CITIES OF THE RED NIGHT by William Burroughs

The addict's sense of world is timeless. Hour after druggy hour he sits contemplating the end of his shoe. Life is measured by the intervals between fixes, waiting for The Man to come. But The Man is late. (Always catch the buyer hungry and always make him wait.) When the pusher does arrive, the dope he brings will cost the addict, whose algebra of need ever-expands. Entrepreneurial killer instinct obtains.

No booking American letters captured the essence of junk life better than "Naked Lunch" when it appeared in1959. Surreally fragmented, nihilistic, time-warped, obsessively homosexual – it chillingly paraphrased its author's view of modern man hooked on a capitalistic regime that ultimately swallows him.

Redeeming this mordant view of America as spiritual wasteland was the kaleidoscopic language that exploded from its pages like a pinball machine gone berserk – jump cuts, pornographic flash, psychotic vaudeville sketches, hangings by the dozens, lowlife bohemian scams, abrupt fadeouts. What instant horror would come next one never knew, but veining its awfulness in therapeutic relief was a flow of comic writing that recalled great satirists of the past.

After more than 20 years of writing for the avant garde, Burroughs in"Cities of the Red Night" is clearly attempting to make his apocalyptic view accessible to a wider audience. His subject – the spiritual decline of man – remains the same but is here treated in more conventional literary form. Though sequences still jumble and spatial shifts are dizzingly frequent, the narrative is easier to follow than in previous works.

Deep in the Gobi Desert time is turned inside out. The ancient cities of Tamaghis, Ba'dan, Yassmaddah, Waghdas, Naufana, and Ghadis are riddled with infectious Space Age diseases. Viruses are genetically induced and characterized by cancerous sores and priapic seizures.

Lithe primitive youths with trigger-happy libidos roam ruined streets in pederastic packs. A soldier of this not so brave world, his tingling energy gun blazing a path, conducts an out-of-body search of a village decimated by epidemic. The followers of an 18th Century pirate with utopian dreams share pages with a screeching humanoid mandrake plant that feeds on human excrement. Macambo magic implemented by buggery exorcises a young man's evil spirits.

It is clear that this book means to offend entire groups of readers. Boosters of new technology will find the graphically detailed accounts of inhuman medical experiments distasteful just as feminists will deplore the exceptionless depiction of women as evil incarnations or despised sexual receptacles. Burroughs is democratic in his putdowns of organized groups, treating them all the same. Like dogs.

In fact the outrageousness of "Cities of the Red Night" suggests it was written in collaboration with Swift, Baudelaire, Schopenhauer, Orwell, Lenny Bruce, General Patton, and in a curiously perverse way, John Calvin.

Inside the pessimistic cloak he has shrouded himself, a strait-laced moralist with religious strivings is struggling to emerge. William Burroughs just may turn out to be a hipster Moses leading his children into the promised land**.**

San Francisco Chronicle, 1981