

**Charles Bukowski. *Hollywood*
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Those accustomed to Charles Bukowski's usual rant will find less of the offensive, misogynistic, bar-brawling alcoholism than usual here; but that doesn't mean it is entirely absent. A novel about the filming of the 1985 film *Barfly*, which starred Mickey Rourke in the days when he swaggered with a slanted, smart-aleck smile and hadn't yet undergone the transformation to boxing from which he recently returned (for *The Wrestler*, another fine performance) and Faye Dunaway. Bukowski, as he does in other works of 'fiction,' barely bothers concealing the inspiration behind his characters. Again he is Henry Chinaski, beaten down by the stupidities of human nature, but never beaten out of the game. The pseudonyms he chooses for others are sometimes merely slight changes of real names and usually the brief description gives the game away; hence we get characterisations of Sean Penn and Madonna, Norman Mailer, Francis Ford Coppola, David Lynch and Isabella Rossellini, and Helmut Newton amongst others. But whereas sleaze and shame are constitutional trademarks for Bukowski, you will not find the kind of kiss and tell gossip you might otherwise find when such fiction takes cover under false names. Bukowski simply wants to tell his story the way it is to him, the 'bum that made good' as the media of the time made him out to be, or the scratch in the mud at the edge of madness writer who actually lived in Hollywood – the mean streets of East Hollywood, not the manicured sets of more upwardly mobile neighbourhoods, naturally – and wrote about the things he loved and hated, or just could stomach, amidst the foul reservoir of (self)deceit and hypocrisy he saw in the human race in general and in aspirational America in particular.

So what do we get in *Hollywood*? The swilling of vast vats of alcohol,

yes; the almost heroic resistance to any sort of conformity, especially that aimed towards 'bettering' one's station in life, certainly; and the writer struggling with the process of having his words – always guttural as a truth of life, consistently railing against the mainstream cannibalisation of all other culture in the name of profit, restrained only in their wild meanderings by the author's craving to display an economy of style equal to the tender pointlessness of his subjects – transformed into film. The setbacks along the way convince the reader more than once that the project will not be successfully completed, Chinaski's romantic relationship of the time seems a relative cure to the sickness of his soul, the checks keep bouncing, while the author describes his incessant gambling at the tracks (and offers helpful advice to hopefuls who believe that such an activity could improve their financial status). The film is due to be directed by the maker of a documentary about reviled African despot Idi Amin, while another character contends that witnessing a Tom Jones concert is worse than being beaten by the police for nothing ("well, almost for nothing"), there is much leaning against the bar, railing against potential Geniuses like Godard who 'just laid on you like a slab of cement' when you just wanted to get out and away, an experience that forces Chinaski to lapse into his 'pathetic cut-off period,' where he nods and pretends to understand because he doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, 'the one weakness that has lead me into the most trouble. Trying to be kind to others,' Bukowski opines, 'I often get my soul shredded into a kind of spiritual pasta.'

The film is eventually made and although Bukowski can't believe the fight scenes Rourke gets a pretty good review ('Nice kid, nice smile'), as does Dunaway (although where Rourke comes to see Bukowski personally at the wrap party, the female lead is a no-show, as there are no media in sight). Speaking of fighting in bars, Bukowski guides Rourke with a marvelous rendition of his experiences, which inevitably ended up with the beaten wordsmith checking for his wallet whenever he wakes up from another bout of unconsciousness in the alley, ready for that familiar feeling of being let down by the rest of humanity – nope, it's not there, again. We find this story rehearsed in another recent Bukowski publication, this time of mainly unpublished short stories, *Portions From a Wine-stained Notebook; uncollected stories and essays 1944-1990* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008). For the uninitiated, *Hollywood* comes with a generous foreword by Bukowski biographer Howard Sounes, while *Portions* also comes with an helpful introduction by David Calonne.

In the film's aftermath, Bukowski reviews the film reviewers ("Is there any way I can give this a minus one?" one asks), but in spite of them the film is a success and he finally goes to see it with girlfriend Sarah a month

later (after having been given the worst seats in the house at the premiere; Bukowski makes a point of the fact that the lead actor earns 750 times what the writer does from the film). Then it's back to the track, where Chinskai gets to watch humanity at its worst, which he claims keeps him close to their abiding reality of greed, fear and anger. If Oscar Wilde is right, and we are all in the gutter, with only some of us looking up at the stars, then Bukowski is looking both to the sky and to the grit beneath him, the folk around him, the desperate, sometimes pathetic, mostly fighting effort of human beings to rise above their frailty... or sink beneath it. He looks into the cracks and isn't afraid to report on the nastiness he finds there. *Hollywood* is another testament to his fortitude, his prodigious alcohol abuse and his finely honed ability to tell a story laced with streetwise realism.

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