



On the Road

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Jack Kerouac's most famous book was withheld from publication for six years while editors vainly attempted to persuade the author to delete or rewrite potentially shocking portions. But this formless and irreverent novel was an instant success and remains a best-seller. It placed Kerouac firmly at the center of the literary movement he helped to found, and to this day it is one of the two or three works most closely associated with the Beat generation.

The novel's two principal characters are the narrator, Sal, and his companion and hero, Dean Moriarty--thinly veiled versions of Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassady. The book unfolds as a loosely connected series of episodes that document the pair's adventures during a drunken and drug-ridden odyssey through the United States. Along the way, they meet and befriend an unforgettable gallery of American types: jazz singers, drug addicts, hitchhikers, and drifters. Their journey culminates in a revealing and darkly humorous stay in Mexico.

Much of ON THE ROAD is barely disguised autobiography, a document attesting to the alienation felt by Kerouac, Cassady, and other members of the Beat group in Eisenhower's America. This group, which also included the poets Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder, and the novelist William Burroughs, sought to transcend the conformist values of the 1950's through such diverse channels as sex, drugs, alcohol, Eastern mysticism, and the poetry of William Blake. Their works were meant to shock the middle-class establishment, by which these writers felt beaten down and disenfranchised.

Though ON THE ROAD is basically apolitical, it and other Beat writings had a profound influence on the countercultural movements of the 1960's. Kerouac himself did not survive that decade, dying at the age of 47 in 1969.

Bibliography

Cassady, Carolyn. *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg*. New York: William Morrow, 1990. Background and chronology of *On the Road* from a woman's point of view. See also her 1978 memoir *Heartbeat: My Life with Jack and Neal*.

Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973. First book by Charters, a tireless Kerouac scholar. Discusses *On the Road*'s biographical underpinnings and connections.

French, Warren. *Jack Kerouac*. Boston: Twayne, 1986. Two chapters analyzing *On the Road* from biographical and critical approaches.

Kerouac, Jack. *Visions of Cody*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972. Contains notes, early drafts, and passages expurgated from *On the Road*.

Milewski, Robert J. *Jack Kerouac: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources, 1944-1979*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981. Exhaustive bibliography covering primary and secondary works, reviews, theses, dissertations, and related works. Includes a long discussion of *On the Road* with extensive citations and annotations.

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