

And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks.

William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac.

New York: Grove Press, 2008.

\$24

Despite having one of the most unattractive titles in the history of literature, *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* is a highly entertaining read. This short novel describes the genesis of the Beat Generation in New York in the mid-1940s, and focuses on the murder of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr. Although not a writer himself, Carr brought Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs together and was clearly a catalyst for their creative energy. Kammerer, on the other hand, was a hanger-on; he had fallen in love with Carr years before, followed him across the country, and become a neurotic stalker who finally, it seems, pushed his attentions too far and ended up in the East River, stabbed in the heart by Carr's Boy Scout knife. In 1945, Kerouac encouraged Burroughs to collaborate with him on a novel about the murder, and they wrote alternating chapters, with Kerouac becoming "Mike Ryko" and Burroughs "Will Dennison." Their effort is published now for the first time. The title apparently derived from a radio broadcast about a fire in a zoo or circus, although the actual event has never been definitively identified (despite James Grauerholz's best efforts).

We will never know if the actual hippos were soft or hard-boiled, but the novel itself is hard-boiled through and through. The adjective invariably pops up in any discussion of the book, from current reviews (Nicosia and See) to Kerouac's own 1945 description: "—a portrait of the 'lost' segment of our generation, hardboiled, honest, and sensationally real" (qtd. in Grauerholz 199). As Grauerholz points out in his "Afterword," Burroughs and Kerouac "were writing explicitly for a genre-fiction market" (211), and their debt to Dashiell Hammett is unmistakable throughout, particularly in Burroughs' Will Dennison chapters. The specifics of time and place, the precision of Dennison's actions, and his sense of being at home in the midnight city streets all capture the Sam Spade mode so popular at the time.

The narrative pacing of *Hippos*, however, is decidedly flat in comparison with Hammett, and despite the adeptness of their "hardboiled" style, Burroughs and Kerouac fail to draw us into the psychological drama at the heart of the action. Grauerholz invites us to relinquish any prior knowledge of the events and "let the novel's characters 'Phillip Tourian' and 'Ramsay Allen' speak for themselves" (187). Here, however, we find the book's most glaring deficiency. The baffling circumstances of the Phillip Tourian (Lucien Carr) and Ramsay Allen (David Kammerer) relationship are never treated convincingly, and neither character says anything to illuminate it. Allen reiterates his desire for a relationship rather than a carnal fling with Tourian (28), while Tourian tells Ryko that he wants to ship out with him because Allen "is getting inconvenient" (14). This complaint hardly seems grounds for murder, in real life or fiction.

The narrators themselves exhibit inconsistent attitudes towards Ramsay Allen. Dennison states in his opening chapter that "Al is one of the best guys I know, and you couldn't find better company" (4). Yet when Phillip tells Dennison that he has murdered Allen, Dennison's reaction

is so detached that the scene reads like a Sam Spade parody. Ryko's reaction to Allen's murder is more convincing—"My legs kept bending at the knee and I had to lean most of my weight on the bar" (168). Yet Ryko is also surprisingly callous, saying to Tourian, "Al was queer. He chased you over continents. He screwed up your life. The police will understand that" (170). This attitude seems rather odd considering that Ryko has earlier encouraged Allen to ship out with them and then jump ship in France: "As far as I'm concerned I'd like to have you along. The more the merrier, and with around we'd make a better go of it on the tramp" (91). From a biographical point of view, these inconsistencies raise interesting questions about the real nature of the Lucien Carr-David Kammerer relationship.

Kerouac describes Carr in *Vanity of Duluo* as "a mischievous little prick" (223), and this is certainly the impression created here. From the opening scene, in which he appropriates Dennison's comfiest chair and demands some marijuana, Tourian is portrayed as a rude, self-absorbed young man whose relationships with his girlfriend Babs and his mentor/stalker Ramsay Allen are openly manipulative. He has no compunction about taking food and money from Allen (or anyone else, for that matter), and, according to Allen, has actually responded to his sexual advances. Allen tells Dennison that "He kissed me several times, and then suddenly he pushed me away and got up" (26). Now, the fictional version of events that we are reading in *Hippos* is certainly not to be taken as historical fact, but as Grauerholz points out, "There is much more to be said about Lucien Carr's early life and youthful bisexuality than has ever been published in even the fullest, most reliable biographies of the major Beat figures" (188). Part of the book's fascination for the Beat specialist is the possible insights it offers into the complex dynamics with the group. To what extent was Kammerer the victim of Carr's capricious and manipulative personality? Was the murder the finale to Carr's long series of gratuitous acts, which were well enough known for Kerouac to write in *Vanity of Duluo* that he "was a great one for what André Gide called the *acte gratuite* ('the gratuitous act'), the doing of an act just for the hell of it" (241)?

But the book's interest is not limited to biographical matters. While it certainly has flaws in terms of narrative pacing and character development, *Hippos* also displays a thematic integrity that confirms Kerouac's description of it as "a portrait of the 'lost' segment of our generation." Tourian may not be a sympathetic character, but he clearly represents the generational shift that marks the emergence of the Beat movement. When asked why he can't develop his New Vision in New York, Tourian replies, "Because Al's around, and he's a dead weight on all my ideas. I've got some new ideas. He belongs to an ancient generation" (17). This theme is cleverly represented by Kerouac when he intercuts a conversation between Tourian and another character with dialogue from a radio drama in which a country doctor offers advice to a young man. The doctor's platitudes are juxtaposed with Tourian's philosophical discourse, so that the two appear to be in conversation with each other, while also completely failing to communicate (40). With World War II firmly in place as the backdrop to the action, Kerouac and Burroughs are clearly creating their version of the lost generation of the Twenties, but with a more darkly inflected atmosphere of social rupture. Burroughs described their novel as "very much in the Existentialist genre" (qtd. in Grauerholz 195), and he was right, in that it explores the inadequacy of old

absolutes and the reckless desperation that their collapse brings about. Or, as Nicosia puts it, “think Dashiell Hammett meets Albert Camus.”

When the book is approached as an existential study of a new, “lost generation,” its title makes a certain sense. The image of creatures trapped in a tank, unable to escape an environment that will destroy them, symbolizes, with absurd pathos, the plight of this “lost segment” of the post-war population. Tourian tells Ryko, ““You’re a fish in a pond. It’s drying up. You have to mutate into an amphibian, but someone keeps hanging on to you and telling you to stay in the pond”” (46). While Tourian’s New Vision—of “the ultimate artistic society” (41)—is not persuasively developed, the dislocation of his group is compellingly presented.

In recent years, we have seen the publication of several archival Beat works. This is one of the most interesting, capturing not only the mood of the time but also an important moment in each writer’s literary development. In Burroughs’ chapters, we find the laconic masculinity of film noir, testament to the many hours he spent in New York City’s movie theatres. He would later transfer this tone to his gay protagonists, but here, Will Dennison is decisively heterosexual, representing perhaps an element of wish-fulfillment in the still-conflicted Burroughs. In Kerouac’s chapters, we see the unmistakable stamp of Hemingway, yet there’s also evidence of Kerouac’s own exuberance and his delight in the diversity of American types and speech patterns. His description of the Jamaican dispatcher in the Union Hall, who humorously describes each ship he calls out, gives an early taste of what would become a defining characteristic of Kerouac’s mature work.

Works Cited

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