



Jack
Kerouac
On the
Road

MODERN CLASSICS



JACK KEROUAC

On the Road

Introduction by Ann Charters



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On the Road

Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, where, he said, he 'roamed fields and riverbanks by day and night, wrote little novels in my room, first novel written at age eleven, also kept extensive diaries and "newspapers" covering my own-invented horse-racing and baseball and football worlds (as recorded in novel *Doctor Sax*).' He was educated by Jesuit brothers in Lowell. He said that he 'decided to become a writer at age seventeen under influence of Sebastian Sampas, local young poet, who later died on Anzio beach head; read the life of Jack London at eighteen and decided to also be a lonesome traveler; early literary influences Saroyan and Hemingway; later Wolfe (after I had broken leg in Freshman football at Columbia read Tom Wolfe and roamed his New York on crutches).'

Kerouac wished, however, to develop his own new prose style, which he called 'spontaneous prose.' In it he recorded the life of the American 'traveler,' and the experience of the Beat generation of the 1950s. This may clearly be seen in his most famous novel *On the Road*, and also in *The Subterraneans* and *The Dharma Bums*. Other works include *Big Sur*, *Desolation Angels*, *Lonesome Traveler*, *Visions of Gerard*, *Tristessa*, and a book of poetry called *Mexico City Blues*. His first more orthodox published novel was *The Town and the City*. Jack Kerouac, who described himself as a 'strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic,' was working on his longest novel, a surrealistic study of the last ten years of his life, when he died in 1969, aged forty-seven.

Ann Charters, Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, has been interested in Beat writers since 1956, when as an undergraduate English major she attended the repeat performance of the Six Gallery poetry reading in Berkeley where Allen Ginsberg gave his second public reading of *Howl*. She began collecting books written by Beat writers when she was a graduate student at Columbia University, and after

completing her doctorate she worked with Jack Kerouac to compile his bibliography. After his death she wrote the first Kerouac biography and edited his posthumous collection, *Scattered Poems*. She has written a literary study of Charles Olson and biographies of black entertainer Bert Williams and (with her husband) the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. She was the general editor of the two-volume encyclopedia *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America* and has published a collection of her photographic portraits of well-known writers in the book *Beats & Company*.

Introduction

Shortly before midnight on Wednesday, September 4, 1957, Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson, a young writer he was living with, left her apartment on the Upper West Side in New York City to wait at a newsstand at Sixty-sixth Street and Broadway for the next day's *New York Times* to come off the delivery truck. Kerouac had been alerted by his publisher that his novel *On the Road* would be reviewed in that issue, and so they bought the first copy of the *Times* they could pull from the stack. Standing under a street lamp, they turned the pages until they found the column 'Books of the Times.' The reviewer was Gilbert Millstein, and he had written:

On the Road is the second novel by Jack Kerouac, and its publication is a historic occasion insofar as the exposure of an authentic work of art is of any great moment in any age in which the attention is fragmented and the sensibilities are blunted by the superlatives of fashion . . . [The novel is] the most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as 'beat' and whose principal avatar he is.

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.

Kerouac and Johnson took their copy of the newspaper to the dim light of a booth in a neighborhood bar and read the review over and over. Jack kept shaking his head, she remembered later in her memoir

Minor Characters, 'as if he couldn't figure out why he wasn't happier than he was.' Finally they returned to her apartment to go to sleep. As Joyce recalled, 'Jack lay down obscure for the last time in his life. The ringing phone woke him the next morning and he was famous.'

What the reporters wanted from Kerouac the next day, and demanded of him for the rest of his life, were explanations of 'Beat,' not interviews about his writing. He had published a book that the *Village Voice* reviewer called 'a rallying cry for the elusive spirit of rebellion of these times.' Two weeks before, Allen Ginsberg's book *Howl and Other Poems* had been the subject of a widely publicized obscenity trial in San Francisco that had not yet been decided; then in October, Judge Clayton Horn ruled that Ginsberg's poetry had 'redeeming social importance.' Ginsberg had dedicated *Howl* to his friends Carl Solomon, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady, beginning his poem with the line, often quoted by the press, 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked . . .' The Beat Generation was news, and Kerouac had been officially dubbed its chief incarnation in human form.

