

The Road to Interzone: Reading William S. Burroughs Reading

By Michael Stevens

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Is a writer what he reads? This is an intriguing ontological question for literary philosophers, and Michael Stevens's new scholarly text certainly makes a vigorous attempt to demonstrate that William S. Burroughs's eclectic reading played a crucial role in the development of this elusive and fascinating author. Though Robert Gluck, in his introductory endorsement for the book, states that "Stevens has created a new kind of biography," it is actually a reference book, which is not at all like the traditional narrative biography *Built of Books: How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde* (2009), which Thomas Wright has recently published, spending twenty years in an attempt to examine nearly every book Oscar Wilde read and relating them all to Wilde's flamboyant and mesmerizing life. Yet, to read *The Road to Interzone* straight through is like experiencing a biographical cut-up of Burroughs's literary imagination. But this is not how Stevens, who seems to have spent nearly a many years on his project as Wright did on his, intended the book to be used. The title of Stevens's work signifies on the pioneering work by John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927), which examined how the books Coleridge read influenced his poetic imagination. Burroughs studied under Lowes at Harvard, and *The Road to Xanadu* was one of the books Burroughs owned. Stevens's project is similar to Lowes's in that he attempts to show how traces of Burroughs reading are found in his literary production. We are told in the introduction that Burroughs was not a "collector." He enjoyed giving away to his friends such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac books that were important to him in order to edify their minds. Like Wright, Stevens admits he was unable to track down every book his subject ever read, but the result of his research is staggering—bordering on the obsessive. Yet, as Emily Dickinson will tell us, "Much Madness is divinest Sense— / To a discerning Eye." What Stevens has created is an impressive document that will surely influence the course of Burroughs studies in fruitful and profound ways for years to come.

Stevens's work is organized into six parts. The first, which is the most useful, examines the references Burroughs made to other authors in his own published and unpublished fiction, essays, journals, and interviews. It allows the reader to discern where, when, and how Burroughs used and transformed these authors and their works. The second part is a bibliography of Burroughs's contributions to other authors' work, such as forewords, introductions, and postscripts. An entire section on dust-jacket endorsements constitutes the third section. A catalogue of Burroughs's personal library from the 1950s to 1971, now in the New York Public Library and listed in Barry Miles's *A Descriptive Catalogue of the William S. Burroughs Archive* is found in the fourth section. A fifth section lists those works in Burroughs's private library from 1974 to 1997, as noted in John M. Bennett's *An American Avant Garde: First Wave; An*

Exhibition Catalogue of the William S. Burroughs Collection at The Ohio State University.
Books remaining on the shelf when Burroughs passed away make up the final section.

Those scholars familiar with Burroughs's life and work will find some elements related by Stevens not terribly surprising: Burroughs admiration for Jack Black's *You Can't Win* and the works of Joseph Conrad and Denton Welch. Stevens provides commentary that highlights Burroughs admiration for Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Kafka, Beckett, Genet, Graham Greene, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Joseph Moncure March's *The Wild Party* is said to have made Burroughs want to write, and Ernest Seton-Thompson's *The Biography of a Grizzly* inspired an 8-year-old Burroughs to create his first literary production. Stevens tells us that even though Burroughs thought highly of Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," he believed Papa's embracing of his own image destroyed him as an artist. We learn that Burroughs was not a fan of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (although he admired "The Dead"), championed Henry Kuttner's *Fury*, and believed that the French author Julian Green was a truly neglected master of prose. Burroughs disliked Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, yet savored Suzy McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World*. He did not read Faulkner; disliked the Marquis de Sade; was inspired by John O'Hara's characterization and dialogue; and enjoyed D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.

There are also some surprises, like the strong influence of Robert M. Lindner's *Rebel Without a Cause: The Story of a Criminal Psychopath*, and Burroughs's admiration for Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and Stephen King's *The Shining*. Stevens provides lists Burroughs made of his favorite novels, those he felt were most neglected, and his favorite women writers: Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, Susan Sontag, Djuna Barnes, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Bowles, Dorothy Parker, Eudora Welty, Isabelle Eberhardt, and Colette. It is interesting to note that Burroughs had a copy of Charles Bukowski's *Women*, and the only Kerouac novel he seemed to have held onto was *Maggie Cassidy*. When he died Burroughs had copies of David Dalton's *James Dean: The Mutant King* and Dave Thompson's *Never Fade Away: The Kurt Cobain Story* on his shelves. More importantly, we find the sources for Burroughsian characters like Salt Chunk Mary, Captain Mission, and Noah Blake. We also see the novels Burroughs was reading that helped inspire his final "Red Night Trilogy": James Jones's *A Touch of Danger* and Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*.

It appears, in the case of Burroughs, that reading helped make the writer more than we might have previously imagined. Burroughs used his eclectic reading to inform his own works in numerous ways. Stevens has produced a rigorous work which will undoubtedly inspire future scholarship. Perhaps this handsome and deceptively petite scholarly tome, with an appropriately Burroughsian cover illustration by Peter Maloney, is not for the uninitiated—those who have yet to catch the virus. But as the virus spreads the value of this work will become truly appreciated.