



The Gallery

John Horne Burns

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John Horne Burns brought 'The Gallery' back from World War II, and on publication in 1947 it became a critically-acclaimed bestseller. However, Burns's early death at the age of 36 led to the subsequent neglect of this searching book, which captures the shock the war dealt to the preconceptions and ideals of the victorious Americans.

Set in occupied Naples in 1944, The Gallery takes its name from the Galleria Umberto, a bombed-out arcade where everybody in town comes together in pursuit of food, drink, sex, money, and oblivion.

A daring and enduring novel—one of the first to look directly at gay life in the military—"The Gallery" poignantly conveys the mixed feelings of the men and women who fought the war that made America a superpower.

"The first book of real magnitude to come out of the last war." —John Dos Passos

The Gallery Details

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Author : John Horne Burns

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From Reader Review The Gallery for online ebook

Ryan says

I will begin by saying that I didn't even finish a third of this book, so yes, I will own up to the criticism of not being capable of accurately reviewing this book without having completed it.

That being said, I have never encountered a book that is so mind-numbingly dull that simultaneously asks so much of the reader at the same time. I, at no point in time, found even the slightest moment of interest in what was a series of disjointed, erratic, and haphazard ramblings.

No, I'm not afraid or hesitant of stream of consciousness style; my background is Modernism. I immersed myself in this. Certainly the disjointed, stream of consciousness style can be productive and novel...when it happened as a result of the FIRST great war. Joyce, Woolf, Remarque, Barbusse, and Junger have already been there. The fragmented structure of the novel as a representation of the fragmented soldier/warrior has been done *successfully*.

This novel did nothing but alienate the reader with its painfully esoteric military jargon and bits of broken French. This possibly could have been forgiven if any of the characters were interesting, but what little I could excavate from the superficial interior monologues didn't seem like it was worth my time anymore.

Again, I concede, I did not finish this book. I'm ok with that. There are plenty of other worthwhile reads out there.

Mariel says

I might read everything the same way. Maybe I have some social anxiety lens like a toy view finder with stills all from the same movie. Click the handle and there's a GI soldier who can't talk to a girl. Click it again and a GI soldier is about to get scammed by a hot young Neapolitan lad (there is no other kind, I'm gathering). It's screwing bunnies and horny priests. I try to do something different. Last week I read a crime novel (The Friends of Eddie Coyle)! I rarely read those. You can't trust people. Okay, a WWII novel. Oh no. It's me. It has to be me! You would think it would be so easy in a war zone. If you can't know who your enemies are when people are shooting at you...

I liked these short stories. They are meant to be like slices of life or little episodes in the lives of Americans in Italy and North Africa. Burns is good at the unease, the shift in what used to be a comfort and now isn't. When faces look happy without you and the romance of what's not really meant to be yours. It did get tiring that there was a tacked on moral at the end way too many times that Americans should think about different cultures. Burns, you did not need to do that. Sure, 1947 but still. I think that a good reader of any time would be capable of putting two and two together if they cared about what they were reading in the first place. Considering that there are a lot of stories in this book it got pretty old. Still, I liked The Gallery a whole lot better than The Moon and the Bonfire that I read last year about an expat returning home to Italy after the war. It was so pompous like a man who would sob over his raped daughter like she was dead and it was all about him and she was no good to HIM anymore. Despite the message! to possible American readers Burns was pretty good about not assuming too much about every person. I liked his tongue in cheek humor about how they took themselves seriously as if everyone around them noticed every thing they were doing when

they probably didn't (just another American, right?). I liked the bittersweet edge to those impossible romantic dreams because of that humor. It's too bad that Burns probably did take him too seriously, if the biography is anything to go by. He allegedly drank himself to death after his writing career didn't take off. Too bad! I want to say: Burns you didn't put yourself out there THAT much. Didn't you read your own book? No one is going to pay that much attention to you! Dream a little and pull back to walk a little sadly on your way home. Maybe smile a little if you think they'll remember you. They probably won't. It's a sad sigh. Maybe he would walk on the bridge of sighs. Where in Italy is that? My geography sucks. Italy can put its boot up my ass if I'm wrong.

