

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

'Junkie' in the Joint

By Mikita Brottman | JULY 31, 2016



Gary Neil for The Chronicle Review

When I first got to college, the excitement of my new independence led me to experiment with a changed-up self-image. Before long I'd settled on a punk-Goth look. This involved a beaten-up black motorcycle jacket worn over a sweater with the collar and sleeves torn out, a skirt ripped to midhigh, fishnet tights, eight-hole Doc Martens boots, and dirty white-lace gloves with the fingers cut off. My hair, crimped to death, was part blond, part pink. My gutter chic was

seriously out of place in Oxford's cloisters and croquet lawns, which was precisely the point. I was secretly flattered when one afternoon, on arriving at an English faculty get-together, I was handed a glass of wine by my tutor, who announced, "I'm sorry, my dear, we don't have any syringes."

It was at this time that I discovered William Burroughs's *Junkie* (original subtitle: *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*). I knew literature didn't always have to focus on rich people, or even the middle classes — I'd encountered the noble poor in Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, and I'd read about the not-so-noble poor in George Orwell and H.G. Wells — but until then I'd never read literature that involved the kind of people Burroughs writes about. I loved horror stories but had read

only the kind that elevate ordinary pastiness, making it lofty and supernatural. *Junkie* does just the opposite, grinding your face in the dirt.

During my first sabbatical year, I started a reading group in a men's prison outside Baltimore and chose *Junkie* as one of our books because I thought the inmates would be interested in the unflinching description of the addict's underworld. Many of these men had been addicts or dealers, and I was curious whether they would recognize themselves in Burroughs's world.

Reading *Junkie* with the prisoners made it seem darker than ever. I was especially struck, this time, by a character named Bill Gains, the son of a bank president, whose "routine" is "stealing overcoats out of restaurants." "He was not merely negative," writes Burroughs. "He was positively invisible; a vague respectable presence. There is a certain kind of ghost that can only materialize with the aid of a sheet or other piece of cloth to give it outline. Gains was like that. He materialized in someone else's overcoat." Gains seems to be the literal version of a state of mind, a symbolic representation of the pleasure we get from another person's misery. The worst kind of junk pusher, Gains smiles as he reports on other people's misfortunes, getting a special kick out of seeing nonusers develop a habit.

At the prison, we took the books slowly. The men would read a certain number of chapters during the week, then we would meet to discuss their impressions. The first week we met to discuss *Junkie*, I noticed that Guy wasn't sitting with his pal and cellmate, Steven. What's more, he had a black eye. He'd been bitten in the face, he said, by the service dog that Steven was training and which shared the two men's cell.

Guy was one of the youngest men in the group. He was 28 but looked like an overgrown kid, so tall and skinny that his standard-issue prison jeans were always hanging halfway down his backside in gangsta fashion, revealing his oversize underpants. I knew he was an orphan. He had a brother somewhere, but the only person who came to visit him regularly was an aunt. Like his buddy Steven, he could be animated and enthusiastic, but he didn't have Steven's intelligence or constitutional optimism and could fall into fits of inattentive petulance, slouching in his chair or slumping forward over his tray table with his head on his arms.

SECTIONS **THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION** **LOG IN**
Guy had served four years of an eight-year sentence for drug dealing, a sentence that took into account his prior convictions: theft, possession of a firearm with a felony conviction, and burglary in the second degree. I found it difficult to imagine this indolent young man in the role of a violent criminal. He had a limited attention span. Often, after half an hour of discussion, he'd rest his head on his folded arms and nod off to sleep.

I didn't mind if Guy dozed, since the other men in the group all seemed involved in the book. They were intrigued by Burroughs's descriptions of the guns he'd owned, his accounts of robbing drunks on the New York subway and weaseling morphine scripts out of the less-than-scrupulous doctors known as "croakers." They were also curious about the kind of drugs used by Burroughs and his cronies (mainly morphine, heroin, Pantopon, Dilaudid, codeine) and how much they cost. ("A heroin addiction in 1953 cost about \$15 a day, or the equivalent of \$125 in today's dollars," wrote Nathaniel Rich in a 2013 column about the novel.) They enjoyed Burroughs's graphic picture of the physical horrors of addiction (uremic poisoning, chronic constipation), and, at some length, they debated the advantages of his various experimental remedies.

At our next meeting, Guy wasn't there. In fact, I didn't see him again for six months. He'd been sent to the lockup. Men were sent to the lockup for all kinds of reasons — sometimes they themselves were never told why — but in Guy's case, it was because he'd been using drugs. I thought of his moodiness, his slumping down in his seat, his nodding off during the discussion. The whole time we'd been reading *Junkie*, I realized, he'd been high.

How stupid I had been. *Junkie* contained vivid descriptions of heroin intoxication. What if, by asking him to read the book, I'd played a part in Guy's relapse?

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have asked him to read *Junkie*," I told the men. "That must have been what sent him back to doing drugs."

Someone gave a snort of laughter. Guy, the inmates told me, didn't go *back* to doing drugs — he'd been high since he got to prison.

Of course, I recalled, you can get anything on the black market. Deprivation creates

desire, and desire creates demand. Drugs can be bought on the inside, just as they can on the streets, and the boredom and monotony of life behind bars must surely increase the temptation to use.

Guy's black eye, Steven told me, had actually been the result of an unpaid drug debt. Looking back, it should have been obvious — how could a well-trained service dog give his handler a black eye? — but, too excited by the men's interest in *Junkie*, I'd failed to notice the presence, right in front of my eyes, of a sleepy, nodding drug addict.

So much for the power of literature, I thought. According to the other men, Guy hadn't so much as cracked open the cover of *Junkie*. To tell the truth, they weren't even sure if he knew how to read.

Mikita Brottman is a professor of humanistic studies at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her new book, The Maximum Security Book Club: Reading Literature in a Men's Prison, is published by HarperCollins.

A version of this article appeared in the August 5, 2016 issue.

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education