

WILLIAM BURROUGHS AND JACK KEROUAC AND THE MURDER THAT HELPED
SHAPE THE BEAT MOVEMENT:

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Most followers of the Beats know that Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allan Ginsberg were friends and kindred souls in New York City in the 1940s. They most likely know that Burroughs is the character “Bull Lee” in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and that he appears in two other Kerouac books. They probably know that Kerouac supplied the title for Burroughs’ most celebrated book, *Naked Lunch*. (“A frozen moment,” Burroughs writes, “when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.”) They may also know that Kerouac and Ginsberg visited Burroughs in Morocco when Burroughs was living a drug-drenched life there in the 1950s. And that Kerouac typed out the first two chapters of *Naked Lunch* for Burroughs who, in Burroughs’ own words, was so drugged out he “could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours.”

What they may not know is that before Morocco, before *On the Road*, before *Naked Lunch*, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac collaborated on a novel. This novel, *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*, was only published last year—sixty years after it was written. The book is based on a murder in which Burroughs and Kerouac played minor supporting, non-lethal roles. However, a case can be made that this murder, and the subsequent book collaboration, made Burroughs understand that he could write—something he had not thought of before and had, in fact, disdained.

In other words: no murder, no collaboration—no *Naked Lunch*.

It all centers around an unlikely character named Lucien Carr, a childhood friend of William Burroughs' and a most peculiar fellow.

The facts, more or less, are these. Jack Kerouac, the young man from Lowell, Massachusetts, had come to New York to attend Columbia University in the early 1940's. There, in 1944, he met, first, a young man named Lucien Carr. Then he met Allen Ginsberg, and then, shortly after, William Burroughs. Here's how Kerouac himself describes it in the *Paris Review* interview, which Kerouac submitted to a year before he died:

First I met Claude [Kerouac's pseudonym for Lucien Carr]. Then I met Allen and then I met Burroughs. Claude came in through the fire escape...There were gunshots down in the alley—Pow! Pow!—and it was raining, and my wife says, “here comes Claude.” And here comes this blonde guy through the fire escape, all wet. I said, “What’s this all about, what the hell is this?” He says, “They’re chasing me.” Next day in walks Allen Ginsberg carrying books. Sixteen years old with his ears sticking out. He says, “Well, discretion is the better part of valor!” I said, “Aw shutup. You little twitch.” Then the next day here comes Burroughs wearing a seersucker suit, followed by the other guy.”

The “other guy” being David Kammerer, about whom you will hear shortly.

Ginsberg, a scrawny kid from New Jersey “with his ears sticking out,” holding a burning desire to be a genius and a festering guilt about his then unacknowledged homosexuality, was in awe of the Apollo-like Kerouac. Their relationship would always have an edge to it, with the twin prejudices against Jews and queers lurking in the back of Kerouac's mind. The Kerouac scholar Isaac Gewirtz said that while Kerouac would from time to time in his journals make cutting remarks about Ginsberg's homosexuality, he never said a negative word about Burroughs' gay proclivities. Burroughs was then living on Bedford Street in Greenwich Village. The whole lurid drama of David Kammerer and Lucien Carr unfolded in short order.

Lucien Carr—a friend of William Burroughs' from St. Louis where they had both grown up—was acknowledged by anyone who met him to be angelically handsome. He was also strange and manipulative. David Kammerer, an older gay man, and also a childhood friend of Burroughs' from St. Louis, was obsessed with the younger Carr. He had been his teacher at one time and followed him from state to state, hoping for some kind of idealized, or actual, consummation. When Carr came to New York, so did Kammerer.

