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Remembering *Jack Kerouac*

A friend of the author of *On the Road*, published 50 years ago this month, tells why the novel still matters

ONE SNOWY January night in 1957, I found myself in a Howard Johnson's in Greenwich Village buying a hot dog and baked beans for a virtually unknown writer named *Jack Kerouac*. It was a blind date arranged by Allen Ginsberg, who always looked out for his male friends. As Allen no doubt saw it, *Jack* needed a place in New York to stay for a while until he could take off for Tangier, and I was that rare thing--a girl who had her own apartment.

My independence at 21 would not be questioned now, but in the 1950s it was definitely the wrong way for an unmarried woman to be living, though nothing would have induced me to go back to my parents. By day, I typed rejection letters for a literary agent, for \$50 a week; by night, I was working on a novel about a college student so intent on breaking through the glass wall that seems to separate her from real life that she decides to lose her virginity as a kind of gratuitous act. At Barnard, my creative writing professor had chided me for being "a little existentialist." "Oh, you girls have such dreary little lives," he told his discouraged female students. I was sure he would be horrified at the way young women were depicted in my book.

Just a few months before I met *Kerouac*, my boss at the agency had given me the task of clearing her shelves of books by former clients. One book destined for the Salvation Army pile was *Jack's* first novel, *The Town and the City*, which had been published in 1950. My boss remembered him well-- "crazy and impossible." In his jacket photo, though, he looked quietly intense and appealingly melancholy. I left the office that evening with his novel under my arm, opened it on the subway and sat up reading it most of the night. I remember feeling that I had discovered a writer who knew all about me--about my restlessness, my struggle to leave home, my feeling of being somewhat orphaned and adrift yet open to what life had to offer.

The astonishingly handsome, road-weary man sitting beside me at the Howard Johnson's counter seemed larger than life but strangely unexcited about the forthcoming publication of his second novel, *On the Road*, years after he had composed it at white heat on a 120-foot-long, taped-together scroll of drafting paper. He told me he was hoping the book would bring him a little money and some recognition in literary circles for what he called his "spontaneous bop prose." Numerous publishers had rejected it, and even Viking Press had kept it on ice for two years, fearful of lawsuits as well as the consequences of

bringing it out at a time when the novels of Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were banned in the United States. The date Viking had finally selected was September 1957, fifty years ago this month. For all their caution, *Jack's* editors were as unprepared as he was for the book's profound and immediate impact. Who could have predicted that an essentially plotless novel about the relationship between two rootless young men who seemed constitutionally unable to settle down was about to kick off a culture war that is still being fought to this day?

THE PUNDITS OF MY TIME Called people my age the Silent Generation, a designation most of us more or less accepted in what was thought to be our characteristically lethargic manner. We were the children of parents who had lived through the dislocating upheavals of the first half of the 20th century, yet many of our mothers and fathers, especially those born into immigrant families, had essentially been formed by 19th-century upbringings. Their own experience -- two world wars, a devastating economic depression, the cold war, with its public persecutions of those who were deemed un-American and its threat of nuclear annihilation--had made them fearful conservators of the postwar status quo. Like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, which had opened on Broadway in 1949 some months before *The Town* and the City quietly came out, they anxiously pursued a narrow definition of the American dream, terrified of losing their hard-won middle-class status.

My parents were among the thousands of older people who had winced in recognition when they flocked to Miller's play Miller insisted that Willy Loman's pathetic story had the ennobling dimensions of an American tragedy, but few among the teary-eyed audiences left the theater with much hope that life would be different for other white middle-class strivers. Most came home more depressed than exalted, with their resignation intact. They continued to teach their children to keep their heads down so they would not stand out in a crowd or be perceived as "different" (or "red" or "fast"). Girls were to guard their purity, marry young and produce babies; boys were allowed a little more latitude, but even the ones who needed to "find themselves" were expected to settle down and support families. (In those days homosexuals did not officially exist.) I had won my own freedom abruptly, at the price of a wrenching break with my parents after their shocked discovery that I'd been having a love affair with a divorced psychology instructor at Barnard. The sociologist David Riesman had written off my generation as an "other-directed" crowd of sheep-like conformists, yet when I looked around me, I saw many of the young people I knew hiding their restlessness, frustration and sexual confusion behind respectable masks. I was hardly expressing only my own longing for a full range of experience when I wrote in the opening pages of my novel, *Come and Join the Dance*, "What if you lived your entire life completely without urgency? You went to classes, you ate your meals, on Saturday nights a boy you didn't love took you to the movies; now and then you actually had a conversation with someone. The rest of the time --the hours that weren't accounted for--you spent waiting for something to happen to you; when you were particularly desperate, you went out looking for it."

