

# Post Office

CHARLES BUKOWSKI



Penguin  
Random House  
EBURY PUBLISHING

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## About the Book

Henry Chinaski is a low life loser with a hand-to-mouth existence. His menial Post Office day job supports a life of beer, one-night stands and racetracks. Lurid, uncompromising and hilarious, *Post Office* is a landmark in American literature.

*Post Office* was Charles Bukowski's debut novel, and has sold over a million copies in more than a dozen languages since its first publication in 1971. Bukowski's Beat Generation writing reflects his slum upbringing, his succession of menial jobs and his experience of low life urban America. He died in 1994 and is widely acknowledged as one of the most distinctive writers of the last fifty years.

## **Also by Charles Bukowski**

### **Novels:**

Factotum

Women

Pulp

### **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

# POST OFFICE

Charles Bukowski

Introduction by Niall Griffiths



*This is presented as a work of fiction  
and dedicated to nobody*

# Introduction

By Niall Griffiths

It wasn't so much the work itself that was getting to me as the people I had to work alongside. With the work, well, you could just switch off, go onto automatic pilot, let your mind drift and dance as your hands and arms went through the robotic motions; scoop the letters out of the central trough onto the conveyor belt that ran at crotch-height, place parcels and outsize packages into the pigeon-holes at face-height. Brainless and easy, albeit mind-numbingly boring after several hours. But the people, God, my fellow workers . . . one would shout 'ah yip! ah yip!' in a high-pitched screech whenever another sack of mail was emptied into the trough; one would call his workmates over to stand and point and snigger if I looped the sacks incorrectly onto the brackets; another kept shaving his head for charity ('do anything for the kiddies, me') and made sure that everyone else knew about it; and, when I fortuitously found a letter addressed to myself out of the many hundreds in the trough and suspected that it was an urgently-needed cheque and asked the boss if I could take it home rather than wait the three days for it to be delivered, he looked at me as if I'd just asked him for permission to expose myself to a nun. 'How do I know it's for you?' 'Because it's got my name on.' 'Could be for someone else with the same name.' 'What, at the same address?' 'How do I know it's your address?' 'Because it's on the form I filled in for you when I started here. Go and check. I really need that money.' 'This is the ROYAL Mail. Until it goes through the letterbox it's the

property of Her Majesty The Queen. Can't let people take it willy-nilly. Now get back to work and put that letter on the belt.'

And so on. The envelope tsunamis kept coming. Tens of thousands of letters each night. Scores of thousands. Every night.

I'd read some of Bukowski's work before circumstances drove me to the job in the sorting office, and the film *Barfly* had just come out, starring Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway, based on Bukowski's early life as a bum, so I had some idea of who he was and what he was about. I'd read the novel *Women*, and a couple of his poetry collections had been my sole companions on many daytime drinking sprees. I'd liked what I'd read, but the only editions of his books available at that time were expensive American imports, so his was one of the names I'd look out for on the cheap second-hand bookstalls in the market square. Which was where I found *Post Office*, in a nice hardback, fine condition, two quid. I could barely afford even that meagre amount; most of my earnings were being given up to debtors, so that I wouldn't be evicted from my bedsit or taken to court or have my legs broken, and anything left over went on food and drink. I couldn't afford to buy books. And I didn't want to half-inch this one because I knew and liked the stall-holder, so I handed over the two quid and prepared myself to go hungry for a day. Maybe I could scrounge a few spuds from the couple upstairs, or a tin of soup from the feller below. Steal from the communal fridge. Something.

Food quickly ceased to matter. I took the book home, sat in my chair by the window, and, in the few hours I had to myself before I had to clock on at the sorting office, read the entire thing twice. I devoured it . . . the cool messiness of the writing and how it managed somehow to imbue mundane ritual with a mythological weight; how it helped me to feel that what I was doing, what I was being forced to



do in order to continue breathing, were scenes in a life lived specially; the validity of the individual experience gulped in a vast and featureless organisation (the mail was Royal, I was never allowed to forget, it belonged to The Queen). I knew, reading it, that the tedium of that night's work to come would be just a little bit more bearable. The book tosses you about like a choppy sea; you're laughing, then you're feeling the heartbreak of the narrator's return to Betty, and then his anguished rage at her premature death, and then you're immersed in Bukowski's metaphor for existence - horseracing - and then you're back to laughing. The book throws you about all over the place. In truth, the post office features rarely, at least in any immediate sense, although it looms like a war in the background, behind the stuff about relationships and writing and the fun and frozen wastes of being alive.

