



Grace Notes:

GRACE CAVALIERI INTERVIEWS LINDA LEE BUKOWSKI

A Conversation with Linda Lee Bukowski, wife of the late Henry Charles Bukowski



Linda Lee Bukowski

Grace: Was Charles Bukowski – the Man – different from Charles Bukowski – the Poet?

Linda Lee: He was always the same man. He was a unique personality and always the real thing. There was no clothing he could put on to make himself different. He was genuine and always himself.

GC: I was reading music critic Geoff Himes' article on the music Bukowski influenced, mostly folk, and rock. Which arts do you think Bukowski affected and changed?

LLB: Oh Hank influenced generations of artists. 100's of artists. There was a big piece on him in LA at the Disney Center. I can name so many musical pieces, and kinds of music, not only pop music, but classical, baroque, jazz, neo

modern, every kind you can think of. I just came back from Burbank where there was an art gallery opening on Bukowski with a book about the places he went, and a guide to Bukowski. The art show featured 25 artists and each did an impression of Bukowski. The GREATEST portrait ever done though is by John Register, a real genius, a neo realist – think Edward Hopper but better – much better.

GC: Where is that portrait?

LLB: I'm looking at it right now. It was done from John's memory but Hank had met him before. Register did the cover of Hank's book *Hollywood* (1989). He was the greatest artist ever, gone now. But these kids at the Burbank Gallery doing their impressions were so nice, a great young crowd. So kind.

GC: How was it to be with a man always in the spotlight?

LLB: Well when I met him he wasn't! He lived in a hovel in the gritty world he wrote about. I had a health food restaurant, and I was a real flower child of the 60's. Then of course I became a revolutionary. By the way, Hank always mocked Hippies and called them "silly," and "wimpy."

GC: What was your restaurant?

LLB: A health food café. The Dew Drop In! Redondo Beach.

GC: You were a hippie all right. Was Bukowski different in public than he was in at home?

LLB: It made no difference. He was very shy, and liked to be anonymous even when out in public. He was disfigured with some

dermatological problems and was not physically attractive, and it made him feel better with irregulars. I don't know which came first the skin problem or the shyness, but he felt comfortable working with others who were different.

GC: How did you meet?

LLB: I had read his books and read the *LA WEEKLY* regularly – his “Notes of A Dirty Old Man.” I went to every reading he gave within a 100-mile radius. I'd never met him, but I adored him and loved his wisdom and brilliance. I never imagined I'd meet him, but it was as if Stephen Hawking had come to town, I'd go to hear every word he said. The area he was working in, and writing, was amazing. I knew him eight years before we were married

GC: How do you describe this man?

LLB: He was # 1. There will never be anyone but him for me. This was the greatest man I ever met. My access was first poetry back then, and then to him, as a man. Being a “poet” was his job. But to me he was everything, husband, lover, friend, warrior, my partner, my son of a bitch.

GC: Tell us about the tender part of him.

LLB: He had tenderness toward all that emulated tenderness. He had internal tenderness from childhood. This was denied and stifled, and he had to put that away to stand up. Read *Ham On Rye* (1982). I wish you could see photos of him as a little boy with his father's hand on his shoulder. This was probably just after he was beaten half to death or would

be beaten any minute, for moving the wrong way. The little boy was a poster child for abuse. That's why he became a speaker for the oppressed.

I never had that kind of physical suffering. We all have suffering but nothing like that. I did not walk that walk like he did, but I had my own pain. It is a tapestry we have with all our different threads in it that makes for the creativity I guess. Each strand adds to it.

GC: Do you consider yourself fortunate?

LLB: Yes. By knowing Hank and loving him. But also we are the fortunate Beings on earth with a roof over our heads and plenty to eat while billions have nothing, not even a little fire to sit around.

GC: How did Charles feel about the distribution of wealth in

the world?

LLB: He was angry. He hated it. He didn't get how the wealthy could ever claim they knew suffering. He evolved to having enough, but never was a millionaire. People have an image of a rich Bukowski. We live in a cottage in a working class town. People have the idea he was super rich. We have this little bitty place but we were happy.

GC: What did he think of the "literary establishment?"

LLB: He said *when the east coast establishment likes me, I'm in trouble*. Now universities teach Bukowski. I think inside he liked the attention. I'd see a little glow once in awhile that meant *Well shit – it's about fucking time*.

GC: When did he write?

LLB: He wrote at night. Every day he went to the racetrack, and being shy, he went to the far end in the grandstands, San Anita racetrack. He used the racetrack like a temple. He never bet much, maybe \$5.00 but it was the process he liked . . . the different ways of betting going on . . . He always said I was one of the best horse players. I learned. I'm a good learner. I'd win sometimes and he would lose. That endeared me to him.

