



American literature

The Beat
Generation

The history of literature has been "landmarked" by countless movements of varying styles and direction.



The Beat Page is dedicated to the movement that began in the early 1950's with a small and tightly connected group of young writers who demonstrated a care-free, often reckless and unquestionably fresh approach to literature as well as a demonstrative social stance toward what was sometimes referred to as "The Establishment".



The term "Beat" was reportedly coined by Jack Kerouac in the late 1940's, but became more common at about the time that writers like himself, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were beginning to get noticed. It was quickly becoming a slang term in America after World War II, meaning "exhausted" or "beat down" and provided this generation with a definitive label for their personal and social positions and perspectives.

THE POCKET POETS SERIES

HOWL

AND OTHER POEMS

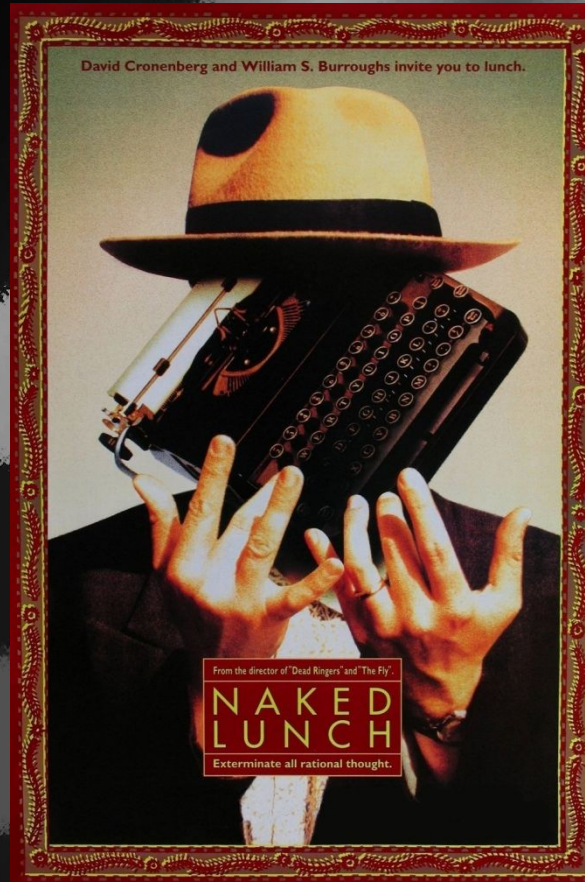
ALLEN GINSBERG

Introduction by

