

# Charles Bukowski—the Post-Beat Outsider

**From his early life, Charles Bukowski seemed to have all odds against him. Born on August 16, 1920 in Andernach, Germany, he moved with his parents to the United States at only two years of age.**

His mother, Katharina Fett (her name was later changed to Kate Bukowski), was German and his father, Henry Bukowski, an American serviceman that had been an allied soldier during World War I.

At the onset of the Great Depression, Bukowski's father, like many others, became unemployed. The father's frustration was transformed into physical and verbal abuse of his son and, as Charles describes him in *Ham on Rye* (1982), into endless troubles and "arguments with people." There are similar pictures in stories like "The Death of the Father" and the novel *Factotum* (1975).

During these early days, Bukowski suffered from a very bad *acne vulgaris*, which stigmatized his face and back and had to be surgically removed. "The worst case I've seen in all my years of practice!" one of the doctors stated when examining his condition. This malady molded the young Bukowski in some other ways, too. It made him a young outsider and predestinated him to later become a drunk, but it also gave him his underlying perspective, as in the poem "The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth":

I think of the men  
I've known in  
factories  
with no way to  
get out —  
choking while living  
choking while laughing

Bukowski started to write poems when he was about 20 years old, but he didn't become widely known until he began to publish his works more frequently in the 1960s. Some have categorized his style as beat poetry, while others say that he doesn't belong to the same tradition as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, but rather should be categorized as a hippie writer or latter-day beat. According to Carl Williams' interview with John Martin, founder of Black Sparrow Press, the independent publisher of Bukowski and many beat poets in the 60s, the man "was not a 'beat writer' and felt that many of the so-called beat writers were not artists but posers."

Beginning when he was young, Bukowski worked in any job that could give him a stable income. The list soon encompassed "dishwasher, truck driver and loader, mailman, guard, gas station attendant, stock boy, warehouseman, shipping clerk, post office clerk, parking lot attendant, Red Cross orderly, and elevator operator, among other things," according to *Contemporary Authors*. For eleven years, he worked at a post office in Los Angeles. In 1969, he quit to become a full-time writer for little magazines and small presses. His famous novel *Post Office* (1970) describes his last and most sustainable period at an ordinary job. According to Bukowski, the book was written in only three weeks.

And certainly, he remained a productive writer. Since the beginning of the '60s, Bukowski has published over 60 books of poetry, short stories, and novels, and he has been translated into all the European languages. Many of his books, which are based on his own experience, have become bestsellers, while young writers have copied his casual style. In both novels and poetry, his alter ego is Henry Chinaski, which reminds of his full Christian name, Henry Charles (originally Heinrich Karl); and their common friends use to call them Hank.

Bukowski's major breakthrough was in 1987 when Francis Ford Coppola produced the movie *Barfly*, based on the writer's life and screenplay. The film depicts Bukowski in the late 1930s and features Mickey Rourke as Chinaski, and Faye Dunaway.

For many years Bukowski lived in the Californian city of San Pedro, where he eventually died on March 9, 1994. He was buried in Green Hills Memorial Park not far from his last residence. His wife, Linda Lee Bukowski, and his publisher, John Martin, visited the sermon.

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