



Running with Scissors: A Memoir

by Augusten Burroughs

Publisher: St. Martin's Press

Pub date:2002.

Pages: 302 p.

ISBN:0312283709

#1 New York Times bestseller, remained on the list for four years

Book Jacket Summary

"Running with Scissors" is the true story of a boy whose mother (a poet with delusions of being Anne Sexton) gave him away to be raised by her psychiatrist, a dead ringer for Santa and a lunatic in the bargain. Suddenly, at age twelve, Augusten Burroughs found himself living in a dilapidated Victorian house in perfect squalor. The doctor's bizarre family, a few patients, and a pedophile living in the backyard shed completed the tableau. Here, there were no rules. There was no school. The Christmas tree stayed up until summer, and Valium was eaten like Pez. And when things got dull, there was always the vintage electroshock-therapy machine under the stairs... "Running with Scissors" is at turns foul and harrowing, compelling and maniacally funny. But above all, it is a truly amazing chronicle of an ordinary boy's survival under the most extraordinary circumstances.

Plot

Running with Scissors covers the period of Burroughs' disturbed adolescent and teenage years, starting at age twelve. Burroughs is sent to live with his mother's psychiatrist, Dr. Finch, when his parents separate and his mother comes out as a lesbian. He lives in filthy conditions, where rules are practically non-existent and children of all ages basically do whatever they want. Burroughs tells Dr. Finch's adopted 33-year-old son, Neil Bookman, that he is gay. From the age of thirteen to fifteen, Burroughs has an intense and open sexual relationship with Bookman, which started when Bookman forced the young boy to perform oral sex on him. Neither his mentally unstable mother nor any member of the Finch family try to stop the relationship. Bookman is besotted with the young boy but later suddenly disappears and is never seen again.

Burroughs forms a strong sibling relationship with Dr. Finch's daughter, Natalie, who is one year older than he, and together they break away from the madness of the Finch household as they make their separate ways in life. As a young teen, Burroughs accepts his homosexuality.

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

The son of a poet with a "wild mental imbalance" and a professor with a "pitch-black dark side," Burroughs is sent to live with Dr. Finch when his parents separate and his mother comes out as a lesbian. While life in the Finch household is often overwhelming, Burroughs learns "your life [is] your own and no adult should be allowed to shape it for you." There are wonderful moments of paradoxical humor. Beautifully written with a finely tuned sense of style and wit, this memoir of a nightmarish youth is both compulsively entertaining and tremendously provocative.

From Library Journal

This memoir by Burroughs is certainly unique; among other adventures, he recounts how his mother's psychiatrist took her to a motel for therapy, while at home the kids chopped a hole in the roof to make the kitchen brighter. Not all craziness, though, this account reveals the feelings of sadness and dislocation this unusual upbringing brought upon Burroughs and his friends. Burroughs has written an entertaining yet horrifying account that isn't for the squeamish: the scatological content and explicit homosexual episodes may limit its appeal. Recommended for the adventurous seeking an unsettling experience among the grotesque.

From Booklist

It's hard to imagine a childhood more disturbing and relentlessly surreal than the one the author describes in this memoir. When his violent, nearly homicidal parents divorce, young Augusten lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his mother, a confessional poet battling a mental illness that manifests itself in consuming self-absorption and psychotic episodes. Deciding she needs more space for personal exploration and art, Augusten's mother packs her 12-year-old son off to the home of psychiatrist Dr. Finch, a wildly eccentric egomaniac; most of this memoir centers on Augusten's teenage years spent in this uncontrolled, profoundly bizarre household. Luckily, Burroughs tempers the pathos with sharp, riotous humor in stories that are self-deprecating, raunchy, sexually explicit (14-year-old Augusten becomes lovers with Neil, a Finch family member 20 years his senior), scatological, grotesque, and deeply affecting. Edgier but reminiscent of Dave Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), this is a survival story readers won't forget.

FILM ADAPTATION (Sony 2006, R-116 minutes)

The film adaptation of *Running with Scissors* stars Alec Baldwin, Annette Bening, Brian Cox, Joseph Fiennes, Evan Rachel Wood, Jill Clayburgh, Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Cross as Burroughs, and was released in 2006.



Director and Screenplay writer Ryan Murphy.

Nominated for a Golden Globe Award.

Author Biography



Author Website <http://www.augsusten.com>

Augusten Xon Burroughs (born Christopher Robison on October 23, 1965 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) is an American writer known for his *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Running with Scissors* which spawned a feature film of the same name.

