

## The Library of America interviews Douglas Brinkley about Jack Kerouac

In connection with the publication in September 2007 of *Jack Kerouac: Road Novels 1957–1960*, edited by Douglas Brinkley, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for the Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*Gilbert Millstein, who reviewed On the Road in The New York Times Book Review upon its publication in 1957, immediately registered what it achieved when he wrote, “Just as, more than any other novel of the Twenties, ‘The Sun Also Rises’ came to be regarded as the testament of the ‘Lost Generation,’ so it seems certain that ‘On the Road’ will come to be known as that of the ‘Beat Generation.’” What was it about On the Road that made it such a landmark in American literature?*

Kerouac was liberating the American language. His first novel, *The Town and the City*, was a sprawling conventional book, very derivative of Thomas Wolfe. In *On the Road* he honed down an insight—“first thought best thought”—the sort of spontaneous burst of energy which he learned how to harness from studying jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie or Lester Young. He was trying to put America down on the page. He wanted to get that rolling, raw essence of the United States. But it was also about being young. He captured that moment after college when American kids take a couple of years to try to find themselves. *On the Road* is still the premier coming-of-age book for people who have a travel bug, who want a sense of adventure, who want to discover themselves. And that’s the key. At its heart, like all road odysseys, it’s about finding oneself. You’re going on these journeys to find your authentic self. *On the Road* is filled with the possibilities you can have today and the fun you will have tomorrow. It’s clearly one of the four or five most significant novels of twentieth-century literature.

*There’s a good deal of mythology about the writing of On the Road. The myth is that Kerouac laboriously wrote, rewrote and revised his first novel, The Town and the City, which was published in 1950 to mixed*

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*reviews and little sales. So in 1951 he moves into a new apartment on West 20th Street in Manhattan, and in April, just after turning 29, he puts a 120-foot-long roll of teletype paper into his typewriter and types maniacally for three weeks and the result is On the Road—which he refused to revise. What is the truth?*

Well, like most myths it's half truth and half not. There is such a thing as the scroll which is Kerouac's original version of *On the Road* that he typed up on Japanese tracing paper in long sessions while he listened to a late-night New York jazz station. That's the reality. What it belies though is that Kerouac took many trips around the country and he kept detailed journals. What he was doing when he was engaged in that marathon typing bout was sitting with his journals. Like anyone keeping a road or travel journal he took those journals and turned them into a novel. It wasn't just coming from the head in a burst of inspiration.

*We think of these books as being published after On the Road but The Subterraneans and Tristessa were written before On the Road was published, when everything he was submitting to publishers was getting rejected.*

Starting in the late forties when he started taking his *On the Road* trips and up until about 1960, Kerouac's work is very impressive. *The Dharma Bums* was the first important novel to capture the influence of Buddhism in California and everything that went with it: John Muir, yoga, meditation, free love. As a corollary to that, *The Subterraneans* deals with interracial sexual relationships. It was a very risky book at the time. His main character, Mardou, pioneered in blurring racial boundaries. You have to remember this was being written when there was Jim Crow in the South. McCarthyism. The Red scare. In a way each novel was the spawn of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The journal entries give a little more historical context for what Kerouac was trying to achieve in the forties and fifties.

Stories of the rejections of his work, of his feuds with editors about not compromising the integrity of his prose with enforced punctuation have led to the Kerouac legend. *Tristessa* is a beautiful work. Back then no one wanted to touch it. It was totally rejected. But today we read it and it's this poignant, important portrait of the American in Mexico. It shows Kerouac's infatuation with what he called "people of the earth," people who were not part of the success racket in America but were just trying to survive. What makes Kerouac's work edgy is his venture into the world of drugs and free love. For Kerouac, being the antihero—what Norman Mailer called "the white negro"—was an admirable thing to do. This was very radical in the fifties.

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*Three years ago you edited the book Windblown World, which published for the first time a selection from Kerouac's early journals. This new Library of America volume includes some 60 pages from those journals. What do they reveal about Kerouac?*

He was a huge student. He would read everything. He read biographies. He took courses to study how to write. He had memorized the sonnets of Shakespeare and devoured the novels of Celine and Proust, Joyce and Dostoevsky. No one worked harder than Jack Kerouac on trying to become a first tier writer. That didn't happen by osmosis or a lightning bolt of inspiration. It happened because of a huge effort. Almost to the point that he said that his books were like his children. He did not have a stable family life. He wandered America like a homeless person. What he had were his notebooks. He picked that up from Henry David Thoreau, one of his heroes. Walden Pond was not that far from where he grew up in Lowell, Massachusetts. He believed, like Thoreau, in "simplify, simplify, simplify," and in the concept of "leave things behind." He would carry his backpack west, then come back east—it could be Queens or New York or Manhattan or Lowell or Hyannis or St. Petersburg or Orlando—he would hole up with his mother and write about his adventures, drawing on his journals.

