

## Ham on Rye

*C. Bukowski*

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Sorting out my books in my library I came across this oversized book by the underground poet and 'dirty old man' - Charles Bukowski, known through his by acne deformed visage. Prime candidate for exclusion and to be relegated to a minor book case in the nether regions of the house. But before throwing it away I decided to pursue its contents and ended up devouring the book during an evening, finishing off the last few pages the next morning. It was a long time since I devoured a book, this being something that usually is connected with reading in your childhood. What so great about the book? Does it have hidden qualities?

It is a thinly disguised autobiography masquerading as a novel. It depicts the growing up of the author, starting with his first memories under a table in Germany. His father is a sadist, taking particular enjoyment from hitting his son (preferably with his razor strap) and his mother loyal to her husband. His paternal uncles are all good for nothing, drunks and always whoring, one of them depicted from a brief visit of the family while dying from TB in his youth. The cards are not stacked favorably for our unfortunate protagonist. An outsider at school, and the only people who want to associate with him are people more pathetic than himself. There is sexual awakening, lustful phantasies about young female teachers. Under a bandstand at an aerial show he gets his first glimpse of a cunt through the cracks of the planks. An experience so exciting that it dwarfs watching a fatal accident during the show. He slowly starts to get respect by becoming a tough guy, but his trajectory is stopped by a particular bad case of acne in his early teens requiring medical treatment. In a sentimental aside, the reader is made privy to his epiphany of finally meeting a kind soul, a nurse. Then he discovers the pleasures of drinking coming of age. So this is poor L.A. during the depression and as in the city of L.A. poverty is not so obvious. They all live in homes with big lawns although there is hardly food on the tables and most people around are unemployed. We follow him through elementary school, junior and senior high school, even to a junior college. Academic education counts for nothing already in the America of the 30's. Not much of the academic instruction seems to filter through, school is mostly a question of sports, baseball or football, this is what counts, this is what gives respect. But the author discovers literature at the local library. Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Hemingway, in short the hard-boiled American variety, but also D.H. Lawrence. He wants to be a thug, but also a writer, and at home he gets a typewriter and starts to type short stories, and also gets to have a buddy at college, with similar interests, but who also introduced him to his criminal acquaintances and true drinking binges. The author at the end of his teens had become a tough guy, or at least having the reputation as such, which counts for the same, engaging himself in boxing and regular fights. He is a strong young man, apparently blessed with an iron constitution able to withstand the sustained abuse he submits himself to. Drinking, smoking and fighting. An abuse he would in real life continue until his death into his seventies from leukemia

which he may have died of even if he had led an exemplary life (if that was written into his stars or genes).

At the end he is thrown out of his home by his father who has sneaked inside his room rummaged through his belongings and found his short stories. 'You father is going to kill you' his mother comes running warning him and gives him ten dollars. He then is reduced to find rooms on weekly rents and descends into an orgy of drinking and fighting. But what about whoring?

The reader, his prurient interest being provoked by titillating hints, is bound to be disappointed (which may be a mark of literature), our hero remains a virgin throughout the narrative of his early youth. His acne no doubt inhibiting his initiatives on this regard, the young women being inaccessible apparitions far beyond his reach. When drunk once he makes a pass at the mother of one of his friends, a woman of easy virtue returning from her nocturnal shift at a bar. Initially hostile, she unexpectedly hisses up her skirt revealing all her private parts. Too much for our young hero, who overwhelmed beats a retreat excusing himself by the presence of her son lying insensible from drink in the bedroom. Later on at the graduation ceremony he meets her again and she whispers into his ears that would he be interested in a real graduation she could supply him with a diploma. Of this apparently nothing comes.

So simple hard-boiled prose. Short sentences, short chapters. Bang, bang. Thump, thump. The effect not being that different from that of comics. In fact the author writes in the manner of pulp. Maybe no wonder it is so easily digested, yet one should not deprive the author of his proper dues. It is not pulp, although set up to resemble it. But Bukowski writes with a certain verve, the story jumps and has life, and you eagerly head for the next chapter in anticipation. The subject matter may be fascinating, at least to a bookish reader, but most expressions of such matter would be far too tedious to read. Here we have a logical fallacy, examples of which abound in life. Bukowsky gives the bums and thugs a voice, he is their representative. But in so being, he invariably separates himself from them. He has literary interests, in fact he has literary talents, and thus his tales, meant to be representative, are bound to differ, as his perspective, being a narrator, distinguishes him, makes him less representative. So what do we have left? A fiction, or at least truth forced to masquerade as fiction.

And the book? I must have bought my copy shortly after it was published, and now it is known as a first edition. Maybe commercially the most valuable item in my library. The ironies are ripe.

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