

Loneliness of the long-distance writer

The muscular prose and poetry of Charles Bukowski made him one of the most influential of minor US literary figures, suggests **Kevin Rabalais**

HE was the Bard of the Barroom, the Patron Saint of the Young and Disaffected, but Charles Bukowski never liked those labels. "I am a f... king oracle (oriel?) for the lost or something, is what they tell me," he once wrote. "That's nice but *I am the lost*."

Bukowski drank and fought with men and women and blew his money at the racetrack. Then he went home to drink some more before writing unguardedly about his experiences: the miserable childhood, years bumming around America living in rooming houses while he worked menial jobs and honed his skills as a barfly, the many women, and the obsessive writing that fills more than 40 volumes of poetry, stories, essays and novels.

Much of that work, as Bukowski writes in one poem, is "jagged, harsh, with self-inflicted wounds". Writing became as much a means for Bukowski to record the events of his life as it was, he said, to "keep from going crazy". "Everybody knew everything he wrote was a real thing," one of his lovers said, and Bukowski never bothered to disguise this, claiming that 93 per cent of his work was autobiography while the remaining 7 per cent was "improved upon".

In the poem "mind and heart", he explains his method:

*I have satisfied my thirst / at the well
/ of my self / and that wine was good,
the best I ever had, / and tonight / sitting
/ staring into the dark / I now finally
understand / the dark and the / light and
everything / in between.*

More than 20 volumes of Bukowski's

Kevin Rabalais

Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life

By Howard Sounes

Canongate, 309pp, \$26.95

The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993

By Charles Bukowski. Edited by John Martin
Canongate, 556pp, \$34.95

writing have appeared since his death, in 1994. In the page-turning *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, Howard Sounes writes about the legendary lifestyle that has sustained interest in the work that spawned generations of fans and imitators:

... there is an uncompromising personal philosophy running through that is convincing, if challenging: the rejection of drudgery and imposed rules, of mendacity and pretentiousness; an acceptance that human lives are often wretched and that people are frequently cruel to one another, but that life can be beautiful, sexy and funny.

Readers see these shades in Bukowski's poem "the girl outside the supermarket":

*a very tall girl lifts her nose at me / outside
a supermarket / as if I were a walking
garbage / can; and I had no desire for her,
/ no more desire / than for a / phone pole.
/ what was her message? / that I would
never see the top of her / pantyhose? / I
am a man in his 50s / sex is no longer an
aching mystery / to me, so I can't*

*understand / being snubbed by a / phone
pole. / I'll leave young girls to young / men.
/ its a lonely world / of frightened people,
/ just as it has always / been.*

For Bukowski, that loneliness began during childhood. He was born Heinrich Karl Bukowski in Germany in 1920 to a German-American soldier and a German mother. In 1923, the family moved to Los Angeles, where Bukowski lived for most of his life. His most successful novel, *Ham on Rye* (1982), details, with typical Bukowski style and wit, the hardship of those early years.

Henry Chinaski, the narrator of this and other Bukowski novels, including *Post Office* and *Factotum*, is indistinguishable from his author. In high school, both developed severe acne that sent them into depression. As a teenager, that acne and its subsequent scarring made Bukowski look old enough to be served alcohol in bars. When not in bars, he sought solace in the Los Angeles Public Library, where he searched for books that spoke to his unhappiness.

One day, he randomly selected John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust* (1939) from the shelves. "Then like a man who had found gold in the city dump, I carried the book to a table," he later wrote. "And here, at last, was a man not afraid of emotions."

In Fante's main character, Arturo Bandini, a restless and unhappy 20-year-old would-be writer living in Los Angeles, Bukowski found for the first time in literature a portrait of his own life and dreams. But he still held deep fears and suspicions of the world outside the library. "His acne left him with a face," Sounes writes, "like a Frankenstein mask and skin so bad it looked like he'd been in a

HIS LONGING FOR SEX AND COMPANIONSHIP ARE THE FOCUS OF HIS BEST WORK

fire." Longing for normalcy, he began expressing his emotions, like Fante, in a simple, direct style. Throughout his career, he would make his subject the everyday life he knew, namely men and unfaithful women who drink and abuse each other physically and emotionally as they struggle to scrape by in menial jobs.

The Bukowski myth is so large that even those who have never read his work believe they have a sense of the man. And like the man, that work sets out to provoke. Bukowski wrote with base simplicity and honesty about man's animal desires.

From Fante, he learned to be unafraid of revealing his emotions. The straightforward