*Writing about The Dharma Bums recently, Ann Douglas argued that Kerouac's "spontaneous prose" actually required more discipline, not less—that the journal and sketch writing were rehearsals, a kind of training for the moment of performance.*

I think that's exactly right. These journals are clearly just the dress rehearsals and getting into the groove a little bit, getting this pile of material. Then comes that magic hour where you have to, as Sinclair Lewis used to say, put the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair. You can't write great novels on the run. Kerouac never even learned how to drive an automobile. He would come back and just sit and say, I have to have the self-discipline to pull this off. Even after these three classics that are in the Library of America volume—*On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *The Subterraneans*—there's a fourth book of his called *Visions of Cody*, which is another fine innovative effort. But even the books that were criticized that came out of the 1960s, books like *Visions of Gerard* or *Satori in Paris*, even as his alcoholism and fame were destroying him, he continued to marshal this work ethic and created a substantial body of work for a man who died in his forties.

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***In On the Road and The Dharma Bums Kerouac cast himself as each book's narrator and turned his friends into his main characters: Neal Cassady in On the Road, Gary Snyder in The Dharma Bums . . .***

All of those books are autobiographical in nature but they're still novels. That's why he used to say, all of my books are one—"The Duluoz Legend." He was trying to do what Proust did in *Remembrance of Things Past*—create one giant oeuvre. The trick in all these books is that he was making saints out of outlaws and misanthropes. It's easy to make a hero out of a Marine in Iwo Jima. Kerouac was giving almost comic book superhero status to people like Gary Snyder, a Zen poet, or Allen Ginsberg, a gay, ranting poet, or Neal Cassady, an ex-con car thief who finagled a living out of people, or women like Tristessa who had to use her body for money to survive. Or migrant workers he met in California. He takes marginalized people who hadn't really had a leading role in American culture and puts them front and center. In that way he was something of a proletariat writer. There was nothing of the bourgeoisie in Jack Kerouac. Because French was his first language and he was a first-generation American, he tended to romanticize the United States in a way that other writers didn't. He had this kind of wild-eyed enthusiasm for stories like the Yellowstone Red up in Montana or for Lafitte the pirate in Louisiana or stories of the James Gang in Missouri.

***It seems that every character in a Kerouac novel is based on someone in his real life. In On the Road Carlo Marx is Allen Ginsberg. Old Bull Lee is William Burroughs. In The Dharma Bums Japhy Ryder is Gary Snyder and Arthur Whane is Alan Watts and even Gore Vidal and William Gaddis have characters based on them in The Subterraneans. You kindly include a key in the Notes to who's who for each book.***

He's mythologizing his sect, his friends. To be a friend of Kerouac meant that you would be mythologized in literature. That's what he did. That's the fuel that ran his engine. He didn't want to write autobiography per se. If you read the original scroll you'll find the names of all the original people in it. He wanted to be a novelist. That's not unique. So many novelists draw on personal experience for their work and change names. Graham Greene did. So did F. Scott Fitzgerald. For some reason people hold Kerouac to a different standard. It's probably because a lot of the people Kerouac profiled became famous later. He wrote about them before they became household names. Later a handful of them became synonymous with the Beat Generation and the counterculture of the sixties. It's as if Kerouac was forecasting their genius.

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*Some would argue that the poet Gary Snyder, the basis for the main character in The Dharma Bums, was perhaps the most important person in Kerouac's life, the person who was most successful in achieving what Kerouac was looking for.*

The most important things in Kerouac's life were God, his Catholicism, and his sense of forgiveness and the need to be humble and his sense of prayer. He was a deep Catholic mystic. He recognized a fellow religious seeker in Gary Snyder. Someone who was also bookish and loved literature, who was finding God in nature and in Buddhist tenets. He was symbiotic for Kerouac. I do think it was the most important relationship in Kerouac's adult life, besides his mother and father. He and Snyder didn't become road buddies to the extent that he did with Cassady. In Cassady, Kerouac was looking for the wild man, the kind of Nietzschean super-willed guy with charisma and cunning. Cassady was the confidence man. Snyder was like a priest to him. He had respect for him. He recognized the deeper lessons Snyder was offering. In many ways Kerouac had to graduate from Cassady to Snyder. What's interesting is that Kerouac needed to be second fiddle to these characters. All of this worked together in his narratives. He wanted someone else he could turn into that kind of unusual outlaw saint who wasn't playing by the rules of conformity but was creating a new form of consciousness. In that way he was pioneering in the 1940s and 1950s.

