



Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats

Barry Miles

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More than forty years after the publication of *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac is more widely read and revered by a new generation than ever before. Why this is so is the subject of Barry Miles's fresh and revealing portrait of the writer who is the acknowledged leader of the Beats, the group of writers that included Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and Gary Snyder, who together influenced the direction of writing and culture more than any group of artists since England's Bloomsbury.

Drawing on Kerouac's close friendship and conversations with Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, Miles offers provocative new insights into both the exuberance and the dismay of Kerouac, a man full of contradictions who was surprisingly conventional despite his longing to rebel. The Kerouac who emerges is deeper, darker, and more fascinating than any we've ever known. Kerouac is now an icon, an image, an attitude, and Barry Miles convincingly conveys his longing for greatness and the consequences of achieving it.

Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats Details

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From Reader Review Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats for online ebook

Keith says

Most overrated writer/movement ever? Maybe. These guys are just fuck-ups. Silver spoon kids (mostly) with really high IQs, who lacked work ethic, self control, and integrity/morals. Why do people suck off the Beats so much? Is it because they did so many drugs? Wow. Super. Is it because they all slept with each other and homosexuality is interesting and cool? Fuck off. Is it because they went on road trips? I went on a road trip. Is it because Kerouac wanted to fuck his mom and Oedipus complexes are so interesting and relevant? In a 20th century context, sorry, but Oedipus complexes are just disgusting.

There's a lot of revisionist history associated with the Beats. Why their lifestyle is so romanticized now is beyond me.

Jeff says

Kerouac was a worse guy than I realized. And his mom was a real ballbuster.

Dona says

I thought this was a really good biography in that it was well-researched, thorough, annotated, interesting and honest. Miles did his homework and also consulted valuable primary sources such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, themselves. He also included fair criticism of Kerouac's writing which made me more interested to read some of the works that I have overlooked. That being said, parts of this book were very difficult to read. Although I'm always irritated with writers who canonize Kerouac, I don't know if I was ready to read graphic accounts of his deterioration into alcoholism, replete with blow by blow descriptions of racism (he once got his 14 year old nephew to burn a cross they'd erected between a white and black neighborhood--while drunkenly screaming racial slurs) and misogyny. Miles attributes many of Kerouac's demons to an unresolved Oedipal conflict and a really disturbed, enabling and abusive mother, who, in essence, trapped him in a perpetual state of infantilism. While this analysis is well-supported and fascinating, I think Miles could at least have given a nod to the possibility that Kerouac was mentally ill and never got the treatment he needed (given his years of self-medicating with alcohol).

David Rullo says

Barry Miles presents a warts and all biography of the Beat Generation's most famous novelist. In fact, Miles biography, while 100% correct and 100% accurate, is the most negative or realist biography I've read of Kerouac and I think I've read them all.

Let's face it, Kerouac was never the man people thought and still he was. In his later years he was conservative, racist, an alcoholic, isolated by his lifestyle and the way he treated people and a horrible father. Miles doesn't hide any of this from the reader. He touches on the abuse that Ginsberg endured but if I was editing, I probably would have presented more of that.

What this bio doesn't do is explain why an asshole like Kerouac clearly was inspired a legion of people around him to maintain their loyalty and remain friends with him (except William Burroughs) nor does it give enough of a picture of why at least his first three or four books are considered masterpieces and used as a guide for life by whole generations of young people.

Miles does present Kerouac as a complicated, fractured person--a better author than a man, but much of his work is ignored, most of his poetry for example, however, given when the book was written, the vaults weren't yet open with a new Kerouac work making its way every few years on the market as they are now.

I would definitely recommend this book, especially if you think the Kerouac lifestyle is one you'd like to replicate.

Robin Friedman says

A Tarnished King

Barry Miles' biography "Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats" (1999) is part of an unceasing flow of writings about Kerouac and about the Beat movement which he helped to inspire. Miles's book is valuable because it explains why people continue to read Kerouac and the beats and also focuses on the limitations of the movement, I think, through discussion of Kerouac as a person.