Burroughs is the son of poet and writer Margaret Robison and the late John G. Robison, head of the philosophy department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

He is also the younger brother of John Elder Robison. When he was 12, his mother sent him to live with her psychiatrist's family in western Massachusetts. Some of his childhood experiences were chronicled in *Running with Scissors*.

Burroughs dropped out of school after sixth grade, and obtained a GED at age 17. He worked his way up to a high-paying job in the advertising industry before leaving the field to become a writer. His written work blends the fantastic and the mundane, and is delivered in a matter-of-fact style. In addition to *Scissors*, Burroughs penned a second memoir, *Dry* (2003), about his experience during and after treatment for alcoholism. That was followed by two collections of essays, *Magical Thinking* (2003) and *Possible Side Effects* (2006). Burroughs' writing pokes fun at subjects such as advertising, psychiatrists, religious families, and home shopping networks. It has appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, and *Out*. Burroughs writes a monthly column for *Details*. Early in his career, he was a regular commentator on NPR

Burroughs lives in New York City and Amherst, Massachusetts, with his partner, Dennis Pilsits, and their French bulldogs, Bentley and The Cow

Bibliography – 5 works of Non Fiction

A Wolf at the Table (2008)

Possible Side Effects (2006)

Dry(2003)

Magical Thinking (2003)

Running With Scissors (2002)

Sellelevision (a novel, 2000)

Interview with the Author (*April 2006, Entertainment Weekly*)

By Karen Valby

EW: Your memoir Running With Scissors kicks off with your mother's descent into psychosis. Do you feel like you dodged a bullet with mental illness?

AUGUSTEN BURROUGHS” There were two things I used to worry about all through my teens and a little bit in my early 20s: My father was covered head to toe with psoriasis — he was actually photographed once for a medical textbook, that's how severe it was. And then I had my mother, who was mentally ill. So I was always worried that one or the other would happen to me. I was terrified that writing was the door to mental illness, so I was worried to even think of becoming a writer. Whenever she wrote and got really intense with her writing, that's when she'd have a psychotic break, so it was literally like the door that unlocked her mental illness and her psychoses. When my mother was psychotic, she was not there. Her body was there, but my mother was nowhere to be seen in that person. It was horrible, and as a result, all my life I have been prepared for everything to change. Psychologically, I'm primed for that kind of thing — disaster, if I dare to hope that I can be happy.

When you saw an early screening of Running With Scissors were you able to see it as entertainment, or did you want to run and cry?

I could appreciate it as a movie, but it really did hit me. I was really choked up. I remember my parents' fights like they were yesterday, and to see it there on the screen so absolutely as it happened was just chilling. Most of the movie was chilling to me, and also weirdly comforting. I was looking at it and it was a film, and I got out of it. I still have dreams where I'm back there in that town and that life. Those stopped for a while. But it was just a great feeling. It's the ultimate moving on from the past. It now is something completely different. In a weird way, it is like a home

movie with people who are much better-looking. Alec Baldwin is my father. I know that Annette Bening and Jill Clayburgh will win Oscars. And a lot of times in Hollywood, when people play psychotic they overdo it and they get crazy. But a truly psychotic person isn't necessarily running around screaming their head off. It's the expression in the eyes, and it's very subtle. Annette Bening did it. I was so absolutely astonished that she captured the look. She has the look of genuine psychosis, and you just don't see that in film.

Are there more memoirs in your future?

I'm working on a memoir about my father. I haven't done any actual writing, I'm just outlining it a tiny bit. When my father died, he left four journals, the only four journals he ever kept, and we just had a very disturbing relationship. So that's going to be devastating to write... It will be a little about my childhood and about his childhood, and about my adulthood reconnecting with him. I hope to understand him better, and I know I will when I'm done with it. I need a lot of answers and I couldn't get them while he was alive, so I've got to be like on TV, when they do the forensics after the crime: I have to go back and look at the DNA and look at all of the evidence and understand how it could happen. He had very poor health. He had cirrhosis of the liver because of alcoholism, and he had taken extremely huge amounts of medication to treat his arthritis and psoriasis. I have a picture of my father when he was my age now, and he looked 65; when my father was 70 he looked like 103.

Are you tired of being revealing?

No. Everything that I have ever written about, I've met someone else who has gone through the same thing. It's both comforting and upsetting. That's one weird thing I've learned: Nothing is pure, especially with feelings. So much is wonderful and terrible. They seem to go hand in hand. I am very happy in my life now, but I'm also sad. I'm also sad. And that will never go away. Ever. And I live with it. I'm not depressed; it's just a part of me. I can be funny, but I can just be so deadly serious that I want to drive around in a hearse all day.

