



Cain's Book

Alexander Trocchi , Richard Seaver (Illustrator) , Greil Marcus (Foreword)

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This is the journal of Joe Necchi, a junkie living on a barge that plies the rivers and bays of New York. Joe's world is the half-world of drugs and addicts—the world of furtive fixes in sordid Harlem apartments, of police pursuits down deserted subway stations. Junk for Necchi, however, is a tool, freely chosen and fully justified; he is Cain, the malcontent, the profligate, the rebel who lives by no one's rules but his own. Like DeQuincey and Baudelaire before him, Trocchi's muse was drugs. But unlike his literary predecessors, in his roman a clef, Trocchi never romanticizes the source of his inspiration. If the experience of heroin, of the "fix," is central to Cain's Book, both its destructive force and the possibilities for creativity it creates are recognized and accepted without apology.

Cain's Book Details

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From Reader Review Cain's Book for online ebook

Lee Foust says

A remarkable novel by just about any standard. Forget those who say it's about addiction: It is not. It is rather an honest attempt to place a troubled and rebellious human consciousness into a literary space between the many false value systems offered it by all of the anti-existentialist power structures: the ethos of the capitalist religion of work, the moralist conformity of marriage, and all of the modern bourgeois and patriotic constructions of place, of nationality, of sexual mores, of class and societal roles (husband, worker, citizen); as well as the various social, state, and religious institutions that legitimize all of our multiform willful slavery to structure and to those who the structures most benefit, in all of its multifarious forms of conformity and acquiescence. Our protagonist, Joe Necchi, opts for words, heroin and, primarily, play as models for escape from and the rejection of the world's many labels and expectations--each strategy presents itself, to greater and lesser degrees, as a tragic insufficiency perhaps, but they are all-too-logical and at least temporarily consoling actions in the face of the mind-numbing conformity that is still with us in the modern materialistic pseudo-Christian nation-state. I can think of no more important or pointed social novel to read from the last century.

Brent Hayward says

What begins as a junkie's self-indulgent narrative slowly opens up to become a engrossingly nihilistic portrait of a solitary and broken man who has ended up alone on a barge in the Hudson River. A thinly veiled autobiography, Cain's Book is part metafiction, as the writer moves back and forth in time from Scotland, where he grew up in a boarding house, to NYC, either planning or working on the ms, to shooting up H, philosophising about inaction and meaninglessness, and drifting either on the water or into the city, with other junkies, to get fixes. The portrait of lower Manhattan and the docks in the late '50's is indelible, the characterization strong, and, though essentially very bleak, the book has a tremendous dark power.

Dozy Pilchard says

I re-read this book every ten years or so and have done since I was a teenager (I'm approaching 50 now). I see it totally differently every time I come back to it. I find the isolation in it refreshing. It is a world in itself, part liberation, part desperation. Quite a tale.

MJ Nicholls says

Trocchi's final and most fêted work (apart from the odds-and-ends poetry shambles, *Man at Leisure*, also republished by Alma Classics), is a fragmented and not entirely unpretentious novel-of-sorts that seems to be more of a deeply psychological exploration of the author's uncompromising outsider's worldview than any sort of seminal "drug" novel as labelled by most, including Burroughs. The drug use is a mere fact of life and incidental to the more interesting business of what this scow-dwelling author-substitute Joe Necchi (the protagonist of *Young Adam* was named Joe and worked on a scow too) has to say about his Glaswegian upbringing (the father/son scenes are the kernel of the novel and Freudians needn't look too smug about their implications) and his life of perpetual drift (although Necchi like Trocchi isn't free from relationship

obligations). The work is compelling despite occasional lapses into intellectual waffle (i.e. pseudo-philoposting) and unlike most “drug” lit, no doubt stands up to multiple readings and offers a greater depth (minus perhaps the trendier scenes with Trocchi and his lowlife mates) than works by his scuzzier contemporaries (i.e. Burroughs). An excellent work—one we must label (*if* we must label at all) a “masterpiece,” since Alexander rebelled against the obligation to write until his death. If only writers of lesser talent would rebel against that obligation—we may have less whiffy bookstores.

Donna says

This book wasn't at all what I expected. Junkie lit, no matter how good, can't help being formulaic. Those Mission Impossible episodes where Barnie play-acts the sweat-soaked terrors of withdrawal represents one end of the continuum. French Connection 2, Panic in Needle Park, Trainspotting, the dirty cottons of William Burroughs' oeuvre, and so on, nod off along various parts of this continuum and we know every station of this cross. It's part of our folklore.

