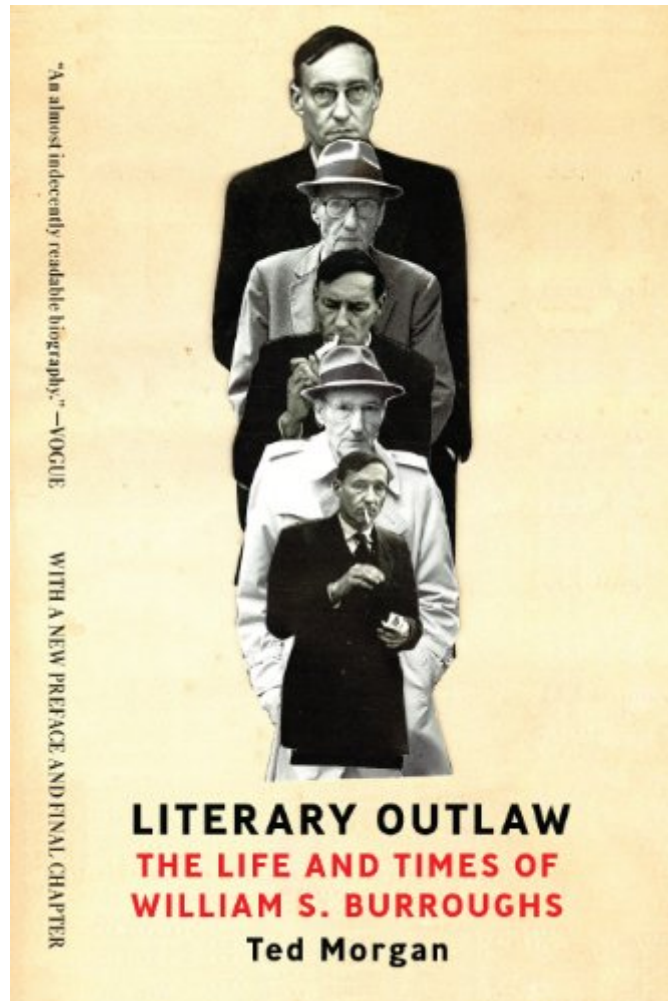


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Literary Outlaw: The Life And Times Of William S. Burroughs



Synopsis

“Almost indecently readable . . . captures [Burroughs’s] destructive energy, his ferocious pessimism, and the renegade brilliance of his style.”
With a new preface as well as a final chapter on William S. Burroughs’s last years, the acclaimed *Literary Outlaw* is the only existing full biography of an extraordinary figure. Anarchist, heroin addict, alcoholic, and brilliant writer, Burroughs was the patron saint of the Beats. His avant-garde masterpiece *Naked Lunch* shook up the literary world with its graphic descriptions of drug abuse and illicit sex—and resulted in a landmark Supreme Court ruling on obscenity. Burroughs continued to revolutionize literature with novels like *The Soft Machine* and to shock with the events in his life, such as the accidental shooting of his wife, which haunted him until his death. Ted Morgan captures the man, his work, and his friends—Allen Ginsberg and Paul Bowles among them—in this riveting story of an iconoclast.

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Customer Reviews

The late William S. Burroughs was one of the most compelling and frustrating writers of our times. For every work of dryly humorous genius like *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*, there were dozens of frustrating, obscure works that seemed to be more the product of Burroughs’ infamous heroin

addiction than his own imagination. As others have stated, to truly understand much of Burroughs' work, one has to first understand the man himself and, to my knowledge, there is no better resource than Ted Morgan's long, detailed, but never boring biography. In *Literary Outlaw*, we get the details of Burroughs' seminal friendships with such future literary icons as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and we also explore the most controversial aspect of the man's life -- the shooting death of his wife, Joan. (After shooting her in the head, Burroughs claimed they were simply playing a game of "William Tell.") If just for this information, this book would be a valuable resource but Morgan goes further. He details Burroughs' life after his fame as one of the original beat writers faded. He explains what was actually going on in Burroughs' head when he created the later works that left so many readers not only confused but often rather angry at this man they'd previously clutched to their own artistic souls (perhaps a bit too quickly, as Morgan reveals with an unflinching candor). The Burroughs who emerges in this book is neither the decadent bohemian of the literary imagination nor the devil incarnate that so many of his critics imagined him to be. Instead, William S. Burroughs comes across as nothing less than the Forrest Gump of modern literature.

When I read this book in 1990, or thereabouts, I had only read William Burroughs' book *Junky*, and I had read nothing by Jack Kerouac or Allen Ginsberg. After I finished reading *Literary Outlaw*, by Ted Morgan, I was so fascinated that I read all of Burroughs' novels, and several books by Kerouac and Ginsberg. I also read two more Burroughs biographies, just to get more information on this weird old guy. *Literary Outlaw* is just that good. There are newer biographies of Burroughs by Barry Miles and also Graham Caveney. Nevertheless, *Literary Outlaw* remains the definitive Burroughs biography written to date. This is a fascinating biography that reads like a page-turning novel. Burroughs grew up in a privileged St. Louis family, spent some time at a rough ranch-style boarding school in New Mexico, attended Harvard, travelled in Europe, and lived in New York, Mexico, New Orleans, Texas, Tangier, London, New York (again), and finally Kansas. Along the way he became the most scandalous figure in modern letters. His adventures and misadventures are related in this marvelous book. *Literary Outlaw* is more exhaustive than either Caveney's or Miles' biographies. Chapters with titles like "Tangier: 1954-1958" and "The London Years: 1966-1973" make for easy navigation. As the book's coverage ends in 1988, there is no information on Burroughs' life in the 1990s, but the essays in the book *Word Virus* (by James Grauerholz) act as a good supplement, for biographical information. Morgan did a good job. He wrote a page-turning biography, but not at the expense of Burroughs' literary reputation. Burroughs' value as a writer is challenged throughout, and it holds up. Biographical detail is linked to popular criticism of the texts. There is an extensive

section of notes. There is an index.

This was a fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable read. It was the most exciting book I have read in quite a while, and yet I have to stop short of saying that it actually meant something to me personally. It was the best book that I have read about the Beats, and I think it belongs in the reading list of any serious beat aficionado. Burroughs had a fascinating life, and the biographer had total access to the subject. To his credit, Burroughs had no interest in sanitizing his life to please the sensibilities of others. This is a true portrait of a remarkable but troubled man, a man whose life spanned a few generations of American culture and touched the lives of many important cultural figures. I won't bother recapping any of his story here, because once I begin, where would I stop? Morgan chose an anecdotal format for his work, one full of the everyday ups and downs, moments of laughter, and interpersonal encounters. This does not read like a literary biography normally does. It sometimes seem like a very long Vanity Fair piece. I don't say this derisively, because the result is a book that is fun and enjoyable, and that also provides a full portrait of his subject. Morgan also has a clear-eyed view of Burroughs's work - the stunning significance of *Naked Lunch*, and the disappointing lack of importance of some of his other pieces. Burroughs was a man who experienced the dregs of society and life in this country - he was a petty criminal, drug addict, alcoholic, and homosexual. He was also the grandson of a famous inventor who was brought up in a comfortable upper middle class home, and he had a Harvard degree. He was literate, intelligent, humorous, and creative, but also destructive and more than a little crazy.

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