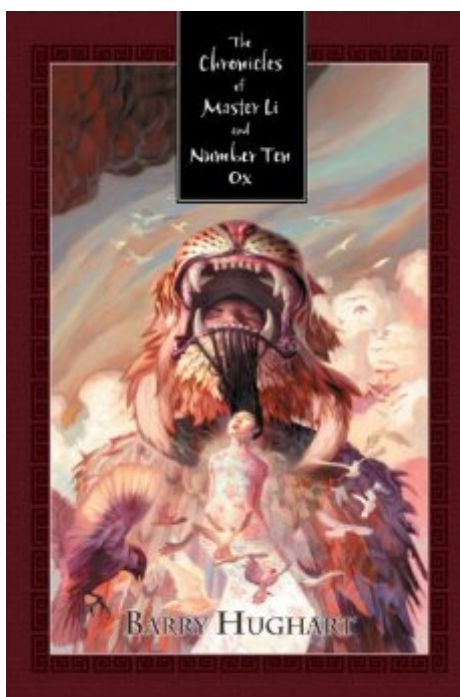


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# The Chronicles Of Master Li And Number Ten Ox



## Synopsis

When I got out of Andover in the 1950s I suffered from fairly severe depression, but this was back when the only such term recognized by the medical profession was "depressive" • following "manic" • which was one bad gig until some genius renamed it "bipolar disorder" • and after that it couldn't harm a fly. Since I wasn't lucky enough to qualify for manic and clinical depression didn't exist they diagnosed schizophrenia and packed me off to a booby hatch. (Which was not entirely a bad thing. Man, the scene at Kings County Psychotic Ward was like awesome!) Then I was promoted to a slightly less odorous asylum where Doctor Oscar Diethelm expounded upon the delights of going snickety-snick on my frontal lobes, and while it would take too long to explain I managed to escape to Columbia University. There I found myself groping through weird landscapes obscured by clouds of pot behind which pimply prophets of the Beat Generation shrieked, "Our minds destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, dragging through black streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, or what the fuck, something like that. Yo, daddy-o!" • and I said to myself, "Barry, you have found a home." When I wafted back into the world a few years later my depression was still there but I was allowed to prove my sanity by blowing things up for the U.S. Air Force. No, not Vietnam. Planting ingenious and mostly illegal mine fields around the eternal DMZ in Korea. Time passed but not much else. I moved to the Arizona/Sonoran Desert where I could live quietly, surrounded on all sides by prickly pear, cat's claw, devil's horns, barrel cactus, jumping cactus, and illegal immigrants. I still occasionally dreamed of bright flashes followed by BOOM! which was a shame because I had other memories of the Far East: good memories, warm memories, and in 1977 "ten years before Prozac" I decided to use those and whatever else I could come up with to create an alternate world into which I could creep on dark and stormy nights and pull over my head like a security blanket. So I read a lot and scribbled a lot and gradually the land of Li Kao began to take shape. But the first draft of Bridge of Birds didn't really work and I couldn't see what was wrong, so I dumped it into a drawer for a few years. Then one day I read Lin Yutang's The Importance of Understanding and found the prayer to a little girl that I mention in a footnote in the final version. It made me realize that while I'd invented good things like monsters and marvels and mayhem the book hadn't really been about anything. I opened the drawer. "Okay!" • I said to myself. "This book is going to be about love." • And so it is, and so are ones that followed. Will there be more? I doubt it, and it's not because of bad sales and worse publishers. It's simply that I'd taken it as far as I could. Oh, I could come up with more ingenious plots and interesting characters and so on, but the Ox/Master Li format had become just that, a format, and no matter how well I wrote I'd just be repeating myself. Many writers are

content to settle down with an endless if predictable series, but I'd be miserable, and so it was like deciding to quit smoking: cold turkey or forget about it, and I chose cold turkey. Anyway, it was a lot of fun while it lasted, and I hope Ox and Li Kao can continue to give fun to readers, and I most particularly hope that on dark and stormy nights some of those readers will be able to crawl into my alternate world and pull it over them like a security blanket. Farewell.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For years "Bridge of Birds," the first book in the chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox, was my Christmas gift of choice. I must have purchased at least three dozens copies for friends over the years. When the entire Chronicles was published together about ten years ago, I happily bought the edition to have a hard cover copy of all three stories in one place, even though I still had each of the original books separately. Simply put these books are hilariously funny, heart-achingly moving, and superbly and beautifully written. The Chronicles consist of three books based on folkloric Chinese ghost stories. In Bridge of Birds we meet the two main characters. Number Ten Ox is a strapping young man from a peasant village in which all the children between the ages of eight and thirteen have fallen into a coma-like stupor. He travels to Peking with the collected savings of the village to

find a wise man who can figure out how a plague can learn to count. Unfortunately, or so it seems, his village is a poor one, and all he can afford is Master Li, a 100+-year-old, alcoholic sage with, as he describes it, a slight flaw in his character. The two set off on an adventure that takes them all over China and brings them into contact with such wonderful characters as Miser Chen, Doctor Death, Pawnbroker Fang, Ma the Grub, One-Eyed Wong, the Ancestress, Henpecked Ho, Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wong and Lotus Cloud. Bridge of Birds is at once a clever mystery, a beautiful love story, and a wickedly funny farce in which the same crazy and wonderful characters keep popping up in amusing new situations. Barry Hughart has taken some of the most popular myths and stories of our time and anachronistically transported them back to a fantastical ancient China to create a simply delightful book.

The Chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox by Barry Hughart is a work of sheer outlandish fiction. It is a beast of a book at 652 pages long and is not for the faint of literary heart, but once you finish the book, you realize how much you really loved it and wanted more. This book fulfill the axiom of "you don't know what you have until it is gone". The use of cliffhangers made this plot of coming of age a truly fast and addictive read. In the book, a country boy named Number Ten Ox from the village of Ku Fu must embark on a journey across China with the sage Master Li, who has a slight flaw in his character, to save the children of Ox's village from a terrible affliction. On the way they meet up with any number of foul and despicable villains and foil them with a devilishly clever series of tricks concocted by Master Li and inflicted by Ox. A great example is their sales pitch of a goat that can defecate gold while eating nothing but garbage, but what the buyer doesn't hear is this description. "The servant brought up the rear dragging a cart filled with garbage and cheap copper disks covered in gold leaf with a goat tethered to it." I found the book unique because of the characters. Characters often recur and appear in different roles each time. Several villains, after being tricked by the dynamic duo see the error of their ways and come back into the story as supporting protagonists. However, the role of protagonist is slightly blurred, and this gives the book its strange appeal. It is hard to distinguish which characters are right. The villains are seen through the eyes of Ox and Master Li, but some of the tricks of these two are just as dastardly as the plots of the villains.

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