
REVIEWS

Rucksacks in the Classroom: Teaching Jack Kerouac in the Twenty-First Century

Ellis Amburn. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. 435p.

Jim Christy. *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1998. 110p.

Barry Miles. *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. 332p.

Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation. Compact Disk. New York: Verve Records, 1997.

Kerouac — kicks joy darkness. Compact Disk. Salem, MA: Rykodisc, 1997.

A Jack Kerouac ROMnibus. CD-ROM. New York: Penguin, 1995.

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Despite public remarks within the last few years, from such well respected scholars as Ann Douglas and Albert Gelpi, that Jack Kerouac's literary contribution needs to be examined with greater academic rigor than previously has been afforded, scholars and teachers interested in bringing Kerouac into their classrooms have been hard-pressed to find sufficient scholarly material to help them. The recent controversy over the Kerouac estate¹ and the inaccessibility of a great deal of Kerouac's unpublished manuscripts, journals, and letters in private archives has frustrated scholars and contributed to an aura surrounding Kerouac studies amounting to an academic soap opera.

Fortunately, Kerouac scholars and teachers of Beat literature can take heart in the increasing public popularity of Kerouac and the Beats. *On the Road* continues to sell over 100,000 copies annually, Douglas Brinkley is writing the much anticipated authorized biography on Kerouac and also editing Kerouac's unpublished

journals, two more volumes of Kerouac's letters are being planned, and Kerouac's estate intends to continue publishing manuscripts [the most recent being *Some of the Dharma* (1997)]. Although scholars and teachers of Kerouac need to contend with zealous Kerouac enthusiasts, who make Kerouac's acceptance into serious intellectual circles increasingly difficult, three recent biographies attempt to demythologize Kerouac and debunk the erroneous legends surrounding his name. In addition to the recent surge of interest in the "true" Kerouac, a current emergence of multimedia materials will make Kerouac primed for entering the twenty-first-century classroom.

Ellis Amburn's *Subterranean Kerouac* is the most controversial of the three Kerouac biographies of 1998. The editor of Kerouac's last two novels, *Desolation Angels* and *Vanity of Duluoz*, Amburn tries to pass himself off as an insider who was privy to information few others had access to, but his accounts of his own interaction with Kerouac seem insubstantial, and his credibility is damaged by the fact that he never met Kerouac in person. Some Kerouac enthusiasts have been upset by Amburn's contention that the alcoholism that plagued the novelist's adult life was mainly attributable to Kerouac's repressed homosexuality. Amburn writes, "rigid divisions such as hetero-, bi-, and homosexuality do not fit reality, certainly not Kerouac's, and should not be used to label him. Though everyone seems to have a genetic inclination in one direction or the other, it is dangerous to use sex to define anyone" (32). Despite this disclaimer, Amburn seems continually to suggest to the reader that Kerouac was *more* homosexual than heterosexual, and that an understanding of Kerouac's conflicted sexuality is the key to understanding his life and thus his literary works.

Although Amburn's book is the most thorough of the recent biographies, his tendency toward lascivious voyeurism with regard to the details of Kerouac's sexual encounters makes the biography seem geared more to the present generation raised on Jerry Springer than for serious scholars and students. One of the more egregious acts of Springerism used by Amburn is his frequent citation of Kerouac's infamous "sex list," a record of all the women with whom Kerouac had sex, a number next to each name indicating the number of encounters. Amburn treats the list, which was recently "uncovered" in the Kerouac archive in Lowell, as a major biographical find. Although he points out time and again that Kerouac was often, despite his legendary reputation for honesty and a photographic memory, unreliable when recounting details of his own life, Amburn, based on the meticulousness of Kerouac's concern with the files he kept presumably for the scholars of the future, takes the "sex list" at face value. "I realized that the sex list sprang from the same meticulous archival passion," explains Amburn, "as well as from the

compulsive reportorial regimen that makes Kerouac's work such a solid document of mid-twentieth-century experience" (216).

