

Jack and Neal

“We All Decided to Tell Our Stories, One by One”

This is a story about friends. To be a *zeitgeist* was probably the last thing they wanted. They were the boy gang, visible avatars of what 1950s America understood as the Beat Generation. They could fit into a single car (and at times probably did): Jack Kerouac, “king of the Beats”; Neal Cassady, male muse and a character in story and song; Allen Ginsberg, transcontinental poet; and William Burroughs, self-proclaimed “cosmonaut of inner space.” They were serious New York writers interested in transcendence, self-expression and personal honesty. They came along at just the right time.



“The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang.”— Allen Ginsberg

Neal Cassady (L), Jack Kerouac (R)

The brightest stars were Kerouac, boy football star from Massachusetts who wrote their most famous book, *On the Road*, and Neal Cassady, reformatory kid from Denver with a dazzling conversation style and legendary appetite for sex and cars, who became the most famous character in Beat literature — Dean Moriarty criss-crossing the country in Kerouac’s novel. As themselves, they became large legends in American popular culture — the “spokesman for a generation” and the “angelheaded hipster.”

They had other Manhattan friends. Among them were the painter Jackson Pollack, who decided the age could not be expressed in the forms of past cultures; emigrant photographer Robert Frank, who wanted to go on the road to see “what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States”; and Lucien Carr, an occasional poet who helped Ginsberg write a “New Vision” and then moved on to become head of the general news desk at United Press International (UPI).

Drive all the way west and there were more friends, the notable poets of the San Francisco Renaissance: Gary Snyder, the Zen Beat, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, seller of banned books who assaulted the hierarchies of America and believed “poetry is eternal graffiti written in the heart of everyone.”

“Beat” was carny slang.

According to legend (Beats are deep with legends), Kerouac picked up the term from a gay street hustler who hung around Times Square and turned William Burroughs on to heroin.



Kerouac remarked to writer John Clellon Holmes, “You know, this is really a beat generation.” Holmes liked the phrase and wrote “This Is the Beat Generation” for the *Times Magazine* (crediting Kerouac with the phrase).

“More than a mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself.

— “The Beat Generation” (1952)

Holmes was writing about the Cold War generation. He felt it had not been able to “keep the world out of their dreams.” He saw Beats as optimists and seekers with “a desperate craving for belief” about how life should be lived.

The boy gang connected at Columbia University when the Great Depression was still a stale fart in America. They were a subterranean presence in cafes, bars and cold water flats as the world plunged into another great war, and then into a postwar world threatening itself with nuclear weapons.

By the mid-1950s America had emerged as a “superpower” (the spoils of war). It was trying to keep its balance between consumerism as the measure of identity and the possibility of annihilation in nuclear war. Industry, corporatism and conformity were values of the day. But there were signs of a counterculture, and struggles for the “man in the gray flannel suit.” Beats emerged from the shadows.

In 1955, Ginsberg read his poem “Howl” at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. East and west coast Beats linked arms in radical gusto and bearing witness.

*I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,*

*dragging themselves through the negro
streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix,*

*angelheaded hipsters burning for the
ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of
night...*

Kerouac had suggested the title and inspired its “spontaneous bop prosody.”



Published copies of “Howl” were seized as offensive and pornographic, and then set free by the courts in 1957, the same year *On the Road* was published. Ginsberg praised Kerouac as “a very unique cat – a French Canadian Hinayana Buddhist Beat Catholic savant.” In 1959, Burroughs, who claimed that writing should cut to a truth the mind would otherwise hide, published *Naked Lunch*. Kerouac was on TV, answering questions about the meaning of “beat” and reading from his novel. *Life* profiled him and European newspapers started writing about Beats.

MGM released a sensationalist movie called *The Beat Generation*. Robert Frank rebutted with a movie called *Pull My Daisy*, based on a Kerouac play and narrated by Kerouac (mostly improvised). They wanted to show Beats as they saw themselves — free-form, jazz-inspired, spontaneous and having fun. The Beat Generation was in full-swing, but not for long.

For those of us who came of age in the late 1960s, the inaugural Beats were already at the intersection of history, legend and myth. Subordinate boxes on the Beat organization chart (had you wanted one for your wall) would be filled by Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, Tom Waits, Hunter S. Thompson and, as Burroughs said of Kerouac's legacy, "Jack sold a trillion Levi's, a million espresso coffee machines, and also sent countless kids on the road."

