

BOOKS

Second verse as good as the first

Augusten Burroughs goes *Dry* in second memoir



RUNNING WITH SCISSORS: A MEMOIR
by Augusten Burroughs; Picador, 2003; \$14 paperback

Once again, truth is stranger than fiction. *Running with Scissors*, the 2002 best seller by gay author

Augusten Burroughs, has recently been released in paperback.

This is far from what one would expect from a "memoir," mostly because it's hard to believe this perry melange of chaos could be more than a modern anarchist's myth—or that a reasonably well-adjusted (we assume) man comes of it. But even more surprising is that we end up caring about what happens to him.

At 12, Burroughs is sent by his mother to live with the family of her nontraditional psychiatrist, a man who just happens to look a lot like Santa Claus. Burroughs eventually creates his own asylum among the fucked-up family of misfits. At the same time, his queer sexuality is budding, and he hooks up with a 34-year-old pedophile (and former psychiatric patient), hopping between the sheets and reading between the lines, all the while growing up faster—and different—than even he expected.

Beyond quirky, the book is brutally bemusing—a smarmy, squirmy story, captivating with its dark humor. Burroughs' personal past is reminiscent of those middle school books in which oblivious family members with outlandish character ticks collide from distant orbits—those kinds of books that intentionally help outcast adolescents feel less freakish. Only the freakish world of this young,

alienated fag is unbelievably real and undeniably much less innocent.

Above all, *Running with Scissors* is about survival. It's a testament to the endurance and tenacity of a young gay man forced to redefine normal. And it's as inspiring as it is unusual.

—Timothy Krause



DRY: A MEMOIR
by Augusten Burroughs; St. Martin's Press, 2003; \$24.95 hardcover

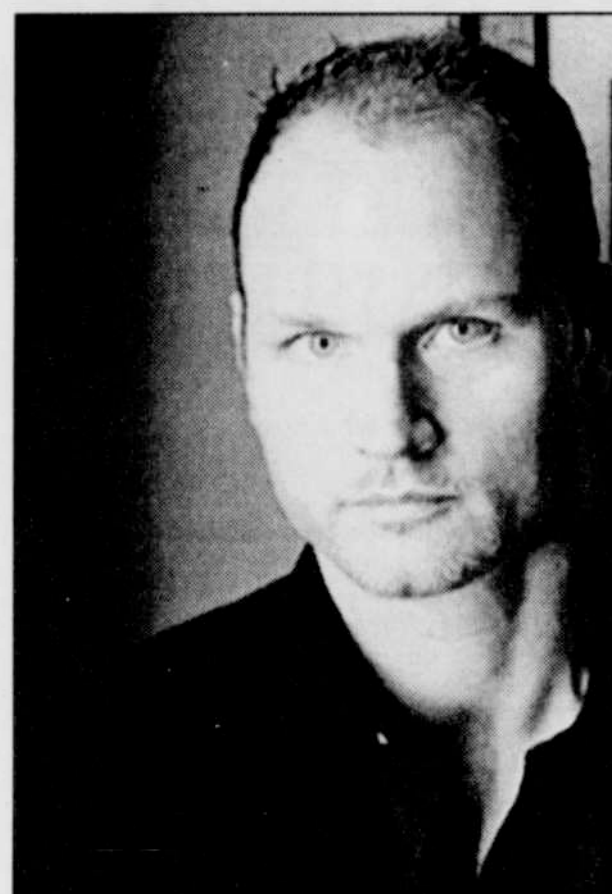
The unanimously positive reviews that greeted Augusten Burroughs' first memoir, *Running with Scissors*, were typically rife with David

Sedaris comparisons. Like Sedaris, Burroughs is a post-Stonewall gay writer whose liberation extends far beyond his sexuality.

But Sedaris' laughs come from holding a mirror—one with cracks wide enough to provide a healthy glimpse of the underlying hypocrisy, pettiness and cruelty—to more or less ordinary, everyday lives, while the abundant humor in Burroughs comes from the incongruously deadpan writer's voice he uses to relate his decidedly singular, unusually free, sometimes awful life.

