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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

'Very funny, very sad, and despite its self-congratulatory tone, honest in most of the right places. In many ways, Bukowski may have been the perfect writer to describe post-war southern California - a land of wide, flat spaces with nothing worth seeing, so you might as well vanish into yourself. In an age of conformity, Bukowski wrote about the people nobody wanted to be: the ugly, the selfish, the lonely, the mad.' --The Observer  
Wordsworth, Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and the Beats in their respective generations moved poetry toward a more natural language. Bukowski moved in a little further. --Los Angeles Times Book Review --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Charles Bukowski is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in 1920 in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother, and brought to the United States at the age of two. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for over fifty years. He

died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp*.

*HAM ON RYE* is a slight, entertaining novel that is often funny. It is served up as a slice of autobiography but I'd take that with a huge grain of salt. It's quite hard to believe some of the events depicted. It covers Bukowski's alter ego from childhood through age 21. I'd say the later part of the book dealing with him after he graduates from high school is far and away the most interesting part of the book. Here we see the Bukowski we have come to know, if not love. One aspect of the novel that is worth attention is the world it depicts. The book is set in Los Angeles between approximately 1923 and 1941. You wouldn't know the film industry or more broadly, the entertainment industry existed. No one here is an actor, would be actor, singer, dancer or screen writer. For that matter, no one is a cop or detective. The people are lower class whites who are often European immigrants or their children who wound up in Los Angeles instead of Cleveland. There are no New York strivers, Mid west farmers daughters or Okies. You only get one glimpse of the rich, near the end of the book. This isn't the LA of Beverly Hills. It's ham on rye country. In other words, it's Los Angeles as you usually don't see it in fiction or movies, especially those covering the time period of the book.

"The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death." This was my second foray into the works of Bukowski, and I will continue. This book reminded me of what "Catcher in the Rye" should have been. Henry Chinanski is the very embodiment of the disenfranchised youth. Although this story takes place in between the 1920's and 40's, the attitude easily translates in today's "modern" world. It's not hard to see the similarities of then and now, only a few details are somewhat different. A very good read that, as another review stated, will leave you weary or angry. This is the novel about everything that is really going on when we say "nothing".

Charles Bukowski's fourth novel, *Ham on Rye*, is the semi-autobiographical story of the early years of his alter ego Henry Chinaski. It is a finely written and honest account of the painful childhood of a boy marked out from his peers. Regularly beaten by his father, Chinaski is shown growing through his difficult and violent adolescence (struck with the worst case of acne his doctors have ever seen) through to the first jobs he can't and won't hold down. In this moving story of growing up Bukowski disciplines his muscular, concentrated writing and creates a novel that distills his poetry into the finest full-length piece of prose that he ever wrote. Bukowski is often good but in *Ham on Rye* he's great. Sadly, best known as the alcoholic inspiration for the film *Barfly* (an experience he reflected on

in his book *Hollywood*), it is as a poet, rather than a drunk, that Bukowski should be best remembered. His bitter, caustic, direct, humane, damaged poetry reflects a life dominated by poverty and booze. His poetry stretches over many, many volumes but Bukowski also wrote great novels: all of them have many faults but the first four books he wrote shine for similar reasons. *Post Office* and *Factotum* both dissect, quite brilliantly, the life of an angry, poor man forced to do mindless jobs, pushed around and considered mindless by the fools who force him to do them. *Women*, as Roddy Doyle points out in his short introduction, continues the themes but focuses on the numerous women who share his hero's bed and bottle. I would call Chinaski a misanthrope, were it not for his abiding love *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â œ nay, obsession- with the female form. (let *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs just say I had no idea how gross teenage males could be). Oh, and of course, alcohol. He notably remarks, after experiencing intoxication for the first time: *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã Â“this is going to help me for a long, long time *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã Â•. Unfortunately, the honeymoon is short-lived, and his relationship with alcohol leads to progressively seedier and more violent behavior. There *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs not really much of a *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã Â“plot *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã Â• in *Ham on Rye*: it tells the story of the first 20 years of Chinaski *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs life; and then it ends. And that was OK with me.

This is a novel about the life and times of fictional character Henry Chinaski, the son of German immigrants growing up in Los Angeles during the depression in the 1930s and early 1940s. Chinaski may be an archetype of the childhood misfit. The most significant contributors to this in his early life are his father *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs psychological and physical brutality, his family *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs poverty, and a severe case of scarring acne in his early teens. As the story goes on, I found myself proceeding on in increasingly dark fascination, but anyone remotely fitting the description of a misfit will also sympathize, perhaps uncomfortably. Chinaski's problems with his self-image and his outlook on life start early, and are negatively reinforced at regular intervals throughout his adolescence, until he finally seems to submit to society's opinion. This book is alternately sad, vulgar, violent, alcohol soaked (later on) and sometimes darkly comedic. The author *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs style made this an easy read, and once begun, I had a hard time putting it down. NOTE: If you are offended by profanity or the explicit sexual musings of an adolescent, this book will not be for you; although not consciously gratuitous, the author writes quite straightforwardly and graphically about Chinaski *ÀfÂçÃ* â ¬Ã â „çs life and thoughts.

The character fights, objectifies women, hates virtually everyone. Underneath the hardened exterior,

there's a wounded man. Most people wouldn't care to look beyond the surface, but if the character hooks you early you'll enjoy it. The imagery came easy to me with this one. I'm not going to dedicate a lot of time to this review because Bukowski is fairly well known, and I don't have much to say that hasn't already been said.

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