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Press Release

October 21, 2009

For Immediate Release

BURN & LEARN: 54 Cubic Inches of Crazy-Crafted Contemporary Tales in One Novel

For a serious writer of fiction, Eric Paul Shaffer doesn't take fiction seriously. In fact, he calls it 'play.'

"When I was finishing the first draft of *Burn & Learn*, every night after dinner, I would go to my office to play. I told Veronica I was 'making sentences.' And that's what I was doing. I was 'fooling with words.' I wrote each chapter one sentence at a time, sometimes in spurts, but usually, really working slowly, playing with word choice and order and images. The novel took a long time to finish because I spent so much time working at the sentence level."

Burn & Learn is Eric Paul Shaffer's first novel. The author is known mainly for his five books of poetry, including *Portable Planet* (2000) and *Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen* (2001), for which he was recognized with the 2002 Elliot Cades Award for Literature. *Lāhaina Noon*, his fifth book of poetry, received an "Award of Excellence" from the Hawai'i Book Publishers Association in the 2006 Ka Palapala Po'okela Book Awards.

Shaffer has been writing fiction for as long as he's been writing poetry, and for the same reasons.

"I was studying at the University of California-Davis, and I was reading a lot of wild novels, Borges, Melville, Marquez, Cortazar, Calvino, Vonnegut, and Brautigan, but what killed me was how serious everyone seemed to take fiction, even some of the writers. Fiction can entertain and instruct, but it should also be just plain fun. And that's what I set out to do in my own novel: have fun."

Burn & Learn is, among other things, a wild and amusing story of five friends attending college, drinking coffee and eating cinnamon rolls at the Frontier Restaurant, and learning the wisdom of the ages, the era, and the street in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the world. The novel consists of short episodic chapters that begin where Laurence Sterne and Richard Brautigan left off, opening up a wilderness of words through which readers can blaze their own glorious trails.

"Here's my best TV commercial voice-over," Shaffer says, "*Burn & Learn* is 54 cubic inches of crazy-crafted contemporary tales, an off-road, four-wheel-drive vehicle of raw and ready fiction."

In *Burn & Learn*, each chapter stands alone, yet many of the chapters are also continuations of a larger story or return to the same set of characters or circumstances. The length of the chapters allows readers complete freedom, and since the readers are free, there is plenty for them to do as they read.

There are tales of King Charles the Ragman, an other-worldly-wise street person; Coyote, the Native American trickster figure; four monkish brothers who live in a hermitage on the Continental Divide; the two-man crew who bottle a strange liquid called “Renew”; and Rufus, “a professor among dogs.”

Burn & Learn is a blast, a comic and cosmic novel. There are 167 short chapters, and readers are encouraged to read them in any order. “Pick and choose, skip, alternate, or read the book backward one chapter at a time,” says Shaffer, “this novel is open for any funny business readers can imagine.”

Shaffer believes that readers read novels in their own ways. Some skip around, some skim the pages for the “good parts,” some read the beginning and ends of chapters, and some, like he does, read the last page first. In fact, he’s included a chapter entitled, “Reading the Last Page First” — the last one, of course. Every one of these readers will be rewarded in *Burn & Learn*.

“I’ve always loved novels that won me over, in a charming or even a crazy way, yet challenged me as a reader. I wanted to try that, but I also wanted the book to be accessible, and so here it is: *Burn & Learn*. I say to my readers, ‘Here is what I made of my ‘experience.’ What do you make of it?’”

Shaffer looks forward to discovering what an audience makes of his new novel. The publication celebration for *Burn & Learn* will be held on November 14, 2009, at 2 PM at the Hawai‘i State Public Library at 478 South King Street (at the corner of Punchbowl Street) in Honolulu. Everyone is welcome to the celebration.

“I’ve enjoyed working on *Burn & Learn*. I’ve been writing, re-writing, and editing it for decades. Really! Ask my friends who’ve read drafts through the years. The manuscript has been through at least thirteen formal revisions and nobody-knows-how-many proof readings. If there are any mistakes in this novel,” Shaffer laughs, “they’re really good ones.”

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Book Information

ISBN: 978-1-58775-028-1
LCCN: 2009927183
Publication Date: November 5, 2009
Trade paperback
Format: 6 x 9 inches, 424 pages, \$24.95 US
Distribution: AtlasBooks Distribution
30 Amberwood Parkway
Ashland, OH 44805
Phone: (800) 266-5564 (1-800-BookLog)
Fax: (419) 281-6883
E-Mail: orders@AtlasBooks.com
Also available: Baker & Taylor and Ingram