Even more unfortunate than Amburn's fascination with sexual gossip and his penchant for taking off-handed, sexually suggestive remarks by Kerouac literally, is his biographical procedure. "I, like other Kerouac biographers," he writes, "have been able to rely on fictional works as primary nonfiction sources" (6). The use of Kerouac's fiction as basis for biographical data is a major problem with all previous biographies on Kerouac and it is unfortunate to see Amburn freely choose to go down the same road. Amburn's use of other biographies also ensures the possibility that previous inaccuracies will continue to be circulated.

Although Kerouac is portrayed as a sexist, racist, and homophobic conservative, Amburn does a remarkable job of keeping his tone sympathetic rather than accusatorial. Despite its problems [problems it shares with the often insightful but excessively voyeuristic *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean* (1994) by Paul Alexander], *Subterranean Kerouac* presents enough evidence for readers to question why Kerouac's obvious sexual confusion was not explored more thoroughly by previous biographers. Scholars interested in reading Kerouac's novels and poetry through his sexuality will be inspired by Amburn to pursue work which will enhance our understanding of the writer's oeuvre through exploration of the underlying sexual tension that often arises in Kerouac's texts.

Unlike Amburn's highly detailed exposé, Jim Christy's booklet *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac* avoids sensationalism and tries to make some commentary on the last decade of Kerouac's life, the years most neglected by previous biographers. Responding to Amburn's emphasis that Kerouac's homosexuality was a "hidden life," Christy writes, "occasionally, Kerouac would acquiesce to a come-on from a man, but always when drunk and never without later undergoing agonies of guilt. He never tried to hide these leanings; in fact, he openly discussed them, worried over them" (21). Christy tries to portray Kerouac as a religious writer, more closely aligned with St. Augustine than Thomas Wolfe or James Joyce, whose reputation fell prey to the media's constant linking of him with James Dean, Elvis Presley, and the young Marlon Brando. Even though this short biography hits all of the main events in Kerouac's life, it reads more like an extended essay by a dedicated Kerouac reader than a serious, scholarly biography. Part of what Christy attempts to do is bring our attention to the lack of a definitive biography on Kerouac. [He calls Ann Charters' *Kerouac* (1973) "the worst," and although he says Gerald Nicosia's *Memory Babe* (1983) "is the only biography worth a look," he adds that the look "should be under eyebrows raised high as they'll go" (84)].

Yet, Christy's booklet is too short and lacking in detail and cited evidence to fill in the gaps he sees in the previous biographies.

Christy's booklet is reminiscent of his other short treatment *The Buk Book* (1997), which covered the life and writings of Charles Bukowski. Both works display some insight into how the personal lives of the writers influenced their writing and how their public personas influenced how they are read, but his commentary is geared toward the casual reader rather than the scholar. What is of particular interest to the reader familiar with some of the previous Kerouac biographies is what Christy calls into question. He suggests that when Kerouac was arrested as an accomplice for helping Lucien Carr dispose of the weapon that killed David Kammerer in 1944, Kerouac was simply keeping the distraught Carr company, rather than insidiously trying to impede justice. Although Kerouac's mother, Mémère, is consistently portrayed as a vile human being in the previous biographies, Christy presents evidence to argue that she was not nearly the racist she has been stigmatized to be, and that she returned courtesy and respect when it was given to her. One of the more legendary events that Christy discusses is the 1964 meeting of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters with Kerouac in New York. All of the previous commentators have called the meeting unsuccessful, portraying Kerouac as a conservative grump, but Christy rightly points out that the pictures of a happy Kerouac at the event tell another story. And while most of the portraits of the older Kerouac characterize him as remorseless racist, Christy relates a 1967 episode in Germany where a crying Kerouac locked himself in his hotel room regretting his anti-Semitism. The most controversial suggestion Christy makes is that Kerouac's death was hastened by a beating he took in a black bar shortly before his gastrointestinal hemorrhage from cirrhosis of the liver on October 21, 1969.² There are some inaccuracies that Christy seems to have gleaned from previous biographies,³ but he does well in making his readers question some of the legends and myths surrounding Kerouac.