*The volume also includes Lonesome Traveler, Kerouac's book of travel essays. One critic has said that "Among 20th-century American writers, [Kerouac's] flair for divining the spirits of actual places, of living, peopled locales, is rivaled only by Faulkner's . . ." How do Kerouac's travel essays compare to his rendering of places in his novels?*

His travel essays are wonderful. He had a great ear. That's what every novelist needs. He always finds the apropos phrase or slang idiom of a certain locale. More than that, Kerouac was one of those map guys. He loved all those American-named cities. He could just roll off town names. Tallahassee. Shreveport. Elk City. Reno. He loved hearing the names of these places. When he got there he wrote about them in a descriptive manner without sounding like a travel brochure. He could capture the essence of looking down at the valley in El Paso in two or three lines. Traveling was his modus operandi. That's where he got his material. In truth he was probably better in creating geographical locations and conditions on the road than he was in creating believable and sustainable characters. That was one of his gifts. And he was opening up the West in his writing to a new degree. Certainly Mark Twain wrote about the West as

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did Jack London, Bret Harte, and Frank Norris. It wasn't new terrain but Kerouac brought modernity to it. He brought the automobile into the West as a kind of spiritual playground where you can travel at whim and find freedom. If you got a tank of gas you could go anywhere in any direction at any time. He's searching. In *On the Road* he says, "I'm searching for IT." He's searching for that moment when everything makes sense to him. Those are hard moments to find. You might get it watching sundown over the Grand Canyon or watching a flock of terns over the Everglades or you might get it in a big Catholic cathedral in downtown New York. Peace envelops you and you know everything forever. More than being a novelist, Jack Kerouac was a religious seeker. He was trying to make sense of existence, which as we all know, is a difficult road to take.

*In The New York Times review of Windblown World, Walter Kirn described you as "a sober, well-known political historian who seems an unlikely candidate for the job" of Kerouac editor. How did you come to get so intimately involved with Kerouac's work?*

I feel I'm the most likely of characters. I have a school program called "The Majic Bus." I travel with kids all over America, introducing them to classic books. That started in 1992 and I published a book about the program in 1993, also called *The Majic Bus*, and that was directly inspired by *On the Road*. I've been a Jack Kerouac fan ever since I was working as a waiter in a Holiday Inn in Perrysburg, Ohio, just outside Toledo at 16 years old. I read the book and it had a great influence on me. I had a beat-up old car and suddenly I said to myself I can't wait to get out there and just go see this country. I want to get out there and have these experiences. I want to be hanging out in Chinatown in San Francisco when the fog comes in. I want to be walking down Oliveras Street in Los Angeles and listening to the mariachi players on the street corner at dawn. I want to see the cowboys in Montana and be eating apple pie a la mode. You want to get out there and feel all this. America is not just the flag. It's these thousands of subcultures and Kerouac was saying, get out of your subculture. There are a lot of other ones. Get out there and experience them. There's a kind of wisdom that comes through. Also a kind of risk when you take off like that. He captures that strange period from 17 maybe up to 25 when the world is your oyster. You just have to go out there and get it. Literature is supposed to inspire and Kerouac does. He inspires you to not overthink travel and get out there into the wilds of America and see what you can see.

How can you grow up in America and not read a Jack Kerouac book? It's a rite of passage.

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*September 5, 2007, will mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of On the Road. The original scroll, which was sold at auction in 2001 to Jim Irsay, owner of the Indianapolis Colts, for \$2.43 million . . .*

I went with Irsay. He flew his Indianapolis Colts plane down to New Orleans and picked me up and we flew into New York and we stayed at the Waldorf. I was his sort of adviser on it. He wanted me to answer press questions about Kerouac. He came determined to buy it no matter what. He considered it such an important and inspiring document. He's not only put money into refurbishing it and will be donating it to the Lilly library at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, but he's also letting it tour the country so people can come and see it.

