

# Charles Bukowski's West German Connection

by JAY DOUGHERTY

Ask Carl Weissner, Charles Bukowski's longtime West German translator, just how well-known the L.A.-reared Bukowski is in Germany, and he'll lean back, smile knowingly, and savor the thought of his quintessential anecdote before releasing it.

"Well, this friend of mine in Cologne did a television documentary of Bukowski's 1978 Hamburg reading," Weissner says, "and he started it off with maybe six or seven minutes of random interviews in the street near his home in Cologne. He just walked up to people and stuck a microphone in their faces. 'You know Bukowski? Read any of his stuff?' He didn't have to search. He could take his pick: a cabdriver, a B-girl, a rookie cop, an architect, two girls from a high school, a painter, the 75-year-old wife of a steel magnate, a street musician. They'd all heard of him, and most of them had read his books.

The average American reader, who has never heard of Bukowski, much less read his work, will probably knit his brows in disbelief. After all, Bukowski's books have not been typical book-of-the-month club selections, nor will one find them stacked predictably along with other modern classics in Waldenbooks or B. Dalton. In fact, the whole idea of doing a documentary on Bukowski would sound a trifle suspect to most American producers, at least it would have before the international success of Bukowski's recent movie "Barfly," starring Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway.

But "Barfly" simply gave West German critics and readers another chance to dote over Bukowski—and to re-emphasize the fact that they recognized Bukowski's genius before his own country did. "As a 'dirty old man,' Bukowski has never been socially acceptable in the U.S.," wrote West German journalist Anke Wienand in a recent syndicated news wire critique. "The West German public, however, ate him up. From the early '70s on, Bukowski's books found their place in every good household."

The sales figures substantiate this observation. More than 2.5 million copies of Bukowski's books—prose and poetry—have

been sold to date in West Germany, compared to around one million in all the rest of Europe. In West Germany, one can find Bukowski's books not only in virtually every book store, but in department stores, airport shops, and train stations, as well. "Bukowski stopped needing reviews or write-ups about eight years ago," Weissner points out. "Now the books sell by themselves."

Asked if Germans, in particular, might seek in Bukowski's flaunting of etiquette and propriety a kind of wish-fulfillment, Weissner grins. "Well, being a good citizen is such an innate thing in Germany," he says. "A lot of people just don't dare to speak out against the authorities; they cringe as soon as they have to pull over for a cop or something," he adds.

But Weissner quickly subordinates such stereotypical characterizations to more general explanations. "Most importantly, he expresses realistically the unappealing aspects of life in a serio-comic way. And he's not afraid to overdo it from time to time."

Weissner, now 48, serendipitously came across Bukowski 21 years ago. As a student in English at Heidelberg University, he had become bored with the very traditional education he was receiving. "American literature practically didn't exist in the university at that time, and English literature seemed to stop at Thomas Hardy," Weissner says.

"I mean, here I was sitting around in cafeterias between classes, nursing a cup of coffee and reading 'Naked Lunch,' 'On the Road,' 'Tropic of Cancer,' and so forth. And after that, you know, going back to another seminar on Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' . . . well, that was rather discouraging," he says, grinning.

But then Weissner discovered the growing network of "little" magazines in England and America: low-circulation, independent periodicals that were publishing without inhibitions or highbrow editorial restrictions. Inspired, he began his own little magazine, which he called Klactoveedsedsteen, named after a Charlie Parker tune, in order to be able to trade



Carl Weissner

with other little magazine publishers.

And in March 1966, Weissner got a magazine in the mail called Iconolatre, from a place called West Hartlepool, England, and he came across seven poems by Bukowski. Weissner pauses and leans back, joyfully mesmerized by the memory. "Hell, I thought, who is this guy? Here was one who apparently didn't give a damn about poetic frills and niceties. He was pissed. He was mad, and he just let it hang out. Relentless. Great," he says.

Weissner immediately wrote to the editor of Iconolatre to get Bukowski's address, and, when he received it, he wrote to Bukowski to ask for poems that he could publish in Klactoveedsedsteen. Bukowski wrote back, and thus began the most important and substantial correspondence of Bukowski's career, a correspondence that amounts to 400 letters to date and will be published next year by Black Sparrow Press.

