

'Dreadful' captures tortured spirit of John Horne Burns

Dreadful: The Short Life and Gay Times of John Horne Burns

By David Margolick
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NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

It is too often the fate of great talents to destroy themselves.

And few American authors living and writing in the 20th century brought about their own oblivion with more flare or blinding speed than John Horne Burns, who produced one of the greatest novels to emerge from World War II and then promptly vanished into history like a puff of poisonous smoke.

In his excellent new biography, "Dreadful: The Short Life and Gay Times of John Horne Burns," David Margolick has plunged his hands into the messy annals of American literary history and rescued a singular author from obscurity.

His book paints a nuanced, engrossing and less-than-flattering picture of Burns, a self-styled and flamboyant character out of Oscar Wilde acknowledged by even his closest friends and admirers to be an insufferable genius. The broken man Margolick gives us, across 382 pages of sensitive and meticulous reportage, is a heartbreaking product of his time and circumstances.

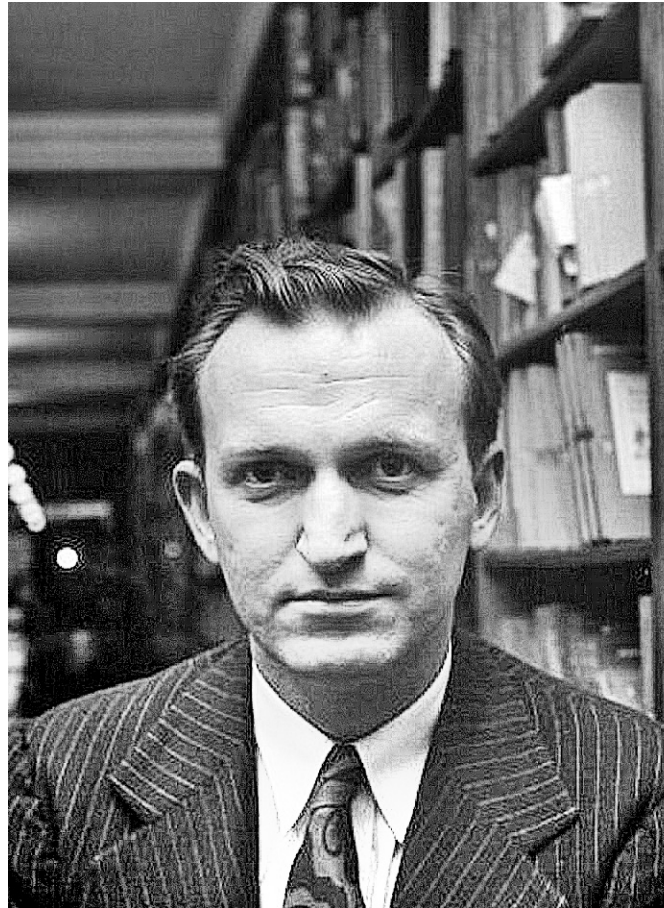
Burns was born and raised in insular New England, making his way through a

typically upper-crust education. His life's tragic trajectory went like this: Andover, Harvard, a stint teaching at a Connecticut private school, wartime service in Africa and Italy, a brief return to teaching and finally his death abroad and disappearance into the great unknown.

In his 36 years, Burns produced one enduring piece of literature: the 1947 book "The Gallery," a collection of vignettes set in wartime Naples that chronicled the seedier doings of American Army men and their Italian hosts that was praised far and wide for its honesty and lyricism. Some of its champions included John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Gore Vidal and practically every working literary critic writing in English at the time.

What's most remarkable about the book – even more remarkable because most criticism and praise of it at the time overlooked it entirely – is its frank portrayal of homosexuality among American troops and Italian citizens in war-weary surroundings. Margolick describes one chapter set in a Neapolitan bar which may or may not have existed as the "apotheosis" of Burns' always simmering desire to bring gay subject matter into the light. In his research, try as he did, Margolick was unable to discover any evidence that the place ever existed.

"It seems more likely than not, then, that Burns made the whole thing up, creating an elaborate fantasy of openness



John Horne Burns, a prickly figure who nearly vanished into literary obscurity, comes back to life in David Margolick's sensitive biography.

and tolerance to challenge his storytelling skills, proclaim who he was, defend his culture and his friends, and plead for greater understanding and acceptance."

The fact that almost no one took notice, or cared to acknowledge, that central achievement of Burns'

masterwork, goes a long way toward illustrating his incurable dissatisfaction, his boundless insecurity bordering on self-hate and his likely deadly alcoholism.

After Burns' years as an officer in the Army, during which he saw no action and worked largely as a censor

while spending great chunks of time performing classical music for other servicemen, things went directly downhill. He returned to his teaching post at the Loomis School (now Loomis Chaffee) in Windsor, Conn., where he put the finishing touches on "The Gallery" and began work on his second novel. That follow-up, "Lucifer With a Book," was a merciless send-up of the culture at Loomis that included cruel and thinly veiled caricatures of his fellow teachers and administrators. It was roundly trounced by critics, and in Margolick's description seems to embody all of Burns' childish and self-destructive tendencies.

He quotes former Loomis student Phillip Isenberg, who among others attributes Burns' second novel to a kind of incurable self-loathing and sense of being ill-at-ease that had been with him ever since he was a child: "He hated himself and he spewed it all over the landscape on everyone else," Isenberg said. "His suffering was palpable, even when I was a 15- or 16-year-old kid. His face was flush, his eyes darted around. He was just never comfortable with himself."

After the brilliance of Burns' wartime letters to friends and former students back home and the glory of his first novel, it's utterly painful to read the details of his demise. As he tried in vain to reproduce the vitality and spontaneity of "The Gallery," he sank deeper into his own distorted ego

and his output grew steadily worse. He drank to excess. And finally, he died under mysterious circumstances in a seaside Italian town in 1953.

For better and mostly for worse, for a generation of gay writers living and working in America, self-loathing was an inescapable part of their life and work. Some writers, like Gore Vidal, molded that feeling into a fantastic defense mechanism that imbued his writing with a scalding wit and self-confidence and seemed to propel itself to ever-greater heights. Others, like Truman Capote and countless schoolteachers and promising term paper writers who succumbed to the silent tortures of homophobia before they could make an audible peep, allowed those social pressures to destroy them.

That doesn't take away one little bit from their accomplishments, nor should it. Vidal, in a quote toward the end of Margolick's excellent book that includes evidence of his own inflated ego, may have put it best:

"Extreme circumstances made him write a book which was better than his talent, an unbearable fate for an ambitious artist who wants to go on, but cannot; all later work shadowed by the splendid accident of a moment's genius. I suspect that once Burns realized his situation, he in fact chose not to go on, and between Italian brandy and Italian sun contrived to stop."

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