In *On the Road* Kerouac had supposedly defined a new generation, and he was besieged with questions about the life-style he had described in his novel. The reporters didn't care who he was, or how long he'd been working on his book, or what he was trying to do as a writer. At first Kerouac's standard response to their questions – delivered, as Joyce Johnson remembered, with 'weirdly courteous patience' – was to define the term 'Beat,' which he'd first heard more than a decade before, used by a Times Square hustler named Herbert Huncke to describe a state of exalted exhaustion, but which was also linked in Jack's mind to a Catholic beatific vision, the direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. This line of thought was obscure to most interviewers, who wanted a glib quote rather than a religious derivation of a hip slang term.

Kerouac's explanation that he'd been on the road for seven years but had needed only three weeks to write his novel didn't help the situation, either. When Kerouac was featured on the Steve Allen show as a best-selling author, Allen quipped that he would have preferred to spend three weeks on the road and seven years writing the book,

instead of the way Jack had done it. Kerouac's boast that he'd created the original *On the Road* manuscript nonstop in a three-week burst of writing prompted author Truman Capote to sneer, 'That isn't writing; it's typing.' Kerouac finally complained, 'Wasn't there a time when American writers were let alone by personality mongers and publicity monsters?' The media response was so unrelenting that another generation would grow up before Kerouac was accepted as a serious writer with a unique prose style as well as a compelling vision of life. *On the Road* became an American classic long before he did.

Kerouac was thirty-five years old when *On the Road* was published, and later it would seem he had spent the first part of his career trying to write the book and get it published, and the rest of his life trying to live it down. One problem was that he was supposedly the spokesman for a new generation. The other problem was that his portrait of 'Dean Moriarty' in the novel was so exhilarating that reporters expected him to live up to its image, despite his insistence that he was the character 'Sal Paradise,' who had 'shambled after' Dean in their cross-country trips.

Interviewers weren't interested in 'Sal Paradise' or in Kerouac's life as a writer between his trips on the road. They put down their pencils when he told them he came from a French-Canadian family; they turned a deaf ear when he said that he loved America because it had opened its doors to his immigrant parents; they thought he was kidding when he tried to explain that he wasn't 'beat' but a 'strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic,' and that he wouldn't have been able to write as much as he did if he didn't live 'a kind of monastic life' at home with his mother most of the time. None of this sounded as exciting as Moriarty's exuberant personality or the emergence of a Beat Generation. Yet what the publication of *On the Road* signified was much more enduring than newspaper headlines. Years after Kerouac had struggled to find a personal voice, he had finally been heard.

Jack Kerouac was born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts, on March 12, 1922. His parents, Leo and Gabrielle, had immigrated separately from rural Québec to New Hampshire, where

they met and married shortly before moving to Lowell. The family lived in French-Canadian neighborhoods in Lowell and spoke the French-Canadian dialect of *joual* in their home. It was Kerouac's first language. He spoke it for the rest of his life in conversations with his mother, whom he called 'Mémère.' He didn't learn to speak English fluently until he was six years old and began attending parochial school.

In 1939 Kerouac graduated from Lowell High School as a star athlete, winning a football scholarship to Horace Mann preparatory school and Columbia University. He played football as a Columbia freshman, but dropped out of school after quarreling with the football coach in his sophomore year. At the age of nineteen, as he later said, he was 'independent, nutty with independence, in fact,' and decided that he didn't need to finish college because he 'had his own mind.' He wanted to become 'an adventurer, a lonesome traveler,' so that he could be a great American novelist in the tradition of Jack London and Thomas Wolfe.