Do you feel resentful of the added scrutiny you'll face because of James Frey?

Remember Milli Vanilli? He's like that. Writing is very hard work. All your friends are out and they're doing stuff, and you are like, "No, I'd rather stay home alone and write about myself." You have to really want to be a writer to be a writer. In order to be a writer, you have to not be able to do anything else. Right after the Frey thing broke I was at a college giving a talk and this kid stood up. He was really, really nervous and he was like, "I want to be a memoirist — is this going to affect me and my career?" He was really worried that now people are going to be doubtful. Most writers, especially memoirists, put their heart and soul into the book.

I will never believe that the majority of memoirists are just making stuff up cavalierly and going on TV to swear that it is exactly the truth. I just think Frey's a rare exception.

Do you feel like people are gunning for you now?

No. I focus on my life — otherwise, you can get addicted to your own press. You can be checking your Amazon ranking constantly. Whenever a writer tells me they're publishing their first book, the first thing I tell them is to never look at your Amazon. You have to get used to being attacked. You become in a weird way like a product or a brand, so there's people who slam you. There's this magazine that runs this thing called "Celebrity Flaws." They'll do a photograph really close up of someone's cold sore. It's absolute fixation on human perfection; they'll show somebody's thighs with a little bubbling. Imagine being that person. It's cruel, but we get off on this as a culture.

Is Running With Scissors a true story?

It's a true story. I did not embellish it.

And Dry?

Dry is different. I had to combine a couple people. Dry took place over so many years. The journal itself was 1,800 pages, and it would have been very confusing if I didn't combine people. To me I had do things to make it read easier.

What's next?

My very next thing is working on my own TV show for Showtime. I'm going to create a series, but it's great because it gets to be anything I want. I can't tell you what it's about yet. I have to get my ass in gear and finish working on the bible, the first initial big bang, but I'm really excited about it because it's about something that hasn't been done, not correctly. Then I'm going to write my Christmas book. Every holiday I've ever had has been absolutely hideous. But it's weird because I'm so stupid, I love the holidays. And then after I write my book about my father, I'm going to write a novel. That won't be until like 2010.

ARTICLE: Legal Controversy Settled

"Burroughs settles lawsuit with 'Scissors' family " Posted 8/30/2007 (USA Today)

BOSTON — A family that claimed they were defamed in the best-selling book Running with Scissors has settled a lawsuit against the writer and his publisher.

Author Augusten Burroughs and publisher St. Martin's Press agreed to call the work a "book" instead of "memoirs," in the author's note — though it still will be described as a memoir on the cover and elsewhere — and to change the acknowledgments page in future editions to say that the Turcotte family's memories of events he describes "are different than my own." It will also express regret for "any unintentional harm" to them. Howard Cooper, a lawyer for the family, said financial terms of the settlement are confidential.

The family's lawsuit had sought \$2 million in damages for defamation, invasion of privacy and emotional distress. It alleged the book is largely fictional and written in a sensational way to increase its market appeal; it also demanded a public retraction and an acknowledgment that *Running With Scissors* is a work of fiction.

Burroughs has said the book is only loosely based on his life, but in a statement released Thursday by St. Martin's he defended his work as "entirely accurate."

"I consider this (settlement) not only a personal victory but a victory for all memoirists. I still maintain that the book is an entirely accurate memoir, and that it was not fictionalized or sensationalized in any way," Burroughs said. "I did not embellish or invent elements. We had a very strong case because I had the truth on my side." In the publisher's statement, St. Martin's called the settlement "a complete vindication of the accuracy of the memoir." Burroughs' new acknowledgments note will say that the Turcottes "are each fine, decent, and hard-working people," and that the book was not intended to hurt them.

Discussion Questions (from BookBrowse.com)

1. Author Augusten Burroughs was raised by his mother's psychiatrist, who lived in a dilapidated house of almost unimaginable squalor. Why are psychiatrists such dirty people? Do you think medical schools should teach basic house-cleaning skills to psychiatric residents?
2. Hair and hairdressing are themes that resonate throughout the memoir. Are you happy with your own hairstyle? What would you do if somebody were to offer you a makeover?
3. Augusten Burroughs was fascinated with celebrity and pop culture as a child, and wanted to be famous himself. Now that Augusten Burroughs is famous, do you think he still does his own laundry, or do you think he sends it out? In addition, would Augusten have an easier time getting a good table at a New York City restaurant than you?

