

~ The Janus File ~  
*A look back at a writer for the ages*

I Am No Doctor \*  
*or*  
*Naked Lunch* After Fifty

**A meditation on  
William Burroughs' seminal work  
and its pop cultural legacy in the nuclear age**

**By R. B. Morris**

I am no doctor, no PhD, no master of this or that, no scientist or journalist, no veteran of any particular front, no literary scholar. I am a poet well outside the academic world of letters with only a few books to show, a songwriter and occasional recording artist. Thanks to the unparalleled referencing of the Internet I can be located in obscure recesses, but otherwise you haven't heard of me. But then, the world of recording artists is a wasteland, and a book of poetry perhaps the most ineffectual art form in the culture. So, what would it matter if I were more renowned, or notably qualified? If the subject is William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and how it fares in fifty years of the world, why would we trust a doctor or scientist, a scholar or artist of any make in today's society to offer any particular insight into him or this fifty-year-old work that is most often referred to as a novel?

I can only lay it out as a layman. Half a century is a long time in the mercurial world we have become. Things get lost. Heroes come and go, eras come and go. Generations die off. Centuries pass. Millennia pass, and new ages begin, all in the span of these few years. William Burroughs is dead. All the Beat writers are dead, except Ferlinghetti who'll be 90 this year. Burroughs (1914-1997) lived for 38 of those 50 years since *Naked Lunch* first saw publication. He continued to write books that still live on shelves of literature. There were celebrated CDs of recorded readings with musical accompaniment. A loose composite of *Naked Lunch* was made into a feature film bearing the book's title. Burroughs himself had small roles in a number of films. There were conferences and articles and documentaries, a few biographies. Like Henry Miller, he also became a painter of some renown. There were always sightings, a cameo in a Laurie Anderson video, a half sung track on a Tom Waits record,

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even a voice-over at the beginning of the first episode in the last season of HBO's smash hit, *Sopranos*. Ever a shadowy icon, Burroughs remained reclusively at large and a sometime inspiration to subsequent generations. But on the whole, as with everything and everyone else, he fades more and more from public knowledge. *Naked Lunch*, the dark masterpiece, and William Seward Burroughs, the always astute and well-attired enigmatic figure, slip a little further into the footnotes of history. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

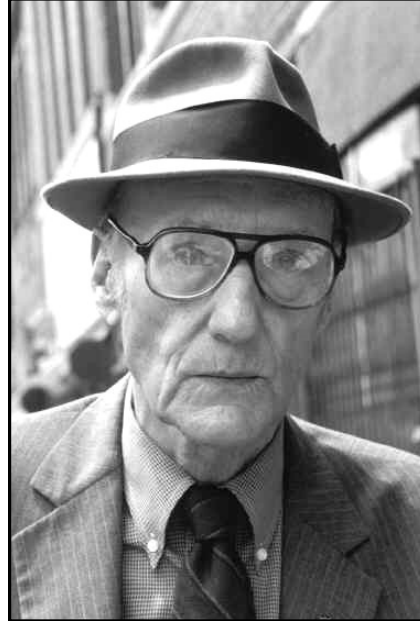
*Naked Lunch* was surely the most controversial, most rumored and buzzed up book to be released in the U.S. since Joyce's *Ulysses*.

From the first excerpts published in American magazines in 1957 through its various obscenity trials and eventual U.S. publication in 1966, it had a book launch that lasted nearly a decade. Bootleg copies were widely circulated in the states after it was published in Paris in 1959. Its cult popularity and illegal status combined to give it tremendous notoriety. The success of Ginsberg's *Howl* and Kerouac's *On The Road* paved the way for it, all riding shotgun on an exciting counter-cultural expedition that promised new brilliance and new truth.