This sequel to *Running with Scissors* finds the 20-something Burroughs living a driven but luxurious yuppie existence within a Manhattan ad agency. His best friends are an undertaker and an HIV-positive investment banker (who wryly calls himself an "AIDS baby").

Burroughs himself is a raging alcoholic, which, as it turns out, is quite compatible with the advertising game. His descriptions of the frenetic rationalizations, the close calls, the inevitable intervention (delivered on the job



Augusten Burroughs

via co-workers in one of *Dry*'s funniest episodes) and the subsequent shotgun rehabilitation are packed with liquor-induced humiliations that would make even Liza Minnelli blush.

The tone is relentlessly self-critical, but minus the absolution begging that typifies so many recovery memoirs. Burroughs is very aware, in hindsight, of his own self-destructive behavior, ignorance and superficiality ("A rehab hospital run by fags will be hip. Plus there's the possibility of good music and sex," he very mistakenly thinks to himself while checking into Pride Institute, a gay substance abuse center), but he never gives us generalized cautionary-tale homilies, the Big Lessons he's learned.

Instead, we're left with the simple realization that Burroughs was a human being guilty of some particularly punishing mistakes and possessed of the good sense to laugh at them, as well as the talent to make us do the same. He generously wants us to learn nothing more from his story than that real victory over our flaws and errors comes when we can see how truly funny they are.

—Christopher McQuain

MORE REVIEWS



HE'S THE ONE
by Timothy James Beck; Kensington Publishing, 2003; \$14 softcover

Timothy James Beck's second novel, just released in paperback, is an implausible story told in an uninteresting way.

Like many protagonists of bad gay fiction, Adam Wilson is tall, handsome and well-built. He also lives in rural Wisconsin, where he has a loving relationship with his family and a successful business. Still, when a client's project temporarily relocates him to New York City, he jumps at the chance.

The rest of this thin story (the plot is thin, the book is 360 pages) is about how Adam falls in love with Jeremy, another tall, handsome, well-built stud (he's the one, get it?) and schemes to meet and woo the beautiful and sensitive actor.

In the Manhattan of *He's the One* (an island of 1.5 million), only a few dozen people really matter. They all know each other and know all about the rest. So, when Adam wants to score an invitation to a party in order to bump into Jeremy all he needs to do is

mention it and (voilà!) he happens to be asking a friend of the host.

All in all, *He's the One* is as contrived as an episode of *Veronica's Closet* and just as forgettable.

—Floyd Sklover



QUEER FEAR II
Edited by Michael Rowe; Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002; \$17.95 softcover

Adolescence is a time when everything confusing and inconvenient in life—sex, family, our status in the world—enclose us like a pressure cooker. Teen-agers long for an outlet, and I'd be willing to bet that well over half of the audience for most of what falls under the "horror/fantasy" category of fiction is younger than 20.

The recurrent images in horror—gore, blood, a fascination with the abject, with death, with the frailty of the human body—are, if you'll indulge my dime store Freud, the half-sublimations of the revelatory teen-age epiphany that sex and death are, to our endlessly odd human psyches, inseparable.

That must have something to do with the

most vivid stories in *Queer Fear II*, the second anthology of queer-themed short stories about, or at least aimed at, the young adult reader. The authors (most of them lesser-known and male, though well-known female Poppy Z. Brite pops up here) are surprisingly sharp and sophisticated.

Any anthology is a mixed bag, and there are some ordinary-going-on-stale offerings here, and some stories don't quite fit the bill: Steve Duffy's well-constructed "Numbers," a literary AIDS quilt, has the queer and the fear, but it's hardly "horror fiction" befitting this volume.

No, the teens and teen-minded have it here, whether it's Scott Treleaven's "Bugcrush," a creepy-crawly tale of high school crushes, Joseph O'Brien's pastiche of queer avant-garders like William S. Burroughs and Dennis Cooper in "artGod" and—best of all—David Coffey's "On Being a Fetish," which deliciously mocks (from beyond the grave, no less!) the limitations of sexual fetishes and the duplicitous, carbon-copy world of gay Internet chat rooms.

The best stories in *Queer Fear II* are pulpy and nasty—bite-sized pieces that go down easy while you smoke a clove and wait for your black nail polish to dry.

—CM



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