



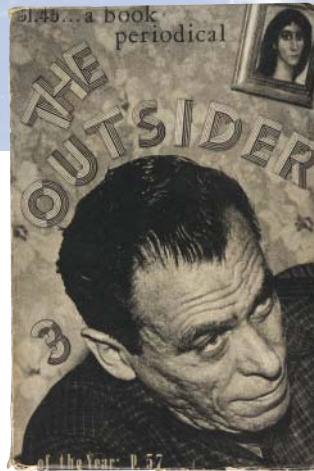
C H A R L E S
B U K O W S K I

P o e t o n t h e E d g e

Oct. 9, 2010 – Feb. 14, 2011

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

Library West Hall



One of the most original voices in 20th-century American literature, Charles Bukowski (1920-1994) lived and wrote on the edge — in the shadowy outskirts

of society and the literary establishment. His poems and tales tell of his life among society's outcasts – prostitutes, drunks, and gamblers

– and among ordinary people struggling to survive in an unforgiving world. In telling these stories, many set in Los Angeles, Bukowski wrote without artifice, in simple, natural language, repudiating the formal literary subjects and conventions used by other authors. He strove to keep his writing “raw, easy, and simple,” to grasp the “hard, clean line that says it.” By challenging the literary and cultural establishment, and by speaking for those on the edge, Bukowski forged a deep bond with his readers, and he became not only an icon of Los Angeles but also a cult figure with a huge international fan base. This exhibition is drawn from the archive of his papers donated to The Huntington by his widow, Linda Lee Bukowski. She also lent special items for this display.



Cover: Photograph by Ulf Andersen, 1978. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved. **Top:** The Outsider, issued by LowJon Press in New Orleans, published Bukowski's poems in its first issue in 1961. The third issue, in 1963, featured him on the cover, as Outsider of the Year. **Right:** Bukowski and his parents, ca. 1928.

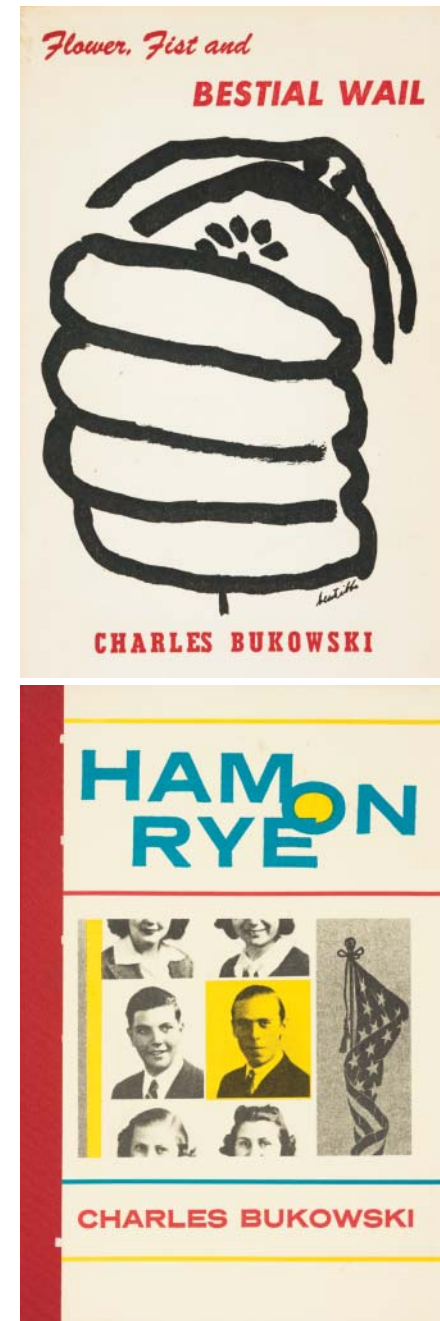
What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire: Childhood and Education

