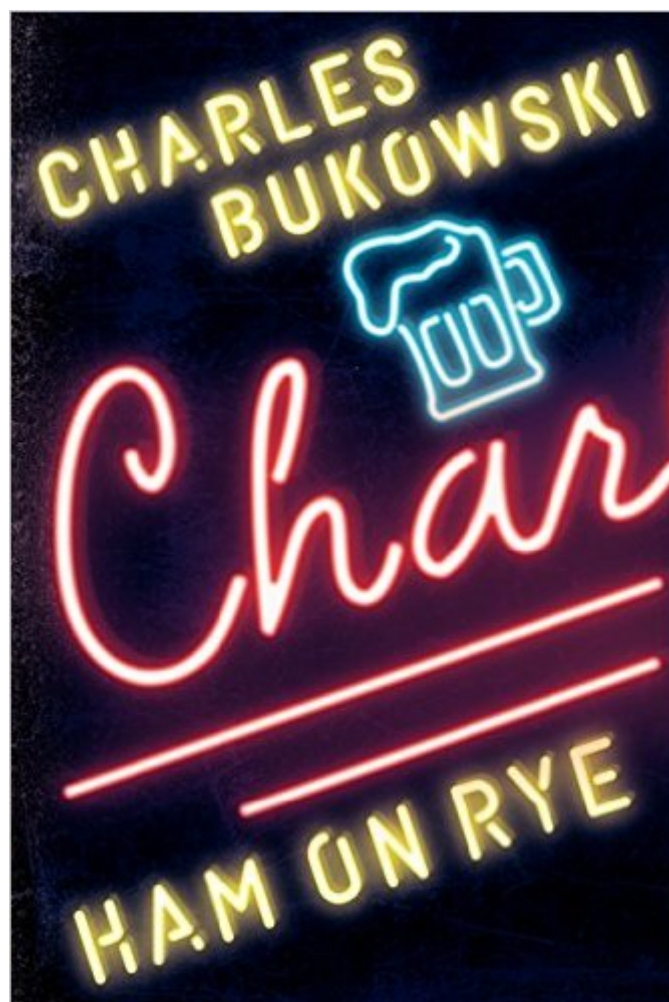


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Ham On Rye: A Novel



Synopsis

In what is widely hailed as the best of his many novels, Charles Bukowski details the long, lonely years of his own hardscrabble youth in the raw voice of alter ego Henry Chinaski. From a harrowingly cheerless childhood in Germany through acne-riddled high school years and his adolescent discoveries of alcohol, woman, and the Los Angeles Public Library's collection of D.H. Lawrence, *Ham on Rye* offers a crude, brutal, and savagely funny portrait of an outcast's coming-of-age during the desperate days of the Great Depression.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Most fans of the late, great Charles Bukowski, myself included, list *Ham On Rye* as their favorite Bukowski novel - and rightfully so. This novel is actually a thinly-veiled autobiography of the man we knew and loved as "The Bard of Booze and Broads." We see through the eyes of young Henry Chinaski as he comes of age in Depression-era America, the product of a dysfunctional and physically abusive household. From his early childhood as a desperately lonely, yet antisocial little boy to his adolescence (where he struggles with crippling acne and develops a love of literature), we see the genesis of a great writer. Bukowski pulls no punches (no pun intended) in his descriptions of abuse suffered at the hands of his father, a coldhearted, arrogant, sadistic SOB. The reader is drawn in to Bukowski's passionate determination to be the exact opposite of what proper society tries to mold its youth into. A powerful and heartbreaking read. Great work, Buk! R.I.P - you will be missed!