And, of course, there's more to it than that. Central to much of Bukowski's work is a striving towards a kind of Zen-like detachment, a reaching of the perennial Outsider towards some understanding of his place in a world which he feels to be botched (*Post Office's* opening line - 'It began as a mistake' - resonates in this respect), and to seek the meaning, if there is one to be sought, in his capacity and role as alien. America, or the stage of human evolution that post-war America represents, has jettisoned its soul; the clock is dominant, technology is choking, the manufactured and accepted need to consume has replaced any hunger for spiritual sustenance. And in the underground figure are battles for the fulfilment of base needs and the demand to live a worthwhile existence, through sex and love and laughter and booze and music and the written word. Bukowski was writing about Los Angeles; I was working in a sorting office on the outskirts of Cambridge. But I knew exactly what he was talking about. 'Mailman, you got any mail for me?' his postman-narrator is asked, and he screams in reply: 'Lady, how the hell do I know who you are or I am

or anybody is?' We're forced into absurd lives, against which the only sane response is to wage a guerrilla operation of humour and lust and madness. The post office, or any world of work, is only one institutionalised system of control that is designed to beat people, to condition them into accepting that humiliation and failure is the norm. Those who do not rebel against this lose any ability to think for themselves. The workers are robbed of power whilst the bosses have only a small amount of it and can only use it arbitrarily, which is to say, pointlessly. In *Post Office* this situation is seen not only in the titular establishment but also in human interactions, marriage, consumerism, the hippy movement. Far from being hopeless, though, or despairing, we're shown that in resisting lies the potential for growth. These arenas – which are encapsulated in the phrase 'war all the time', as the title of one of Bukowski's many poetry collections has it – with their intricate systems of power and control, offer, in fact, an environment in which the human animal, in all its wildness, can flourish.

So the influence of Bukowski is more attitudinal than literary or stylistic. His novels – and *Post Office*, being his first, is no exception – are messy, ramshackle, rambling, structurally chaotic, held together, it seems, by bits of Sellotape and string. Even the punctuation defies basic grammatical rules. Yet to criticise it with the exegetical tools of formal literary appreciation is to entirely miss the point; the disorder of it, the near illiteracy of it, even, is of a piece with the explicit command it contains to construct a uniquely personal set of rules and beliefs as a way of resisting absorption and remaining, in a very real sense of the word, alive. This was vital to me at the time, living as I was surrounded by ivied halls and towers in which literature was unstintingly drained of all blood and relevance. It remains so. Bukowski's work, with less mess, with less chaos, with more reins and restrictions, would lose most of its value and charm.

He was an astonishingly prolific writer, Bukowski, producing scores of volumes of letters and poetry and essays and short stories and novels and screenplays and journals, some of it great, some of it good, some of it bad, some of it terrible. But the work thrusts itself into the world as he did himself; beer-bellied, flatulent, crude, aggressive, sensitive, acne-scarred, everything. It must be taken as a whole. When that envelope was eventually put through my letterbox it contained not the cheque I was praying for but a final threat of eviction; I was able to laugh, and sign up for more overtime at the sorting office, feeling less pain than I would've done before I read the book you're holding in your hands right now. And if this is your first contact with this odd and unique writer's work, and you want to read more, then be happy because there's a huge wave of it out there. Ah yip.

Office of  
Postmaster

Memo

United States Post  
Office  
Los Angeles, California

January 1,  
1970

742

### *CODE OF ETHICS*

The attention of all employees is directed to the Code of Ethics for postal employees as set forth in Part 742 of the Postal Manual, and Conduct of Employees as outlined in Part 744 of the Postal Manual.

Postal employees have, over the years, established a fine tradition of faithful service to the Nation, unsurpassed by other groups. Each employee should take great pride in this tradition of dedicated service. Each of us must strive to make his contribution worthwhile in the continued movement of the Postal Service toward future progress in the public interest.