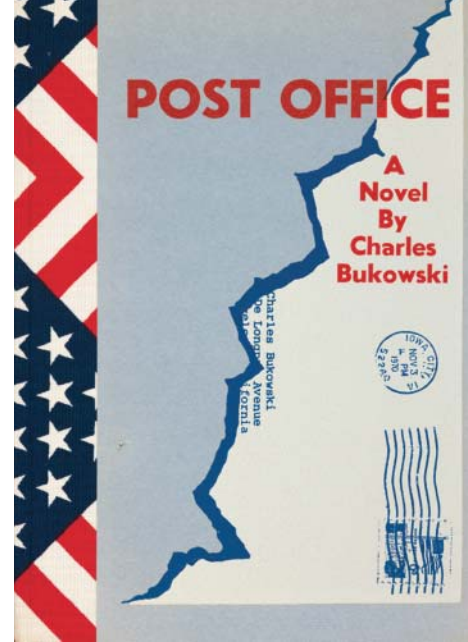
Born in Andernach, Germany, in 1920, Bukowski emigrated to the United States with his American father and German mother two years later. He was a perpetual outsider in school, his isolation made worse by a horrific case of acne that turned his face and chest into a mass of boils requiring painful treatments. He left home in his late teens, escaping an abusive father and passive mother. Wandering from one rooming house to another in cities across the nation, and working an endless string of dead-end jobs in slaughterhouses, factories, and stockrooms, he lived on the edge of society and struggled to make it as a writer. These early years are captured in two autobiographical novels, *Ham on Rye* and *Factotum*.

The Roominghouse Madrigals: Early Writing

Until the mid- to late 1960s, when he was in his 40s, Bukowski waged a constant, largely unsuccessful, battle to establish himself as a writer. As an itinerant worker of odd jobs, he hung around bars, drinking staggering quantities of liquor and cadging free drinks. He would say later that while he was on this multiyear binge, he wrote nothing, but, in fact, he did write and he submitted his works widely. First approaching such establishment magazines as *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *New Yorker*, he eventually realized that his works did not fit those mainstream publications, and he focused instead on little magazines, which began to publish him. They had small readerships, operated on shoestring budgets, and paid their authors nothing, but through them Bukowski began to be discovered by a modest number of readers, who liked what they read.

Top right: Bukowski's first book, *Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail*, published in 1960 by Hearse Press, Eureka, Calif., edited by D.V. Griffith, with cover art by Ben Tibbs. **Right:** First edition of the autobiographical novel *Ham on Rye*, designed by Barbara Martin, Black Sparrow Press, 1982.





“As I go on, I write as I please and as I must. I don’t worry about critics or style or fame or lack of fame. All I want is the next line as it truly comes to me.”

ardent admirer, appeared at Bukowski’s door and asked to see some poems. Martin was a rare book collector about to launch a fine printing establishment, the Black Sparrow Press. He proposed paying Bukowski a monthly stipend of \$100 if he would quit his job at the post office to write full time. Bukowski accepted, and he became the press’ best-selling writer.

Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way: Beginnings of Success

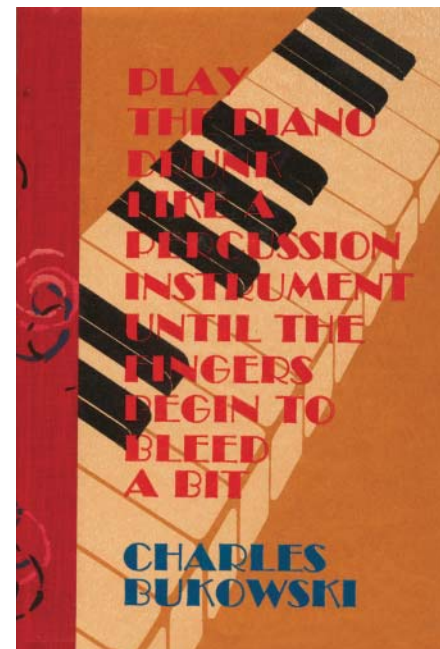
Once Bukowski left the post office and began to write full time, his reputation and standing as a cult writer took off. As he continued to find readers in the little poetry magazines, and as his books were issued by the Black Sparrow Press, he found fame and success throughout the 1970s and ’80s. He was gratified by his popularity with fans, even as he turned his back on literary critics, who denigrated his writing. He noted, “To me the finest praise I have ever received was from somebody doing time in Australia who wrote me, ‘Your books are the only books that pass from cell to cell.’”

The Pleasures of the Damned: Passions and Vices

Bukowski’s pleasures, whether we see them as passions or vices, were strong and integral elements of his life and his writing. His drinking was legendary and contributed to his bad-boy image with fans, whether he tipped the bottle while writing or while reading his poems to an audience. He also relished spending hours at the racetrack, betting on horse and harness racing, as a way to witness life’s most elemental moments and to jump-start his creative energies. Bukowski discovered classical music as a boy and always wrote with his radio tuned to a classical station.