While little in Christy's book can substantiate that Kerouac was a twentieth-century St. Augustine, there is an urgent sense that Christy wants his readers to reevaluate their assumptions about Kerouac in literary history. Christy believes that by the time *On the Road* was published in 1957 Kerouac had written enough "to lay legitimate claim to being the greatest writer of his age" (10-11). This is indeed hyperbolic, but it is used to counter Christy's feelings about Kerouac's present standing with literary academics: "But for those in charge of reputations — in North America, anyway — he's a joke" (8). Christy's book tries valiantly to revision Kerouac as a mystical writer, a persona usually buried beneath a clown's mask.

Unlike Amburn and Christy, who both come across as sympathetic admirers of Kerouac and his work, the overriding sense one gets from Barry Miles' *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats* is that Miles is not enamored with his subject matter. Nevertheless, Miles's book is arguably the best of the Kerouac biographies to be published in 1998. The time is right for a Kerouac biography that avoids falling under the seductive influence of the Kerouac myth, and even more than the Amburn and Christy biographies, Miles' work provides the clear-headedness for which Kerouac scholars have been longing. *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats* is not as thoroughly detailed as Miles' excellent *Ginsberg: A Biography* (1989), but it is a much better read than his *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible* (1992), which did not have the same biographical rigor as the Ginsberg book. Miles' extensive knowledge of Ginsberg and Burroughs allows him to paint a rich portrait of the interaction between the three main figures of the Beat movement. At times, Kerouac seems to go momentarily out of focus as Miles gratifies his readers with the background details of the characters who influenced and were influenced by Kerouac, and this effect is rewarding.

Yet Miles suggests that Kerouac's importance is that of a cultural icon and that the importance of his most successful novels are as cultural artifacts rather than literary masterpieces. Miles writes, "This is why Kerouac is important: he prophesied and popularised these ideas [exploration and rejection of consumer society] and these two books, *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, became handbooks for the new, unchartered sixties lifestyle which made up its own rules as it went along" (237). He says that Kerouac's prose is "often splendid," but also that "Jack remained forever callow, a perpetual adolescent, and it is this immature view of the world that will always prevent his works from being truly world class: they do not address adult themes" (169). Arguing that Kerouac's semi-autobiographical fiction is unsatisfying as fiction and equally unsatisfying as memoirs, Miles insists, "One of the greatest limitations of his work was that he only wrote about himself, which was only of interest if he had done something of interest" (xiv). The implication is that Kerouac did not do enough of interest to warrant so many novels. Miles' criticism fails to take into account that part of Kerouac's literary project was to write about a human life including even those things that seem mundane to show that there is potentially poetry in the so-called ordinary.

Like Christy, Miles tries hard to debunk the myths of Kerouac's life. He suggests that Kerouac's marriage to Edie Parker while in jail in 1944 was not simply to get Parker's parents to post the bond that Kerouac's father refused to post and that Edie's family refused to give unless it was for a son-in-law. Miles claims that Jack and Edie had planned to get married as far back as October 1943, that they

had taken the required blood tests, and possibly had fixed a wedding day. Miles also argues that Kerouac's *Visions of Gerard* was not based on Kerouac's own memory of his older brother who died of rheumatic fever at the age of nine when Kerouac was only four, but actually the exaggerated idealisation of his mother's memory of her favorite son. Miles even goes so far as to blame Kerouac for the early death of his daughter Jan, whom Kerouac did not recognize as his own during his lifetime.