Paul Fussell wrote the introduction for my NYRB copy. It took me way too long to remember where I know that name from. I used to stare at his name for hours and hours in my ex boyfriend's bedroom. Fussell wrote The Great War and Modern Memory (that giant book about pop culture in WWI). I can't tell you how many times I looked at that book and wanted to be somewhere else. Talk about noticing things when you are some place that you don't belong. Words cease to look like words. I could remember where every book goes. I never feel like I belong in someone else's home. See, that's the feeling that The Gallery needed more of... Mariel, you said you weren't trying to read social anxiety books. I lied! What else could this book possibly be than that? It's a war out there! There are other books but I wouldn't belong in them.

Is anyone interested in this book? It's not popular by any means. I suppose I'm probably off putting with my "It's good but it's a lot". Burns is hornier than Barry White. He writes really good about kissing... Vicarious kissing. You know, not yours but lick your lips and it almost could be. You could move somewhere else.

Gary the Bookworm says

John Horne Burns' *The Gallery* isn't always pretty, but neither is life. It takes us on a journey into the hearts and minds of an unlikely mix of American servicemen and vanquished Neapolitans after the Allied invasion of Southern Italy. In a series of nine portraits, we meet a few honorable Americans, some desperate Italians and a mountain of moral ambiguity. American greed complements Italian ingenuity in this caldron of destruction and despair which is Occupied Naples in the summer of 1944. Not surprising, corrupt officers, effete clergy and hypocritical support staff are eviscerated, but a few of the Americans, the ones who can look beyond their prejudices and prerogatives, experience the rewards of perceiving life from a unique perspective.

Each portrait reads like a short story and they are connected by a series of promenades, Burns' term for short, evocative descriptions of time and place. He is scathing in his depiction of widespread American callousness toward the starving Italians, but equally dismayed by the opportunistic perfidy of those Italians who benefitted from the corruption and incompetence of the occupiers; Naples, at the foot of Mt Vesuvius, is a powerful metaphor for the complexities of what Burns calls the worst war in history. He uses slang and dialect to humorously define his characters and the prose is as hard-boiled as anything written by Raymond Chandler. There are moments of unforgettable sweetness, like two scoops of gelato on a summer day, and of heartbreak as bitter as a swig of grappa, but in the end this is about human beings struggling to survive a series of catastrophic events beyond their control.

Hadrian says

There's an arcade in Naples that they call the Galleria Umberto Primo. It's a cross between a railroad station and a church. You think you're in a museum till you see the bars and the shops. Once this Galleria had a dome of glass, but the bombings of Naples shattered this skylight, and tinkling glass fell like cruel snow to the pavement. But life went on the Galleria.

This book is centered around the Galleria building, but it is also a gallery in the alternative sense. It contains portraits which capture in detail the appearance and a bit of the inner psychology of its framed subjects; but it also panoramas which encompass a view of the countryside, or of a moment in the life of a great city.

The Gallery is about the North African and Italian fronts of World War II. The Americans were having their first adventure in the Old World, and then made up for their lack of combat experience with boundless material wealth and overwhelming force. By 1943, they were a people triumphant, who had sent the Fascist armies of Mussolini cowering behind their German allies, but now had to take possession of an impoverished and battered landscape where they were the unquestioned masters.

This is not so much a novel about every hero in the war effort, but it is about ordinary people. It's about the mud on their clothes, their greed, egos, and prejudices, and how very rich the Americans are and how very poor the Italians were. It's about outsiders, chaplains, secret love affairs, indiscreet soldiers with VDs and even a story about a loving Italian woman, Momma, running a gay bar. (How exactly did this get published in 1947?)

Burns here is showing that war is not all combat. It is about great masses of people moving in unfamiliar places, with all that entails. This is a fine book, and one that has earned its posthumous revival.

Tony says

Southwest Airlines is different from other airlines. They don't charge a fee for baggage, they don't have assigned seating, and whoever is speaking over the intercom system likes to crack jokes. I boarded one of their flights last week, holding my carry-on in one hand and this book, 'The Gallery' by John Horne Burns, in the other. The pilot -- the *pilot* -- was greeting us, the passengers, as we stepped on board. Warmly, too. When the pilot -- the *pilot* -- saw my book, he grabbed it, and said, "Hey! What's this about?"