Working as a merchant seaman during World War II, Kerouac began a novel called *The Sea Is My Brother*, which he finished in 1943. He became even more determined to be a writer after he became friends with a group of people around the Columbia campus in the summer of 1944. This group formed the nucleus of what would later be called the Beat Generation, and some of its members would appear as characters in *On the Road*. Through Edie Parker, a woman studying art at Columbia who was introduced to him by an old prep school friend, Kerouac met Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg, then Columbia undergraduates, and William Burroughs, a Harvard graduate living in New York. Carr was from a wealthy family in St Louis and had been expelled from several schools before attending Columbia; Ginsberg, then an eighteen-year-old freshman, was the son of a New Jersey high school English teacher and poet. Burroughs, a grandson of the founder of the Burroughs Office Machine Company, was living on an income from his parents and beginning to experiment with drugs through contacts with various suppliers like Herbert Huncke in Times Square and others on the Lower East Side.

Lucien Carr remembered that in the mid-1940s he and his friends

were 'a rebellious group' who were 'trying to look at the world in a way that gave it some [new] meaning. Trying to find values . . . that were valid. And it was through literature that all this was supposed to be done.' From reading French Symbolist poetry, Carr had the idea of creating a 'New Vision' critical of all existing social conventions. As Ginsberg wrote in his journal, they experimented with drugs to facilitate their discovery of a new way of life that would enable them to become great writers. 'The poet becomes a seer through a long, immense, and reasoned derangement of all the senses. All shapes of love, suffering, madness. He searches himself, he exhausts all poisons in himself, to keep only the quintessences . . .'

Burroughs, several years older than Carr and Ginsberg, was skeptical of their chaotic attempts to articulate a new philosophy. He took on the role of their ironic mentor, insisting they read Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* to balance their infatuation with the French poet Arthur Rimbaud. Kerouac admired the 'terrible intelligence and style' of his New York friends. As he wrote in *Vanity of Duluoaz*, he thought this 'clique was the most evil and intelligent buncha bastards and shits in America but had to admire [them] in my admiring youth.'

Between his friends and family, Kerouac began leading a kind of double life that he was never able to resolve. He divided his time between wild 'experiments' with the Columbia group using different drugs – Benzedrine, morphine, marijuana, alcohol – and a straight life in his parents' working-class household. In August 1944 he found himself involved in a manslaughter case after Carr stabbed David Kammerer, another member of the group, in self-defense with a Boy Scout knife. Carr asked Kerouac to help him dispose of the evidence, and Jack was arrested as a material witness for not reporting the homicide. When Leo Kerouac refused to put up \$100 to bail his son out of jail, telling him he'd disgraced the family name, Edie Parker came up with the money, on the condition that Jack first marry her in City Hall. He was released from jail, but they separated soon afterward. Kerouac signed aboard another merchant ship, then returned to his friends in New York. He took so many drugs with them that finally his health began to suffer, and he was hospitalized after an attack of phlebitis brought on by excessive Benzedrine use.

Leo and Gabrielle had moved from Lowell to Queens, and after leaving the hospital, Jack stayed home to nurse his father, who died of cancer in 1946. Grief-stricken, Jack decided to write a 'huge novel explaining everything to everybody' that he hoped would redeem him in his family's eyes. Mémère continued working at her factory job to support him through the writing of the book. Kerouac titled this novel *The Town and the City*, and he worked on it for two years. He kept notebooks to record the process of his manuscript, including hymns and prayers that strengthened his belief that with the writing of the book he would create something that would make his family proud of him.

The Town and the City, like everything else Kerouac was to write, was autobiographical. He later said, 'I used various friends and girlfriends, and my own parents, to form a large family, the Martin family,' whose activities the book chronicles from 1935 to the end of the Second World War. In the book, Kerouac dramatized his own conflict between his nostalgia for his family life in Lowell and the irresistible attractions of New York City by contrasting the experiences of two Martin brothers, Peter and Francis, both projections of different aspects of himself. There was no easy resolution of their differences, which reflected the clash of values within himself.

Contrary to his expectations, Kerouac did not find himself 'redeemed' after he had written *The Town and the City*. He finished the novel in May 1948 and it was published to tepid reviews two years later, but it sold poorly, so he was as dependent on his mother's income as before. Even more important to him, he had taken the style and structure of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* as his literary model, and he was dissatisfied with the conventional result.