GC: How would you like to remember that?

LLB: I can't go back now. I'll never go back. But I'd love a sculpture of him sitting there to the left in the grandstand, sitting, all hunched over (The hunch was where he'd been beaten and injured so much by his father). He'd have a race form in his hand. I can see it. It is so visual

to me already.

GC: Let's put a call out to sculptors! Where did he write?

LLB: We have a typing room, a tiny room with a little balcony upstairs. It overlooks the industrial harbor, not pastoral San Pedro.

GC: Your house sounds like a shrine to him.

LLB: Well, we are preserving the house with the CHARLES BUKOWSKI FOUNDATION. Everything goes into that trust. When I go, it'll be a private museum, not open to the public, but for tours a couple times a year for truly interested scholars.

GC: Where are his papers?

LLB: I gave 1000's away. And I have lots of paper left. The main archive is at the

Huntington Library and Botanical Garden. 155 acres. It's beautiful. Hank hated universities because they were so oppressive, so I gave everything to the Huntington Library. They are wonderful people. They have Gutenberg, Darwin, Bukowski, the greats. I've been offered huge sums for his work, but I knew he'd rather donate them to the right place. There are other archives also . . . many . . . UC Santa Barbara, U Texas at Austin, Wisconsin, lots more. I've given away 1000 of his personal books and still have at least that many here in the house. Huntington is the state of the art – everything is scholarly and handled well.

GC: You mentioned the gardens there...

LLB: Loved the gardens and would go every day after dropping him off at the track. There are 9 races. I'd come

back to bet on the 9th, but until then I walked the gardens.

GC: Did you travel much?

LLB: Oh sure we went to Germany, France, all over, but he couldn't stand traveling. He couldn't stand the inconvenience. Said he couldn't understand the goddamn languages and there was never a good place to write.

GC: We know who Bukowski influenced, but who influenced Bukowski?

LLB: He read all the great masters. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Celan. He was a prolific reader and read in the public library when he had no place else to go. He never liked Hemingway . . . *Forget about it*, he said

GC: What were his politics?

LLB: Hank was a Pacifist. He also never voted or even registered to vote until I pushed him. The first election he voted for Jesse Jackson. He also voted for Bill Clinton. He was against inequality, he despised wealth, and he had a deep transcending idea of everything, even marriage.

GC: We know his evolution. What was yours?

LLB: I was follower of Meher Baba for a time, even traveled to India. Meher Baba always said we should find ourselves in the presence of true Masters and follow their guidance.

GC: What is the greatest regret that you have?

LLB: I only regret that he's gone. The love of my life—the love of my lives—all my lives—

beyond that—Beyond Beyond, even...forever and ever...

GC: What is your fulfillment now?

LLB: I am in the garden every day. I'm out there every day. I have this tiny yard but I was inspired by the Huntington Gardens and this is a miniature botanical garden. I have nine different sections: subtropical, northern Italian, South Asian, an English garden, a regular California garden. Fifteen fruit trees—plum, avocado.

GC: How many languages is Bukowski translated in?

LLB: At least twenty, but he was just translated into FARSI! For the population in America, not for overseas, that would be banned, but it's for the "ex-pats" here.

GC: You know, we will be talking together live for the nation NOVEMBER 18th on Pacifica Radio stations for the Pacifica Archives Fund drive! It will be a blast. Pacifica is doing a BUKOWSKI REVIVAL, and the new *City Lights* book is the centerpiece. What a fabulous time we'll have.

GC: The Linda and Grace Show!

GC: The Grace and Linda show!

LLB: If Hank walked in right now, he'd say *Are you girls still blathering?!*

GC: The Pacifica Archives are giving a premium gift of one of the first tapes of your husband's READINGS. First Readings ever! Twelve poems never heard before. From, I think, 1962. What did you think when you heard that tape they sent you?

LLB: I put it on and went in the kitchen and it sounded like he was right there – the tonality of the voice, I couldn't believe I was hearing it. It was very hard for me to listen. It's been fourteen years . . . since he died . . . but he is still my husband. I couldn't listen to all of it. I had to turn it off.

GC: Why don't you come visit me and we will listen together?

LLB: can't travel. I have nine cats. Come here. We can walk the beach.

GC: Well, I might just do that, but I'll have to have a Mimosa after.

LLB: I don't drink much, but I'll have a rum and coke.

GC: I'll buy. White or dark?

LLB: Dark rum. Always dark. Dark rum only.