



## William S. Burroughs (Critical Lives)

*Phil Baker*

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Along with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) is an iconic figure of the Beat generation. In this revealing study Phil Baker traces this cult writer's life - from the New York underworld of the 1940s to Mexico and the South American jungle, Tangier and the writing of Naked Lunch, Paris and the Beat Hotel, 1960s London, and small-town Kansas - in order to investigate his work as an autobiographical explorer of altered consciousness and inner space, reporting back from the frontiers of his experience. After accidentally shooting his wife in 1951, Burroughs felt it was his destiny to struggle with the 'Ugly Spirit' that had possessed him. His early absorption in psychoanalysis gave way to Scientology and demonology, and he came to believe in an increasingly magical universe, sending curses and operating a 'wishing machine'. His paranoid vision and his lifelong preoccupation with freedom and its opposites - all forms of addiction and control - finally evolved into a concern with ecology and an all-out ethical conflict between good people who live and let live, or 'Johnsons', and those who impose themselves on others, wrecking the planet in the process. Drawing on newly available material, and rooted in Burroughs's vulnerable emotional life and seminal friendships, this insightful book provides a lucid and powerful account of his career and significance.

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