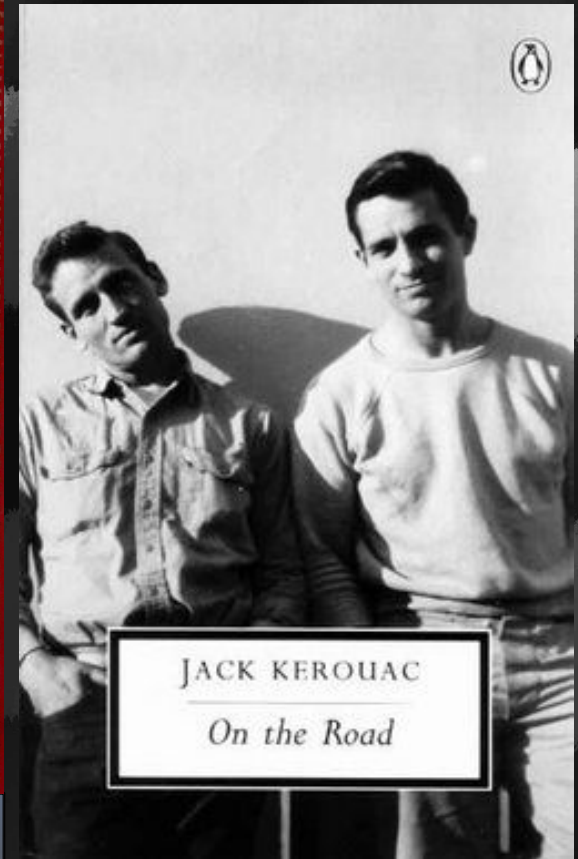
William Carlos Williams

NUMBER FOUR

**Allen Ginsberg's Howl
(1956)**



**William S. Burroughs's
Naked Lunch (1959)**

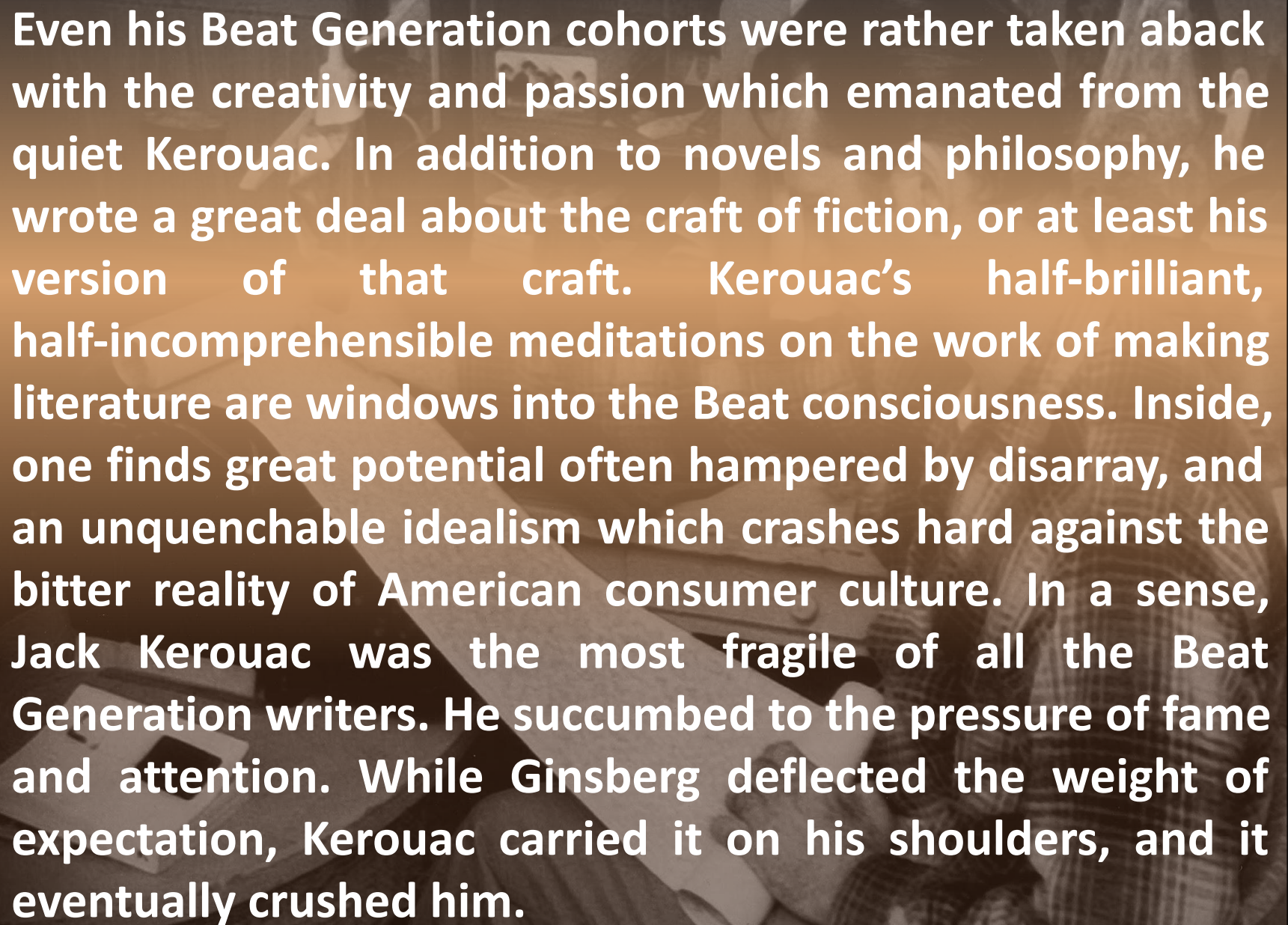


JACK KEROUAC

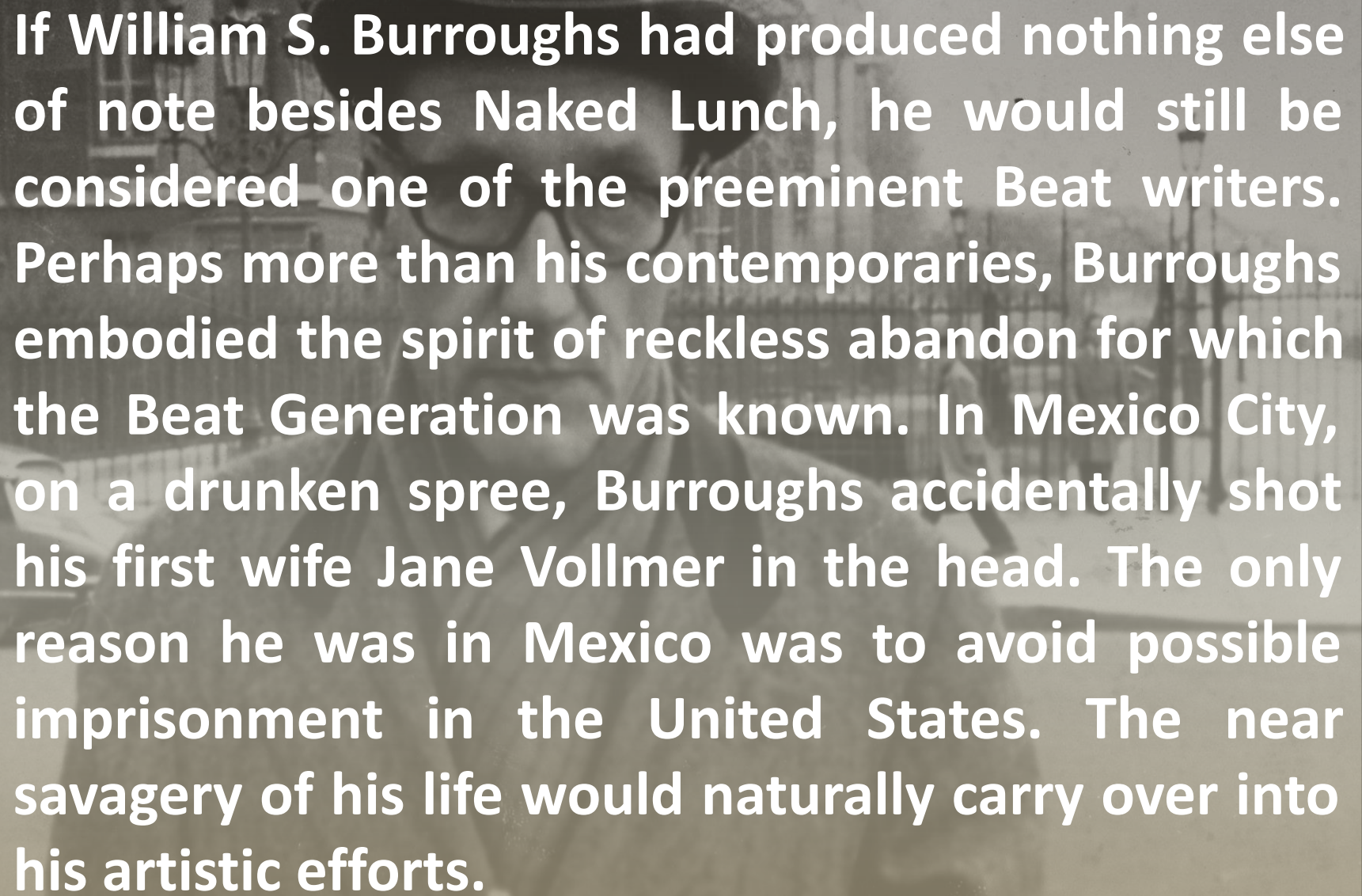
On the Road

**Jack Kerouac's On the
Road (1957)**

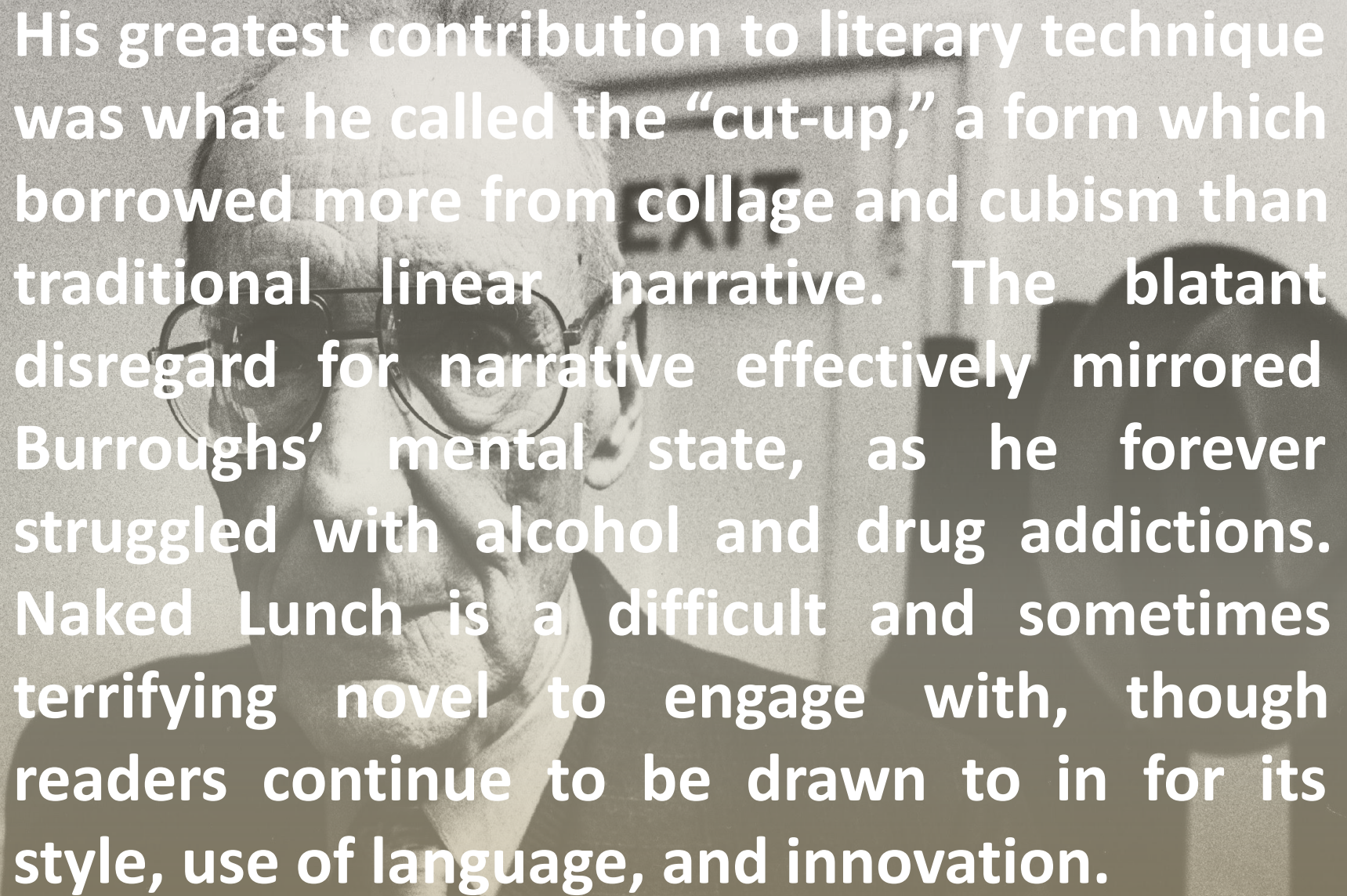
No Beat Generation novelist garnered more attention and adulation than Jack Kerouac, and none of their personal lives were more filled with conflict, confusion and crippling depression. Eventually dying from his alcoholism, Kerouac was never happy with the position that he attained as the de facto spokesperson for his generation. He was reportedly quite shy, and had a difficult time with the rejection that he faced early in his career. His single greatest success was *On the Road*, a philosophical travel narrative which blends stream of consciousness, drug visions, and profound observations into a generational statement that resonates to this day. The book made him immediately famous.