Ultimately, Miles concludes that Kerouac "is probably not as good a writer as his many fans would like to think, nor are his books anywhere near as bad as his numerous detractors would have the world believe" (295). Like Amburn's portrait, Kerouac comes across in Miles' biography as disturbingly racist, sexist, and homophobic. Yet while Amburn seems to be sympathetic to the Kerouac who drank himself into a horrid incarnation of his racist, sexist, and homophobic father, Miles is unmoved. "At various Kerouac conferences one hears how Jack was so sensitive, compassionate and tender," writes Miles. "Ginsberg particularly talks of his 'great heart', but his rejection of his daughter negates all this, if his constant betrayal of his friends had not already done so. Jack was cold-hearted, obdurate, and callous" (277). Such violent attacks against the accepted image of Kerouac as the most compassionate writer of his age are needed to prevent us from blindly following cultural myths. Miles' book will not make him a great deal of friends among the Kerouac enthusiasts, but it will force its readers to think twice before making trite statements about their idealised image of Kerouac.

While the recent biographies should give teachers of Kerouac's work some idea of the issues currently being debated by scholars [his homosexuality (Amburn); his mysticism (Christy); the myth of his compassion (Miles)], recently released recordings of people reading Kerouac, Kerouac reading, and a Kerouac CD-ROM should help make Kerouac an exciting figure to study in the twenty-first-century classroom. Along with web sites (the best being Levi Asher's "Literary Kicks" <http://www.charm.net/~brooklyn/LitKicks.html>) and listservs, numerous recordings of Kerouac's prose and poetry are available, from David Carradine's reading of *On the Road* (Penguin 1993) to Graham Parker's reading of *Visions of Cody* (Penguin 1996) to Allen Ginsberg's reading of *Mexico City Blues* (Shambhala 1996). Two of the best recordings of Kerouac's work are the tribute compact disc *Kerouac — kicks joy darkness* (Rykodisc 1997) and the reissue compact disc *Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* (Verve 1997).

Kerouac — kicks joy darkness is a tribute to Kerouac with readings by an eclectic group of artists ranging from Beats (Ginsberg, Burroughs, Ferlinghetti), to writers inspired by the Beats (Hunter S. Thompson), to pop singers (Michael

Stipe, Steven Tyler), to movie actors (Johnny Depp, Matt Dillon). The band Morphine wrote an original song for the disc, Joe Strummer (formerly of the punk band The Clash) provides music to accompany a recording of Kerouac reading his poetry, and the comedian Richard Lewis, providing the biggest surprise on the disc, gives an outstanding reading of Kerouac sounding more like the Beat writer than any of the other performers. One of the more exciting readings comes from Johnny Depp, who reportedly bought one of Kerouac's raincoats for \$15,000, as he gives a haunting rendition of "Madroad driving..." from the introduction Kerouac wrote for Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959). The selections for this disc are excellent, many of them never before published, and they include poetry, prose, essays, and letters. While it is often difficult to get students excited about literature in this highly visual age, the admiration many current music and film personalities have for the Beats helps students make connections with literature and, I have found, sometimes interests students in the writers the Beats found exciting — Rimbaud, William Blake, and Walt Whitman.

Kerouac's concern with how his prose and poetry sound makes hearing his work read aloud beneficial for students. Fortunately, there are a number of excellent recordings of Kerouac reading his own work. The reissue of *Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* provides teachers with the rhythm of Kerouac's reading voice to give their students some idea of how Kerouac hoped his audience would hear his work. Kerouac has one of those distinctive voices that makes it difficult not to hear him, after first experiencing the cadence of his voice, while reading his work. This reissue is superbly packaged to look like a postcard folder with photographs and liner notes by Allen Ginsberg explaining the significance of Kerouac's sound. The selections include Kerouac's often neglected poetry and pieces from *The Subterraneans* and *Visions of Cody*. These recordings from the 1958 album of the same title were also reissued as part of *The Jack Kerouac Collection* (Rhino 1990), but the packaging makes this CD worth purchasing again, and it is an excellent sample of Kerouac's reading for those who do not wish to purchase all three of the reissued recordings released by Rhino Records.