I read *On the Road* in 1969, over Christmas break from college course work at the University of Utah. It was just two months after Kerouac's death, which created a small ripple in the campus literary pond. I found a paperback copy at Sam Weller's, the hippest bookstore in Salt Lake City at the time (the sales guy knew Neal Cassady had been born in Salt Lake City).

Two guys, Sal Paradiso and Dean Moriarty, were on the road and telling me their stories with confessional honesty and bebop self-expression. There was a barely discernible distance between the narrative "I" and me.

The road was the governing metaphor: nothing here, nothing there, everything to be found along the line between. The road was America — "all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going." All you had to do was *go!*

"You and I, Sal, we'd dig the whole world with a car like this, because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world."

I thought I had read a talismanic text for an essentially American freedom — you could light out for territory. The bonanzas would be transcendent experience, girls and an elusive "pearl." Wisdom waited in saxophones, poets and kicks. It was a postwar American naiveté of hope.

"Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me."

In retrospect, nostalgia was part of the appeal. The 1960s featured nostalgia for what Kerouac saw as a hobo-inspired "rucksack nation," just ducking out from America (maybe nostalgia had also sent Kerouac on the road). And the appeal was probably a yearning for my own Dean Moriarty. I hadn't known any of "the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved." If I found my Dean would there still be an opportunity to find the mad ones? Were they still out there in the confounding America that was stretched out along its highways?

Obscure for the Last Time

Kerouac went on the road to write about the road. By his own account, “The motive was not tourism or escape; it was literature.” He had published a pretty standard novel called *Town and Country*. It had a few “hipsters.” He spent three years trying to write another standard novel about being on the road but had nothing that he liked.

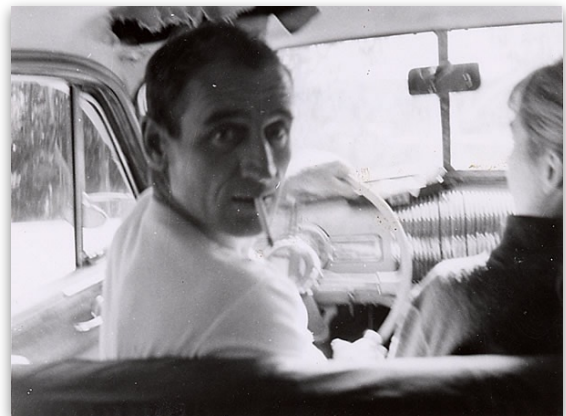
“I’d been pouring over maps of the United States in Patterson for months, even reading books about pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron.”

— *On the Road*

Then he hit on a new principle — “spontaneous rendering.” He had glimpsed it in rhapsodic and confessional letters written by Cassady, and in Cassady’s conversational style that friends characterized as “sixteenth notes.” Now his road novel would not be conventional. It would be uninhibited and avoid the censorship of conscious art. It would be a “necessarily modern language.”

Kerouac laid out his principle in “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” It would be an “undisturbed flow from the mind of idea-words.” Getting the flow going relied as much on imagery of jazz — “a saxophone blowing freely” — and painting — “sketch from memory a definite image-object” — as writing down words. His enthusiasm for those images almost obscures being a writer. He applied it to everything in his “great historical record” of his own life and dreams, and lives of his Beat friends who were most of his characters. It would be the special grace in his writing and also the worst in his writing.

Kerouac was smitten with Neal Cassady. He had a curious mind, virtuoso verbal style and yahoo enthusiasm for almost anything. He was bisexual and promiscuous, and for Kerouac that was probably a little homoerotic. He wrote letters to Cassady and composed an autobiography of himself. He asked Cassady to recognize how “strangely connected” they were. You could read all of it as a plea for love. He had a foil in life and literature. Sal Paradise had his Dean Moriarty.



“With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road.”

It was an heroic feat with few parallels in literature. In 1951, Kerouac fed a roll of taped-together paper into his typewriter (it broke his concentration if he had to change the paper), and over the next 20 days he knocked out a manuscript of *On the Road* (Beat legend says he did it on benzedrine but Kerouac denied that). It had real names and no paragraphs. Then came the six years of editing, rejections, editing and wondering, “Why don’t they know I’m good?”