What's this about? I spend a good chunk of my life writing about what any given book is about; and I bemoan the fact that I don't get asked that very often in real life. So here I was being asked what a book was about when all I really wanted was to get to my seat, so my new best friend -- the *pilot* -- could get to his seat; and he could fly and I could read. But he asked. So, I hurriedly said, "It's a World War II novel. An nyrb-classic. It's kinda weird." "This looks great!" he said, handing the book back. "I'll have to get this."

Well, won't *he* be surprised!

Now. No line behind me, and no place to go. Ask me again, Captain.

"Hey! What's this about?"

(view spoiler)

Oh, you know, the usual, Captain. A place in Naples, almost after the fighting. Not so much a clash of cultures as a rubbing against each other. Italian honor and hunger. American purchase, and a different hunger. All descending to the Galleria Umberto, *The Gallery*. Soldiers find solace, sometimes with each other. Sometimes in Louella's Bar, full of queens.

Oh, okay, well thanks for my book back. You okay to fly?

John says

A very impressive novel by a now-unknown author. This was one of the first US novels after WWII and depicts, in vignettes separated by "Promenades", nine persons who end up in Naples in August 1944. Two things are especially fascinating: the very bleak portrayal of the "Greatest Generation," and the (to a modern reader) blatant gay themes throughout. The NYRB edition contains two introductions which provides helpful background, and notes the fact that no reviewer when the book came out (1947) commented that one chapter takes place in what obviously is a gay bar. This book is also one of the only WWII novels I have read that deals almost exclusively behind the front lines. One notable section is "Queen Penicillin" which deals with a stay in a VD ward that I have never seen described.

I was seriously considering a 5 star review--the vignettes are that good, but I felt the "Promenades" which connected the stories were variable. I found myself rushing through these sections to get to the vignettes. I

would highly recommend this book.

John says

If this suggestion seems to come out of left field, that's fitting, since my rediscovery of this mid-century American masterpiece swept me away from out of nowhere, recently. The novel appeared in 1947, widely hossana'd, though considerably ahead of its time in its jaundiced view of World War II — not the battlefield itself, but the terrible toll for those anyway near the shooting, the people we'd now call part of war's "collateral damage." Then, though, *THE GALLERY* fell from notice. Part of the problem was Burns himself: deep in the bottle & conflicted about his sexuality, he never brought off a worthy followup & died at 36. Still, his debut had insights too acute, sympathies too effulgent, to stay buried. Norman Mailer, among others, championed the novel, & so I rediscovered it, in paperback again. The setting, most of the way, is Naples, Italy, impoverished & blasted, just after the city switched from German hands to Allied in the fall of '43. Nine "portraits" unfold, a series of chapter-length tragedies — galling, stark portrayals of human failing. Come to think, doesn't Dante's *INFERNO* spiral down through nine circles? In Burns, the "portraits" share the motif of prostitution, actual or figurative, in search of security & decent comfort. Each has a different perspective, yet each returns to the actual "Gallery" in downtown Naples, Galleria Umberto Uno, "a cross between a railroad station and a church." Also a place of myth: "like that city in the middle of the city that rises every hundred years to dry itself in the sun." In the barely-legal watering holes of the Galleria, nowhere do we encounter an idealized G.I. band of brothers. Rather, Burns prefers the company of outcasts. Many of its major actors are Neapolitans, derided as "rats" and worse by the swaggering Americans. The city has "a taste at once modern and medieval, all grown together in weariness and urgency and disgust." Other chapters consider a Jew in the U.S. infantry, an African-American saddled with VD and trying out the experimental new drug penicillin, and — in what may be the most astounding, most moving portrait — the tumultuous crowd in the Galleria's gay bar, one evening in summer '44. The party proves glum & unfulfilling, no more than a liquor-soaked peek out of the closet, yet still "even in her half-death Naples is alive and furious with herself and with life... very tender in her ruin."

J.M. Hushour says

I have a tendency to ruthlessly divide art dealing with war into two categories which dovetails nicely with my experience in what people like when it comes to portrayals of war: you're either a "Full Metal Jacket" kind of war person, or a "Thin Red Line" kind of war person. That is, you like it brutal or you like it thoughtful.

