

Biography dull, falls short in chronicling artist's life, thoughts, controversies



Barry Miles
"William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible: A Portrait"
Hyperion

How anyone could make the life of William Burroughs sound dull is a mystery, but Barry Miles succeeds at doing just that.

Maybe part of the trouble is Miles' own difficulty deciding just what kind of book he's writing.

"William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible: A Portrait" begins like a bad biography—with the obligatory log cabin origins—and ends like a bad critique of Burroughs' writing.

Miles seems, at first, to want to paint a portrait of Burroughs as a normal guy, far removed from the pop culture image of the man.

But that's a fatal strategy in the biography of an artist who has lived one of the most engaging lives around.

Burroughs is famous as the reprobate junky queer who: accidentally shot his wife, intentionally cut off his own little finger with a pair of bolt clippers—an incident Miles doesn't even mention, played mentor to the Beat Generation, wrote the book that sparked the most recent book-banning in American history, created cut-ups and bent time—and who may yet write his way out of death.

That's right. Burroughs is still alive and well and living in Lawrence, Kan., where he regularly draws fans from around the world.

Miles makes all this chaos of a life sound like something thought out in advance—some-

thing equivocal and dead.

"Little did Burroughs know it," he hints on more than one occasion, "but his years of addiction were really spent gathering material for his novels."

It's a simple-minded view of history that imagines genius is destined, somehow, for greatness.

Miles falls into this trap when, confronted with Burroughs' life, he looks for how Destiny was serving one of Her chosen few—instead of how the absolute forces of chaos shaped a human life.

Burroughs is possessed by genius. As he himself points out, it's a case of possession—he's sometimes controlled by forces neither he nor anyone else fully understands.

But what's really unforgivable is the book's overlooking of the brilliance of Burroughs' thoughts on the subjects of death, time and the human destiny of what Burroughs calls the "human artifact."

Probably, like most people, Miles found these ideas too bizarre to comprehend. And, ever the loyal fan, he refrains from critiquing them at all.

When he writes of Burroughs' ideas he holds them at arm's length, afraid to engage, afraid to ignore.

That's a tragedy, considering the importance these same ideas may have for human history.

This is a book written by a fan, a fate no writer as eminent as Burroughs deserves.

The author of "Naked Lunch" deserves better. He deserves someone to wrestle with, a partner in bringing his ideas to a public that already loves his writing.

—Mark Baldridge

WILLIAM BURROUGHS



Photo courtesy of Hyperion

Lively video releases offer action, thrills, a taste of cannibalism



NEW
RELEASES

Dramatic and traumatic are the best words to describe this week's video releases. Toss in a big gun or two, some chilling background music and a killer black chiffon dress and that's everything.

"Alive" is based on a true story—an action-packed drama with more than its share of tears and trauma. A plane filled with a Chilean team of rugby players and their families crashes in the Andes.

The survivors must deal with life and death in more ways than they had ever expected. They resort to an unpleasant means of survival—cannibalism. But director Frank Marshall handles the grisly subject matter with subtlety and elicits memorable performances from his stars, especially Ethan Hawke and Vincent Spano. A must-see.

"Point of No Return" Bridget Fonda stars in this Hollywood remake of the French film "La Femme Nikita."

Fonda stars as a junkie who is convicted of murder. She is saved from execution by government agent Gabriel Byrne, only to be turned into an assassin.

Trained to perfection by Byrne, she's cut loose to establish a new identity and told to wait for instructions. In the meantime she begins a new life, filled with the opportunities for change.

Part of that life includes a new boyfriend, played by Dermot Mulroney, a photographer she meets on the beach. She keeps him in the dark about her secret life, but of course, it can't stay that way.

Although this version lacks the finesse of the original, it is nonetheless a captivating movie with a great soundtrack. Fonda is terrifying in the beginning as the strung out junkie, and even more lethal as an assassin in black chiffon. Worth seeing.

"This Boy's Life" Robert DeNiro plays yet another psychotic bastard. This time he's an alcoholic and abusive stepfather to newcomer Leonardo DiCaprio. Based on the best-selling, semi-autobiographical book by Tobias Wolff, it also co-stars Ellen Barkin as the boy's weak and troubled mother.

If these titles don't pique any interest, there's always the latest installment in video erotica: "Night Eyes 3" with Andrew Stevens as a security agent hired to protect Playmate Shannon Tweed from her stalker. Or try one of the first three volumes of the collected episodes of Nickelodeon's "The Ren and Stimpy Show."

—Anne Steyer

Latest Theodore Roosevelt novel doesn't provide new information to enhance buff's knowledge



Nathan Miller
"Theodore Roosevelt: A Life"
Morrow

The noted historian Nathan Miller, whose previous works include "FDR: An Intimate History" and "The Roosevelt Chronicles," has written a simplistic, candid portrait of the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt.

Although two fairly recent works, "The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt" by Edmund Morris and "Mornings on Horseback" by David McCullough, provided detailed accounts of Roosevelt's early life, Miller's book is the first full one-volume biography of the man to appear in 35 years.

There are several skeptical assertions made at the outset of the book. The most notable is Miller's claim that "probably no president has more captured the imagination of the American people" than Roosevelt. Most historians would argue that Abraham Lincoln fits that role better.

Moreover, Miller writes, "If Americans were polled on which past president they would like to have in the White House today, Roosevelt would probably be the winner."

That question has been asked for many years by the Gallup Poll and the

answer was actually John Kennedy or Lincoln.

The most effective element of Miller's biography is its ability to make us understand the complexity of Roosevelt.

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Prize), campaigning for regulatory reform and coining the term "muckrakers," a reference to crusading journalists not intended as a compliment.

The notion that Roosevelt was a one-of-a-kind American phenomenon is an important theme in the book. He was a pioneering president who was

the first American leader to have an impact in world affairs, the first to trumpet the United States as a global superpower and the first environmental president. As both a lovable teddy bear and a stern, hard line politician, he was committed to a "Square Deal" at home while wielding a "Big Stick" overseas.

Miller uses previously unavailable letters between Roosevelt and Alice Lee, his first wife, to discuss Roosevelt's private life in considerable detail. Miller never overlooks his subject as a jack-of-all-trades.

"Life bubbled over in him like a laughter from a healthy child," he writes in the prologue.

"He had punched cattle, led the charge up San Juan Hill, hunted big game, and waved his fist under J.P. Morgan's rubicund nose. A man of contradictions and barley contained energies, he exercised strenuously, yet read a book a day."

Of course, all these elements of Roosevelt's life are considerably expanded in the chapter's that follow, but Miller never abandons the simplistic tone that is echoed in his concise introduction.

"Theodore Roosevelt: A Life" is a relatively slim work that provides a clear foundation to the saga of the man's brilliant political career as well as his diverse private life. Those who already have a firm understanding of Roosevelt will find little in this book to enhance their knowledge.

—Neil Feldman