

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Pulp

Charles Bukowski

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About the Book

Nicky Belane, private detective and career alcoholic, is a troubled man. He is plagued not just by broads, booze, lack of cash and a raging ego, but also by the surreal jobs he's been hired to do. Not only does he have to track down French classical author Celine - who's meant to be dead - but he's also supposed to find the elusive Red Sparrow - which may or may not be real.

Pulp is Charles Bukowski's brilliant, fantastical pastiche of a detective story. Packed with wit, invention and Bukowski's trademark lowlife adventures, it is the final novel by one of the most enjoyable and influential cult writers of the last century.

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960-1967* (2001), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished.

Also by Charles Bukowski published by Virgin Books:

Novels:

Post Office

Factotum

Women

Anthologies:

The Most Beautiful Woman in Town

Notes of a Dirty Old Man

Tales of Ordinary Madness

Poems:

New Poems One

New Poems Two

New Poems Three

New Poems Four

Letters:

Selected Letters Volume 1: 1958-1965

Selected Letters Volume 2: 1965-1970

Selected Letters Volume 3: 1971-1986

Selected Letters Volume 4: 1987-1994

PULP

Charles Bukowski

Introduction by Michael Connelly



Dedicated to bad writing

Introduction

Michael Connelly

OK, let's start at the very beginning, with the first clue to the mysteries of this book. *Dedicated to Bad Writing*. In his life as a writer Charles Bukowski never took the pose of the great man of letters. He was a dirty realist. I think he liked to look at the work as craft, not art. A craft you work at, you hone. It takes time and dedication. An artist need not worry about such things.

But Bukowski, of course, did. He was a grinder. He was ham on rye, a pound-it-out guy who used words like a carpenter uses nails. To dedicate a book - his last book, at that - to poor carpentry in effect gives the nod to a life's pursuit of building the perfect chair. It can't be done, but the craftsman never stops trying.

I never met Bukowski. I wish I had. I surely was one of those who fell under his spell. I love the novels more than the poems because they are easier to grab onto, to see the pictures he's drawing. They're where the craftsmanship disappears beneath the surface. They're where his 'bad' writing is so good. My favourite line, written in *Hollywood* to describe a Tom Jones-like Vegas showman: 'His mouth was a horrible hole, torn in a pancake.'

It's a line I can recall from memory, more than a decade after reading it. It is a line I have used often in conversation, to gain a laugh or to talk about the craft of writing. One line that sums up a character's interior and exterior being. One line! Now that's *good* 'bad' writing!

I never met Bukowski but I met Red Stodolsky, the writer's friend, drinking pal, and owner of the bygone Baroque Books in Hollywood (both Red and the store play

prominent parts in this book). Red was the primary keeper of the Bukowski flame after the writer passed on. A trip to the bookstore on Las Palmas, a half block down from Hollywood Boulevard and not far from Musso's, another of the author's treasured haunts, was an easy trek to the altar of Bukowski. Red seemed to have an endless stash of books marked by Bukowski with caricatures of himself and signed with the simple signature 'Buk'. They were high-priced books but I bought a bunch of them and gave them away as gifts. There was a certain coolness to giving away signed Bukowski books after the man himself was dead.

But there is no signature inside my copy of *Pulp*. The novel was published posthumously and there seems to be a certain plan in that. Another clue. The book is a meditation on writing and death and no doubt the author, fighting leukaemia when he penned it, could see the gaping beak of the 'Red Sparrow' opening for him each day that he wrote. More so than this, the book reflects on the eternal questions of life. What are we doing? Why are we here? What and where is the meaning of it all?

For Bukowski - whose gravestone epitaph is *Don't Try* - the answers were decidedly bleak.

In his last book Bukowski chose a form he had not previously inhabited to mount his investigation of these questions. He was confronting life's biggest mystery, so he explored it as a hard-boiled gumshoe. He chose the noir detective novel. And in doing so he adopted a form known for its plot devices and traditional framework and turned it upside down. In his hands the detective novel becomes an existential rumination on the end of the line, the dark at the end of the tunnel. An absurdist descent into the death sparrow's yellow beak.

To be sure, Bukowski brought in all the usual suspects: beautiful dames, gun-toting heavies, the loner private eye with a bottle in one drawer and a gun in the other. And he brought along the hard-boiled patter of the private dick: 'It

was a hellish hot day and the air conditioner was broken. A fly crawled across the top of my desk. I reached out with the open palm of my hand and sent him out of the game. I wiped my hand on my right pants leg as the phone rang.'

