

**Drunken Angel by Alan Kaufman**  
(Viva editions. Berkeley, CA. 94710) \$18.95

*Review by Doug Holder*

I always tell my creative writing students not to be polite in their writing. If a girl steals your boyfriend you don't say: "How dare you--you offended my honor." It's more like " Hey bitch--get your slutty hands off my man."--or worse. To write, to really write, you must be willing to insult your mother as Philip Roth once said. Alan Kaufman, does exactly this with his new memoir "Drunken Angel." He writes about the self-absorbed, abusive monster he once was--fueled with high octane booze. He writes graphically and without apologies about his self-destructive urges, his blind, drunken ambition, his hitting rock bottom, sleeping in the gutters of New York--Tompkins Park in the East Village serving as his bedroom. He writes about being the Bronx child of Holocaust survivors. He portrays his damaged parents and the people in his life brutally and at times cruelly, and at times it was hard to take. Kaufman was a monster. He didn't understand love--he used people as a means to an end--and that end was to drink himself to oblivion. By the finish of the book he comes full circle. He reunites with his estranged daughter, realizes his dream to become an accomplished and respected writer, and stops his drinking. In essence he becomes a human being.



I was introduced to Alan Kaufman by a few anthologies he edited "The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry," "The Outlaw Bible of American Literature," and "The Outlaw Bible of American Essays." I have used these anthologies with good effect with my writing students at Endicott College in Beverly, Mass. and Bunker Hill Community College in Boston. The work by these "outlaw" poets and writers like Henry Miller, Herbert Selby, Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Patti Smith and others reaches these young readers. At a time of their lives where they are searching for identity, and often at odds with society, the works speaks to them in a way the mannered work of Henry James never will.

I have had the pleasure to interview Kaufman and conducted a sort of informal Q and A with him on Facebook. Although I am far less worldly than he, and have nowhere near his accomplishments--I could identify deeply with him in certain regards. Like him I have lived in gone-to-seed rooming houses, I am Jewish-- in my family there are Holocaust survivors, my father and mother are from the Bronx; I toured Israel as a guest of a literary organization, and I had my severe bouts of depression and serious flirtations with heavy drinking. Oh yes, like him I am a poet. Needless to say I was riveted by the book. Kaufman is a novelist, poet, and memoirist, who was instrumental in the development of the Spoken Word Movement in Literature. He is also the author of the celebrated memoir "Jew Boy" and the novel "Matches."

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On one level "Drunken Angel" can be read as a delicious collection of anecdotes about the literary life and the folks who peopled it. There are portraits of I.B. Singer, (Kaufman was invited up to his apartment when he was a CCNY student) Bernard Malamud ( Who Kaufman dissed at a lecture at Columbia University- and Malamud dropped dead the next day), the ego of poet Jorie Grahm, Allen Ginsberg( Who Kaufman angered at a reading in Germany), Herbert Selby (A spiritual godfather of the writer) and so many more.

And on another level it can be read as a literary self-help book. The book is sort of like a big A.A. meeting with Kaufman in the center of it all. Kaufman is the guest speaker--tracing his rise and fall and his rise once again. There is a lot of stuff in here about the recovery process, perhaps at times a bit too much-- but then again this is a central concern of the book. Yes the Higher Power is mentioned often--but this is the author's mantra for survival.

Kaufman writes about the young man he once was. In short he was an animal. He threw away opportunities like Columbia Graduate school, editorships at prestigious lit mags, friendship and lovers with acts of astounding selfishness. He abandoned his young daughter for booze--his primal relationship. All this was to block out his tortured childhood with his dysfunctional family--and the demons that psychically possessed him.

But in the end Kaufman gets straight, not only through sponsors at A.A. but through the poetry scene of San Francisco (A city he moved to from New York). He frequented the poetry venues in North Beach, and walked in the steps of the poets of a generation before like Di Prima, Ginsberg, Michelene, etc... Kaufman was led to the real core of what he really was about by a wizened old A.A. sponsor by the name of Ray. In this excerpt Ray gives it to Kaufman straight with no chaser:

" A writer is someone who writes. When you write, when your pens moves on the page, you're a writer. When you talk about writing without doing the work, it is called being a phony." Ray adds: " The world has... more than enough phonies and critics. But there are too few writers. So why don't you be one?"

And with this clear-eyed insight , Kaufman writes.

As a literary work the book is hugely successful. The detail, whether about his paranoid delusions, his psychosis, his family, the people that made up his tortured milieu is stunning. He gets into the mind of a self-destructing alcoholic that he was and is never far from becoming again. The dialogue was sharp and authentic--for the most part the characters were fully fleshed. Sometimes however I thought his characterization of his female characters was thin--either stock raving mad, or sex addicts. But his description of his relationship with his first true love Ana was masterful.

In any piece of writing there should be universality. And I think all of us have a piece of Kaufman inside us--unless you want to bullshit yourself and deny it. Few of us could survived a life like this--few of us could write a memoir like this--and few us can create art like this. Highly Recommended.