Carr seems to have tolerated this obsession and perhaps was even titillated by it. (Isaac Gewirtz thinks this was because “Carr was a sadist.”) In any event, on the night of August 16th, 1944, on the Upper Side of New York, David Kammerer and Lucien Carr were sitting together in Riverside Park near Columbia University. This time, apparently, Kammerer, who always seemed to know at what point to stop his advances, went too far. Lucien Carr stabbed David Kammerer to death with a pocket knife. He tied Kammerer's hands and feet together, and threw the body into the nearby Hudson River. Realizing the grave nature of his deed, Carr first went to his old friend, William Burroughs, for advice. Burroughs told him to turn himself in. Ignoring this counsel, Carr went to Jack Kerouac, and Kerouac, for some reason, helped Carr dispose of the murder weapon.

Carr did finally turn himself in. He was tried and convicted, but he served just two years in prison for the murder. A homosexual preying on a youth was a very sure defense back then in court. Kerouac spent a few days in jail for aiding and abetting. He got out by marrying his girlfriend and having his in-laws post bail. (His own father would not.) Burroughs' was put in jail, too, but his father posted bail immediately.

When the dust settled about a year later, Burroughs and Kerouac decided to write a novel together based on the murder. The two men, along with Edie Parker—Kerouac’s former wife and intermittent lover—and Joan Vollmer Adams—who Burroughs would later marry and, in Mexico City, shoot to death—were all living together in an apartment on the West 115th Street. In August of 1945, Burroughs and Kerouac began writing *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*, quite clearly based on the Kammerer murder. Burroughs wrote the first chapter, and then the two men alternated after that, chapter by chapter. It took them just a month to finish it.

There is no doubt this is a *roman à clef*. If you’re a stickler about these things, and demand proof that the novel is, in fact, based on this rather tawdry murder, the proof is in the New York Public Library. A few short weeks ago I was at the Library visiting the Berg Collection of English and American Literature. I had before me the second draft, in typescript, single spaced, on onion paper, of *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*. At this point, it was called *I Wish I Were You*. At the top of page one, which is dated August 25, 1945—it’s quite sobering to think that two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan just two weeks earlier—are the names of the main characters, in Rosetta Stone-like fashion, deciphered. It says:

Phillip=Lucien [Carr]

Dennison=[William] Burroughs

Ryko=Jack [Kerouac]

Ramsey Allen=Dave K[ammerer]

When the novel was finished, Burroughs and Kerouac tried to get it published, but with no success. Burroughs didn’t think much of the book. In any case, the men went their separate

ways, literarily and actually, to meet again in Louisiana, Mexico and, in the mid-1950s, Morocco. They also went on to write their own books and to carve their individual niches in American literary history. *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* was forgotten, or, more accurately, was unknown to all but a few people. The book did, however, achieve a kind of mythical status by those who *had* heard of it. An unpublished Burroughs/Kerouac manuscript! Will it ever surface?

James Grauerholtz, the executor of William Burroughs's estate, promised Lucien Carr—who, by the way, after he was released from jail, went on to have a long career with United Press International and is the father of the novelist Caleb Carr—he would not try to get the book published while he, Lucien Carr, was still alive. When Carr died in 2005, Grauerholtz felt free to try to get *Hippos* published and, in 2008, it was, by Grove Press, the American publisher of *Naked Lunch*. I should say I don't think the book is a major literary event—just a curiosity. However, others do attribute merit to the book. Here's what Ian Pindar of England's *Guardian* newspaper wrote about the book in late 2008, a month after *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* was published:

Neither Burroughs nor Kerouac is at his best here, but *Hippos* has value as a testament to their latent talent. Both men, though young, come across as natural writers with an instinct for the telling detail. Burroughs is grimly fascinated by the abuse of authority, his sarcastic, petty-minded landlord Mr Goldstein being a distant relative of the County Clerk in *Naked Lunch*. If anything, *Hippos* proves that becoming a junkie was the making of Burroughs, pulling his unique vision into focus.