Something else was happening in Kerouac's life at this time, as important as his determined efforts to become a writer. In December 1946, shortly after he'd begun *The Town and the City*, Kerouac's friends introduced him to a visitor from Denver, Neal Cassady, who had ridden a Greyhound bus to New York with his teenage wife, LuAnne, in order to visit his friend Hal Chase, a student at Columbia. Cassady would become the model for the character Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* years later. Kerouac had been reading Cassady's letters to Hal

Chase from the Colorado reformatory before they met, and Jack was curious about him. Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1926, Cassady grew up in Denver, living with his alcoholic father in skid row hotels. As a teenager, he'd served time in the reformatory for stealing cars and joyriding, but he'd decided he wanted to try to attend Columbia after encountering the Harvard Classics in the prison library.

Cassady gave up his vague plans to get into Columbia after Hal Chase introduced him to Ginsberg and Kerouac. He decided instead to become a writer by learning how to write from them. His first meeting with Kerouac on the Columbia campus was not a success, but their second meeting in a cold-water apartment in Harlem early in 1947, described in the opening chapter of *On the Road*, gave them a chance to talk, and their friendship began.

Initially Kerouac had mixed feelings about Cassady, who disconcerted him by looking both like Gene Autry, the cowboy hero of Western movies, and like 'certain French Canadians I used to know in my boyhood in Lowell, Mass., who were real tough.' When Cassady returned to Denver, he started writing Kerouac letters, which so excited Jack that after he finished writing the first half of *The Town and the City*, he decided to make his first cross-country trip. 'Filled with dreams of what [he'd] do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran,' he started hitch-hiking, his first destination a rendezvous with Cassady in Denver. This was the trip Kerouac would describe in Part One of *On the Road*.

Kerouac's earliest 'road' adventures in July 1947 overlapped his writing of *The Town and the City*, and they so overwhelmed him that he tried to base a new book on them soon after finishing his first novel. His discussions concerning a 'New Vision' of writing were continuing in Manhattan with Ginsberg and a new friend, John Clellon Holmes, who was also an aspiring novelist. After several false starts, Kerouac discovered that when he wasn't imitating Thomas Wolfe, he couldn't find a way to turn his thoughts and feelings into fiction. His struggle to write *On the Road* was one of the most frustrating experiences of his life.

Shortly after finishing *The Town and the City*, Kerouac began writing one of the earliest versions of *On the Road* using what he called a

'factualist' or naturalist way of handling his ideas in imitation of Theodore Dreiser, whose novels he was reading in a course on American fiction at the New School. Initially his work went well. An early journal entry on November 29, 1948, testifies to his long hours at the typewriter: '32,500 words since I started on November 9 . . . I delight in the figures, as always, because they are concrete evidence of a greater freedom in writing than I had in *Town & City*.'

Yet, after a month of work on this early version of *On the Road*, Kerouac apparently reached a dead end, feeling 'emptiness and even falseness' when he sat down with the manuscript. His new style didn't allow him to express 'the reverent mad feelings' he had been able to tap in what he considered the best passages of *The Town and the City*. Cassady's unexpected arrival at Jack's sister's house in North Carolina right after Christmas 1948, later fictionalized in Part Two of *On the Road*, gave Kerouac an excuse to put this new book project aside so he could go off with his friend in Cassady's new Hudson, the first time they drove cross-country together.

When Kerouac returned to his mother in February 1949, he was so shattered by his weeks with Cassady that he decided he couldn't salvage his abandoned 'factualist' attempt at his 'road book.' Instead he took up another project, 'A Novella of Children and Evil, The Myth of the Rainy Night,' which would be re-worked years later as the book *Doctor Sax*. He also went back to finish his New School class on the American novel, writing a final essay on Thomas Wolfe. Trying to break away from this literary influence to find his own voice, Kerouac was now very critical of Wolfe's language, which he felt did not sufficiently attain the intellectual clarity and spiritual resonance he wanted. Kerouac was experiencing, in the critic Harold Bloom's terms, 'the anxiety of influence,' struggling to free himself from his affinity for the work of a writer he'd admired.