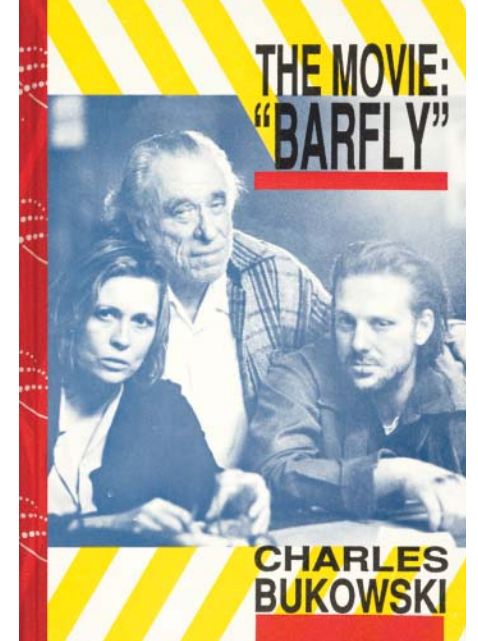
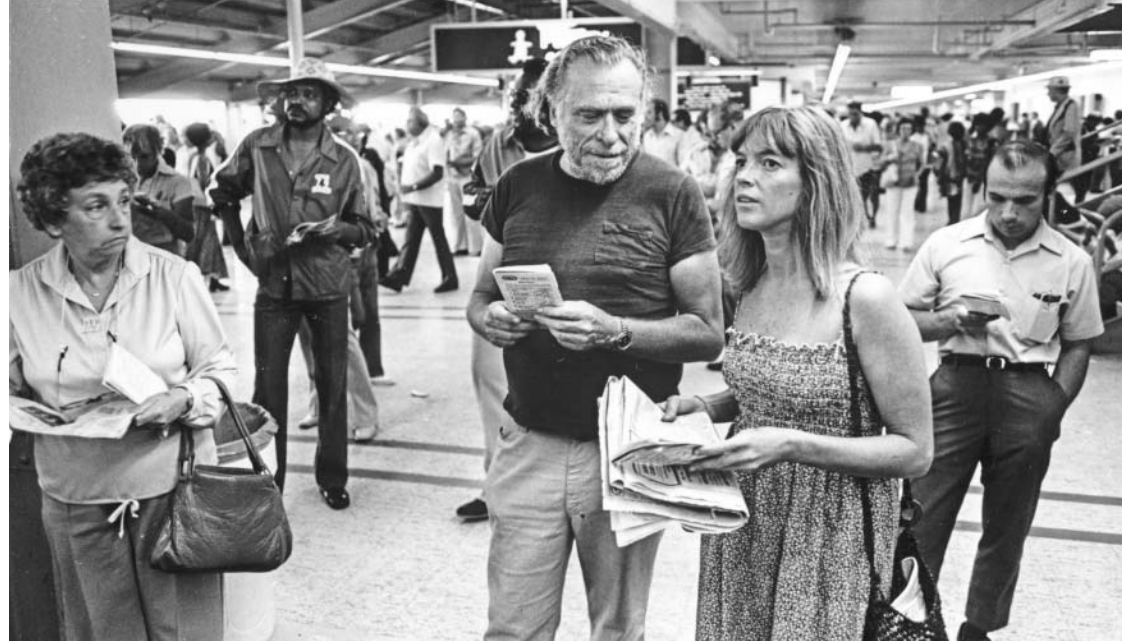
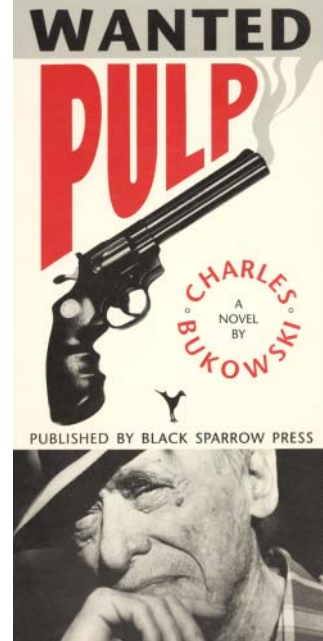
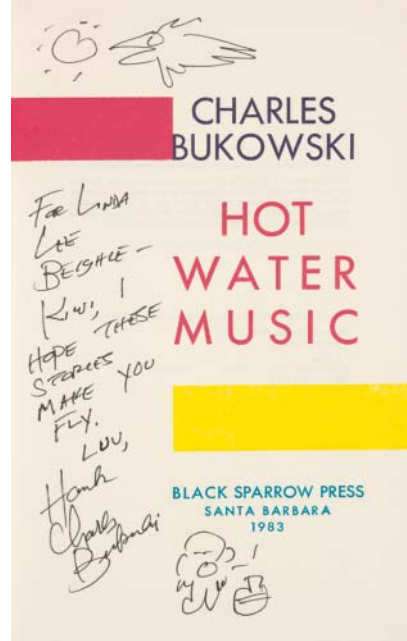
Living on Luck: Black Sparrow Press