I don't know exactly what the junkie is in our folklore-literature but I do know he is a very important archetype. I say 'he' because though the female of the species exists, she has a different meaning that I haven't quite worked out. Girls getting their own are rare in literature, though in real life they are far more efficient. All this to say that junkie lit has certain elements in it that are as predictable as a Betty and Veronica comic. And we want these elements. We wait for them as surely as we wait for the crucifixion in a passion play.

Trocchi's book subverts all of this. He cops, he shoots, he scores. But Pilate never comes and neither does the great withdrawal, which for this kind of epic serves as the journey to the underworld. Nope. He keeps himself in dope and replaces the crucifixion with the work on the scows where he is towed out to the sea to sit adrift with just enough until the he is returned to the harbour. His job is to maintain the scow without toiling to tow it, unload it, or anything of that sort. He drifts, and these parts of the book bracketed by the onshore world of copping, shooting, negotiating, copping, shooting, become strangely beautiful. Hence the underworld is a beautiful sea-borne limbo wilderness wherein Cain makes an imperfect peace with the realities of what have him living by the dropper.

Though I never got the impression he could leave this world, the whole thing left me with an odd sense of hope.

Kobe Bryant says

He should have stuck to writing about the barge life

Tim says

I read it like 18 years ago, I liked it but I can't really remember anything except for him for being all alone on the barge, and now and then having sex with various other lonely barge operators.

Tosh says

I have no memory of reading this book in the past, but it seems that I had read it some years ago.

Nevertheless, I purchased this copy at the Red Wheelbarrow in Paris last week. It's excellent, because the character of Alexander Trocchi is on every page, and he himself is a fascinating figure. One could call this a junkie's memoir or journal, but it is much more than that. It's a portrait of a man who is floating between what culture wants him to be, and the refusal of that society. There is no plot in this novel, but more of a series of commentary on life as it is lived. Trocchi is a remarkable writer with great descriptive gifts. Amoral in a sense, but on the other hand he sees the world as a place of not allowing pleasures, so, therefore, he drifts between jobs on a boat to investigate an alternative life, that is chosen in a sense, but not clear if it's the right choice or not. Which I don't think is the point of the book. As a reader, we're sharing his moments, and that is part of the adventure.

Jonathan says

The best heroin addiction book that exists, because it is much more than a heroin addiction book. If "Junky" weren't already a thinkin man's book, I'd call this the thinkin man's Junky. So i don't really know what to say besides, go read it.

Jack Spiegelman says

Book review: cains book

This was many years ago when my wife and I moved to Los Angeles from New York and installed ourselves in a 7 room apt on Berendo street for \$175 a month. That is correct. My wife got a job and I opted to stay home and write—or try to.

Each day I would sit down at the typer to bang and I would try this sentence and that sentence and the other sentence but it was no dice. There was nothing. Writing must have energy. Here there was the energy of a piece of pocket lint. It was a form of literary constipation.

But if you cant write you can at least read other writers who are. I was at Book Soup on Sunset waiting for my wife to finish work. I picked up a book—Cains Book. The writer was Alexander Trocchi. Id heard of this book--From Hank in San Francisco, fellow writer—or writer wannabe.

He said: I think you would like it. Its brilliant.

There was a blurb on the cover: the genuine article on the dope addicts life.

The publisher was Grove Press. This was the sixties and in the sixties there was a particular kind of writer—the Grove Press writer. Publishers have something called a stable—like a horse stable but instead of horses they have writers. In Groves stable were Henry miller, Beckett, Jean Genet, Celine, etc—the renegade outcast types—perverse, nihilistic, scatological.

I read a few bits and pieces. There was a preface—a quote from Cocteau:

Tout ce qu'on fait dans la vie, meme l'amour, on le fait dans le train express qui roule vers la mort. Fumer l'opium, c'est quitter le train en marche; c'est s'occuper d'autrechose que de la vie, de la mort

I translate though the French says it better:

Everything we do in life, even to make love, we do on a train that is rolling towards death. To smoke opium is to leave the train en route; to concern ourselves with other things than life, than death.

Also:

Ettie was a thin negress who shot up ten five dollar bags a day. She pushed everything, clothes, meat and other valuables she boosted, her own thin chops. "Man it's a hassle what you do", I said to her, "peddling around town all day with the heat breathing down your neck".

"He kin breathe right up my vagina dear, jist so long as he don't bust me", Ettie said.