I have been returning to the work of Charles Bukowski (1920 -- 1994) after reading his novel "Factotum" and watching the movie based upon it. Bukowski's novel "Ham on Rye" (1982) is a coming-of age novel in that it tells the story of Bukowski's protagonist, Henry Chinaski, from his birth to his young manhood, ending with the attack on Pearl Harbor. ("Factotum", written in 1978 covers the next period of Chinaski's life, after he has been rejected for the draft and wanders from city to city in search of work.) Chinaski is based loosely on Bukowski's own life; but "Ham on Rye" and Bukowski's other novels are, after all, works of fiction and should be read as such. The scene of "Ham on Rye" is Los Angeles during the Great Depression, particularly the lower middle-class homes in which Chinaski grows up, as families struggle to survive and to escape from poverty. Bukowski is at his best in describing dingy homes, streets, schools, and desperate people. But "Ham on Rye" is a coming-of-age book told with irony and twists. It seemingly mocks the story of self-discovery and self-awakening common to these distinctively American books, but in the end I think it follows the pattern of a coming-of-age story in spite of itself. Most American coming-of-age books recount the life of a young person and end when that person comes to some crisis which he meets and, thus, attains a degree of understanding of himself which he carries through life. Bukowski's book tells the story of an unhappy childhood, as Chinaski is subjected to an overbearing father and frequent beatings. In addition, as an early adolescent, Chinaski develops a terrible case of acne which exacerbates his tendency to aloneness as well as his anger and rebelliousness. After graduating from high school, Chinaski loses a menial job, enrolls in a Junior College, and begins to drink heavily. He is well on the way to a life of alcoholism, fighting, wandering, and gambling that is detailed in chronologically later novels of Chinaski's life, such as "Factotum" or "Women". Yet for all its rawness and Chinaski's sense of failure and purposelessness, the book conveys a sense of promise. The book shows a young Chinaski forming the desire to be a writer, and beginning to work at his craft and respond to his experiences in a manner that, years later, would result in "Ham on Rye" and in Bukowski's other works of fiction and poetry. Some of the best moments in "Ham on Rye" show the adolescent Chinaski sitting alone in the Los Angeles Public Library and ultimately discovering authors, including D.H. Lawrence, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis, who speak to him. As had many before him, Chinaski learns that projecting oneself into artistic creation offers a form of release from the difficulties of everyday life. Chinaski writes: "Words weren't dull, words were things that could make your mind hum. If you read them and let yourself feel the magic, you could live without pain, with hope, no matter what happened to you." (p. 152) These words reflect the theme of "Ham on Rye" and, I think, of Bukowski's work as a whole. Similarly while suffering from his acute acne, Chinaski develops a character a WW I pilot named Baron Von Himmlen, and writes stories of

his imagined adventures. Chinaski writes: "it made me feel good to write about the Baron. A man needed somebody. There wasn't anybody around so you had to make up somebody, make him up to be like a man should be". (p. 168)"Ham and Rye" is the story of how a young man found himself in adulthood leading a life of alcoholism, poverty, and loneliness, with no ambition and seemingly few prospects. The book is full of adolescent sexual frustration, dysfunctional families, rawness, vulgarity, and failure. It also includes some funny scenes. The story is told in a sharp, crude, no-nonsense style. But together with all the outward failure and the shocking scenes, we see a young Chinaski in the process of attaining his dream and gaining victory over himself after all. In spite of the dead-end vicissitudes of his life, Henry Chinaski perseveres and gradually brings his experiences alive and learns to make something worthwhile of his existence. He learns to reflect upon himself and his life and to describe them without cant or mercy. Henry Chinaski becomes a writer. Robin Friedman

Depending upon your taste in literature, Charles Bukowski was either a brilliant writer who has yet to receive to respect he truly deserves or nothing more than a drunk with a typewriter. Most of those who love Bukowski seem to have discovered him through his poetry, but Ham on Rye was my introduction to the author, and it remains my favorite work of his. In fact, I think Ham on Rye is probably the best coming-of-age story in American literature, far superior to Catcher in the Rye. Although Salinger's novel captures your attention when you're thirteen, it tends to suffer terribly when you reflect back on it as a more mature individual and recognize the narcissicism and insincerity at the heart of Holden Caulfield's attitude towards the world. Ham on Rye does not romanticize the innocence of children and depict adults as "phonies." It is Bukowski's own thinly veiled account of his childhood and adolescence in Los Angeles between the two world wars, as told through the eyes of his alter ego, Henry Chinaski. Ham on Rye shares the same brutal humor and breezy prose style as Post Office and Women, but it is much more tightly focused than any of Bukowski's prior novels, which tended to be more episodic than anything else. For that reason I think it ultimately achieves a sort of lasting resonance with the reader that is lacking in much of Bukowski's other prose work, for all of the energy and spontaneity his writing always possessed. Ham on Rye is alternatively hilarious and horrifying, but it always remains truthful in a way that few coming-of-age novels are. Anyone new to Charles Bukowski should start with this.

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