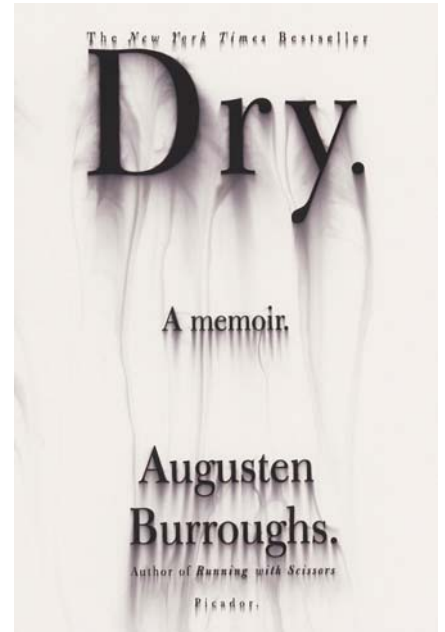


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Dry* *A Memoir*

*by Augusten Burroughs*

ISBN: 0-312-42379-9



### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Dry* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Dry*.

### About the Book

Even as a kid, Augusten Burroughs liked liquor bottles. At age eleven, he saved up his allowance to buy a “faux crystal decanter and glass set from J. C. Penney for nine dollars, then filled it up with cream soda, pretending it was scotch.” Now twenty-four and an overpaid copywriter, he has been summoned to his boss’s office for missing meetings, showing up late, drunk, and smelling like booze. As one co-worker quietly tells him, “You’re a mess.”

“Encouraged” to attend a thirty-day treatment center, Burroughs finds himself at Proud Institute, where he meets a bevy of substance abusers including the pill-popping psychiatrist Dr. Valium and a crack-using Brit named Hayden, his new best buddy. Yet, when the month is up, he discovers checking into the hospital was not nearly as hard as checking out. And the challenges mount. At work there’s the pressure to come up with a new ad campaign—for German beer. His oldest friend’s health is rapidly deteriorating. And then there’s the irresistible

charm of that beautiful drug addict from group therapy. Once again, those glass decanters are looking real good.

“Beneath the quick-flowing, funny-sad surface of Burroughs’s prose lurks considerable complexity: wherever he goes, whatever he’s doing, you can feel how badly he wants to drink—as well as the sadness from which that desire comes and courage it takes to make the sadness so funny, all at the same time. If anything, *Dry* is even more compelling than Burroughs’s first outing.”

—*Time*

“More than a heartbreaking tale; it’s a heroic one. As with its predecessor, we finish the book amazed not only that Burroughs can write so brilliantly, but that he’s even alive.”

—*People*

“[A] wrenching, edifying journey . . . with the added benefit of being really entertaining.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A deeper book than *Scissors*, revealing Burroughs to be a more accomplished writer, creating scenes of real power.”

—*USA Today*

“Augusten Burroughs is a wickedly good writer . . . *Dry* is a great read.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times* (grade: A)

## About the Author

Augusten Burroughs is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Running with Scissors*, *Sellelevision*, *Magical Thinking*, and *Possible Side Effects*. A film version of *Running with Scissors* was adapted for the screen by Ryan Murphy. Augusten has been named one of the fifteen funniest people in America by *Entertainment Weekly*. He lives in New York City and western Massachusetts.

## Discussion Questions

1. Augusten Burroughs begins *Dry* by saying that “sometimes when you work in advertising you’ll get a product that’s really garbage and you have to make it seem fantastic, something that is essential to the continued quality of life.” How does this set the tone for the memoir? Why is advertising an apt metaphor for the story Burroughs tells?
2. The first friend of Burroughs we are introduced to is Jim. Do Jim and Burroughs have anything in common beyond drinking? What qualities do Jim and Burroughs’s other friends share? On page 27, Burroughs admits to keeping his friends separate. Why do you think he does this? What are the advantages and disadvantages to such an arrangement?