Also:

Claire was my sister-in-law. She didnt like me. Nor was I fond of her. MY brother was devoted to her. He did everything for her and his reward was to receive the impression he did not exist. She would have betrayed him for a dry martini.

I liked that line about the martini. It was perfect.

I bought the book and knocked it off that night. It was short but not too short—50,000 words—the perfect length for a book, as Poe has said, to finish off in one sitting.

Hank was right: an amazing writer.

The book is autobiographical, written in the first person by Joe, writer/junkie type living on a barge tied up in the Jersey docks across from New York. There is no plot. The action such as it is revolves entirely around Joe and his fellow junkies shooting dope or, when they are not doing that, running around in a frazzled state trying to score for dope. Here and there are flashbacks to his childhood and some good sex scenes. Thats the book.

But there was something about it—a rhythm. It wasnt a linear rhythm. It was a non-linear rhythm. I was reminded of Beckett and the way the element of time got bounced around—now here now there now somewhere else. The voice was strong--elegant, comic, salacious.

All great art and today all great artlessness must appear extreme to the mass of men as we know them today. It springs from the anguish of great souls. From the souls of men not formed but deformed in factories whose inspiration is pelf. The critics who call upon the lost and beat generations to come home, who use the dead to club the living, write prettily about anguish because to them it is an historical phenomenon and not a pain in the arse. But it is pain in the arse and we wonder at the impertinence of governments which by my own experience and that of my father and his father before him have consistently done everything in their power to make individuals treat the world situation lightly, that they should frown on the violence of my imagination—which is a sensitive responsive instrument—and set their damn police on me who has not stirred from this room for 15 years except to cop shit.

I went to the library to further investigate this Trocchi character but the pickings were slim. He had written Cains Book and another called Young Adam—long out of print. Also a handful of porno novels while living in Paris for Maurice Girodias—Olympia press—the European version of Grove.

There was reference to a writers conference in Scotland organized to discuss the current state of Scottish letters and Trocchi was invited to participate and his turn arrived to speak and he said: the greatest Scottish

writer is me.

One of the other participants, a poet, Hugh McDiarmid referred to him as “cosmopolitan scum”.

And that was it. Some years later, many years later, a movie was made from Young Adam and a modest revival of interest in Trocchi was the result. Cain's Book was reissued in a new edition and a few copies of the porno novels—White Thighs, Helen and Desire, Thongs—could be had at an inflated price on eBay

The movie, not a bad film, in fact a good film, flopped. I was curious to know, tho I never did know, how much the writer of the script got paid. My guess is much more than Trocchi ever made for anything--or everything--he ever wrote.

Meanwhile there on the internet I came across a piece written for An English mag—The Guardian--to coincide with the release of the film that filled in some of the holes bio-wise.

Trocchi was Scottish, or Scottish/Italian, born in Glasgow in 1925. He attended the university, married young and had two children. He wanted to write and in view of this, in his opinion, Scotland was a loser. The action was in Paris.

Once in Paris two things happened. He met Beckett and acquired a girlfriend—an American with money. The money was important because he had conceived a plan—to publish a magazine.

Writers write to publish and if the publishers decline—you can always publish yourself. Why not?

Trocchi had a gift. He had two gifts. He had the writing gift and he had the hustling gift. He had charisma—a terrific magnetism that drew people into his orbit and this he combined with gift #3—the ability to manipulate these people to satisfy his needs which were: sex, drugs, money. Any journalistic enterprise needs an angle and he had one—the existential angle. It was the fifties in Paris— and there was a mood—the existential mood. Existentialism is a slippery concept that can be interpreted in this way, that way or the other way but however you interpret it the one word that will never apply is: optimism. The war had finished that one off—in spades.

So that was the angle and in view of this the writers he chose to zero in on to get the mag rolling were the Olympia/Grove Press type—Beckett, Genet, Robbe-Grillet.

He had a name for the mag—Merlin

The life span of the average small press literary magazine is measured not in years but issues. They are issued monthly or quarterly or annually and if you manage to give birth to a half dozen numbers of the publication before your money or your enthusiasm expires—youre doing ok. Merlin held on for 3 years and during that time established a bit of reputation—for the quality of the writing and the brilliant--and brilliantly erratic--behavior of the editor.

