite of his illness?

Charles Bukowski: I think that the “illness” is in not being ill. I think that the most horrible people are the well-balanced, the healthy and the purposeful. Van Gogh is overrated but if he were around now I'd sure as hell hate to see him down working out at the corner gym.

Tom Clancy: That is probably a medical judgment. I'm not qualified to make an observation.

Elmore Leonard: Good writers who are addicted write better than mediocre writers who aren't.

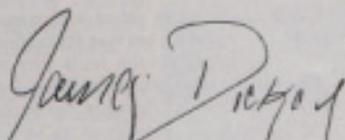
Joyce Carol Oates: Which writers? Not all writers, addicted or otherwise, write well.

Kurt Vonnegut: Yes, if they are sober when they write.

John Gardner: There are exceptions, but as a rule I think not — or at least the final long term addiction inevitably comes between the writer and his work.

Can alcohol and drugs be surrogate friends for writers?

Charles Bukowski: A writer has no friends, only distant allies. And I don't like to speak of alcohol and drugs in the same way. I fell into drugs for a while. I found that drugs made the mind indifferent to creation. Indifferent to everything. Alcohol made the muse dance; drugs made the muse vanish. For me.



John Gardner: Well, yes, of course. But, in the long run they prove to be surrogate enemies. You only have to look at the lives of many great writers to see how that happens.

Elmore Leonard: They are places to hide.

Joyce Carol Oates: Yes, as for anyone.

Kurt Vonnegut: Not for me. Maybe for some.

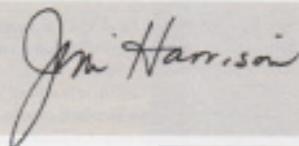
Have you ever written under the influence of drugs or alcohol? If so, how do specific drugs stimulate or retard your thought and visual processes? How do they affect your writing?

Charles Bukowski: I drink when I write. It's good luck, it's background music. Wine and beer are excellent for long hours of good luck. Whiskey, hard drink, if you drink it the way I do, well, that's only good for maybe an hour. After that, you imagine you are creating the world's greatest masterpiece, only to awaken in the morning to pages of wasted dung.

Tom Clancy: I have never written while intoxicated. Of course, I don't often get intoxicated.

Elmore Leonard: I knew better than to try it. What if it worked? Would I have to get half in the bag every time I sat down to write?

Joyce Carol Oates: No. (I don't smoke, drink and I avoid caffeine.)



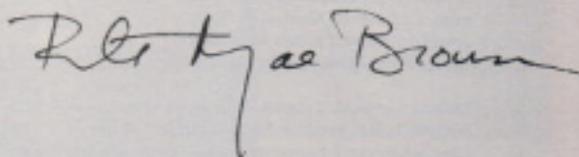
Kurt Vonnegut: Years ago, and the writing always stunk.

John Gardner: I have not written under the influence of anything since 1959. Before that, I was a journalist and I did sometimes write what I thought were brilliant pieces when drunk. In practically every case, these had to be rewritten when sober.

Is writing while experiencing the effects of drugs important to the creative process for you? Or, are the

benefits of drug use obtained at a time entirely separate from the act of writing?

Charles Bukowski: Drinking is just fine, all by itself. In fact, sometimes it's a real savior, especially when you find yourself trapped with dull, lonely and unoriginal people.



Elmore Leonard: No. When I was drinking, it had nothing to do with my work.

Kurt Vonnegut: The rush after the first drink is briefly useful, for maybe half an hour.

Truman Capote said that once he began writing, "he fearful earnest, my mind zoomed all night every night, and I don't think I really slept for several years. Not until I discovered that whisky could relax me." Have you used drugs or alcohol to escape the grip of obsessive writing, or to relax from the effects of creation?

Charles Bukowski: When I read Capote I need a drink to get that thin crap out of my mind.