Even more exciting is the CD-ROM which provides teachers with their greatest resource to date. While the focus of *A Jack Kerouac ROMnibus* is Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, the scope and quality of the information make it an extremely useful source for dealing with any of Kerouac's works. A gallery section provides photographs of Kerouac, his friends, his family, and various people who influenced his work and his life, as well as paintings by Kerouac. The *ROMnibus* will even present a slide show of its collection of pictures and portraits. For those who enjoy audio stimulus along with the visual, the CD-ROM provides brief video clips

of people discussing Kerouac's work and life. Dr. Ann Charters from the University of Connecticut is the literary consultant for the *ROMnibus* and is the most featured speaker. Even more impressive is being able to see and hear Kerouac read from his appearance on *The Steve Allen Show* from 1959. Another section provides samples of Kerouac's work from *The Town and the City*, *Visions of Cody*, *San Francisco Blues*, *Mexico City Blues*, and *The Subterraneans*, read by Ann Charters, Graham Parker, Michael McClure, and Kerouac himself. Snippets of classical music, blues and jazz that inspired Kerouac's work are also provided. A chronology of Kerouac's life from his birth in 1922 to his death in 1969, with brief accounts of the significance of each year to Kerouac and the world, helps contextualize Kerouac for users unfamiliar with the time period (this is more of a quick reference than a substantial historical source, though). Charters' essay on the Beat Generation adds a strong literary context to the historical context. Kerouac's relation to various writers and figures associated with the Beat Generation and the San Francisco Renaissance is displayed on a page which provides short biographies. The weakest part the CD-ROM is the superficial connections made among these figures in various ways (Buddhism, relationships, broken relationships, romances, mentors, publishing, and cohabitation), but it may provide some users with a basic sense of how these people were part of each others' lives.

The most outstanding feature of the *ROMnibus* is the complete text of *The Dharma Bums*. The screens are very easy to read. Page numbers and chapter numbers are provided along with a tremendous amount of text, audio, visual, and video links. A user can learn that Han Shan, to whom Kerouac dedicate the novel, was a Zen poet whose poems appeared in the latter years of the T'ang dynasty and whose name means "Cold Mountain." The Six Gallery poetry reading, which is depicted in the novel and which was the first time Allen Ginsberg read his famous poem "Howl," is also discussed. One can even hear Ginsberg read the dedication and first lines of "Howl." A few of the major highlights which seem particularly beneficial to students reading *The Dharma Bums* are the videos of Charters discussing the book and the videos of Gary Snyder, the inspiration for Japhy Ryder, the main character in the novel, discussing his experiences with Kerouac and his opinions of the book. Although the information provided does not replace secondary sources for quality or quantity of information, the links enhance the pleasure of the text and explicate various parts that most readers of the paperback novel would simply ignore.

With all of the new material related to Kerouac already available and much more to be issued in the first few years of the twenty-first century, teachers may become a bit overwhelmed when trying to choose the best pieces for their class-

rooms. The glut of material should make teachers interested in using multimedia presentations wary of choosing simply any title with Kerouac's name on it. Yet the variety of materials should make Kerouac one of the most enjoyable writers to teach in a multimedia setting. While scholars continue to debate Kerouac's place in the American literary canon, the current marketing blitz of Kerouac material should make it clear that his popularity itself demands that scholars and teachers take notice. ❀

Notes

¹ See the *San Francisco Weekly* July 29-August 4, 1998 article by Jack Boulware (12-22) for an extended discussion of the recent controversy over the Kerouac literary estate.

² At the 1995 Kerouac conference at New York University, Gregory Corso made reference to this incident when he off-handedly remarked that Kerouac was "murdered." Both Amburn and Miles make reference to the event, but only Christy emphasizes its contribution to Kerouac's death.

³ Like some previous Kerouac biographies, Christy's claims that Joan Burroughs "dared" William Burroughs to shoot a glass off her head the night she was accidentally murdered by her husband, despite Ted Morgan's *Literary Outlaw* (1988) clearly showing that William was the instigator of the tragic event. Christy also claims that Kerouac was completely against the idea of cashing in on James Dean's automobile accident as part of the movie version of *On the Road*, which the producer wanted to end with Dean Moriarty dying in a wreck like the teen icon. The recent selection of journal entries in the November 1998 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* edited by Douglas Brinkley (49-76) show that Kerouac was not averse to the idea.