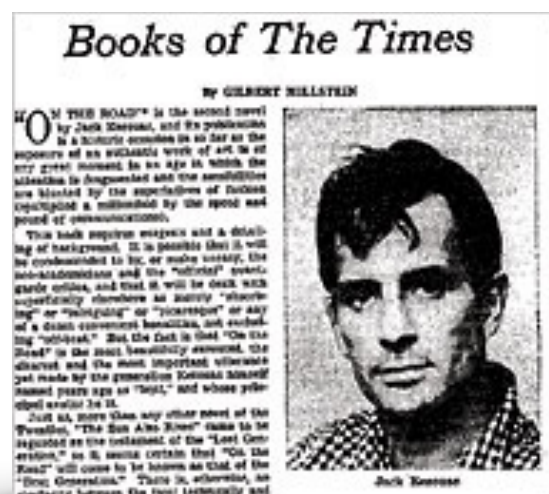
**“Action ... speed ... grace ... Go!
Express more and record less...”**

—Kerouac’s journals

In the published novel, Sal Paradise (Jack) is the narrator, and Dean Moriarty (Neal) does most of the driving — most of it fast. The original endless scroll is aerated with paragraphs, and it’s poeticized with “holy” experiences and people, and with psalmodic references to his generation. At the insistence of the publisher there is less about sex and drugs.

America changed in the years Kerouac was editing. Elvis Presley shifted the course of popular music, and James Dean and Marlon Brando emerged as brooding anti-heroes. Film *noir* was having a heyday. His friend, Robert Frank, was completing his photobook, *The Americans*, that would change photography. Ginsberg had published “Howl”, US Customs had seized it and the whole hot mess was in the courts, putting art and free speech on trial.

In September 1957, the *New York Times* reviewed *On the Road*. The reviewer praised it as “the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as ‘beat’, and whose principal avatar he is.” Kerouac and a girlfriend read the review in a coffee shop and walked back to her apartment, where she observed, “Jack lay down obscure for the last time in his life.”



Kerouac was not only suddenly famous, he was notorious as a literary bad boy. Most of the initial attention he got was hostile, some of it probably humiliating. But the media had a handsome face for the Beat Generation and a talisman of the youth culture. Salvador Dali said he was “more beautiful than Marlon Brando.”

Immediately there were detractors. Academics dismissed his novel, literary critics attacked and liberal intellectuals said it was irresponsible. Lionel Trilling, the moral conscience of Columbia University’s English Department and Ginsberg’s former professor, said it lacked essential qualities of a modern novel — largeness, coherency and attention to the complications of life.

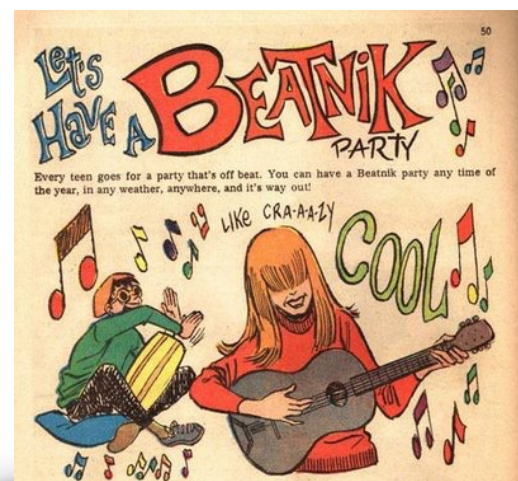
Truman Capote famously remarked, “That’s not writing, that’s typewriting” (yet it was Kerouac, not Capote, who had just made the “non-fiction novel” popular).

Socially concerned detractors suggested the book was promulgating domestic rebellion and juvenile delinquency. Beats might well be the barbarians already inside the gates (Kerouac insisted that “beat” essentially meant sympathetic).

On the Road became a bestseller and Kerouac was the first literary figure in the media age. He turned down an offer for the movie rights. He craved attention as a writer but hated the spotlight as “principal avatar” of the Beats, for which he was too introverted and naively unprepared. Within months he was on television shows, and churning out a sequel (*The Dharma Bums*), a play and magazines articles. Publishers were ready to publish his shopping list if he gave it to them.

“He had absolutely no idea what awaited him,” said his girlfriend from the coffeeshop. Something would undo Kerouac, leave him the “broken-down hero” of his novel. Maybe it began in that spotlight or maybe a long time before.

Middle-class America hurried to make the Beats cultural eccentricities. An unserious columnist in San Francisco compared them to Sputnik — “they’re both far out” — and renamed them “beatniks.” Someone made a TV show about that, and Dobie Gillis became more famous than Dean Moriarty. The “angelheaded hipsters” were shrunk to fit as the finger-snapping, fast-talking and do-nothing caricatures of tomfoolery. Someone published a beatnik cookbook.