Among the college students that I knew, nostalgia for the Roaring Twenties was widespread. We worked at identifying with the world-weary, hard-drinking expatriates in the novels of Hemingway and Fitzgerald and talked of running off to Paris ourselves. Even the heroine of my novel was slated to go there after her college days ended. Among the sophisticated French, she would presumably find the intensity she craved without the censure she would have experienced in the States. Except for Holden Caulfield, the 16-year-old protagonist of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, my generation found no iconic figures in contemporary literature--until *Kerouac's* Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty came along. It was *Kerouac* who would define, eloquently, that nagging secret itch many young Americans were feeling and send so many of us out in search of that elusive It right in our own country.

IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN, Willy Loman sacrificed his life to a fruitless pursuit of the American dream; *Kerouac's* two protagonists acted as if that dream was of no importance. On the Road followed Sal and Dean through three years of frenetic transcontinental movement in the late 1940s. Their main goal in life was to "know time," which they could achieve by packing as much intensity as possible into each moment. Sal and Dean didn't have houses with mortgages --they had wheels. They didn't worry about hanging on to 9 to 5 jobs--they picked up lowly gigs that kept them afloat between adventures. Convinced that black jazz musicians, freight-hopping hobos and Mexican grape pickers knew more about the meaning of life than men in gray flannel suits, they didn't care about achieving respectability. And they felt no need to go abroad; the American highway sped them from coast to coast through still relatively unspoiled vistas of mountains, prairies, deserts and rivers. They were waiting for some prophet to deliver the Word to them, and the Word was: "Wow!"

Dean Moriarty, sexual athlete, car thief, autodidact, marathon talker and Sal Paradise's spiritual guide, slowed down from time to time to mistakenly marry various women. Sal, more introverted and reflective, and the narrator of the novel, claimed to be looking for the perfect girl but was actually on a much stranger search --a spiritual one--for "the father we never found." (The father figures in the novel, whether Dean's hobo father or God, always remained out of reach just around the next corner.) When Sal earnestly asks a rather pathetic girl in the Midwest what she wants out of life, he feels sad that she cannot envision anything beyond the mundane life she already has. Although feminists would later condemn the way *Kerouac's* male characters exploited women without taking the least responsibility for them, when I first read *On the Road* in the summer of 1957, I felt that its liberating message was addressed to me as well as to men --a view that many other young women would come to share.

My blind date with *Jack* had led to a love affair that we kept alive through letters after *Jack* left for Tangier that February. We reunited briefly on his return to New York, and then he headed West for the coast, where he stunned me by settling into a house with his mother in Berkeley. Knocked out by the energy of his sentences, the dynamic rushes of images and words that practically impelled you to take to the road yourself, I wrote to him that *On the Road* reminded me of Huckleberry Finn. "I think you write with the same power and freedom that Dean Moriarty drives a car," I told him. As for me, I was ready

to pack my bags and see America by Greyhound bus or join **Jack** in Mexico City, where he headed in July (after returning his mother to Orlando, Florida) just around the time Random House bought my novel on the strength of the first 50 pages. The check for \$500 seemed a fortune back then--enough to live on south of the border for months. In fact, **Jack** had fantasized that the two of us would be living in a tiny Mexican mountain village, far from the madness of New York, when *On the Road* came out in September. Mexico, he promised, would be my real "education" as a writer. But just after I rushed out to buy my plane ticket, **Jack** came down with the flu and had to return to the States. As broke as ever, he turned up in New York on September 4. (I'd had to wire him \$30 for a bus ticket from Orlando.) He arrived just in time to read the New York Times review by Gilbert Millstein that made him famous--or notorious--overnight.

