I assume that my reason for choosing to read *Ask the Dust*, the third novel John Fante wrote (though the second to be published), is similar to many people’s: it has earned the praise of Charles Bukowski. As Bukowski is not especially renowned for undeserved or indiscriminate admiration, the 2012 Canongate edition featuring an introduction by the late author will likely attract many new readers to Bukowski’s little known hero.

*Ask the Dust* is one of four books featuring Arturo Bandini, Fante’s alter ego, in what has been termed ‘The Bandini Quartet’. It’s the most popular novel of the saga and has seen something of a renaissance over the past decade, likely in part due to Robert Towne’s 2006 film adaptation of the book.

The problem is that if you are familiar with Bukowski’s writing, *Ask the Dust*, despite being published more than three decades before Bukowski’s debut novel, will feel a little too familiar. If the quote ‘good artists copy, great artists steal’ is to be taken as gospel, then Bukowski can certainly be deemed a great artist. But whether it’s because Bukowski has become notorious enough to make his alter ego worth caring about, or because he simply is a writer who provokes more investment in his characters, it is this lack of investment in Fante’s protagonist that is fundamentally missing from his writing.

There are moments of very basic yet astonishing beauty in *Ask the Dust*, like Fante’s description of the sun as simply ‘a defiant red ball as it sank beyond the sea’ (112) and his assertion to his love’s lover that ‘the ink spot you have splattered will never be examined from a longer view’ (138). But they overwhelmingly do not make up for the, at best, faceless (at worst, loathsome) characters.

Where a passionate but damaging relationship is promised in the blurb, the liaison between Bandini and Camilla Lopez, a waitress whom he almost arbitrarily becomes enamoured with, oscillates between revering and humiliating. Camilla is initially depicted as sympathetic, but her pandering to Bandini even as he readily insults and attempts to destroy her ultimately renders her weak and unlikeable. Though fragility and flaw will often add depth to a character, Camilla is only ever shown through Bandini’s perception, and while the inability to see her as a whole person is a shortcoming on the part of the protagonist (presumably a deliberate construction by Fante), it also makes it difficult to extrapolate much about her beyond the very simple slice we are shown.

Bandini is similarly exasperating, inciting the same kind of frustration as Knut Hamsun’s unnamed protagonist in *Hunger*. Bandini likewise perpetuates the self-destructive and desolate characterisation of writers so common to Fante and his contemporaries, but at only 23 years of age, Bandini’s vulgarity and bitterness often come across as simply unnecessary. He is reckless with other people and with money, and lacks perspective on his own success, preferring to flaunt the little he has achieved rather than feeling encouraged to further his accomplishments.

Though Arturo Bandini the writer is certainly self-indulgent, he does thankfully spend enough time writing to indeed be considered a writer, and Fante’s descriptions of his protagonist’s creative process are worthy of admiration:

> My plight drove me to the typewriter. I sat before it, overwhelmed with grief for Arturo Bandini. Sometimes an idea floated harmlessly through the room. It was like a
small white bird. It meant no ill-will. It only wanted to help me, dear little bird. But I would strike at it, hammer it out across the keyboard, and it would die in my hands. (22-3)

The depiction of Depression-era Los Angeles is another accomplishment of the novel, painting the city virtually as a character unto itself rather than a mere backdrop. But these fluid and undemanding descriptions don’t compensate for Bandini’s aimless roaming, as he searches for something, perhaps distinction or love, that is never really altogether clear.

As much as we all want to believe that we live in a meritocratic society, the truth is that many people deserving of accolade and praise never receive it. This is how we might justify the recognition that E.L. James and Stephanie Meyer have been awarded, whilst far more deserving writers have been overlooked. The same has happened in virtually every other sphere of the arts. But for all the praise John Fante has received from many, including Bukowski, who tout Ask the Dust as one of the great American novels of the twentieth century, this hero worship could be considered parallel to the kind of obsession with various women that both Bukowski and Fante have depicted in their writing: once their alter egos have become fixated on a given woman in a narrative, often with very little prompt or reason, their attention is unswerving.

Ultimately, John Fante is indeed a brilliant writer. There are many passages that can be appreciated for their rhythm and splendour without necessarily having to consider what is actually being communicated. However, my lack of investment in Arturo Bandini, as well as the repulsion and frustration I often felt towards him, are reason enough to not pursue reading the remaining books of The Bandini Quartet.

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