A person is seen from behind, sitting and reading a book in a dimly lit room. The person is wearing a plaid shirt and a watch. The background is dark, with some papers and a lamp visible. The text is overlaid on this image.

Even his Beat Generation cohorts were rather taken aback with the creativity and passion which emanated from the quiet Kerouac. In addition to novels and philosophy, he wrote a great deal about the craft of fiction, or at least his version of that craft. Kerouac's half-brilliant, half-incomprehensible meditations on the work of making literature are windows into the Beat consciousness. Inside, one finds great potential often hampered by disarray, and an unquenchable idealism which crashes hard against the bitter reality of American consumer culture. In a sense, Jack Kerouac was the most fragile of all the Beat Generation writers. He succumbed to the pressure of fame and attention. While Ginsberg deflected the weight of expectation, Kerouac carried it on his shoulders, and it eventually crushed him.



If William S. Burroughs had produced nothing else of note besides *Naked Lunch*, he would still be considered one of the preeminent Beat writers. Perhaps more than his contemporaries, Burroughs embodied the spirit of reckless abandon for which the Beat Generation was known. In Mexico City, on a drunken spree, Burroughs accidentally shot his first wife Jane Vollmer in the head. The only reason he was in Mexico was to avoid possible imprisonment in the United States. The near savagery of his life would naturally carry over into his artistic efforts.



His greatest contribution to literary technique was what he called the “cut-up,” a form which borrowed more from collage and cubism than traditional linear narrative. The blatant disregard for narrative effectively mirrored Burroughs’ mental state, as he forever struggled with alcohol and drug addictions. *Naked Lunch* is a difficult and sometimes terrifying novel to engage with, though readers continue to be drawn to it for its style, use of language, and innovation.