And so begins our story. Our narrator, Nicky Belane (as in Mickey Spillane?) is a down-and-out, six-bucks-an-hour dick hired by Lady Death to find a supposedly long-dead writer. A variety of other cases and clients ensue. One client wants Belane to find the Red Sparrow. One wants him to nail his cheating wife. Another wants him to expose an alien inhabiting the bodies of humans at a local funeral home. Belane works each case as dutifully as the obstacles allow. Along the way he dodges his brutal landlord and a bookie's enforcers.

It's the detective story as allegory and metaphor. Writers from Céline to Hemingway to Faulkner and Fante turn up and Belane has something to say about each. Considering Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, one character riffs: 'In the old days ... writers' lives were more interesting than their writing. Nowadays, neither the lives nor the writing is interesting.'

Death is always close, in metaphor and reality. The novel is an existential stew and in the end a lot of swatting of flies. And that's the point. The dying writer tells us that in the end it's all just a lot of swatting of flies. Life's about 'the needed machinery of the moment' and its many human parts.

As Belane himself explains: 'Sometimes I felt that I didn't even know who I was. All right, I'm Nicky Belane. But check this. Somebody could yell out, "Hey ... Harry Martel!" and I'd most likely answer, "Yeah, what is it?" I mean, I could be anybody, what does it matter?'

Or as he says when confronted by three goons from 'Acme Executioners' with plans to introduce him to the Red Sparrow: 'We're talking about my life here, you know. It's like it doesn't matter, you know.'

Ultimately, that is the writer's observation. That it doesn't matter. Ultimately, we are just pulp. We are simply a part of the machinery of the moment.

And in telling us so, we come back to the beginning. Bukowski reveals the biggest clue to life's biggest mystery was indeed handed to us in the first paragraph of the book. Bukowski tells us we are simply just here until that unseen hand swings down out of the heavens and sends us out of the game.

1

I WAS SITTING in my office, my lease had expired and McKelvey was starting eviction proceedings. It was a hellish hot day and the air conditioner was broken. A fly crawled across the top of my desk. I reached out with the open palm of my hand and sent him out of the game. I wiped my hand on my right pants leg as the phone rang.

I picked it up. 'Ah yes,' I said.

'Do you read Celine?' a female voice asked. Her voice sounded quite sexy. I had been lonely for some time. Decades.

'Celine,' I said, 'ummm ...'

'I want Celine,' she said. 'I've got to have him.'

Such a sexy voice, it was getting to me, really.

'Celine?' I said. 'Give me a little background. Talk to me, lady. Keep talking ...'

'Zip up,' she said.

I looked down.

'How did you know?' I asked.

'Never mind. I want Celine.'

'Celine is dead.'

'He isn't. I want you to find him. I want him.'

'I might find his bones.'

'No, you fool, he's alive!'

'Where?'

'Hollywood. I hear he's been hanging around Red Koldowsky's bookstore.'

'Then why don't *you* find him?'

'Because first I want to know if he's the *real* Celine. I have to be sure, quite sure.'

'But why did you come to me? There are a hundred dicks in this town.'

'John Barton recommended you.'

'Oh, Barton, yeah. Well, listen, I'll have to have some kind of advance. And I'll have to see you personally.'

'I'll be there in a few minutes,' she said.

She hung up. I zipped up.

And waited.

2

SHE WALKED IN.

Now, I mean, it just wasn't fair. Her dress fit so tight it almost split the seams. Too many chocolate malts. And she walked on heels so high they looked like little stilts. She walked like a drunken cripple, staggering around the room. A glorious dizziness of flesh.

'Sit down, lady,' I said.

She put it down and crossed her legs high, damn near knocked my eyes out.

'It's good to see you, lady,' I said.

'Stop gawking, please. It's nothing that you haven't seen before.'

'You're wrong there, lady. Now may I have your name?'

'Lady Death.'

'Lady Death? You from the circus? The movies?'

'No.'

'Place of birth?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Year of birth?'

'Don't try to be funny ...'

'Just trying to get some background ...'

I got lost somehow, began staring up her legs. I was always a leg man. It was the first thing I saw when I was born. But then I was trying to get out. Ever since I have been working in the other direction and with pretty lousy luck.

She snapped her fingers.

'Hey, come out of it!'

'Huh?' I looked up.

'The Celine case. Remember?'

'Yeah, sure.'

I unfolded a paperclip, pointed the end toward her.

'I'll need a check for services rendered.'

'Of course,' she smiled. 'What are your rates?'

'6 dollars an hour.'