3. In chapter two, “Those Fucking Eggs,” Burroughs’s co-worker Greer immediately covers for his irresponsible behavior. What sort of relationship do they seem to have? How does it change when he gets sober? In what ways might Greer encourage his drinking?
4. Burroughs explains, “The fact is, I have accepted Pulitzer Prizes, Academy Awards, met wonderful people, and had healthy, loving relationships, all in my mind, all while drinking” (p. 29). What does this statement reveal about drinking’s appeal? Are there other addictive behaviors that can have the same affect?
5. On pages 30 and 31, Burroughs recalls the “horribly deep” loneliness of his childhood. How did he deal with such feelings? How did those coping mechanisms extend into adulthood?
6. How do flashbacks—of Burroughs being abused by his father and neighbor; his mom’s debilitating illness—function throughout the book? Do they add resonance to the story he is telling? Do they provide answers or just raise more questions?
7. Consider Burroughs’s descriptions of the people he encounters in rehab. Why are the physical details and behavioral tics he records so funny? How might his comic approach make the serious subject matter of his story more accessible and poignant? Have you read other books about the same subject that use a different approach? Compare the effectiveness of each.
8. Burroughs chooses the Proud Institute, a substance-abuse treatment facility for gay men and women. Upon hearing the dramatic personal histories recounted in group therapy, he thinks, “*That is the reason to go to a gay rehab. People appreciate the drama*” (p. 74). What do you think he means? How does Burroughs use stereotypes throughout the memoir as a source of humor and truth?
9. On page 91, Burroughs describes his friendship with Hayden as the kind that’s easy to make in elementary school when you’re six or seven. “You never question it,” he writes. “You never say to yourself, *Am I spending too much time with him? Am I sending the wrong signal?*” Do you think that sexual development permanently alters childhood friendships? Is it different for men and women? Why?
10. Just before Burroughs leaves rehab, Hayden says that when he first met him, he wasn’t sure Burroughs was an alcoholic. “Now I’m positive that you are, in fact, a raging alcoholic,” he says. “It’s means, my dear boy, that you are more real” (p. 93). What do you think Hayden means by “real?” How might a person be less “real?”
11. In the chapter “Prepare for Landing,” Burroughs attends his first AA meeting. What is it about AA that helps keep alcoholics sober? Do you think that such meetings could be of value to people who are not alcoholics? Can you name other social activities that function similarly?

12. After becoming sober, Burroughs describes Greer as accommodating herself to him. He defines this as “shape-shifting” (p. 129). Is such behavior healthy? Do all people “shape-shift” in various ways throughout their lives? Explain.
13. Burroughs says that he is attracted to Foster “*because* he’s such a mess” (p. 204). What do you think he means by this? Why would a “mess” be attractive? Why do you think Foster is attracted to Burroughs?
14. “Part of me believes that love is more valuable when you have to work for it,” Burroughs admits to his therapist Wendy (p. 205). Do you agree? Do you see any connection with Burroughs take on love and his childhood? Explain.
15. In the chapter “What’ll It Be?” Burroughs walks along the street, “telling myself how much better my life is sober” (p. 208). What does this statement reveal about the difficulty of staying sober? Do you see this moment as a turning point in the narrative? How? Consider the subsequent series of events.
16. “Alcohol time is very different from sober time. Alcohol time is slippery whereas sober time is like cat hair. You just can’t get rid of it” (p. 220). What do you think Burroughs means by this? Do you agree?
17. On page 247, Pighead whispers to Burroughs “You,” to which Burroughs whispers back, “You.” Discuss the significance of this scene. What is being communicated between them? What makes the economic dialogue so effective?
18. Were you surprised by the turn of events in the next-to-last-chapter “Dry”? Why? Did the final chapter offer a satisfying resolution to those events?
19. Consider Burroughs’s observation of “how people in recovery are always looking for these big, dramatic miracles” (p. 123). Does the ending provide such a miracle? Would you categorize the ending as a happy one? Why?
20. If you’ve read *Running with Scissors*, how would you compare the style and tone of Burroughs’s first memoir with *Dry*? Do the memoirs complement each other? Why?

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