All postal personnel must act with unwavering integrity and complete devotion to the public interest. Postal personnel are expected to maintain the highest moral principles, and to uphold the laws of the United States and the regulations and policies of the Post Office Department. Not only is ethical conduct required, but officials and employees must be alert to avoid actions which would appear to prevent fulfillment of postal obligations. Assigned duties must be discharged conscientiously and effectively. The Postal Service has the unique privilege of having daily contact with the majority of the citizens of the Nation, and is, in many instances, their most direct contact with the Federal Government. Thus, there is an especial opportunity and responsibility for each postal employee to act with honor

and integrity worthy of the public trust; thereby reflecting credit and distinction on the Postal Service and on the entire Federal Government.

All employees are requested to review Part 742, Postal Manual, Basic Standards of Ethical Conduct, Personal Behavior of Employees, Restrictions on Political Activity, etc.

Officer in Charge

IT BEGAN AS a mistake.

It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought. Soft! They only gave you a block or 2 and if you managed to finish, the regular carrier would give you another block to carry, or maybe you'd go back in and the soup would give you another, but you just took your time and shoved those Xmas cards in the slots.

I think it was my second day as a Christmas temp that this big woman came out and walked around with me as I delivered letters. What I mean by big was that her ass was big and her tits were big and that she was big in all the right places. She seemed a bit crazy but I kept looking at her body and I didn't care.

She talked and talked and talked. Then it came out. Her husband was an officer on an island far away and she got lonely, you know, and lived in this little house in back all by herself.

"What little house?" I asked.

She wrote the address on a piece of paper.

"I'm lonely too," I said, "I'll come by and we'll talk tonight."

I was shacked but the shackjob was gone half the time, off somewhere, and I was lonely all right. I was lonely for that

big ass standing beside me.

“All right,” she said, “see you tonight.”

She was a good one all right, she was a good lay but like all lays after the 3rd or 4th night I began to lose interest and didn't go back.

But I couldn't help thinking, god, all these mailmen do is drop in their letters and get laid. This is the job for me, oh yes yes yes.

## 2

so I TOOK the exam, passed it, took the physical, passed it, and there I was—a substitute mail carrier. It began easy. I was sent to West Avon Station and it was just like Christmas except I didn't get laid. Every day I expected to get laid but I didn't. But the soup was easy and I strolled around doing a block here and there. I didn't even have a uniform, just a cap. I wore my regular clothes. The way my shackjob Betty and I drank there was hardly money for clothes.

Then I was transferred to Oakford Station.

The soup was a bullneck named Jonstone. Help was needed there and I understood why. Jonstone liked to wear dark-red shirts—that meant danger and blood. There were 7 subs—Tom Moto, Nick Pelligrini, Herman Stratford, Rosey Anderson, Bobby Hansen, Harold Wiley and me, Henry Chinaski. Reporting time was 5 a.m. and I was the only drunk there. I always drank until past midnight, and there we'd sit, at 5 a.m. in the morning, waiting to get on the clock, waiting for some regular to call in sick. The regulars usually called in sick when it rained or during a heatwave or the day after a holiday when the mail load was doubled.

There were 40 or 50 different routes, maybe more, each case was different, you were never able to learn any of them, you had to get your mail up and ready before 8 a.m.

for the truck dispatches, and Jonstone would take no excuses. The subs routed their magazines on corners, went without lunch, and died in the streets. Jonstone would have us start casing the routes 30 minutes late—spinning in his chair in his red shirt—“Chinaski take route 539!” We’d start a half-hour short but were still expected to get the mail up and out and be back on time. And once or twice a week, already beaten, fagged and fucked we had to make the night pickups, and the schedule on the board was impossible—the truck wouldn’t go that fast. You had to skip four or five boxes on the first run and the next time around they were stacked with mail and you stank, you ran with sweat jamming it into the sacks. I got laid all right. Jonstone saw to that.

### 3

THE SUBS THEMSELVES made Jonstone possible by obeying his impossible orders. I couldn’t see how a man of such obvious cruelty could be allowed to have his position. The regulars didn’t care, the union man was worthless, so I filled out a thirty page report on one of my days off, mailed one copy to Jonstone and took the other down to the Federal Building. The clerk told me to wait. I waited and waited and waited. I waited an hour and thirty minutes, then was taken in to see a little grey-haired man with eyes like cigarette ash. He didn’t even ask me to sit down. He began screaming at me as I entered the door.

“You’re a wise son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t curse me, sir!”

“Wise son of a bitch, you’re one of those sons of bitches with a vocabulary and you like to lay it around!”

He waved my papers at me. And screamed: “MR. JONSTONE IS A FINE MAN!”