



Way, Way Off the Road. The Memoirs of the Invisible

Man. By Hugh Fox

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Hugh Fox, in his memoir of the small press movement, "Way, Way off the Road," quotes the poet Charles Plymell:

"...the generation that came after the Beats, was overpowered by the Beats themselves. All that media hype. My god, the media fell in love with them. They were practically rock stars. And the post-Beats, the Hippie-Yippies, whatever you want to call them, were lost in the Beat's shadow. They were and still are invisible!"

Plymell defined the group of poets Fox feels he was part of. Fox was solidly in his 30's, a nerdy academic, equipped with a PhD and a foundation grant, when he picked up a copy of "Crucifix in a Death Hand," by the "dirty old man," of poetry Charles Bukowski. Fox was thrilled by the Buk's use of language and felt a new door was opened for him outside the stagnant air of the academy. Fox wound up doing a critical study of the man. Here is an account of his first meeting with Bukowski:

"So I'd gone over and found him in this motel-hotel place in Hollywood. You know, the usual tattered, potted palms out in front, everything kind of run down."

Fox told Bukowski that he wanted to do a critical study of his work. Fox was sick of Eliot and Pound, and wanted a taste of the wild side. Here is Bukowski's response according to Fox:

"...nothing wrong with Eliot and Pound, they're some of my best friends, he answered, got up and started emptying the wall of bookcases that contained all of his printed work, all the books, all the magazines. Went into a closet and started taking out suitcases and throwing the books and mags inside."

Bukowski said: "Ok I can trust you. I'm gonna give you the

whole schmear. And if you find any duplicates, keep them.”

Fox wound up writing the first critical study of the man, as well as studies of Winans, and Lifshin, and began his life as a wandering-Jewish scribe, recording the comings, goings, happenings and personalities in the small press for the last 40 years.

Fox recounts his years at COSMEP, a seminal press organization, that he was a founding board member of, and his years of publishing the avant-garde lit mag “Ghost Dance.” Fox, who admits he has a very manic side, has written literally thousands of reviews of poetry books, chaps, and small press publications, as well as edited the groundbreaking anthology “The Living Underground.”

This book is not a straight narrative. It reads the way Fox talks. It is written in a rapid-fire stream of consciousness style—so that often the reader has to catch his or her breath. His description of fellow writers is often inspired. Here is a portrait of a down-at-the-heels Richard Nason, a movie critic for TIME magazine,

“And when he’d come into the office out of the Captain Midnight dark, you always smelled the booze on him. Pickled full time. Fedora. Sports jacket. Topcoat. Remnants of former glory. Only when he pulled his topcoat off there would be five pens in the front pockets of his sports coat, all of them uncapped, leaking into the coat itself, another uncapped pen in his shirt pocket also leaking, so it looked like he had been harpooned and was bleeding blue blood.”

Fox has an inquisitive, fascinating, and hungry mind, and he covers a wide range of subjects from drug-induced writing, ancient Indian cultures, men’s sexual prowess and perversions, you name it. In the books there are countless anecdotes about personages from the world of the small press like: Lyn Lifshin, A.D. Winans, Harry Smith, Len Fulton, Richard Kostelantz, Allen Ginsberg, “The Boston Underground,” Bill Costley, Sam Cornish, Bill Blatty, Donald Hall, and Fox has an original take on them all.

In ways Fox’s literary history reminds me of Howard Zinn’s writing. He gives you a view of the outsider, and how the outsider views things. This is a history you won’t find in the classrooms, although it should be there. Fox makes darkness visible, with this iconoclastic, zany and compelling memoir.

Doug Holder/Ibbetson Update