



December 12, 1971

The Wild Boys

By ALFRED KAZIN

William S. Burroughs is a great autoeroticist--of writing, not sex. He gets astral kicks by composing in blocks, scenes, repetitive and identical memories galvanizing themselves into violent fantasies, the wild mixing of pictures, words, the echoes of popular speech. It is impossible to suspect him of any base erotic motives in his innumerable scenes of one adolescent boy servicing another like a piece of plumbing; nor should one expect a book from him different from his others. Burroughs is the purest writer in Barney Rosset's grove, and not just because in this book he more than ever turns his obsession with cold, callous homosexual coupling into a piece of American science fiction.

THE WILD BOYS
A Book of the Dead
By William S.
Burroughs.

The fact is, he is mad about anything that he can get down on paper. He loves, literally, being engaged in the act of writing, filling up paper from the scene immediately present to him. Composition by field, as the Black Mountain used to say; plus composition by frenzy and delight, and in any direction. Words, horrid isolate words, those symbols of our enslavement, are replaced by the a-b-c of man's perception of simultaneous factors--the ability to drink up the "scanning pattern." Get it down when it is still hot, vibrant and wild to your consciousness! The literary impulse is more daemonic to Burroughs than sex was to Sade, but can be just as nonconductive to onlookers.

"The Wild Boys" is Burroughs's fifth or sixth or seventh book. The gang of totally sadistic homosexual young Snopeses who come into the book in the last third are not important except as a culmination of the continual fantasy of boys in rainbow-colored jockstraps coldly doffing them; nor are they important to the book. Nothing here is any more important than anything else, except possibly Burroughs's unusually tender memories of adolescent sex around the golf course and locker rooms in his native St. Louis in the 1920's. But the wild boys are apaches of freedom, and so are different from the "thought-control mob," the narcotic cops and the despots of the communications monopolies who are the villains of Burroughs's other books--especially "Nova Express." The wild boys in this book are a positive force for freedom: i.e., they have such an aversion to women (to Burroughs, women are the thought-control mob in infancy) that the boys continue the race by artificial insemination and thus, *Gott zu dank*, a "whole generation arose that had never seen a woman's face nor heard a woman's voice."

This book in texture is like Burroughs's other books--"Naked Lunch," "The Soft Machine," "Nova Express," "The Ticket That Exploded," and for all I know, "Skirts" and "Who Pushed Paula," published under a pseudonym and which I have never seen. The book is essentially a reverie in which different items suddenly get animated with a marvelously unexpected profusion and disorder. Anything can get into it, lead its own life for a while, get swooshed around with everything else. Reading it does communicate Burroughs's excitement in composition and in the arbitrarily zany rearrangements that he calls cutups. Actually, he is a cutup who writes in kaleidoscopic shifts, spurts, eruptions and hellzapoppins. But with all the simultaneous and cleverly farcical reversals, noises, revolver shots, sado-masochistic scenes on and off the high wire, the book is inescapably a reverie, the private Burroughs dream state. Whole scenes collide and steal up on each other and break away as if they were stars violently oscillating and exploding in the telescopic eyepiece of an astronomer who just happens to be gloriously soused.

Burroughs became an imaginative force in our self-indulgent literature of disaster with "Naked Lunch." He was able to turn his addiction to morphine, to "junk," into a really amazing ability to scrutinize the contents of his restlessly bold, marvelously episodic imagination. His aversion to the hallucinogens (LSD and the like) is significant. He did not want to have *his* mind changed--Burroughs does not need inspiration! He wanted in the tradition which is really his own, for he transcribes sexual fantasy into *literary* energy, to make the fullest possible inventory and rearrangement of all the stuff natural to him. He wanted to put his own mind on the internal screen that is his idea of a book.

More than anyone else I can think of in contemporary "fiction," he showed himself absolutely reckless in writing for his own satisfaction only. And yet he was so inventive, brilliant, funny in his many wild improvisations (he writes scenes as other people write adjectives, so that he is always inserting one scene into another, *turning* one scene into another), that one recognized a writer interested in nothing but his own mind. He was more crazily "dirty" than anyone else (ah, those hanged men having their last involuntary sex thrill) yet one could not put him down as another tiresome Sixth Avenue sex store between covers.

Burroughs from "Naked Lunch" on showed himself a man who had gone very far in his own life and had put just about everything into his system--to please his imagination. He was an addict from 30 to 45. He had an insatiable sort of mind; he was well educated, had a taste for slumming, yet had some marked resemblances to his brilliant grandfather Burroughs, who did not invent the adding machine but thought up the little gadget that kept it steady, and to his uncle Ivy Lee, the public-relations man for old John D. Rockefeller who helped to sweeten that fetid reputation.

