

DRY (2003)

A Memoir

Augusten Burroughs

Augusten Burroughs followed up his successful 2002 childhood memoir, Running with Scissors, with this adaptation of ten years' worth of journals he kept while recovering from alcoholism.

OVERVIEW

Dry is a memoir by Augusten Burroughs based on the journals he kept over a ten-year period chronicling his time in rehab for drug and alcohol addiction. After an adolescence marked by “squalor, pedophiles, no schools and free pills” and an early entry into the business world as a boozing advertising copywriter, he is forced by his employers to check himself into the “Proud Institute,” a “gay rehab hospital” in Minnesota, specializing in the treatment of addiction and mental health needs for LGBTQ+ patients. Part I of *Dry* ends with Burroughs’s completion of the program at the Proud Institute but well short of rehabilitation. Part II deals with his relapse into drug and alcohol addiction, his attempt to resume his advertising career, and his chaotic sex life. A major figure in Burroughs’s memoir is George Stathakis, called

“Pighead,” a lover he met on a telephone sex line, whom he calls “the person at the heart of *Dry*.” Pighead’s death from AIDS shocks Burroughs into an awareness of the need to reform himself. At the book’s end, Burroughs, sober and struggling to remain so, is supported by the memory of Pighead, who serves as his conscience.

Though published later, *Dry* was written before Burroughs’s novel *Sellelevision* (2000) and his childhood memoir *Running with Scissors* (2002). *Dry* was a best seller, generally well received by critics, who noted Burroughs’s negotiations of everyday struggles with addiction, recovery, memory, loss, self-help, and the contemporary rituals of self-narration. In his preface to the tenth anniversary of *Dry*’s publication, Burroughs writes about composing the book and its effect on audiences, noting that it was “written largely in real time” and “as it happened.” *Dry* is the second of nine autobiographical works Burroughs published between 2002 and 2016.

✦ Key Concepts

Alcoholism
Rehab
Addiction and recovery
LGBTQ
Sexuality
HIV/AIDS

KEY FACTS

Subject:

Augusten Burroughs (1965–)

Occupation:

Writer

Nationality:

American

Genre:

Memoir (with some fictional elements)

Time Period:

Late 20th century

Historical Context:

The second decade of the AIDS pandemic

Noteworthy:

Burroughs’s brother, John Elder Robison, is also a noted memoirist

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Dry fits into a long tradition of personal narratives about addiction and recovery—including works by Thomas De Quincey, William S. Burroughs, and Nancy Lee Hall. While *Dry* ends with a brief chapter called “One Year Later,” which describes Burroughs’s struggle to remain sober, his memoir is also about relapse. In the penultimate chapter, he finds himself suffering acute alcohol poisoning, hallucinating spiders, covered in hives, and unable to move, and at the end of the book he admits that though he has been sober for a year he still feels like he has “hives in my brain that I can’t scratch.”

Like earlier addiction narratives, *Dry* also exhibits the author’s compulsion to write, which Susan Zieger (2007) indicates is characteristic of what she calls “drug autobiographies.” This quality is evident in Burroughs’s description of his writing process. As he explains in the preface to the tenth anniversary edition,



PRIMARY SOURCE

Excerpt from *Dry*

I'm standing in front of a white marker board, upstairs, writing down "to the best of your ability" a complete history of my drinking. [...]

Age 7: Given NyQuil for cold. Grandfather is NyQuil salesman so we have cases of it. Green is favorite color so sometimes sneak sips.

Age 12: First real drunk. One bottle of red wine. Threw up on friend's sheepdog.

Ages 13–17: Smoke pot once a week. Drink alcohol maybe once a week.

18: Drink nightly, always to intoxication. Five drinks per night, + or –.

19–20: Drink maybe ten drinks per night, with occasional binges. Coke once every six months.

21 to present: A liter of Dewar's a night, often chased with cocktails. Cocaine once a month.

I stand back and look. A jumble of blue words, my messy writing, my magic marker confession up here for all to see. I've never actually *quantified* before.

People look at the board, then back at me.

Tracy, the leader of the CDH [chemical dependency history] group, looks at me with eyes that seem to belong to someone three times her age. It's something beyond wisdom, all the way to insanity and back. It's like her eyes are scarred from all the things she's seen. "When you look at what you've just written, what do you feel?" she asks.

I look at the board. Now that it's up here, it does seem like I drink a lot. "I guess I drink a lot." I feel ashamed, like I wear the same pair of underwear for days at a time. [...]

I sit quietly and a strange and unfamiliar feeling comes to me. It's almost a feeling of relief, ears popping, pressure released. But it's something else, too. I think for the first time I can see, right up there on the board, that I do drink much more than normal. And the pills I have to swallow to drink. Like my body is allergic to alcohol and is telling me I shouldn't be drinking, but I do anyway. And when I sit there looking at what I've written, I almost can't help but feel like it's possibly a good thing I am here.

SOURCE: Burroughs, Augusten. *Dry: A Memoir*. New York, Picador, 2003, pp. 56–59.

I found quickly that the mechanics of writing, of my fingertips jabbing at the letters, served to somehow focus me by funneling my attention, backspacing and typing my way into my thoughts. The soft and steady percussion of hitting the keys was a metronome of sorts, allowing the amorphous anxiety or confusion or

discomfort or misery or excitement short-circuiting inside my brain to form into actual sentences, detailed thoughts and emotions with definite form.