"I felt that with Carl I could say anything, and I often did," Bukowski says. "I even wrote him at times to say something like, 'Damn, man, you've saved my life.' And it was true. Without Carl I would be dead or near dead or mad or near mad, or driving into a slop pail somewhere, mouthing gibberish," says Bukowski.

One year later, in 1967, Weissner received a Fulbright grant to study in the United States. He spent

much of his time talking with and tape-recording writers like Allen Ginsberg, Ray Bremser, Ted Berrigan, and Diane DiPrima, some of whom, years later, he would end up translating into German. And in the summer of 1968 he made his first trip down to Los Angeles to visit this mad genius Bukowski whom he had known only through letters and literature.

Both men have vivid recollections of their lives at the time. "I was in the Post Office . . . and living with a crazy and alcoholic woman and writing anyhow," says Bukowski. "All our money went for booze. We lived in rags and a rage of despair. I remember I didn't even have money for shoes. The nails from my old shoes dug into my feet as I walked my routes hungover and mad. We drank all night and I had to get up at 5 a.m. When I wrote, the poems came out of this. The letters from Carl had been the only good magic about . . . and I had pictured him exactly as he looked and acted when I met him: one hell of an amazing human."

"I didn't have it half as bad," says Weissner apologetically. "I had no problems except how to keep the little magazine going and scrape by somehow, working at odd jobs."

Weissner returned to Germany in 1969 and fell back into working those odd jobs, one of which was as an out-of-house editor for the J. Meltzer publishing firm in Frankfurt. Meanwhile, City Lights Books in San Francisco published Bukowski's first full-length book, "Notes of a Dirty Old Man," and Bukowski sent Weissner a copy. "I showed it to Meltzer," Weissner says, "and Meltzer sat down, read the first one-and-a-half pages, and said: 'I want to do this. Can you get me a contract for the German rights? Will you translate it for me?'"

The book was not an initial success in Germany, mostly due to poor advertising. And the next publication, a translation of the novel "Post Office," was a failure as well.

"Everybody thought the publisher was nuts," Weissner adds. "Even books by well-known German poets didn't sell more than 600 or a thousand copies. Big anthologies of the New American Poetry

had flopped."

"OK, never mind. While I was at it, I chose a looong title, which in German, of course, came out twice as long," Weissner adds, laughing. "Poems Written Before Jumping Out of an 8th Story Window." Another no-no in this racket: never use a title that people can't read at a glance. This title you had to bend down for," Weissner says, motioning to the floor. "But if you did, you were rewarded."

The book made Bukowski famous in West Germany. "It sold 50,000 copies," says Weissner, stretching his arms out wide. And from that point until today, Weissner has been kept busy translating the wild old man of L.A. "We're up to date on Bukowski. I translate the works as soon as they appear in the U.S.," Weissner says. "And I see it as a kind of poetic justice that Bukowski made his breakthrough in Germany on the strength of his poems, and entirely on his own," he adds.

Weissner's next job is to translate the new edition of Bukowski's early, previously unpublished poems, "The Roominghouse Madrigals," that Black Sparrow Press released in the United States this spring (see Page 4). But Bukowski himself has recently been concentrating primarily on prose. He's writing a novel called "Hollywood," based on his experiences while assisting with the filming of "Barfly." "Hollywood is at least 400 times worse than anybody has ever written about it," declares Bukowski.

So the phenomenon persists. Bukowski continues to hammer out the tough, individual writing that keeps him out of the mainstream book stores in the United States but in the mainstream bookstores in West Germany. He's a virtual out-cast in one society, and a celebrity in another.

And how does Bukowski feel about his dual status? With characteristic pointedness, Bukowski says, "As a writer I consider myself in the best of worlds: famous elsewhere and working here."

*Dougherty has been living in West Berlin during 1987-88, researching the West-German reception of Charles Bukowski.*

## BOOK CALENDAR

### TODAY

Costa Mesa. Missy Laws signs "Meet the Stars," Brentano's, South Coast Plaza, 2-4 p.m.  
Venice. Open readings, Beyond Baroque, Old Venice City Hall, 681 Venice Blvd., 8 p.m.; sign-ups: 7:45 p.m.