4. Members of the Finch family regularly consult the bible when faced with making a decision, no matter how small. A question is asked, the bible is opened, and a word is chosen at random. Is "Bible-dipping" something you would like to incorporate into your daily life and if so, should Wall Street begin using this strategy as a forecasting tool?
5. One of the most disturbing features of *Running with Scissors* is the graphic sexual relationship between the thirteen year old author and the thirty-four year old Bookman, who is Dr. Finch's patient and "adopted" son. Yet if Bookman had been a television star, this would have been an exciting relationship any parent would approve of. Discuss why.
6. Throughout the memoir, Augusten's mentally ill mother is obsessed with achieving her own fame as a poet. But everybody knows that nobody reads poetry, and thus it's almost impossible to achieve fame as a poet. Why didn't Augusten's mother write a line of Chinese romance novels instead?
6. *Running with Scissors* details a world with no boundaries, little personal privacy and regrettable decorating and fashion decisions. Now that Target sells tasteful yet inexpensive items designed by famed designers Michael Graves and Todd Oldham, everyone can afford to look good and live in a nice home. Do you wish Target had been around when you were a child?
7. Augusten uses humor throughout his memoir, even while describing "appalling" or "horrifying" aspects of his unconventional childhood. Does this inspire you to do something "appalling" or "horrifying" and then tell somebody about it, trying for laughs?
8. The "memoir" genre of literature has come under a lot of fire. Because there have been so many memoirs published, it almost seems that Augusten "jumped on the memoir bandwagon" a little late. Explain why most of the other memoirs should be pulped, while Augusten should continue to write yet even more memoirs.
9. Reviews have compared Augusten Burroughs to David Sedaris, yet Augusten is a much funnier writer and has more unusual "material" to work with. Do you think David Sedaris hates Augusten Burroughs? If so, should Augusten send him a sympathy note?

Discussion Questions (From Picador Reading Guides)

1. What sort of person does Augusten's mother Deidre initially appear to be? Does your impression of her change throughout *Running with Scissors*? Does Augusten's? How?
2. Why does Deidre leave Augusten with Dr. Finch? Did she do the right thing? With whom would Augusten have been better off? Why? What would you have done if you were left with the Finch family?
3. Augusten initially likes Dr. Finch. Do his feelings toward him change? Why? Is Dr. Finch eccentric or crazy? What's the difference?
4. Augusten sees much of his life in the context of television shows and commercials. Which television shows and commercials were influential to you while growing up? If you had to pick a television show—drama, comedy, or variety series—that best described your own life, which one would it be?
5. The Finch family lives accustomed to chaos and filth. Do you think it's possible to get used to anything after a while? Explain. Are their things about your way life that might seem strange to other people or other cultures? Have you ever had to adjust to a situation that initially seemed foreign or disturbing to you? Explain.
6. On page 69, Augusten writes, "It was one thing to *be* gay. But it was something else altogether to *seem* gay." What do you think he means? Which seems gayer to you: Rock Hudson, Liberace, or metrosexuals?
7. Augusten writes that "Finch believed that anger was the crux of mental illness" (p. 98). Do you agree with the doctor? Why? Who in *Running with Scissors* seems genuinely mentally ill? Why?
8. Should Hope be charged with animal cruelty because of her treatment of the cat? Should Augusten and the other Finches be charged as accomplices?
9. Why do you think Natalie and Augusten become best friends? What pulls them apart? Do you believe Deidre's finally accusation? Explain.
10. What do you think happened to Neil Bookman? From what you know about him and the 1970s, make up your own epilogue for Neil.
11. Dr. Finch believes that children should choose their own parents. Do you agree? Who does Augusten eventually choose? Did he make the right decision? Why? Are there any circumstances under which a child should disown his or her family? Explain.

Read-alikes

Magical Thinking, Possible Side Effects by Augusten Burroughs

Barrel Fever, Naked, and Me Talk Pretty One Day by David Sedaris

A Piece of Cake by Cupcake Brown

A Million Little Pieces by James Frey

Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood by Karen Zailckas

Liars Club and Cherry by Mary Karr

Tender Bar by J.R. Moehringer

We Thought You Would Be Prettier by Laurie Notaro.

Driving with dead people: a memoir by Monica Holloway

Blackbird: a childhood lost and found by Jennifer Lauck

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls

Drinking: A Love Story by Caroline Knapp

This boy's life: a memoir by Tobias Wolff