This was incredibly helpful. So helpful and instructive to me that on that first day I began writing, I continued writing for the next six or seven hours.

And I kept on writing, day after day, month after month. (xiv–xv)

Zieger maintains that in addiction narratives, the drive to write emerges from the addict's need to construct works that "display their own vexed, self-conscious relation to the concept of mapping inherent both in the drug experience, which is thought to chart a uniquely subjective trip, and in the notion of genre, which gives form to the writer's otherwise inchoate, inimitable experience."

Dry also deals with the tragedy wrought by AIDS in the 1990s. Over the course of the book, Burroughs's friend Pighead is repeatedly hospitalized, as doctors cannot find a reason for his unstoppable hiccupping, and he gets progressively sicker. Burroughs notes, "last time I saw him, he looked like him. Now he looks like somebody who is very sick. His face is so thin. It's *that* look. The AIDS look." Within a month, Pighead was transformed "into a skeleton without bladder control." Yet after his death, Pighead's ghost is a guiding force. He arranges for a jeweler to deliver a memorial gold pig's head to Burroughs inscribed: "I'M WATCHING YOU. NOW STOP DRINKING." Burroughs calls his friend "my official rock. The thing that grounds me."

THEMES

Burroughs's candid memoir provides a voice for others who may not have the opportunity to relate their own difficulties with queer life, addiction, sobriety, and the processes of recovery. He describes his shame and guilt, as well as the consequences his behaviors have for others. Despite his subject matter, Burroughs is also wryly humorous. His friend Greer—an aficionado of self-help books—tells him "I wish I were an alcoholic. I mean, you're getting all this really good therapy and all these insights from those alcoholic meetings."

The style in which *Dry* is written, particularly its use of the present tense, is reflective of the rhetorical practices of twelve-step recovery programs. Each time AA members gather, they perform the ritual of self-naming and acknowledgment of their continued addiction; Robyn R. Warhol and Helena Michie (1996) described such practices as oral autobiographical acts, performances of self that are centered on "I" statements. They emphasized the importance of personal narrative to the program: "Every sober alcoholic in AA has a 'story,' a chronological narrative of

substance abuse, epiphany, and recovery.” *Dry* is in many ways an extension of these performances, as Burroughs continually tells on his inner addict: “I try to imagine a nasty little man living inside my forehead, kicking the backs of my eyeballs for telling. Then I imagine myself wearing the hospital slippers.” Burroughs refers to the “monastic process” of transforming a struggle into a routine and attending daily meetings. He tells another alcoholic: “you’re supposed to go to a meeting. I mean, as much as you hate them or if they feel stupid or you just don’t want to go. The thing is, if you go to a meeting, you won’t drink that day. It’s like a minibrainwash. It kind of fixes you for a while.”

CRITICAL RESPONSE

Contemporary reviews of *Dry* invariably compared it to *Running with Scissors*, which established Burroughs as an important memoirist. In his 2003 review, John Green asked, “How to follow your successful my-childhood-was-so-bad-it-was-funny memoir?,” responding, “Why, with a then-my-alcoholism-was-so-bad-it-was-funny memoir, of course.” Although he did note that in places “the narrative descends into cliché-ridden recovery jargon,” Green found that with *Dry* “Burroughs again displays his talent for finding hope and hard-won laughs in the nastiest of situations.” Heather McElhatton (2003) wrote that the work is “disturbingly well written” and that Burroughs’s relationship to truth and memory is “fascinating.” She also indicated that critics have found Burroughs’s author’s note troubling. In it Burroughs explains “this memoir is based on my experiences over a ten-year period. Names have been changed, characters combined, and events compressed. Certain episodes are imaginative re-creation, and those episodes are not intended to portray actual events.” McElhatton pointed out that while such a disclaimer is now fairly commonplace, in 2003, it gave pause to some readers. She continued: “Criticized by some for this fictional slant and applauded by others, *Dry* sparks a debate that asks us to take a hard look at what genre the memoir really falls into: fiction, non-fiction, or creative non-fiction?” She went on to argue that while some of the scenes are fictional and cause readers to question which portions of the memoir are true, ultimately “the story sweeps you along, and the very real sentiments of the book come through, and in the end, like with all good stories, you forget to wonder, and you just read.”

Scholarship dealing with Burroughs’s memoirs has discussed them in the context of trauma studies, specifically considering the role of writing trauma (scriptotherapy). Nicole Stamant (2014) considered Burroughs’s works generally, writing about his relationships to television and serial popular culture. Burroughs’s name has often been mentioned in discussions about truth in contemporary life writing, but specific texts or examples from his own writing



Author Augusten Burroughs in 2006. TINSELTOWN/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

have been rarely noted; he has been, however, frequently linked with the memoir boom of the turn of the millennium. Nicole McDaniel [Stamant] (2010) argued that Burroughs’s narratives *Dry*, *Magical Thinking* (2004), and *A Wolf at the Table* (2008) engage the private tropes of addiction and compulsion in order to illustrate the possibility of serial self-construction and repeated public self-performance. She went on to suggest that the current debate between the traditional concept of addiction, which understands the experientiality of addiction to be substance-based (such as dependencies on alcohol, cocaine, or heroin), and the more recent emergence of behavioral addictions (including sex, exercise, food, or gambling) haunt Burroughs’s narratives.

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