"The Gallery", probably one of the most expressive and darkly sublime portrayals of war I've ever encountered, falls into the second category. It's thoughtful, beautiful, philosophical, and downright disturbing. For all that, there's not a single moment of war in the entire novel (except for a single scene). No, this novel is about everything that goes sour, that shatters one's illusions, that drives the narrator at one point to discover about himself that there is absolutely nothing to love about being an American in "liberated" Italy in 1944. It points up the corruption and often hilarious incompetency of officers, the greed of the common soldier, and the blindness with which one blunders through war's aftermath, rapine and insatiable.

The novel's structure is wonderful. It's based around the bombed-out Galleria Umberto in Naples, center of the black market and lasciviousness in the occupied city, we are treated to nine portraits of people out of the Gallery: a recuperating soldier goes to the opera; a WAC nurse tries to "bolster morale" among officers; an upper-class officer is tormented by the ghost of war slain; a Catholic priest and a Baptist preacher get drunk

and argue; a matronly Italian woman runs a gay bar for soldiers in the Gallery; an insane and racist Virginian officer runs the censorship office into the ground in occupied Italy; a young Italian woman looks for true love; a sergeant with syphilis recuperates in a medical clinic; and, finally, a Jewish officer searches for meaning at the feet of death.

Outstanding.

Daniel says

One of the pleasures in searching through the book reviews of the late 1940s is finding a book such as this: a war novel—one highly lauded in its own time, barely mentioned in succeeding years, and the subject of revival attempts—which still stands up, and in fact exceeds its reputation, after six decades of similar works. Though Shirley Hazard claims, in a blurb on the book cover, that “no one will ever forget this book” it is not one of the more well-known WWII novels, though it was one of the first in the wave of those published by servicemen. It is likely due to the author’s inability to launch a glorious career after its publication that it is today more obscure than some lesser WWII novels from the same era—like Gore Vidal’s taut but narrowly focused **Williwaw**—whose authors went on to literary celebrity.

Vidal has been **The Gallery**’s chief champion since Burns’ death in 1953 at the age of 36. He has repeatedly called the book the finest novel of WWII, and wrote a profile of Burns in which the man comes across as a homosexual supremacist, an alcoholic, as well as “a gifted man who wrote a book in excess of his gift, making a masterpiece that will endure in a way he himself could not.”

The book was reprinted in 2004 as part of the invaluable New York Review of Books Classics series, but I couldn’t easily find a copy of this edition. I ended up getting a hold of a first edition through inter-library loan. It is less a novel than a series of short stories set in allied-occupied Italy and linked by the Galleria, an arcade in Naples where US Servicemen interface with the locals through the black market and prostitution. I’m reminded of Alfred Hayes’ **All Thy Conquests**, for, as in that book, the US Military is shown as a lumbering group of horny, dishonest, naïve, bureaucratic, segregated, xenophobic boy-men occupying a nation (in both cases Italy) with a culture too intricate and ancient for them to understand.

A nurse with a severe attitude toward those she’s come to help hides her valuables from her Italian maid: She knew full well that ten minutes after she’d locked her apartment door the *signorina* would be entertaining some fisherman from the Bay of Naples on the couch. They’d jabber at each in dialect, laugh at the Allies, hang Mr. Roosevelt’s picture upside down, and have one another til supper time. Or two clergymen with divergent views on the poor: (Father Donovan) thought of the tragedy of the children of Europe, born and passing their formative years under a rain of bombs, keeping alive by catering to the desires of soldiers. If these children grew into cold bitter reptiles, then the world would really have lost the war...

—Next week, said Chaplain Bascom, if we’re still here, I mean to bring some soap and wash these children’s mouths out.

—There are better uses for soap in Naples than that.

Burns’ perceived that America would be the reigning military behemoth of the rest of the 20th century and that though it wished to be judged by its stated values and official benevolence toward the peoples whom it sought to liberate, it would be judged by the individuals it chose to represent itself. Individuals, like the officer who sets up his own petty mail censorship empire in the conquered land.

I'm tempted to just keep reproducing passages from the book, for there are hundreds of examples of Burns' excellent, ironic or sometimes odd prose. I'll end with a quote that is a little of each: But often Hal thought that his only salvation would be to marry Jeanne. For she had that awareness and resignation of spirit that has sipped everything lovely in life, letting such values be her guide through some mortal experience that has purged her. The focus of her compassion was in her breasts, geometric as cones. Her nipples seemed to see.