She got out her checkbook, scribbled away, ripped the check out and tossed it to me. It landed on the desk. I picked it up. \$240. I hadn't seen that much money since I hit an exacta at Hollywood Park in 1988.

'Thank you, Lady ...'

'... Death,' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'Now fill me in a little on this so-called Celine. You said something about a bookstore?'

'Well, he's been hanging around Red's bookstore, browsing ... asking about Faulkner, Carson McCullers. Charles Manson ...'

'Hangs around the bookstore, huh? Hmm ...'

'Yes,' she said, 'you know Red. He likes to run people out of his bookstore. A person can spend a thousand bucks in there, then maybe linger a minute or two and Red will say, "Why don't you get the hell out of here?" Red's a good guy, he's just freaky. Anyway, he keeps tossing Celine out and Celine goes over to Musso's and hangs around the bar looking sad. A day or so later he'll be back and it will happen all over again.'

'Celine is dead. Celine and Hemingway died a day apart. 32 years ago.'

'I know about Hemingway. I got Hemingway.'

'You sure it was Hemingway?'

'Oh yeah.'

'Then how come you can't be sure this Celine is the real Celine?'

'I don't know. I've got some kind of block with this thing. It's never happened before. Maybe I've been in the game too long. So, I've come to you. Barton says you're good.'

'And you think the real Celine is alive? You want him?'

'Real bad, buster.'

'Belane. Nick Belane.'

'All right, Belane. I want to make *sure*. It's got to be the *real* Celine, not just some half-assed wannabe. There are too many of those.'

'Don't we know it.'

'Well, get on it. I want France's greatest writer. I've waited a long time.'

Then she got up and walked out of there. I never saw an ass like that in my life. Beyond concept. Beyond everything. Don't bother me now. I want to think about it.

3

IT WAS THE next day.

I had cancelled my appointment to speak before the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce.

It was raining. The ceiling leaked. The rain dripped down through the ceiling and went 'spat, spat, spat, a spat a spat, spat, spat, spat, a spat, spat, spat, a spat, a spat, a spat, spat, spat, spat ...'

The *sake* kept me warm. But a warm what? A warm zero. Here I was 55 years old and I didn't have a pot to catch rain in. My father had warned me that I would end up diddling myself on some stranger's back porch in Arkansas. And I still had time to make it. The Greyhounds ran every day. But busses constipated me and there was always some old Union Jack with a rancid beard who snored. Maybe it would be better to work on the Celine Case.

Was Celine Celine or was he somebody else? Sometimes I felt that I didn't even know who *I* was. All right, I'm Nicky Belane. But check this. Somebody could yell out, 'Hey, Harry! Harry Martel!' and I'd most likely answer, 'Yeah, what is it?' I mean, I could be anybody, what does it matter? What's in a name?

Life's strange, isn't it? They always chose me last on the baseball team because they knew I could drive that son-of-a-bitch out there, all the way to Denver. Jealous chipmunks, that's what they were!

I was gifted, am gifted. Sometimes I looked at my hands and realized that I could have been a great pianist or something. But what have my hands done? Scratched my balls, written checks, tied shoes, pushed toilet levers, etc. I have wasted my hands. And my mind.

I sat in the rain.

The phone rang. I wiped it dry with a past due bill from the IRS, picked it up.

'Nick Belane,' I said. Or was I Harry Martel?

'This is John Barton,' came the voice.

'Yes, you've been recommending me, thank you.'

'I've been watching you. You've got talent. It's a little raw but that's part of the charm.'

'Great to hear. Business has been bad.'

'I've been watching you. You'll make it, you just have to endure.'

'Yeah. Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Barton?'

'I am trying to locate the Red Sparrow.'

'The Red Sparrow? What the hell is that?'

'I'm sure it exists, I just want to find it, I want you to locate it for me.'

'Any leads for me to go on?'

'No, but I'm sure the Red Sparrow is out there somewhere.'

'This Sparrow doesn't have a name, does it?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, a name. Like Henry. Or Abner. Or Celine?'

'No, it's just the Red Sparrow and I know that you can find it. I've got faith in you.'

'This is going to cost you, Mr. Barton.'

'If you find the Red Sparrow I will give you one hundred dollars a month for life.'

'Hmm. ... Listen, how about giving me all of it in a lump sum?'

'No, Nick, you'd blow it at the track.'

'All right, Mr. Barton, leave me your phone number and I'll work on it.'

Barton gave me the number, then said, 'I have real confidence in you, Belane.'

Then he hung up.

Well, business was picking up. But the ceiling was leaking worse than ever. I shook off some rain drops, had a