



Jack Kerouac: King of The Beats

By Barry Miles

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Barry Miles, friend and official biographer of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, presents a provocative and intimate portrait of one of the 20th century's most influential writers

Meticulously researched, this is a compelling exploration of the complex man and extraordinary writer whose creative mishmash of joyous incoherence, drug-induced ecstasy, genuine mysticism, and constant craving has persuaded so many to take to the road. In conformist 1950s America, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was greeted with both delirium and dismay. For his generation, he and the universe he created symbolized freedom. He identified the living pulse of America in jazz clubs and fast cars, and found vibrancy in hobos hopping freight cars and traveling the highways. In his hunt for the big experience and his longing for greatness, Kerouac has inspired each successive generation. He is now an icon, an image, an attitude, forever personifying "the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time." This candid biography reveals a man full of contradictions, rarely at peace with himself.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Barry Miles, noted for *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, also wrote biographies of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. This hatchet job on Kerouac lacks what makes his McCartney book great--total access to his subject--and it won't replace the more eloquent bios *Kerouac* and *Memory Babe*. But it is enriched by Miles's interviews with those in a position to debunk the legend. Was Kerouac a sweet saint, as his burgeoning congregation believes? "He cared more for his cat than for his own daughter," writes Miles, and the rich Kerouac did let his kid become a 13-year-old junkie prostitute. Was he a deep Buddhist? Buddhist poet Philip Whalen says Jack didn't quite get it. Jack couldn't drive, either--it was the idea he liked. Did he write *On the Road* in a burst of unedited inspiration on a 120-foot roll of paper? No, he revised the text. The last four feet of the scroll were chewed up by the dog belonging to Lucien Carr (the father of Caleb Carr, author of *The Alienist*), but the dog may have actually accomplished some helpful editing, as did Malcolm Cowley. The book's best line (about "the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk") was composed months later.

Kerouac was often monstrous, even before he became a KKK cross-burning kook locked in a bizarre relationship with his bigoted, alcoholic mother. For what's good about Kerouac, consult more sympathetic scholars. The best of him is in his own books. --*Tim Appelo*

From Publishers Weekly

Making bricks without straw is a phrase that suggests a product empty of data, but Miles, biographer of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and once proprietor of a "Beat" bookshop in London, has made the process work in the case of Kerouac. Apparently unable to quote from more than a few scraps of turned to other sources to limn Kerouac's sex-obsessed, alcohol-sodden and drug-overdosed life. A striking portrait emerges of the author of *On the Road* (1957). Composing prolifically on teletype rolls, Kerouac produced what he thought of as spontaneous writing. Barely fictional reportage about the lives of his self-styled "Beat" (for beatific) generation. Outwardly virile, looking like a mill-town Canuck lumberjack, Kerouac was, Miles contends, "infantilised by his mother and unable to behave as an adult." Miles sees the mark of mutual Oedipal feelings in Kerouac's work and in his overheated life with his mother, to whom he always returned. Miles concedes that Kerouac's writing is "often splendid" and influential, but he dismisses most of it as self-indulgent concoctions for a market that the Beats created for themselves. A little more about this marketing would have made his book a more welcome addition to the Kerouac biography shelf, already crammed with such titles as Ann Charters's *Kerouac*, Gerald Nicosia's *Memory Babe* and Ellis Amburn's *Subterranean Kerouac*.

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From Library Journal

Miles paints an unflattering portrait of Kerouac in this, his third biography on a major writer of the Beat Generation (e.g., William Burroughs: *El Hombre Invisible*, LJ 8/93). Viewing Kerouac as "insensitive, selfish, and cowardly," an alcoholic with a deep-seated Oedipal complex who remained "a perpetual adolescent," he chastises him for his racism, his misogyny, and his failure to accept responsibility for his daughter (novelist Jan Kerouac, *Trainsong*, LJ 3/1/88), who died in 1996. This iconoclastic approach aside, Miles's portrait differs little from earlier biographies on the details of Kerouac's life. However, he is particularly good at exploring Kerouac's complex relationships with other Beat writers and illuminating the cultural and historical contexts surrounding the Beat movement. His descriptions of Times Square in the 1940s and his comments on jazz, McCarthyism, and the cult of Edgar Cayce provide helpful background for

younger readers. Recommended for all literature collections. A William Gargan, Brooklyn Coll. Lib., CUNY Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Abel Mulholland:

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Mellisa Holden:

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