Western Heroes

In Old America it was always go west. Break away, move a long distance and improve your prospects. You could destroy the old gods and exchange them for new ones. There was the hope of frontier heroism and transformative manhood in crossing the plains. For Sal and Dean, maybe there was still a manly gamble to be made, not in gold or land but in experience. The new West could be conquered in a car.

“And so we picked up our bags, he the trunk with his one good arm and I the rest, and staggered to the cable-car stop; in a moment rolled down the hill with our legs dangling to the sidewalk from the jiggling shelf, two broken-down heroes of the Western night.”

— *On the Road*

Kerouac fills his account of their modern crossing with musings and exuberance about the West that resonate with the romance of frontier mythology. The old West had been an escape from the growing oppression of eastern cities, and he looked to Cassidy and the new West as a way of escaping spiritual suffocation in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, and New York City. It was “Cowboy Neal” who was the bigger western hero, and just enough outlaw to keep any lawman from curbing his prodigious movement. Sal’s role was to “shamble after” Dean to record rather than precipitate.

Sal and Dean may be lonely wanderers outside of society but they are not emblematic heroes of the American West. They’re not looking to homestead or strike it rich quick. They’re not gunfighters who can outdraw anyone (although Sal saw Dean as “the world’s greatest driver”). They don’t return a captive girl, or ride into the town with narrowed eyes to save it or to avenge a wrongful death. They don’t ride broad-shouldered into the landscape at the end of the story.

The often-quoted heroic qualities in the novel are about sensibilities — “the mad ones, the ones mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time.” That seems mostly in line with the ideal man in Kerouac’s essay “America’s New Trinity of Love: Dean, Brando, Presley.” The new hero will have compassion and love.

“Up to now the American Hero has always been on the defensive: he killed Indians and villages and beat up his rivals and surlled ... Now the new American Hero is the image of compassion ... as though Christ and Buddha were about to come again with masculine love for women at last.”

— “America’s New Trinity of Love”

On the Road is a masculine world. When I read it again I read a story about two guys who want to be with other guys. I read a story about the masculinity they thought could be found in the West, which is an old story. But these new western heroes are interested in self-expression and self-knowledge. It's intimacy that inspires writing and complicity.

***“We all decided to tell our stories,
but one by one, and Stan was first.
‘We’ve got a long way to go,’
preambled Dean, ‘and so you must
take every indulgence and deal with
every detail you can bring to mind
—and it still won’t all be told.”***

— *On the Road*

Heroism on the road is also unmistakably sexual. There are poems and women to be made. The frontier boundary between east and west, society and wilderness, is a loosening of sexual mores and the kicks of uninhibited and brief encounters with yet another woman — “for Dean, sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life.” The car is as much libido as escape vehicle.

The tangle of women usually doesn't count for all that much, except those like the group of important women who confront Dean, “For years now you haven't had any responsibility for anyone. You've done so many awful things I don't know what to say to you.” Sal dismisses them as “a sewing circle,” and expects Dean to talk his way out of it. But Dean “fell silent himself...ragged and broken and idiotic.” Dean might well be judged as irresponsible outside the world of the novel, but Sal is usually uncritical and papers over it with prosody.

I avoided the temptation of reading it as a real life story of failed marriages and ambiguous sexuality (always a temptation with Kerouac). Instead, I was reading a novel about love and loss. In the discrepancy between that and the relentless sexual yahoo there is a sadness — “A pain stabbed my heart, as it did every time I saw a girl I loved who was going the opposite direction in this too-big world.” *On the Road* ends with two guys trying to straighten things out with the important women in their lives, and with a suggestion of settling down when you find the right woman, which is probably what Kerouac always saw for himself.

There is an essential sadness throughout the novel. People want to be some place else. “There ain't no flowers there,” says a girl in Cheyenne to whom Sal suggests a walk on the prairie among the flowers. “I want to go to New York. I'm sick and tired of this.” There are the lonely and lost, some are too beat or drunk or forlorn to care if they are a writer's literary *nostalgie de la boue*.

All Roads End Somewhere

There was a funeral in 1961. A group of heavies gathered in a Manhattan apartment to symbolically bury the Beat generation. Attending were Susan Sontag, William Styron, Tuli Kupferberg (later of the Fugs), and Seymour Krim, essayist of the Beat Generation and champion of New Journalism. Tourists were coming to town to get a whiff of bohemian danger and see weirdos perform. John F. Kennedy was the new president, intent on expanding America's international power with an old mythology as a cover story: he called it The New Frontier.