After finishing the Wolfe essay, Kerouac outlined ambitious new plans for the book he was still calling 'On the Road.' At this stage he envisioned it as a quest novel like Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He abandoned his earlier hero, whom he'd named Ray Smith, in favor of a narrator called Smitty, who would play the role of Sancho Panza to the central character, Red

Moultrie, a man in his late twenties who had been a minor league ball player, a jazz drummer, and a seaman who had been jailed as an accomplice in a robbery. At the beginning of the book, Kerouac decided that Red would read *Pilgrim's Progress* while in jail, so that after his release he would go on the road searching, in John Bunyan's words, for 'an inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.'

Kerouac filled his journal with pages of notes describing his ideas for developing the characters and themes of this version of *On the Road*, but the journal's most inspired writing was his description of the 'crazy jazz' performances he was listening to at the time, like that of the tenor sax player blowing with Cootie Williams's group on 'Gator Tail.' Jack wrote, 'I don't care what anybody says . . . but I'm pulled out of my shoes by wild stuff like that – pure whiskey! Let's hear no more about jazz critics and those who wonder about bop: – I like my whiskey wild, I like Saturday night in the shack to be crazy, I like the tenor to be woman-mad, I like things to GO and rock and be flipped, I want to be stoned if I'm going to be stoned at all, I like to be gassed by a back-alley music . . .'

Kerouac put his notes for this version of his 'road book' away in April 1949 when he learned that Harcourt, Brace had accepted *The Town and the City* with the stipulation that he trim the eleven hundred-page manuscript. Jack took his advance from Harcourt, Brace and moved to Denver. In June 1949 he picked up his 'road book' again and wrote a seven-hundred-word description of his hero Red's last night in jail before going on the road. Then Jack stalled, dissatisfied with what he was doing in the novel; it lacked the freshness and spontaneity of his journal descriptions of jazz. It was easier to drop the novel and join Cassady in San Francisco, a time together that later became Part Three of the published *On the Road*.

In March 1950 *The Town and the City* was published, and in May Kerouac went back to Denver, hoping that a change of scene would help him overcome his writer's block. Before he got very far, Neal Cassady rushed back and took him on the trip to Mexico that became the basis of Part Four of the published *On the Road*. Kerouac was so debilitated by the heavy drugs he took in Mexico City that it was a

while before he attempted extensive work on his 'road book.' Sitting in the kitchen of his mother's new apartment in Ozone Park while she worked her factory job, he made a completely fresh start with a story about hitchhiking cross-country, using a ten-year-old black child as his fictional narrator. This was a book Kerouac would revise at the end of his life, posthumously published as *Pic*. He finished what he described as 'a third' of this novel and then put it aside.

In November 1950, dissatisfied with the way his life was drifting, Kerouac impulsively married a second time; his new wife was a woman he had met shortly before in New York named Joan Haverty. At first they lived with Mémère in Queens until they found their own apartment in Manhattan. For a few weeks Jack took a free-lance job as a script synopsisizer for a film company to earn money to pay income taxes on his royalty advances for *The Town and the City*. Despite the dead ends he'd encountered in the past years working on his 'road book,' Kerouac wouldn't abandon the project. About this time he told the English publisher of *The Town and the City* that he conceived the book as an epic, 'a novel whose background is the recurrence of the pioneering instinct in American life and its expression in the migration of the present generation; a book provisionally entitled *On the Road*.'

Kerouac's associations with his New York friends continued through his discouraging efforts to find a way to write his second novel. Ginsberg and Holmes were still in New York, but Burroughs had married and left town for New Orleans, Texas and Mexico City, where drugs were more easily available. He had started sending segments of manuscripts that would later be published as the autobiographical books *Junky* and *Queer* to Ginsberg, who was acting as his literary agent after his release from the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where he had spent several months under psychiatric observation.

