
Sylvère Lotringer, ed. *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960-1997*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001. 845p.

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Sylvère Lotringer's exhaustive, lively, and endlessly fascinating 800-plus-page *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960-1997* opens with an unconventional editorial decision. Rather than beginning where her title seems to promise, with Burroughs in 1960, she includes a never-before-published 1975 radio interview between Charles Ruas and Allen Ginsberg in which the two are talking *about* Burroughs. In this short piece, Ginsberg, speaking of Burroughs' influence on him, sets up what is clearly the overriding "theme"—if there is one—that comes across after reading the remarkable and exhaustive collection: "It is stupid after all that experience to still be clinging to a notion of a permanent self, a reliable self, the self feeling terror or present bliss" (25). Although Ginsberg is referring to the experiences he shared with Burroughs under the influence of LSD, the line stays with the reader as Lotringer presents a man whose ideas on life, art, and himself during the final decades of the twentieth century continuously evolved at the same time they influenced the literary and cultural evolution of those years. As he remarks during a 1972 interview with David Bowie published here, "Only politicians lay down what they think and that is it. Take a man like Hitler, he never changed his mind" (229).

To be sure, some may question the need for yet another book of Burroughs interviews. Allen Hibbard's excellent *Conversations with William S. Burroughs* was, after all, just published in 1999 and his invaluable 1969 project *The Job* with Daniel Odier (which combines interviews with essays and fiction) as well as Victor Brokis' star-studded *With William Burroughs: A Report From the Bunker* (recently revised in 1996) all are available in most libraries and bookstores and are indispensable to Burroughs studies. However, Lotringer's more varied compilation presents us with a broader range of interviewers writing for a more eclectic range of publications than these other collections. And for those studying Burroughs or the Beats, this book would seem indispensable; *Jaguar, S.F. Horizons, Gay Sunshine, The Rocket, Search and Destroy, The East Village Eye, and Rocky Mountain Music Express*, among many other lesser known magazines and journals in which Burroughs granted interviews which Lotringer includes here, are not going to be found in university or community libraries. In addition to these less "academic" periodicals, Lotringer also transcribes several radio interviews and translates into English a number of interviews previously available only in Euro-

pean publications. Eight of the 99 interviews are published here for the first time anywhere.

The interviewers—whose knowledge of Burroughs and journalistic agendas vary widely—bring their own concerns with them to the interviews, and Lotringer's collection may have some crossover appeal for students and scholars of other areas. Included here are Burroughs' conversations with Tennessee Williams, Timothy Leary, Brion Gysin, musicians such as David Bowie and Devo, and other Beat writers such as Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. Burroughs appears to be comfortable—though at times impatient—conversing on the extensive range of subjects they introduce, from the death of his wife, to pornography, addiction, the student protests in the '60s, homosexuality and gay rights, his literary "cut-ups," L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology, punk music, science fiction, the Kennedy assassination (he claims Oswald acted alone), Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Box, government, censorship, Oliver North, popular fiction, television, love, overpopulation, suicide, life on other planets, advertising, terrorism, the Ugly Spirit, and cats. Casting a wider net than previous collections of interviews, Lotringer allows us to see Burroughs from several perspectives as he shares his always fascinating, occasionally hilarious, sometimes contradictory, and often uncannily prophetic thoughts over four decades. For example, his responses to questions about terrorism—"The only viable weapon for a revolution now are biological and chemical weapons," he claimed in a 1973 interview (193)—are absolutely chilling to read after September 11th.

The bold decision to open with an interview in which Burroughs is not even present is one of a number of editorial decisions with which some may question. Lotringer admits not only to trimming certain interviews but also, in order to make some of them read more gracefully, to editing them, re-wording them in a question and answer mode, or to simply reinvent questions "in order to maintain the momentum of the dialogue" (18). Even more certain to raise eyebrows among some is the admission that "[s]everal interviews, more topical or of limited interest, were also edited and collapsed into one stronger statement" (18). To be fair, Lotringer does note in the book's chronological bibliography what has been done to each interview, if anything. And one might reasonably consider, given Burroughs' literary ideals and the defense of "cut ups" to alter our comfortable sense of control over language and reality, if Lotringer's choices aren't in keeping with her subject.

There are other, perhaps more minor complaints with Lotringer's ambitious project. With over 800 pages of text there are (inevitably) a few repetitions and readers might find themselves flipping back, wondering, "Haven't I already read

this one?" In addition, students and scholars would probably want a more thorough index in the back; Hibbard's collection, which is, of course, 600 pages shorter, has a wonderfully detailed index that Lotringer might have used as a model to guide those who do not have the time to sift through all of *Burroughs Live*. One also might wish, given the length and heft of the book, that Lotringer had included her notes at the end of each interview rather than at the back of the book. Finally, her brief biographical essays to transitional periods in Burroughs' life, while informative, might be more thorough. But given the probable audience for this time, as well as the more detailed biographical essays included in James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg's 1998 *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader* (which is an ideal companion piece for this collection), one can understand Lotringer's decision to keep her comments short and to let Burroughs present himself. These points notwithstanding, Lotringer's book is a welcome and invaluable source for Burroughs scholars and students and a captivating read for his old and new fans.

After reading this collection, one might recall a scene from Burroughs' 1981 novel *Cities of the Red Night* in which private investigator Clem Williamson Snide makes the following observation: "Don Juan says anyone who always looks like the same person isn't a person. He is a person impersonator" (41). Reading these interviews, one thing is certain: William S. Burroughs was a person. *