*Naked Lunch* made good on that promise. It was brutal genius. A merciless story regarding a merciless subject told in merciless terms. Like the author, the work had international savvy and human import beyond borders. In fact, *Naked Lunch* made a mockery of all borders, physical, social, and psychic. It created a parallel civilization both real and unreal, current as well as futuristic and prophetic. It revealed a truer nature of human nature, of civilization, of ruling classes and slave classes and the driving *need* that rules them all. *Wouldn't you?*

Burroughs had the Joycean ability to create written language in

Photo by Cynthia McAdams



**William S. Burroughs**

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ways previously unheard. It was language at once shocking and masterful, not only immediate and point blank but hidden and coded. It was a new poetry as much as novel or biography. It was a new literary form really, Burroughs' *routines*. It allowed for all the narrative and dialogue of drama and prose, while paced like a series of interconnected short stories with the periodic exactness of essay or scientific paper. But it was still infused with the heightened lingo and obscurity of poetry. All this was colored further with rumors of Burroughs' "cut-up method" for structuring the work, as handed down through Brion Gysin, a link to exotic North Africa and Europe as well as the Surrealists. Artistically, *Naked Lunch* was a tour de force on every possible level. Add to this the scandal and status of being banned in the U.S. and the subsequent trials.

Not only did *Naked Lunch* present a new language that laid bare the taboos of narcotic addiction and homosexuality, but it lifted the subject from its usual context and gave it far broader meaning. "The Algebra of Need" revealed the junk addict to be the preeminent example of modern man at the mercy of his modern condition. The pushers, the higher ups, the controlling classes, along with the addicts and those who are controlled, are exposed as the primal forces at play in civilization. Much was made of this in the Boston court case where Norman Mailer, John Ciardi, and others spoke of the book's thematic portrayal of dominating and competing parties and classes as a grave social malady. But the ruling went against it then. The sex and drugs were just too prominent, too pornographic to be swallowed for a while. Burroughs takes you all the way to the party and makes you join the dangerous dance. He wants the full revelation of porn, a ravaged search for the most erotic language of the erotically depraved mind. But yes, greater causes are addressed and dramatized as *Naked Lunch* is served.

We should probably go back fifty years before the publication of *Naked Lunch* to get a better reckoning of the context in which it occurred. I recall Burroughs saying something somewhere about "1910," a time he idealized as being prior to major changes and shifts in western civilization. A world war soon left the art world full of cynicism for everything, including itself, and Dada was born. The photograph had freed painting, and the "moving picture" kept moving. For a while fine art's unbridled stepchild, film, would go on to claim popular and economic command over all other art forms long before the end of the century. America embraced Europe's wars and its art. It was only in the decade preceding *Naked Lunch* that America became dominant in the world theater. That ephemeral yet discernible shift in civilizations was the birthing time of *Naked Lunch*. As major art movements often follow major world events, so it was with World War II.

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America emerged as the new big kid on the block. Its confluence with Europe during the Dada and Surrealist movements evolved into a leading role in art, music, and literature after the Second World War. All three traditions converged around the motif of *improvisation*, a notion and technique both intuitive and big spirited, and America had the strong arm and strong will to lead it. The era of jazz became finely tuned to the spontaneity of Bebop. Abstract Expressionism was the natural extension of the psychological realms of Surrealism. The Beat writers who often took their cues from jazz leapt from the literary ivory towers to the street, a modern reclamation of Whitman's breath. Their youth and exuberance were infectious but also masked a depth of expression and connection to history. All of these movements were major turns in traditions and media. They each occurred in varying stages over a decade and more, but were intrinsically linked and often in personal cahoots. All of them had their birth in American cities, primarily New York.



**R. B. Morris**

It's hard to overstate the significance of this time. It was the beginning of the Atomic Age, the Nuclear Age, the age in which we still reside. Who knows, perhaps our final age, the age in which we stumble to our demise? It is an age that underscores every triumph with a dark shadow that no light can dissipate. Every victory is only the shout of a child in the street when we know the sun can be blocked out forever at any stray moment just by solving a new riddle that is continually being passed around a circle of madmen. It has collectively given rise to a great denial, which has resulted in a great complacency. Now a part of our psyche cowers. If Death was always near, whether acknowledged or not, now we developed a new sense of impermanence that ultimately broke our spirit and crippled our faith in whatever form faith might have taken. But this was not so at first. At the dawn of this reckless age there were those who stood forth and shouted from rooftops. Those who, because the old formal gig appeared to be up, let loose their expressions with an urgency bordering on madness that, at least they felt, was necessary.

Turns out this varied act of responsibility/hysteria became the wound we all backed away from, the focus of our denial, the messenger

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rather than the message. The mud we were careful not to track into the aisles of commerce and other human endeavors. The new message became “chill out,” be cool and roll with the flow, have a nice lunch, we don’t need to know what’s on the end of the fork (it will only lead to madness).