Burroughs worked in advertising and, typically, as an exterminator. His travels in Latin America and North Africa show an unmistakably upper-class American taste for practicing discomfort (rather like Theodore Roosevelt proving that he was not a weakling). He has for all his flights into the ether a penetrating common sense about American racketeering, political despotism, police agencies, plus a real insight into how machines work and how the innumerable objects, stimuli and drugs in contemporary life affect the organism. He has put himself to some ruthless tests, for he has the natural curiosity of a scientist, a fondness for setting up ordeals, and above all an inborn gift for subjecting

himself to anything as an experiment. "Experiment" is indeed the great thing in and behind all his work. He is the subject; he is the performing surgeon; he is the paper on which the different stages of the operation are described; he is the result.

Burroughs is indeed a serious man and a considerable writer. But his books are not really books, they are compositions that astonish, then pall. They are subjective experiences brought into the world for the hell of it and by the excitement of whatever happens to be present in Burroughs's consciousness when he writes. There is an infatuation with the storeroom of his own mind that represents a strange lapse somewhere, for Burroughs is smart, perky, courageous, but seems inextricably wired into his adolescence. He believes so screamingly in freedom for himself that one hesitates to admit how boring the wholly personal can be. The self, taken as nothing but itself, its memories, fantasies, random cruelties, is a depressive.

All stream of consciousness writing, in order to rise above the terrible fascination with itself, has to find something other than itself to love. Burroughs is mired in the excitement of writing. A book is something he doesn't really care about. He has invented an instant conduit from his mind to a TV screen before which he sits in perfect self-love. There is no end in sight; hair will grow even in the grave. But what Burroughs has never realized is that a mind fascinated by itself alone is unconsciously lonely, therefore pessimistic.

Burroughs's whole esthetic and his suspicion of every political idea are the same: let me alone! Even his endlessly fascinated, obsessive recall of homosexual intercourse says--let me alone. There is no lovemaking, no interest in love, not even much interest in the sensation of orgasm. The emphasis is on emission as the end product. The idea is to show in how many different scenes and with how many coldly selected partners one can do it. But repetition, that fatally boring element in Burroughs's "cut-ups," turns the coupling into an obsessive primal scene that never varies in its details. The technical arrangements never vary, but they are described with such unwearied relish that the "wild boys" and their sadistic knives, scissors, gougers, castrators, etc., etc., seem like the embroidery of a cruel dream, not wickedness.

Jean Genet is a hero to Burroughs, but Genet's masturbatory fantasies were undergone in prison, and were in the service of love. Genet is indeed an addict of love, which is why his novels and plays are crowded with people. Burroughs seems to me the victim of solitude. He expresses it in the coldness with which partners are dismissed: "The boy shoved the Dib's body away as if he were taking off a garment." The comic moments in "The Wild Boys" are not situations but jokes: "Bearded Yippies rush down a street with hammers breaking every window on both sides leave a wake of screaming burglar alarms strip off the beards, reverse collars and they are fifty clean priests throwing petrol bombs under every car WHOOSH a block goes up behind them."

No situation, no line, no joke, lasts very long with Burroughs. He once noted that morphine "produces a rush of pictures in the brain as if seen from a speeding train. The pictures are dim, jerky, grainy, like old film" And Burroughs does give the impression of reliving some private scene. Everything turns in on itself. Outside, the planets and constellations reel to prove that life has no meaning, that there is not and cannot be anything else but our own sacred

consciousness. Everything outside is *hell*. But as if to prove that life in the United States does not imitate art, I open up the Sunday Times at random and find an advertisement for the Capitalist Reporter that cries out: "Money! Opportunity Is All Around You! . . . American treasures are all around you--attic, church bazaar, housewrecking yards, thrift shops, etc. Old bottles, obsolete fishing lures, prewar comics. . . names and addresses of people who buy *everything*, from old mousetraps to dirigibles to *used electric chairs* [author's italics]."

Alfred Kazin teaches at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His books include "Contemporaries" and "Starting Out in the Thirties."



[Return to the Books Home Page](#)



[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Search](#) | [Forums](#) | [Archives](#) | [Marketplace](#)

[Quick News](#) | [Page One Plus](#) | [International](#) | [National/N.Y.](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Op-Ed](#) | [Arts](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Books](#) | [Diversions](#) | [Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Travel](#)

[Help/Feedback](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Services](#) | [New York Today](#)

[Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company](#)