Kerouac was first and foremost a writer. Miles' book emphasizes this. It discusses virtually each of Kerouac's major works, and minor works as well, in the context of his life -- when, precisely, they were written, what they are about, and where each book fits, in Miles's usually well-considered opinion, in Kerouac's work as a whole. Such writing is more the purview of literary criticism than biography but Miles does it well and it is needed in a consideration of Kerouac's life and work. He focuses on the spiritual side of the beats, their quarrel with conformity, materialism, and repressed sexuality, and their emphasis on feeling and the expression of feeling. Miles properly places Kerouac in the romantic tradition of literature and within American Romanticism in particular as a follower, most immediately, of Thomas Wolfe.

Miles does not spare Kerouac the man, in a discussion that should discourage any tendency to hero-worship or mystification. Kerouac was selfish and inconsiderate of others, adolescent at the core, unduly attached to his mother, on the far fringes of the American right (although he probably deserves to be praised for not adopting the hippie, ultra-left, anti United States attitude of his followers and colleagues), and lead a destructive life, to his own talents and to the lives of people who loved him and had a right to depend upon him, such as his daughter.

As a writer, Kerouac emerges in the book as a person of talent with a vision of American life that is valuable (though hardly unique, I think). He wrote well but too much and too carelessly and too much under the influence of drugs. He also, as Miles suggests was overly dogmatic and rigid in his use of spontaneous prose.

The beats were a unique literary movement and Kerouac was an integral part of it. His books, I think will

continue to be read and valued not for the most part as literary masterpieces, but as expressing the mood of a generation. There is much in them that is worthwhile. Miles' portrait of Kerouac and his work is judicious. It also encourages the reader to explore Kerouac's writings for his or herself, which is the goal of any good biography of a writer.

Robin Friedman

Johannes Hadi says

i wanted to know the person behind the icon before picking up any of Kerouac's books and this book did well to bring me up to speed on the Beat Generation and all its accompanying ideals - literary and philosophical.

author was highly objective in his portraiture of the man (read: harshly critical) and to be frank, i don't have a very good impression of Kerouac after reading this book. am possibly more curious about his contemporaries like Ginsberg or Burroughs. also, i am a massive Bukowski fan, so that's that.

will still continue to pursue Kerouac's work together with the rest of Beat Generation literature due to a personal interest in this period in American history with all its growing pains and teething problems, but i'm clearly not romanticizing it as much as i do Bukowski.

Simon Powell says

Very well written, but a book I found hard to read at times, if only because the subject comes across as such a turd of a man, especially in the treatment of his daughter. However, it is not just about the artist, but the art as well, and the author is fair and balanced, praising the good stuff, constructively criticising the bad and spending some time analysing the place of Kerouac in modern American literature, not just as a Beat writer.

Essential for anyone interested in Kerouac or any of the other fascinating characters in his life, such as Allen Ginsberg or William Burroughs, and I look forward to reading the biographies of those two that Barry Miles has written.

Amy says

Pretty dry bio...I'm going to look for a more fun bio to read. I love Kerouac, and Miles kind of drags him in the dust.

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

I was obsessed with Kerouac during my first two years of high school. I reread this book a couple years ago and generally enjoyed it but not with the same feeling of admiration for the man that I had at 15.

A well done biography nonetheless.

Weston says

Certainly ruins your image of Kerouac as the cool and lovable mofo but incredibly interesting nonetheless

Rachel Skye says

Update as of later.

Neil says

I found this to be a brutal look at the famous writer of On The Road and an interesting insight into his works beyond that. It doesn't encourage you to pursue his works.

Bill says

sgsfgsdfgsdfgsdfgsdfgsfg

Outofunetoo says

Pretty brutal look at a tortured soul.

John says

An entertaining biography of a reprehensible human being who showed flashes of incredible literary talent.