*Naked Lunch* was, unfortunately, more of a prophecy than any beginning of a trend in artistic form. True the boundaries were widened on certain subjects for artistic presentation, and subsequent works—whether science fiction, mainstream or literary, written or film—have delved more often than before into subterranean themes such as addiction and mind control. But from my particular perspective of working songwriter and poet, I see only a lost handful of artists whose work bears noticeable resemblance to the dimensions and intent of *Naked Lunch*.

Bob Dylan broke through, first and foremost, closer on the heels of the Beats. From a troubadour with a poet’s soul and street credentials he evolved into a world-class jester and prophetic bard borrowing much from his predecessors of the printed page besides just a famous name. His ascension may have signaled a fading for the printed word and the Beats, but it also lifted them as well to a greater audience than they would have had without him. There’s no doubt that he was greatly influenced by Burroughs’ wild juxtaposing of images and scenes, as well as subject matter. This is most visible in *Tarantula* where Dylan’s “Black Night Crash” evokes and emulates Burroughs’ “Withdrawal Nightmares,” as well as many other examples of spitfire scenes surrealistically exploding left and right in rapid sequence. One could say *Tarantula* is something of a Dylan version of *Naked Lunch*, replacing Burroughs’ underworld of madness and addiction with his own version of Sixties terrain and structured in a very similar, semi-fragmentary layout of prose sketches and cut-up scenarios. But this influence is also evident in the more renowned verses of many of Dylan’s popular songs, especially from the revelatory period of *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*—the period that most established him as Poet. “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” “Desolation Row,” and “Visions of Johanna,” for example, are all titles directly linked to Kerouac titles, and the lyrics of the songs are poetically linked to Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac. Through this time Ginsberg became a noted friend and influence on Dylan’s work, no doubt, but because of this more public connection it shadowed what Dylan took as well from Burroughs, not to mention what Ginsberg and Kerouac took from Burroughs.

Not only Dylan, but also the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead, Van Morrison, Leonard Cohen, Frank Zappa, David Bowie, Jim Morrison, Steely Dan, Tom Waits, various heavy metal and punk acts, and

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countless others in the pop music culture inherited that part of the previous generation that was primed by the Beats. But Dylan, more than any other artist of any other medium, was able to claim it and move it. Putting the Beats' poetics and social landscape into popular songs hip to current events unfolding propelled him and his medium to a new prominence in the modern world of art and entertainment. The significance of Dylan going electric and taking traditional acoustic folk music into the current realm of rock and pop expression was actually secondary to the significance of him taking the "poetic voice" off the page and putting it into music. The poetic voice became a more active and vital force in social and political affairs than probably any other time in American history.

The rare and disturbed air at such artistic heights within a rapidly expanding pop culture and society soon became untenable, and it was a position Dylan was either unable or unwilling to hold for long. Quite understandable perhaps, but the torch of the poetic voice playing a lead role in current social affairs was dropped along the way. This, along with the demise of the Beatles and John Lennon's proclamation of "the dream is over," sucked the air right out of the cultural sails. We don't want to hang our historical hat on the peg of any pop star's legacy, but it's good shorthand for the way it went, the way the wave of mass consciousness in a generational dream raised its head and rolled back over. There were of course countless elements at play in this rise and fall, not the least of which was a series of prominent assassinations and the Vietnam War which left the nation and a generation torn asunder to such an extent that many emerged severely wounded, confused, disillusioned, and primed to be rewired by the more selfish and safer forces of decadence, compromise, and subversion. Ultimately, the western world of art was put on the auction block, divided up like a subdivision and parceled out to the public as bankers and corporate gods saw fit. Artistically, a subsequent era began, which for all the run of trends and styles and technological advancements and a few generations is still much the same era. An era retro in coined and neutered vision that still produces brilliant artists, master surfers of the American genres, but without as big a wave to catch.

All this is worth mentioning because such social and cultural swings may have much to do with the lifespan of certain works of art. The Beats gained a great deal of public notoriety early on, which was a two-edged sword. They soon devolved into a cultural cliché—the *beatniks*—enough so that their shortcomings became politicized into a partisan stance among otherwise knowledgeable observers of art and literature. Their

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work is generally lumped together, disparate as it may be, and when the tide that lifts all boats recedes, all boats so linked will fall in turn. There have been resurgences, but none have brought the rush of the initial surge. This may be only natural, predictable, and understandable. But how significant are these social and cultural shifts, and what do they mean for the Arts in general?