### TUESDAY

Santa Monica. Westside Literacy Coalition holds an open meeting in honor of International Literacy Day (celebrated on Thursday). Santa Monica Library auditorium, 1343 6th St. (at Santa Monica Blvd.), 3-5 p.m.  
USC. The faculty of the USC Master of Professional Writing program read and discuss their published work. Fall Festival of Writers, USC's Town and Gown Hall, \$2, 7 p.m. Program is preceded by a wine-and-cheese reception.

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### WEDNESDAY

Los Angeles. FEEDBACK, a workshop providing criticism of works in progress, meets at 10746 Francis Place, 4247, 7:30 p.m. Bring four copies of a manuscript (not to exceed 5,000 words) to be critiqued. For information, call Rob Schmidt, 838-5493.  
Sherman Oaks. Christopher Stone signs "Re-Creating Your Self," Waldenbooks, 95 Fashion Square Mall, 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.; and at Waldenbooks, 14532 Ventura Blvd., 5:30-7 p.m.

### THURSDAY

San Pedro. Sharon Olinka reads at Angel's Gate Cultural Center Reading Series, Art Gallery, 3701 S. Gaffey, 7:30 p.m. Open readings, 7 p.m.; sign-ups, 6:45 p.m.  
Santa Monica. Dan E. Moldes ("Dark Victory, Ronald Reagan, MCA and the

Hollywood Mob" and "The Hoffa Wars") discusses his books and the upcoming elections, Midnight Special Bookstore, 1350 Santa Monica Mall, 7 p.m.  
Santa Monica. Christopher Stone signs "Re-Creating Your Self," Waldenbooks, 189 Santa Monica Place, 5:30-7 p.m.  
Studio City. José Quintero signs his memoir, "If You Don't Dance They Beat You," Samuel French Bookshop, 11963 Ventura Blvd. (1 block east of Laurel Canyon), 7-9 p.m.

### FRIDAY

Laguna Beach. Rosemary Adam and Nancy Edwards read from their poetry, Laguna Poets, Public Library, 363 Gleneyre, 8 p.m.  
Venice. Lawrence Thornton reads from his novel, "Imagining Argentina," Small

World Books, 1407 Ocean Front Walk, 7 p.m. (Validated parking available on the corner of Speedway and Market.)

### SATURDAY

Hermosa Beach. Book sale, Public Library, 550 Pier Ave., 9:30 a.m. Volunteers call 376-5765 or 372-3625.  
Hollywood. Fremont Branch Library, 6121 Melrose (at June St.) Workshop, "How the Public Library Can Help You Up the Ladder of Success," 2 p.m. Reservations: 465-1368.  
Brentwood. Jacqueline Platigorsky signs "Jump in the Waves: A Memoir," Dutton's Brentwood Bookstore, 11975 San Vicente Blvd., 3-5 p.m.  
Los Angeles. Christopher Stone signs "Re-Creating Your Self," Waldenbooks, Beverly Center, 8522 Beverly Blvd., 11 a.m.-

12:30 p.m., and at Waldenbooks, Westside Pavilion, 10800 W. Pico Blvd., 2-3:30 p.m.  
Los Angeles. Charlene Faris lectures on publishing, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. (Continues next Sunday at the Eastlake Inn, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.) Information: (818) 341-7241.

Sherman Oaks. Alan Dean Foster signs "To the Vanishing Point" and "Flux in Flux," Dangerous Visions Bookstore, 13563 Ventura Blvd., 2-5 p.m.  
Venice. Michelle Clinton, Starr, Goode, Eloise Klein Healy, Joanna Veronika, Philomene Long, Bia Lowe, Penelope Moffet, Paula Thompson, and Terry Wolverton read from their work, Beyond Baroque, Old Venice City Hall, 681 Venice Blvd., \$5, 8 p.m.

Send notices for Book Calendar to Elena Brunet, Book Reviews, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles 90053 no later than 11 days before issue date.