By March 1966, Bukowski had been working for 14 years for the U.S. Postal Service as a letter carrier and mail sorter, while trying to write between his shifts. Nearly broken by the punishing physical labor, he had reached the point of desperation. At this critical moment, John Martin, an



Top left: Bukowski’s drawing of a horse race appeared in *Death Was Our Escort*, published by Moorpark College Press in 1974. *Top right:* *Post Office* (1971) is the first novel Bukowski wrote after he began to write full time. *Right:* Cover and frontispiece for *Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*, frontispiece drawing by Bukowski, cover design by Barbara Martin, Black Sparrow Press, 1979. *Far right:* The Olympia Standard Bukowski used from 1975 to 1983, when he switched to an IBM Selectric, followed by a computer in the winter of 1990–91. Bukowski always composed at the keyboard, asserting that writing by hand would be “too intellectual, too soft, too dull. No machine-gun sounds, you know. No action.”

From left to right: Linda Lee Beighle kept Bukowski's books in her restaurant for diners to read. Bukowski inscribed this copy of *Hot Water Music*, published by Black Sparrow Press, in 1983 • *Pulp* (1994), published after Bukowski's death, is his nod to the noir detective fiction of James Cain, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Mickey Spillane • Bukowski and Linda Lee at the racetrack, ca. 1978 • Bukowski wrote the autobiographical screenplay for *Barfly*. The 1987 film, directed by Barbet Schroeder, starred Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway.



Reach for the Sun: Settling Down

After rattling from one cheap apartment to another, mostly in Hollywood, and most famously on DeLongpre Avenue in the 1960s and Carlton Way in the early '70s, Bukowski finally reached a more settled, prosperous life in his mid-50s. In 1976, he met Linda Lee Beighle at a reading at the Troubador. She owned and operated a health food restaurant in Redondo Beach. In 1978, they bought a house in San Pedro, and they married in 1985.

Shakespeare Never Did This: Translations and Travel

Fans in Europe, especially Germany, and in other parts of the world recognized Bukowski's unique talent even before he caught on in the United States. In 1978, he and Linda flew to Germany, along with Michael Montfort, a German photographer who had settled in Los Angeles and who was Bukowski's

exclusive photographer for many years. His German translator, Carl Weissner, had invited him to do a reading in Mannheim, and Bukowski wanted to visit his birthplace in Andernach. Bukowski wrote a travel memoir called *Shakespeare Never Did This*, which included Montfort's photographs of the trip.

Hollywood: Bukowski on Film

Bukowski and his books have attracted interest from filmmakers, in and out of Hollywood. Three feature films have been made based on his life and works: *Barfly* and *Love Is a Dog from Hell* (both in 1987) and *Factotum* (2005). Bukowski mined his experiences with filmmakers in a novel, *Hollywood* (1989), a hilarious account of the bizarre world of "The Industry."

"All I need now is what I needed then: a desk lamp, the typer, the bottle, the radio, classical music, and this room on fire."



Photograph by Joan Levine Gannij, 1978. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

Related Programs

The events are open to the public and take place in Friends' Hall at The Huntington.

Bukowski Aloud **Wednesday • October 27 • 7:30 p.m.**

An evening of readings from the works of Bukowski. Linda Lee Bukowski will be on hand along with special guest participants. Patt Morrison, KPCC radio host and *Los Angeles Times* columnist, will lead the conversation. The event is free, but tickets are required due to limited space.

Call 800.838.3006 or visit www.brownpapertickets.com for tickets.

Born Into This **Monday • November 15 • 7:30 p.m.**

A screening of the documentary film about Charles Bukowski, by John Dullaghan. The filmmaker will introduce the documentary and answer questions following the screening. No reservations required.

This exhibition is made possible by the Robert F. Erburu Exhibition Endowment.

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