Orville Prescott, the conservative regular daily reviewer, would surely have panned the novel, but he happened to be away over the Labor Day weekend. The far more sympathetic Millstein called its appearance "an historic occasion," compared **Jack** to Ernest Hemingway and hailed him as the "avatar" of the Beat Generation. And with that, **Jack** became the object of a media frenzy so relentless that he was soon saying, "I don't know who I am anymore!"

IF THE PUBLICATION OF *On the Road* had not been such a galvanizing event, would 1957 still have been a watershed year--one that would lead directly to the counterculture of the '60s? Change would undoubtedly have come, but not so abruptly. Like **Jack's** protagonists, young people in America, without even knowing it, had been waiting for some Word. Now a compelling new voice had uncorked all that bottled-up generational restlessness. American culture was at a crossroads: more and more rooftops were bristling with television aerials, but the written word had yet to lose its tremendous power. *On the Road* hovered at the bottom of the best-seller list for only a few weeks, but through the publicity generated by the burgeoning mass media, "beat" and "**Kerouac**" instantaneously became household words.

The impact of the book was amplified by the figure of the author, who with his rugged good looks and nomadic lifestyle seemed almost the Hollywood personification of his beat characters. But **Jack's** real-life utterances--diffident, gnomic and naively unguarded, often delivered in a haze of alcohol as his weeks in the limelight wore on --tended to bewilder and frustrate members of the media. Most ran with the angle: Is America in danger of going beat? (i.e., nihilistic, shiftless and delinquent), completely ignoring the spiritual dimension of **Jack's** message but spreading the exciting idea that some kind of cultural shift was going on. (Millstein was one of the rare critics who understood that **Jack** was expressing a need for affirmation, although he noted that it was against what another critic called "a background in which belief is impossible.")

In the late 1940s, "beat" had been a code word among **Jack**, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and a small group of like-minded hipster friends; it had connoted a saturation with experience almost to the point of exhaustion-- then looking up from the depths for more. Although **Jack** doggedly tried to explain that he had derived the word from "beatific," the more the press covered the Beat Generation, the more "beat" lost its

meaning. Soon it was the belittling word "beatnik," coined by San Francisco columnist Herb Caen, that caught on.

Becoming beat had implied a kind of spiritual evolution. But "beatnik" stood for an identity almost anyone could assume (or take off) at will. It seemed to come down to finding a beret or a pair of black stockings and a bongo drum to bang on. Beatniks wanted "kicks"--sex, drugs and alcohol. They were more interested in hard partying than knowing themselves or knowing time. The two ideas, beat and beatnik--one substantive and life-expanding, the other superficial and hedonistic--helped shape the counterculture of the '60s and to this day are confused with each other, not only by *Kerouac's* detractors but even by some of his most ardent fans.

Young people often ask me whether there could ever be another Beat Generation, forgetting one essential tenet of the beat writers: make it new. "I don't want imitators," *Jack* would often say, undone as much by the loss of his anonymity and the cheapening of what he wanted to communicate as by the brutal attacks of establishment critics.

Our relationship ended a year after *On the Road* came out when he bought a house for his mother in Northport, Long Island, and moved into it himself, withdrawing from the limelight and, more and more, from his old friends as well. He died in 1969, at the age of 47, from an abdominal hemorrhage.

Beatniks were passé from the start, but *On the Road* has never gone without readers, though it took decades to lose its outlaw status. Only recently was it admitted--cautiously--to the literary canon. (The Modern Library has named it one of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century.) Fifty years after *On the Road* was first published, *Kerouac's* voice still calls out: Look around you, stay open, question the roles society has thrust upon you, don't give up the search for connection and meaning. In this bleak new doom-haunted century, those imperatives again sound urgent and subversive--and necessary.

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By Joyce Johnson