Tom Clancy: I used to have a few glasses of wine (or something else) every night both before and after I started writing full time. (I have never used narcotics of any kind except under medical care.) Alcohol does relax one, I suppose, whether one is a writer or a truck driver. I've effectively stopped drinking, but in my case I found it was an easy way to lose weight, and I'd rather give up booze than food. I still have an occasional drink, but it's quite irregular now.

Kurt Vonnegut: Yes. There's the usefulness of booze for me.

If you do drink or use other drugs, is it at least partly to rid yourself of inhibitions and self-consciousness? Does it help to overcome the fear of exposing yourself? Do you

think that there is a point of diminishing returns?

Charles Bukowski: Only a jealous non-drinker would ask a question like that.

John Gardner: There is bound to be a point of diminishing returns. It cannot be avoided by the true addict of either alcohol or hard drugs. In the end comes shambles, except in a very few, exceptional, cases.

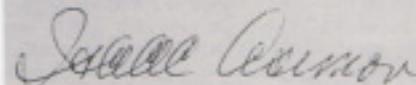
Elmore Leonard: I drank because it was fun and because I "deserved" a drink at the end of the day, after whatever I happened to be doing. I guess I drank to feel less inhibited and self-conscious too, though I didn't have to be with anyone to drink, at least just before I quit.

Kurt Vonnegut: For social occasions yes, for work no.

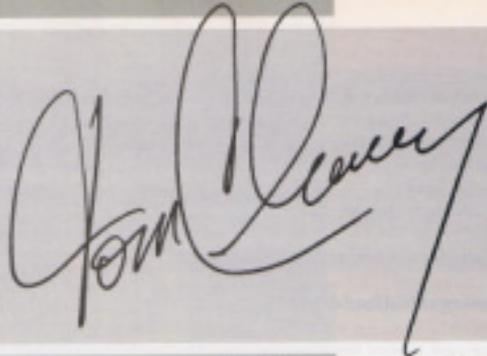
Do you think drugs or alcohol can erode the creative process in the long run? Under what conditions can this be avoided, if it can be at all?

Charles Bukowski: Drugs, especially, can erode the creative process. On drink, any gamble entails a possible loss but it's better to roll the dice than to sleep with the nuns. At the age of seventy, for the sake of my wife and my six cats and my daughter, I attempt not to drink every night. Still, my own death, I am ready for. It's only the other deaths that bother me.

Tom Clancy: Persistent overuse of drugs or alcohol can kill you, which will by definition erode the creative process rather severely. Drug or alcohol



abuse is physically dangerous. I personally doubt that a writer — or any other sort of professional — can perform his job well while in a chemically-affected state. To believe otherwise is almost certainly a delusion, and a dangerous one at that.



Bret Easton Ellis: I think the state of publishing right now can erode the creative process much more efficiently than an addiction to wine or tranquilizers. This questionnaire makes me want a drink.

Elmore Leonard: Yes. Not only that, it can kill you.

Kurt Vonnegut: They can destroy health. There goes the ballgame.

If you previously used drugs or alcohol and now abstain, how has that affected your writing?

Charles Bukowski: That I wouldn't know.

Elmore Leonard: Since my last drink January 24, 1977, I've acquired a new attitude thanks to AA and my wife Joan. I've loosened up. I don't take myself or my work as seriously as I used to. Doing it hasn't gotten any easier, but it's a lot more fun. The trick is to acquire awareness by getting out of yourself, by looking out, not in.

Kurt Vonnegut: Continue to drink in moderation after supper, don't touch a drop in the daytime.