By this time he was on the junk, his wife and children had returned to England and less of his time was spent writing and more hanging out in cafes playing pinball. He was a drug addict and a pinball addict. He writes of the game in Cains Book:

In the pinball machine an absolute and peculiar order reigns. No skepticism is possible for the man who by a series of sharp and slight dunts tries to control the machine. It became for me a ritual act. Man is serious at play. Apart from jazz the pinball machine seemed to me to be Americas greatest contribution to culture; it rang with contemporaneity. The distinction between the French and American attitude towards the “tilt” (teelt”); in America, and England, I have been upbraided

for trying to beat the machine by skillful tilting. In Paris that is the whole point.

That was the first phase—the Paris phase. The second phase occurred in New York. It seems a questionable move for a junkie to relocate from Europe—that adopts a much more permissive attitude towards dope—to a country such as this—the US—with the most penal and pitiless laws concerning this evil habit.

But here he was living on a barge, scoring for dope and trying to write a novel—Cains Book. He had a new girlfriend—a hooker. She wasn't a hooker when they met. She became a hooker after Trocchi turned her on to junk and now there was a double habit to support and this was the solution--for her to become a hooker—they arrived at.

He had a contract to write a book for Grove press wangled by an editor—Dick Seaver—a Trocchi groupie from the Paris days. Trocchi as I say was a master con artist who by this time had burned half a dozen publishers for advances but not Seaver over at Grove, who knew his man and kept him on a short leash. There was no advance. He got paid by the chapter.

This was the book that became Cains Book.

After that not much. He got busted for drugs—not only using but dealing. Seaver got him sprung on bail that he promptly forfeited by fleeing the country, first to Canada and then back to Europe, this time to England.

Yeah—the joint. That wasn't for me. I remember Geo getting busted. The girl he was living with finked on him and one day they came pushing him back into his room, treating him like cattle.

“Ok Falk, we've come for you. Where's your stash knucklehead?”

This time they put him in the Tombs. If anything had broken him it was kicking his habit in the Tombs. When he thought of it he thought of destiny and he felt himself without will.

He was in a cell with a young Italian. Geo was in the bottom bunk. In the top bunk the Italian was sobbing. Why didn't the bastard shut up? They wouldn't give him anything, not even a wet cotton. For a murderer yes but not for a junkie, a junkie couldn't even get an aspirin. Then he felt the wetness on the back of his hand. Jesus Christ! It was blood. The Italian was committing suicide. Call the man. The man took a long time to come and when he came he said: “Why you dirty little junkie bastard!” They dragged him out bleeding at both wrists.

Back in England the writing dried up. There was the occasional story, review, magazine piece but the sustained energy and discipline required to write a book was gone never to reappear. Once a junkie always a junkie.

At some point, in London, he got into business—selling books. He was a good businessman, oddly enough, and was able to make a living wheeling and dealing in the antiquarian book trade, working out of a stall in a fleamarket. He had a new girlfriend, a young girlfriend, the best kind, and it was in her arms following one last shot of heroin that he died in 1984, age 58

Ade Bailey says

Let's cut through the dread the moral authorities and sensibilities of timid readers which reacted against this book on its publication. Yes, horror of horrors, people do have sex, sometimes frequently, and they do take drugs. While not wanting to labour the point of the latter or offer any value judgment, I refer you to Trocchi's own polemic. That very dread (hatred is of dread) is more the point than the object of terror:

When he thinks in terms of kicking he's hooked.

There are degrees of addiction, and the physical part has nothing to do with it. The physical bit comes soon and I suppose that then technically you're hooked. But with the right drugs you can kick that in a few days. The degrees of addiction that matter are psychological, like intellectually how long have you been a vegetable? Are you riding the horse or what? [. . . :] It's not the shit that's got you hooked. You shelve the problem when you think in those terms. . . . There are doctors, painters, lawyers on dope, and they can still function. . . .]You've got to get up off your ass and stop believing their propaganda, Tom. It's too much when the junkies themselves believe it. They tell you it's the shit and most of the ignorant bastards believe it themselves. It's a nice tangible cause for juvenile delinquency. And it lets most people out because they're alcoholics. There's an available pool of wasted-looking bastards to stand trial as the corrupters of their children. It provides the police with something to do, and as junkies and potheads are relatively easy to apprehend because they have to take so many chances to get hold of their drugs, a heroic police can make spectacular arrests, lawyers can do a brisk business, judges can make speeches, the big peddlars can make a fortune, the tabloids can sell millions of copies. John Citizen can sit back feeling exonerated and watch evil get its deserts. That's the junk scene, man. Everyone gets something out of it except the junkie. If he's lucky he can creep round the corner and get a fix. But it wasn't the junk that made him creep. You've got to sing that from the rooftops.