Now you can read the book and see for yourself:



You might be curious as to the genesis of the title. According to Kerouac, “Burroughs and I were sitting in a bar one night and we heard a newscaster saying [remember, this is during wartime], ‘...and so the Egyptians attacked blah blah blah...and meanwhile there was a great fire in the zoo in London and the fire raced across the fields and the hippos were boiled in their tanks! Good night everyone!’” Burroughs caught that and suggested it as a title. He and Kerouac went through a few titles—*I Wish I Were You* being one of them—but finally decided on *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*.

I met Burroughs in 1971 and spent time with him in London and in New York. That affects my response to Kerouac’s description of Burroughs in *On the Road* and, especially, in *Vanity of Duluoaz*. Burroughs was nine years older than Kerouac—although you will read in some biographies that he was eight years older—something that surprised me. (Kerouac wrote, “He was nine years older than me but I never noticed it.”) I think it surprised me because Burroughs always looked old, even when he was young, and Kerouac, when he was young, looked like the epitome of youth. This is how Kerouac describes that first meeting with Burroughs, or “Will Hubbard,” in *Vanity of Duluoaz*:

When I had heard about “Will Hubbard” I had pictured a stocky dark-haired person of peculiar intensity because of the reports about him, the peculiar directness of his actions, but here had come walking into my pad tall and bespectacled and thin in a seersucker suit as tho he’s just returned from a compound in Equatorial Africa where he’d sat at dusk with a martini discussing the peculiarities... Tall, 6 foot 1, strange,

inscrutable because ordinary-looking (scrutable), like a shy bank clerk with a patrician thin-lipped cold bluelipped face, blue eyes saying nothing behind steel rims and glass, sandy hair, a little wispy, a little of the wistful German Nazi youth as his soft hair fluffles in the breeze....

Well, I am here to tell you, having met William Seward Burroughs, that this description is spot on, the best physical description of Burroughs I have ever read and one that captures him perfectly. I feel as if he's stepping right out of the page when I read this, and it brings me back to that day, in 1971, when, as a young man, I nervously knocked on the door of Burroughs' Duke Street flat in London, and William S. Burroughs himself opened the door to let me in. But I want to go forward a bit to quote another passage to show you that Kerouac could not only describe Burroughs' appearance, but his mind and spirit and his character, as well. Kerouac understood that, though he called Burroughs "a teacher," their relationship was not one-sided at all. Here's what Kerouac writes about those early days in New York,

I think it was about then he [Hubbard/Burroughs] rather vaguely began to admire me, either for virile independent thinking, or 'rough trade' (whatever they think), or charm, or maybe broody melancholy philosophic Celtic unexpected depth or simple ragged shiny frankness...

In fact, everything Kerouac writes about Burroughs, and about the two of them, is powerful and pristine—and, above all, generous. Here's one of his rhapsodies in *Vanity of Duluo:*

O Will Hubbard in the night! A great writer today, he is a shadow hovering over Western literature, and no great writer ever lived without that soft and tender curiosity, verging on the maternal care, about what others think and say, no great writer ever packed off from this scene on earth without amazement like the amazement he felt because I was myself.

I won't linger too much more on physical descriptions, only to say that in *On the Road*, Burroughs—or “Old Bull Lee”—comes across as much more of an eccentric shaman. Of course, *On the Road* was written many years earlier than *Vanity of Duluo*. The narrator visits Bull Lee at his farm in Algiers, Louisiana, outside of New Orleans on his cross-country ride. “It would take all night to tell about Old Bull Lee,” the narrator begins. Then, later, he says, “He [Bull Lee] spent all his time talking and teaching others. Jane [the actual name of Burroughs' wife] sat at his feet; so did I.” Kerouac goes on to replicate some of the quirky, wonderful speech of Burroughs' during their stay with him. He speaks as well about sitting at Burroughs' feet in his journal.

By the way, “Lee,” as in Old Bull Lee, is a pseudonym Burroughs himself used for his first book, *Junky*, published in 1953 by Ace Books. So volatile was the subject matter at the time—a book written by a dope fiend!—that Burroughs felt compelled to use his mother's maiden name, Lee, for his own. So the very first edition of *Junky* is by “William Lee.”