From my perspective a great diminution has set in among the Arts. Yes, art survives in all media but foremost as a corporate accomplice, a flourish or detail in service to the gross income; or else in certain small societies, academic, traditional, or otherwise. It may even thrive in these settings, but these can be controlled and kept from having any substantial effect outside their realm. Art in America is held prisoner. It is more employed and higher paid but vaguely impotent as a coalescing force for social change.

“The Algebra of Need” played out in a much less dramatic yet far more thorough and effective guise than we might have suspected. But here it is all the same, pushers and addicts aligned, international corporate controllers and their political, religious, military, and otherwise partisan henchmen all well placed around the big tables while the masses robotically huddle in strip malls, stadiums, race tracks, and traffic jams when not recharging in front of the ever-varied, always glowing, omnipresent screens. A conspiracy? Yes, of course. As Burroughs famously notes, “paranoia is just having the right information.” But it is never just the pusher but also the addict to blame. Corporate advertising, fashioned to fleece the loose herd and suckers in general, has become in this same fifty years the very air we breathe. In the meantime, we’ve neither cultivated the beauty of our traditions nor weeded out the fundamentalist baboonery that has plagued the race so clearly through the last millennia.

The western world where *Naked Lunch* occurred lives a far more virtual reality now. If society in the 1940s, Fifties, and Sixties was less advanced in all the more prominent and measurable ways, slower and un-computerized and far less politically correct in manner and legality, it was also less cynical and more potent for change, more open for possibilities, more imbued with a natural faith for human potential. The air and the airwaves were not so bought up and bought off. The brain police were not so prevalent. The disconnect with nature not so thorough. Our antennae are withering and falling away, being bred out of us. We’ve been conditioned, coerced, manipulated, and hustled into some kind of modern zombie state. Nothing that crosses the television, movie, and computer screens of today ignites any significant change. It’s all

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entertainment. Reality shows take the place of reality. Nothing satisfies for more than a moment, or lifts us beyond our sensory bonds. We are progressively sedated to greater degrees of numbness.

Of course many people, artists, teachers, social workers, politicians, journalists, scientists, diplomats, doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs constantly speak out and try to bring clarity and urgency to the crises of civilization, the injustice of societies, the strangled and destructive politics of the day, the uncharted realm of the mind and heart. But the forces set against those voices have been steadily fortified over the last fifty years, to the point of misdirecting, confusing, waylaying, making light of and destroying almost every effort of their effectiveness. There is no counter force shaking the doors and windows of the status quo enough to bring about a collective epiphany. Turns out we were much weaker than the almighty dollar.

So, what's the endgame, and where does *Naked Lunch* play in? I don't know. I'm just a lowly poet with no answers, a voice in the wilderness, a fellow down at the bar talking to whoever will hang around and listen. No, I don't know what happens to *Naked Lunch* in another fifty years. I would suggest it has a certain staying power in the wide world of literature. It may be exiled but I think quite difficult to kill off. I believe it has the endurance of the roach bug and will bear up even as a dark age persists. *Naked Lunch* remains a brilliant work of art, a wild novelistic tromp through the netherworld that casts light upwards on a devolving situation. It offers behind-the-scenes glimpses of what really goes on. It holds its place in the chorus of those voices tuned to this sort of endeavor. There's not enough negative energy to silence them. Still, the powers that be recognize it is no longer necessary to remove works that challenge the new order. The success of the current milieu derives in part from its knowing that even though most all things remain available to the public, the public no longer has an interest in them.

That's the unspoken plan. *Naked Lunch* has been relegated to an elegant graveyard we've been allowed to visit but are now advised to stay clear of, and that has a punitive admission if we dare enter again. Still, I find that I am a paradoxical and foolhardy optimist at heart, whistling by these old bones. I have an insane hunch that a reversal of course will come, that some clarity will win out over confusion, and the general virtue of collective beliefs will prevail over the fear and lack of virtue that now rules. Somewhere from the Burroughsian right half of my brain I hear faint voices clearing their throats. That's my plan.