and:

We cannot afford to leave the potential power of drugs in the hands of a few governmental "experts," whatever they call themselves. Critical knowledge we must vigilantly keep in the public domain. A cursory glance at history should caution us thus. I would recommend on grounds of public safety that heroin (and all other known drugs) be placed with lucid literature pertaining to its use and abuse on the counters of all chemists (to think that a man should be allowed a gun and not a drug!) and sold openly to anyone twenty-one. This is the only safe method of controlling the use of drugs. At the moment we are encouraging ignorance, legislating to keep crime in existence, and preparing the way for one of the most heinous usurpations of power of all times . . . all over the world. . .

Authorities, take this as a starting point for your condemnations and the laws you frame. This isn't a book about chemistry and law though. Much has been written of its this and that existential themes or insights, commentary on art and writing etc. Much of it is good but safely radical, the sort of stuff any arty adolescent suffused with angst, ennui and the sweet anger at provincialism could come up with:

All great art and today all great artlessness must

appear extreme to the mass of men as we know them today. It springs from the anguish of great souls. From the souls of men not formed but deformed in factories whose inspiration is pelf. The critics who call upon the lost and beat generations to come home, who use the dead to club the living, write prettily about anguish because to them it is an historical phenomenon and not a pain in the arse. But it is pain in the arse and we wonder at the impertinence of governments which by my own experience and that of my father and his father before him have consistently done everything in their power to make individuals treat the world situation lightly, that they should frown on the violence of my imagination—which is a sensitive responsive instrument—and set their damn police on me who has not stirred from this room for 15 years except to cop shit.

Humanity is homo ludens, man at play, and his soul is stifled by “the great mechanical monolith imposed by mass mind” . There is much about the “chemistry of alienation” (and expected stuff about death, eternity, anxiety, time) but not related to the specificity of a heroin fix in general, rather to the chemistry of a body that has become separated from its abstracting mind. Not that, says Trocchi, abstraction or intellect have negative valorisation, and indeed, “The steel of logic has daily to be strengthened to contain the volcanic element within.”

This is a useful book for the burgeoning industry of addiction bureaucrats to pick over, analysers to analyse, existential psychotherapists to refer to gravely and so on. The bottom line is that it is supremely well written, as near as words can get to inhabiting flesh. Thus, I suppose, many of its readers will never get to read it.

RC Edrington says

It was this book alone that convinced me that the life playing out between my ears needed release onto paper.

Tori Miller says

I don't remember feeling this torn on how many stars to rate a book on here. I'm going with 4 stars for now because I did enjoy it enough to read it within a 24 hour period. At various points as I read, I thought it might be anywhere from 1 star to 5 stars. I was so angry by the time I was done at the wasted potential. I felt like it could have been so much better than it was. I loved the first half but didn't feel like the second half really added much to the book. In some ways, I thought it was brutally honest in a very refreshing way, and in

others I felt like he was believing his own lies. I think I kept hoping for more insights. I did think the book stands up very well to the test of time. Other than a little bit of slang, it didn't seem that dated to me. It still felt really relevant to read.

Vit Babenco says

“Cain at his orisons, Narcissus at his mirror.”

Time is fragmented, space is broken – the addict's world is without causes or effects...

“No doubt I shall go on writing, stumbling across tundras of unmeaning, planting words like bloody flags in my wake. Loose ends, things unrelated, shifts, nightmare journeys, cities arrived at and left, meetings, desertions, betrayals, all manner of unions, adulteries, triumphs, defeats... these are the facts.”

Chaotic memories, spasmodic events, sporadic visions – the protagonist knows neither morals nor scruples; he obeys no human laws and he serves no rational purpose; to his existence there is no rhyme or reason...

“Whatever increase of entropy in the external world, my response was relevant. The universe might shrink or expand. I would remain aware, a little pocket of coherence in the city of dreadful night. Or would I? The drug can be treacherous, leading through all the hollow recesses and caves of panic. An identity slips away and one can no longer choose to be immersed in it, voluptuously to be duped.”

For some travellers there is no way but down.

Tosh says

Alexander Trocchi is without a doubt is one of the most interesting characters in 20th Century literature. Almost invisible, yet he was at every scene in the post-war years in Europe and America. Tight with the Paris Review crowd, The Situationists, the porn group at Olympia, and drug addict galore.

'Cain's Book' is such a narrative about a junkie - and there have been books on junkie's before, but this one is sort of the iconic original.