The fact is this: fairly soon after they met in New York, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs wrote a book together. It was clear that Burroughs, a Harvard graduate who had studied medicine in Vienna and had a wide-ranging mind, was the better educated man, certainly from the point of view of certain kinds of reading and exposure to the world. Kerouac had no problem at all acknowledging that Burroughs taught him a great deal in that area. In *Vanity of Duluo*, Kerouac describes one such instructional moment,

Harbinger of the day when we'd become fast friends and he'd hand me the full two-volume edition of Spengler's *Decline of the West* and say ‘EEE dif y your mind, my boy, with the grand actuality of Fact.’ When he would become my great teacher in the night.

If anyone had more experience as a writer at that point, though, it was Jack Kerouac, the younger man. (Kerouac was twenty-three at the time, Burroughs, thirty-two.) Not only that, Burroughs did not think of himself as literary, much less a writer. He abhorred the very idea. Kerouac at this point had a strong yearning to be a writer and was already writing the book that would become *The Town and the City*, his first published novel. In short, Kerouac knew he wanted to be a writer even then, at twenty-three, and even before. Burroughs had no idea, and no desire.

There is a wonderful little book titled *Photos and Remembering Jack*, by Burroughs, published by White Fields Press in 1994. The photos are by Allen Ginsberg. In the photographs, we see Burroughs is an old man, bent over, with a cane, but still vigorous, at one point rowing a boat. There are only two short passages in the book. In the first, Burroughs wrote, simply, “Jack Kerouac was a writer. That is, he wrote.... He went there and wrote it and brought it back for a generation to read, but he never found his own way back. A whole migrant generation arose from Kerouac’s *On the Road*....”

So whereas Kerouac’s feelings toward Burroughs were somewhat worshipful, it may be said, as Isaac Gewirtz notes in his fine book, *Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac on the Road*, Burroughs credits Kerouac for his writing career. Gewirtz quotes an essay by Burroughs titled, “Jack Kerouac,” in which he, Burroughs, elaborates on this:

It was Kerouac who kept telling me I should write and call the book I wrote Naked Lunch. I had never written anything after high school and did not think of myself as a writer and I told him so... “I got no talent for writing...” He insisted quietly that I did have talent for writing and that I would write [sic] a book called Naked Lunch To which I replied “I don’t want to hear anything literary.” He just smiled. In fact during all

the years I knew Kerouac I cant remember ever seeing him really angry or hostile. It was the sort of smile in a way you get from a priest who knows you will come to Jusus sooner or later...”

Gewirtz reconfirmed the importance of Kerouac’s influence on Burroughs. “Burroughs always acknowledged that Kerouac was the reason he became a writer,” he said. “He never had a qualm about that.”

So what I am getting at here is that Burroughs’ influence on Kerouac is probably less than we think and Kerouac’s influence on Burroughs is probably a lot more than we think. This is surely not the popular consensus. Burroughs was a very powerful personality, and I can tell you he was quite formidable in person. He was forbidding and formal—not rude or discourteous, but just, well, awesome, in the original sense of the word. Kerouac was a very powerful personality, but his power was of a different sort. It derived from a strong life force. I think there has come down the notion that Kerouac was much more the absorber, and this is partially reinforced by the narrator’s role in *On the Road*, which is, basically, one of hero worship of Dean Moriarty—i.e., Neal Cassidy. But the evidence points us to another, more equable conclusion.

I think, in the end, we can say that without Jack Kerouac there may never have been a *Naked Lunch*. But I’m not sure that we can say without William Burroughs there never would have been an *On the Road*. I believe the book would still have been written—without “Old Bull Lee” in it, of course, but Dean Moriarty would still be there, and Moriarty is the heart of that book. It’s all an exercise in literary gamesmanship, though. The good thing is, we do have both books—however they got written. That’s all that matters.



William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in New York City