Kerouac was impressed with the honesty of Burroughs's first-person narratives, but he was most taken with the wildly exuberant letters written to him and Ginsberg by Neal Cassady, particularly Cassady's style of combining loose, rambling sentences with meticulously detailed observations regarding his sexual exploits with various girlfriends in Denver. In December 1950 Cassady sent Kerouac a long

letter describing adventures with a girlfriend called Cherry Mary that struck Jack as particularly impressive. Only segments of Cassidy's letter survive, included with his autobiography, *The First Third*, published years later.

After being interrupted in the act of making love with Cherry Mary when the mother of the woman for whom she was baby-sitting showed up, Cassidy hid in the bathroom – 'nude, no clothes, and all exits blocked.' Mary tried to divert the mother, while Cassidy discovered his

task was to, as quietly as a mouse, remove all the yearslong collection of rich peoples' bath knicknacks that blocked the room's only window, then, impossible though it looked, I must climb up the tub to it and with a fingernail pry loose the outside screen. Now, look at this window, it had four panes of glass 6" long and 4" wide, it formed a rectangle of about 12 or 13" high and 8 or 9" across, difficult to squeeze through at best, but, being modern as hell, the way it was hooked to its frame was by a single metal bar in direct center! which when opened split the panes of glass down the middle and made two windows.

I could hardly reach outside to work on the screen – since the window opened outward – but I pushed and making a helluva noise, split the screen enough to open the window. Now the impossible compressing of my frame for the squeeze. I thought if I could get my head through I could make it; I was just able to, by bending the tough metal bar . . . and of course, I almost tore off my pride-and-joy as I wiggled out into the cold November air . . .

On December 27, 1950, Joan wrote Neal that both she and Jack were stunned by his letter. Jack spent two hours 'perusing it in a cafeteria and didn't get home till 6:00, at which time I got my hands on it and dinner preparations were delayed another hour.' Jack's reply to Neal's letter is eloquent testimony to Kerouac's desperate search for his own voice as a writer. 'Just a word, now, about your wonderful 13,000 word letter about Joan Anderson and Cherry Mary. I thought it ranked among the best things ever written in America . . . I say truly, no

Dreiser, no Wolfe has come too close to it; Melville was never truer. I know that I don't dream. It can't possibly be sparse & halting, like Hemingway, because it hides nothing; the material is painfully necessary . . . the material of Scott Fitz was so sweetly unnecessary. It is the exact stuff upon which American Lit is still to be founded. You must and will go on at all costs including comfort & health & kicks; but keep it kickwriting at all costs too, that is, write only what kicks you and keeps you overtime awake from sheer mad joy.'

Besides Burroughs's autobiographical manuscripts and Cassady's letters, Kerouac also had a strong reaction to the work of another member of the group at this time. In March 1951, John Clellon Holmes gave him a copy of the completed manuscript of a novel he had titled 'The Beat Generation,' whose characters were modeled on Holmes and his wife, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Cassady. Kerouac had fictionalized the wild activities of his New York friends in a section of *The Town and the City* three years before, and Holmes had praised his writing when he read Kerouac's novel in manuscript, but now Holmes had gone much further in his own book, quoting some of his conversations with Kerouac and Ginsberg verbatim in his characterization of them as the young writers 'Gene Pasternak' and 'David Stofsky.'

Kerouac had been struggling for years to invent plots and characters for his 'road book,' and he was upset by Holmes's direct incorporation of 'real life' materials into his novel. Privately in letters to friends like Cassady, he patronized Holmes ('Holmes is really not hip to anything until it begins to sink in much later'), so he was caught off guard by what Holmes had achieved in 'The Beat Generation.' A short time later, when Holmes sold the book (retitled *Go*) for a \$20,000 advance, Kerouac was furious. According to his biographer Gerard Nicosia, he told Holmes that 'he had been struggling to create plausible backgrounds and family situations for his characters, and . . . he finally had to admit that he couldn't catch the thing about it that he wanted that way. "I'm going to forget all that horseshit," he concluded. "I'm just going to write it as it happened."'

Kerouac had encouraged Burroughs and Cassady to write the story of their own lives, and he had even started his wife Joan on a project