Norman Mailer was also there. He had proclaimed himself the "philosopher of hip" but his relationship to Beats was grounded in anxiety and self-doubt (some have called it "territorial pissing"). He had panned *On the Road* as "pretentious" and "sentimental as a lollipop." Later he admitted to a "sinking heart" when he realized "Oh, shit, this guy's done it. He was there, living it, and I was just an intellectual writing about it." For his part, Kerouac thought Mailer was probably a kindred spirit but with too much macho swagger.

James Baldwin, on the other hand, was there to celebrate. He was enraged by what he considered Kerouac's patronizing projections about American blacks, the "happy Negroes of America" in *On the Road*. Sal Paradise's black man fantasy struck Baldwin as "absolute nonsense, and offensive nonsense at that." He had famously said, "I would hate to be in Kerouac's shoes if he should ever be mad enough to read this aloud from the stage of Harlem's Apollo Theatre."

Kerouac had retreated to a harbor town in Long Island to live with his mother, who was angry at life and demanding of him. He wrote, sometimes manically, but mostly he drank. "He never had any money, so he'd get your ear until you bought him a drink," recalled a local clammer and drinking buddy. "We knew he was a writer but we didn't know he was famous." When Gary Snyder, the Zen poet, first met Kerouac he sensed a "palpable aura of death and fame." Kerouac said he felt ashamed to see Snyder, "I'm so decadent and drunk ... I need Gary's way now for a while."

"He was just so sensitive," said Neal Cassady's widow, Carolyn, "Everything hurt him deeply. He had the thin skin of the artist as well as the guilt that his Catholic upbringing instilled in him. In the end, he was just so depressed about how he was being misrepresented, how his great and beautiful book was being blamed for the excesses of the Sixties. He couldn't take it."

He drifted away from his Beat friends and seemed disappointed in himself, even though he defended the original spirit of the Beats. He objected to the 1960s counterculture and attempts to trace the cultural tumult back to him, to which Burroughs replied, "by their fruits shall you know them, not their disclaimers." He made a drunken appearance on William F. Buckley's TV show and semi-coherently avoided a sociological discussion of hippies and the Vietnam war. Ginsberg was in the audience and called it "magnificent tragic comedy."

When his disabled mother moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, Kerouac and his third wife went along to care for her. He watched a lot of television and told a visiting newspaper reporter, "I'm glad to see you because I'm very lonesome here." At age 47, he died from a hemorrhage resulting from cirrhosis of the liver. Friends said he died of disappointment.

Neal Cassady had also left town. A case could be made that he, more than Kerouac, was the inspirational soul of the Beats. He was the one born on the road, permanently restless. He left writing to others who had more attention span and they often wrote about him — the Holy Goof Hissell, Dean Moriarty, Hart Kennedy, Houlihan, the "angelheaded hipster" and one of "the best minds of my generation."

In 1964, Cassady turned up with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. He did the things he did best. He drove the *Further* bus on its legendary cross-country trip to the New York World's Fair — existential helmsman of the road — and enchanted pranksters and their groupies with rhapsodic monologues known as "Cassady raps." Tom Wolfe wrote it down in *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*. The Grateful Dead wrote him into a song.

Four years later, he turned up along an old railroad track outside of San Miguel, Mexico, in a coma from alcohol, drugs and exposure. He died the next day. In a last visit with his estranged wife, Carolyn, he had complained that "everyone expected him to be superman, and he just couldn't."



"...Cowboy Neal at the wheel of the bus to never ever land..."

Long before that funeral for the Beats, Ginsberg and his lover, the poet Peter Orlovsky, had also grown tired of critics and public maligning. They sailed for Paris to look for William Burroughs, who was in his long exile from America. Burroughs had left Paris. It took them two years to find him in a Tangier hotel. He was eating majoun, constantly stoned and writing *Naked Lunch*.

Like *On the Road* was for Kerouac, *Naked Lunch* would be Burroughs' defining work. It's a rumination on evil, and an attack on the American Dream and the impulse for domination. Kerouac suggested the title (its opening section is tellingly titled "And Start West").