*Yes, isn't it currently on display in a museum in Kerouac's hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, now through September 5?*

Yes, it is.

*And in August Viking will publish a version of On the Road that will reproduce exactly what's on the scroll. How will that version differ from the one published by Viking in 1957?*

Well, it's much better fodder for scholars because he uses everyone's real names. There are some sequences that Kerouac edited out. There's an inference that Neal Cassady was bisexual, which in the climate of the fifties was nixed out. So there are some elements in the scroll that may cause some controversy in Kerouac studies. But it will not supplant the carefully edited version that was originally published. These subsequent editions never do. So it's a mixed blessing that it's coming out like that.

*So there were edits to On the Road?*

Yes, many. That's a myth that *On the Road* is unrevised. It was heavily revised. What's fascinating is that you can see Kerouac's original energy in the scroll but that's usually in the domain of English professors who swoon over this kind of thing. I think the general readership is just going to want to read *On the Road* as it was originally published.

*You mentioned earlier that Kerouac is often held to a different standard. Why?*

Well, it's this pop culture phenomenon. Much of Kerouac is rallying against elitism, snobbery, and high literary culture. The irony is that when the *The New York Times* gave him that extraordinary review in September it cata-

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pulted him to fame. He was ill-equipped for it. He was in vagabond mode. He tried to attend all the parties and was by nature an incredibly shy man so he had to fortify himself with whisky to be the clown of the party, to be entertaining, to be Jack Kerouac. He's a great example of the destruction of that kind of fame. He wasn't just a well-known writer. He became the thinking man's James Dean. He became a celebrity on all the talk shows and magazine profiles.

In the fifties the critics created the Beat Generation. Kerouac spent the entire sixties trying to distance himself from the so-called Beat Generation. We like things stamped and packaged in America. We want things in schools. Kerouac wasn't a member of the Beat Generation. He was a great original American writer in his own right. He wrote: I want to be considered independent. Like John Steinbeck. Or Robert Frost. He didn't want to be lumped with all these people. It was Allen Ginsberg who pushed this lumping and was marketing the Beat Generation for political purposes in the 1960s. Kerouac in the sixties was reading *The National Review* and was a fan of William Buckley and was supporting our troops in Vietnam. You can write this off that Kerouac was just being regressive because of his alcoholism, but in truth there was always a nativist streak in him. You look at these writers who put America up front and forward the way Kerouac does. Steinbeck was pro Vietnam War. James T. Farrell was. Ralph Ellison. People who really write about America often are not of the hard left. That became a fantasy of the New Left in the sixties when if you didn't agree with their view on politics then suddenly you were out to lunch. Kerouac's letters and journals in the sixties make a good point. He was for the war because he didn't have the heart to go to bars in Lowell and talk to the fathers of men serving over there and seem to be against them. That's a very legitimate human reason. Kerouac was apolitical. But the Beat Generation was highly political because it was seen as attacking the Establishment and Kerouac gets swept in on the wave.

### *What do you see as Kerouac's legacy?*

Kerouac was a deep scholar who was schooled in all the classics and who had spent his whole life working to perfect his writing. He wasn't a tramp but a raw American intellectual busting conventions, like all writers try to do, and creating his own voice. You can go to an Iowa Writers workshop or Columbia University and try to become a writer and get MFA degrees, but the hardest thing to do is to find a voice that's authentic, that if you open a book and read a page anyone can say, "I know who that is." And Kerouac achieved that. You can randomly open the Library of America volume and read any single page and you will immediately know that's the voice of Jack Kerouac. He played

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with the concepts of American language. He wasn't just a cultural phenomenon. He was a literary pioneer in finding a unique way to express himself yet it drew upon all the writers that he admired, particularly Joyce and Celine, Dostoevsky, Thoreau, Wolfe, Tolstoy, and Whitman.

One of the things we're doing with this Library of America volume is to let Jack Kerouac be Jack Kerouac. Don't go to him with presuppositions. Just read him. Read his works as you would the works of John Muir, another solitary tramp, or Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*. Listen to his voice, not what everyone tells you he was. That's the problem with Kerouac. Because he's become such a pop-culture, American studies phenomenon, people think they understand that Kerouac was a beatnik. He was a patriot. *On the Road* is a valentine, a love song to America. People need to find the spirituality in his books, not the decadence.