

*The Lost Years of William S. Burroughs: Beats in South Texas* by Rob Johnson. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006. Reviewed by Jennie Skerl, West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Rob Johnson's new book about Burroughs's life in Texas from 1946-49 is a valuable contribution to Burroughs's biography and criticism. Although Burroughs spent only a few years there, as Johnson convincingly points out, his experiences in "the Valley" of South Texas are revealing about some of his life choices, friendships, and politics. Memories and images from the Valley are prominent in *Junky*, *Queer*, and the short story "Terry the Tiger," and appear fleetingly—though little recognized--throughout his later work. Previous biographers had not given much attention to these "lost" years, and Johnson has done a thorough job of researching people, places, and events, including interviewing area residents now in their seventies and eighties who remember Burroughs, his family (Joan and the two children), and his close friend, Kells Elvins. Indeed, the book is an important source about Elvins, Burroughs's life-long friend since their childhood in St. Louis, and the man who encouraged him to write about his experiences.

Johnson organizes the book topically, devoting chapters to the "Beat" scene in South Texas with Kells Elvins at its center; agriculture in the Valley, with its gentlemen farmers, get rich quick schemes, and the exploitation of illegal Mexican immigrants ("wetbacks"); the gay scene; the wide open town of Reynosa across the border with its "anything goes" bar called (what else?) Joe's Place; Texas oilmen; Texas lawmen; Burroughs's relationships with Ginsberg and Kerouac at the time and his influence on their thinking and writing. Johnson sets Burroughs's life in South Texas (and East Texas where he also lived during this period) within a well-researched historical, social, and cultural context, providing a fascinating account of the Valley during the late forties which, in turn, informed Burroughs's experiences there. The social scene in the Valley, which attracted eccentrics, black sheep, refugees from the law, and investors hoping to make money without working too hard, was an attractive environment for Burroughs at the time, who had been forced to leave New York and live with his parents in 1946 because of a drug bust and who, after moving to Texas, had a family to support. From a literary point of view, Johnson discusses portraits of the Valley and its denizens in *Junky* and *Queer*, works written close to the time that Burroughs spent in South Texas, but he also points to long-term influences in later works such as *Port of Saints* and *Place of Dead Roads*. Johnson also discusses the influence of Burroughs's letters and the manuscript of *Junky* on Kerouac's *On the Road*.

The most significant new biographical information has to do with the influential friendship with Elvins (very little has been previously published about him), Burroughs's failed attempts to achieve economic independence in order to support his family, and his evolving political analysis as a "libertarian conservative" and "factualist" in response to his experience as a gentleman farmer employing illegal Mexican workers. The final chapter discusses the death of Joan Burroughs in Mexico City in 1951 as the end of a trajectory that began in the Valley. Remarkably, Johnson discovered someone living in South Texas who was present at the shooting and who provided details, including a story that the "William Tell" act had happened before on Burroughs's farm in the Valley--with grapefruits as targets, not drinking glasses.

A concern is the way that Johnson elides the time that Burroughs spent living in East Texas and New Orleans within his account of Burroughs in the Valley. Burroughs was in the Valley (following Kells Elvins there) from April to November in 1946, then lived with Joan and the children in East Texas from November 1946 until May 1948. The Burroughs family lived in New Orleans from the summer of 1948 until May 1949, when they moved to the Valley (after Burroughs's arrest for drugs in New Orleans). They then moved to Mexico City in October 1949. Thus, Burroughs lived in the Valley a total of thirteen months within a three-year period. Similarly, the last chapter on the death of Joan Burroughs jumps ahead to a place and an event that Johnson has not researched as thoroughly as the Texas years. The extrapolation from what is known about Burroughs in the Valley is insightful but also highly speculative.

Some other broad interpretive strokes can also be questioned. In what sense were Burroughs's friends and acquaintances in South Texas "Beats"--if by Beat we mean a literary, intellectual, or bohemian movement? The people described appear to be hard-drinking wastrels and hell-raisers (some with membership in the local country club), but hardly Beat. Similarly, comparing Elvins's friendship with Burroughs to Cassady's relationship to Kerouac does not ring true: it was a very different kind of friendship, and Elvins was never a muse. Using Mexican folklore to interpret Burroughs's guilt after shooting his wife is poetic, but tends toward the mythological rather than the biographical. However, despite quibbles with interpretations and generalizations, Johnson's book provides valuable biographical detail and greater understanding of this period in Burroughs's life, and Johnson is often convincing about the long-term influence of the Valley in Burroughs's life and thought.