Ginsberg was transitioning from bard to guru and went on to India. He brought back a harmonium and eventually Bob Dylan taught him to play it. Ginsberg thought of Dylan as "an answering call or response to the kind of American prophecy that Kerouac had continued from Walt Whitman." In 1976, they filmed themselves at Kerouac's grave, reciting his poems. A cultural circuit had closed.

***"I came out of the wilderness
and just naturally fell in with the
Beat scene, the bohemian, Be
Bop crowd, it was all pretty
much connected. It was Jack
Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso,
Ferlinghetti...I got in at the tail
end of that and it was magic."***

— Bob Dylan



A carload of guys left big tire tracks across America. They were celebrated, sometimes with banal superlatives, and credited with bringing Whitmanesque openness and self-expression to an age of form and irony. They were dismissed by others as know-nothing bohemians and literary amateurs who lacked the genius necessary for transcendent visions. The middle-class, if they noticed at all, saw guys who wrote about one another, slept with one another and constantly took drugs. The Beats covered for each other with mysticism and the *New Vision*. I think they're a rorschach image — you'll see what you see.

Coda for Jack

I am not sure how much Kerouac is read anymore. He never triggered a literary revolution and yet he seems to have made a comeback. Publication anniversaries are celebrated, there are critical deconstructions of his works and examples of what Joyce Carol Oates called “pathography” — neglect the work and dish up the dirt.

Despite what pathography loves — self-loathing and guilt, late-blooming anti-semitism, homosexual yearning turned homophobic — he worked hard and defended his work. He felt that he belonged to literature and some day he would be read. His novels would be a *roman fleuve*. “When I’m done,” he said, “in about 10, 15 years, it will cover all the years of my life, like Proust, but done on the run, a Running Proust.”

At his best, Kerouac showed tenderness for the crummy parts of life. There is good will and joyful ambition. Even at his worst, he could show up with empathy toward human beings, nature and the “one unbelievable huge bulge of America,” where he heard “all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds.”

His writing was not as spontaneous as he would have us believe. He had his own strict program that teetered toward becoming “academic.” You can argue that he wrote the same novel over and over, shuffling his “spontaneous prose,” along with his half a dozen or so characters under different names, from book to book.

You can fault him for any of that. But the poet Robert Creeley said he was “old-fashioned and devoted to words,” and probably more professional than his peers. Gary Snyder was impressed by his “evocation of people,” and with his energy and his willingness to be experimental with confessional and bebop-inspired prose. Gore Vidal said he had “a sweetness of character.”



“I didn’t know what to say. I felt like crying, Goddammit everybody in the world wants an explanation for your acts and for your very being.”

— *On the Road*

If you decide to read *On the Road*, for the first time or again after many years, brace yourself for a gush of the confessional. Maybe it will seem more like a “Kilroy was here” book than a spiritual guide for the road. But there is a lyricism of sadness and sense of betrayal. One critic said of all Kerouac’s novels, “Every 50 pages you get an odd reward, some perfect phrase or virtuoso sentence, a tiny Buddhist gift to carry away from the reading like the Diamondcutter of Mercy.”

For my money, he gave us a remarkable story that is full of juice and promise. It’s rambling, rough edges, hearts on sleeves and sometimes elegiac. He gave us two of the great characters in American literature — “Instead of two guys on a raft on the Mississippi, it’s two guys in a Hudson Hornet crossing America,” as another sympathetic critic put it, making plain the novel’s connection to Huck Finn and the other great American stories of lighting out for territory.

I don’t read it as a book about hipsters looking for kicks, or as a sacred text that pointed the way to the 1960s. It’s about those two guys who want to be with guys, who circle endlessly and never find the center of America. They’re sad at times, and self-conscious about loneliness, insecurity and failure. They can’t figure out women and leave. They think the grass will always be greener.

America was big enough to disparage Kerouac as much as Keats once was, and to bury him with praise. The *Atlantic Monthly* granted him “full ascension to academic respectability.” *On the Road* is among the 20th century’s top five bestsellers. Do we reach beyond the grave to give him the news? Probably not, but we would do wrong to abandon him.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about Jack floating around and I keep trying, trying to keep the record straight. And then a new generation of people comes along and I find myself repeating myself.”

– Joyce Johnson, novelist, and Kerouac’s girlfriend in the coffee shop the day they read the New York Times review of *On the Road*

(I’ve included a link to Kerouac reading from *On the Road* on the Steve Allen Show, while Allen noodles on the piano. They made a record together.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LLpNKoo9Xk>