John Fowles: By and large I think it is equally stupid to maintain that [drugs and alcohol] never help or alternatively that they always help. I am suspicious of much avowedly drug-influenced writing. I think this is largely the old social trick of demanding that the writer be a shaman — to experience or experiment in areas most of the world is too frightened to get involved in. I have not much time for this view of life. I certainly think alcohol can occasionally help, but permanent indulgence is, I think, profoundly damaging. For every Rimbaud, there is a world of incomprehensible sots. I did a book tour of the States concerning *The Magus* in the 1960s. The most incomprehensible thing for me was the number of

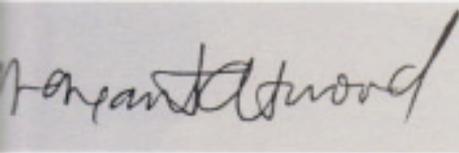
Americans (and especially Californians!) who wanted to know what drugs I had written "under." This assumption in America that you must have some secret help or trick to get where you are is not an aspect of the USA I much like. I used to answer that needing to write and having a rich imagination were in themselves powerful drugs, and I did not need all the magical and mystical rubbish then floating around. Nor, I believe, does any other true writer. We are in a sense shamans, but not in the silliest, most sensational sense. I have never used drugs.

Harlan Ellison: I've never used drugs or alcohol, and I've written forty-five books. Writers who think they need drugs or alcohol are assholes. . . . Anyone who needs drugs or alcohol to write is an asshole and should have his head examined and have two holes put in it.

Judith Krantz: I threw away your questionnaire because I certainly do not use drugs or alcohol. You do not write well on alcohol or drugs.

Ken Follett: As much as I love booze, I cannot write a single line thirty seconds after one sip of any kind of alcoholic drink. Consequently, I never drink until I have finished my day's work.

Isaac Asimov: Oh, for goodness sake! I have never used alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Can't a writer just write? P.S. Don't write again!

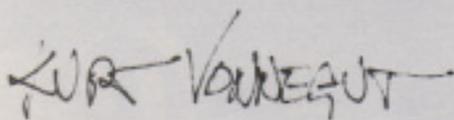


Margaret Atwood: I don't drink or take drugs and have no opinions on the effects these have on the art of writing.

James Dickey: I'm sorry but I can't seem to work up enough interest in your drugs and alcohol questionnaire to respond to it, and must decline your invitation to participate.

Jim Harrisee: Late in the afternoon I can get an extra hour out of a glass of wine. Late in life I have discovered I can also get the same hour by drinking a small glass of Coca-Cola. In Western culture wine and

other forms of alcohol have been used by artists and everyone else, for that matter, for a slightly altered state which is mostly sedation. Under the influence of alcohol one can come up with new ideas but the drug is utterly worthless in the rendering of the ideas. For many, of course, it is mostly a variation on the theme of slow suicide.



Terry Southern: I think Big Chuck Bukowski is probably right that drink brings good luck to writers. God (certainly) knows it brings warmth and companionship — to an otherwise absurdly forlorn situation. Faulkner always liked to say: "A writer without a bottle of whiskey is like a chicken without a goddam head." And Hemingway, of course, enjoyed nothing more than eulogizing the "Godly Brothers Gordon" for hours on end. Joyce would "knock back a whopper" at every opportunity. In fact, one would be hard pressed to name more than five writers of first account who were not drinkers. . . . This is not to suggest that any of these writers were alcoholics. I don't believe that a serious writer is in danger of becoming an alcoholic, because, after a certain point, one would not be working behind it, but directly in front of it, at peril of getting wiped out blotto, thereby defeating its purpose — which is, after all, motivational and as a hedge against the desolation of such a lonely endeavor. Good writers have so much (dare one say "beauty and excitement"?) to come back to that they are not likely to go very far afield for any great length of time. It may be that addiction to alcohol exists among writers only as a psychological painkiller for the "manqué," who had set great store by the potential I.D. value of it.

I think this may be said for other recreational drugs as well — with the notable exception of heroin, the effect of which is to reduce everything to a single glow, where it is no longer a question of doing or becoming — one is. A difficult package for anyone to resist. Almost no one kicks a major junk-habit; only super-artists, whose work is even stronger than the drug itself: Burroughs and Miles Davis are rather obvious examples. Mere mortals, however, beware.