Daniel Polansky says

Interesting. Burns worked in intelligence during WWII, and his job appears largely to have been trying unsuccessfully to keep his fellow soldiers from selling their equipment and rations to the starving Italian population which surrounded them. In this curiously structured novel – consisting mostly of sketches of characters that might have been found in Naples during the US occupation, smugglers, down on their luck GIs, syphilis victims, arrogant officers, club owners, etc. – Burns presents a vision of the war which seems utterly unfamiliar, miserable and resolutely unheroic, the mindless destruction of an ancient civilization by the brute force of modernity, and the human wreckage left behind. A closeted homosexual, Burns also offers a distinct view into the gay subculture which (flourished? Existed?) around the army at that time. His experience provides some really fascinating insights, and he's a skilled writer, but he was also like 25 when he wrote this, and it reads like it. He tries to do to much, and actually one gets the sense that this would have been more effective if it had eschewed the peculiar format for a straighter narrative. It's not at all bad, but it's also pretty miserable and quite difficult, and so I can only offer a sort of mixed-recommendation.

Emily says

"I remember my mother's teaching me out of her wisdom that the possession of Things implies a responsibility for Their use, that They shouldn't be wasted, that Having Things should never dominate my living. When this happens Things become more important than People. Comfort then becomes the be-and-end-all of human life. And when other people threaten your material comfort, you have no recourse but to fight them. It makes no difference who attacks whom first. The result is the same, a killing and a chaos that the world of 1944 wasn't big enough to stand."

Liz Goodwin says

The Gallery turned out to be a masterpiece of WWII literature I wasn't expecting and didn't know I needed. Burns alternates brief recollections of his travels in the military bureaucracy trailing the American forces, with longer stories about a generation certainly no greater than any other. Set against the morally murky backdrops of Allied-occupied Casablanca, Algiers and finally Naples - in the mess halls, censorship mills, a gay bar and a VD clinic - these are portraits of Americans (and a few Italians), some better, some worse, but all whose selves are boiled down to their essence by war, except when they evaporate completely. Burns' unsparing vision pierces hypocrisies, but he never misses moments of harmony. And with the sequencing of his unconnected vignettes, he artfully traces an arc bending toward, if not Justice, at least the possibility of Justice.

T says

When the family tombstone finally has my name on it, I'm fairly certain this book will rank as my all-time favorite. And if I spend eternity thinking about The Gallery, I think I'll be content. The structure of this book, the vivid characters, and the historical significance of it make it truly a heartbreakingly beautiful work of staggering genius.

Burns did us a solid to note for the future that among the millions of soldiers from World War Two: some of them were gay, some of them fell in love, and many of them were lonely. But they were present, and their unique point of view is only one of many, which the uniquely creative narrative points out to us.

But while the wealthy or famous, the Generals and statesmen would have countless books written about their point of view, that of the socially marginalized would be infinitely more rare; and therefore more precious. I appreciate that Burns is to be noted as a pioneer of gay literature. I am thankful that he had the balls to tell this story, and the imagination to do it so beautifully.

If you haven't read The Gallery, do it now. But don't ask to borrow my copy, I will read it again and again.

Phew! Is it obvious that I'm extremely passionate about this book?

Joyce Zhu says

it is obvious after reading this book that burns was a man who saw and loved the beauty in other men; some of his descriptions of male beauty i would ascribe to his being male.

Kim says

I found it helpful to be reading the biography of John Horne Burns while I was reading The Gallery to get some insight into the writer's life while he was writing the book and after it had been written. The Gallery is very unsympathetic to the American soldiers of WW2. Many of the men (and some of the women) stationed overseas during this time are portrayed as arrogant, selfish, and downright ugly. This is not the greatest generation Tom Brokaw spoke of. There are some wonderful glimpses of the claustrophobic life of a serviceman here and Burns does a great job of showing the despair many of these men felt. There's also a lot of homosexuality going on within these pages, but it's often covert. (This book was published in the 1940s.) Everyone talks about the chapter "Momma" that focuses on a gay nightclub, but both "The Leaf" and "Queen Penicillin" focus on male relationships that border on the homoerotic and, to me, are equally as interesting. It's a fascinating book.
