

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

DEAD FINGERS TALK

The Restored Text

Edited by Oliver Harris
(Calder)

Such was the often chaotic state of the William Burroughs archives until James Grauerholz came onto the scene, that the earlier published life of the man was filled with part publications, variants and whathaveyou. The stories of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac arriving in North Africa to see their friend and help him to get a foothold as a novelist, only to find him in a sea of carelessly discarded typed pages, strewn around the chair - and Burroughs nodding away, contemplating his toes in a drugged haze seem true.

Jack Kerouac said he had seriously horrific dreams after putting the pages in order and reading them to get a coherent book out of it all. It was rather a shame to see both Ginsberg and Kerouac relegated to the literary shadows in the Cronenberg movie of *Naked Lunch*. But that's movieland for you.

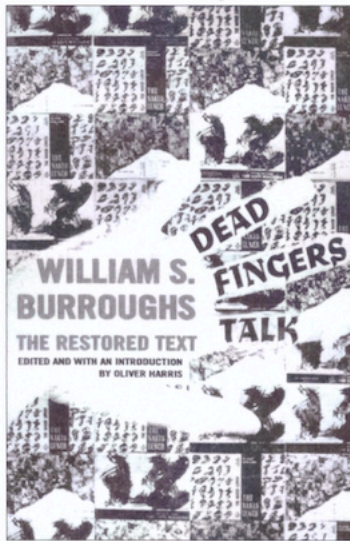
Dead Fingers Talk (what a marvelous Lon Chaney movie of a title) was originally published in 1963 and it was published by John Calder then also. Calder was almost as much of an outsider as Burroughs, famously something of a one man crusade in Britain to introduce innovative and experimental writers. So it is only fitting that Calder (now an imprint under Alma Books) should take up the Burroughs baton once more.

It may surprise casual Burroughs observers a little to learn that *Dead Fingers Talk* is really a book known and read in Britain and mainland Europe. It's hardly registered in America. And, according to the insight-

ful introduction from editor Oliver Harris, it stems largely from the Writers Conference that Burroughs attended in 1962 in Edinburgh where he took the opportunity to talk on a range of topics and introduce himself to a wider, unsuspecting British public. It seems also, from reading this introduction, that *Dead Fingers Talk*, while seen as significant writing by publisher John Calder, was to pave the way for the British publishing of *Naked Lunch*. So, in some respects *Dead Fingers Talk* might have been viewed back in those early 1960s, a world of Harold MacMillan, pre 'swinging London, essentially a decade that was still the 1950s, austerity after the war, the Marshall Plan and all that entailed, as something of a primer.

The book begins, after all the editing heroism of Oliver Harris, with those immortal Burroughs lines, often quoted and I'm not about to miss a chance to relay them here, "I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station, vault a turnstile and two flights down the iron stairs, catch an uptown A train...."

Little wonder he ruffled feathers and disturbed the suits everywhere, his spoon and dropper enter into it without preamble. He's either stupid or inspired. He isn't stupid.



Tom Swift