

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, March 5, 2013

Hosts: Jennie Kammen and Katherine LaCroix

Novel: *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac

Papers:

Biographical: Bob Jackson

Critical: Joyce Kessler

On a clear, cold, almost-spring evening, about twenty members of The Novel Club of Cleveland gathered at the home of Katherine LaCroix. After the characteristically congenial opening refreshments, the meeting was called to order by Katherine LaCroix, in the absence of the President and Vice President. Guest Kevin LaCroix was introduced. Committee reports were invited. Jane Hammond noted that the Program Committee's selection of eighteen suggested titles for next season had been distributed via email earlier in the week. Anyone who hasn't received the list should check email spam filters. [The spam filter investigation is also recommended to anyone who is not receiving regular Evites to monthly meetings.] Minutes from the February meeting were presented, and were accepted as read.

Bob Jackson delivered the biographical paper.

Jack Kerouac has been known as a bigoted, drunken, anti-Semitic, bisexual who enjoyed women. Born in 1922 to a lower-class family of French Canadian extraction, he died of cirrhosis in 1967 at the age of 47. Although he did **not** invent or name the Beat generation, he was promoted by Allen Ginsberg as representing both the good and the bad of that group, seen as successors of the earlier "lost generation." After the success of *On the Road* Kerouac didn't handle fame well, and descended into alcoholism; youtube clips of his drunken rantings during several television guest spots are available for viewing now. Throughout his career, Ginsberg continued to think Kerouac was a great writer, whereas William S. Burroughs in contrast thought Kerouac was a user and exploiter of others.

At an early age Kerouac seemed to have helped his family by getting a football scholarship to Columbia University, but things went wrong there—Kerouac lost his scholarship, his father lost his business, and all went downhill for the family. Jack unsuccessfully tried the military, then entered the Merchant Marine. When not sailing, he hung out with Columbia students of whom his parents did not approve, including Allen Ginsberg. His first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), earned him respect but not fame. He took some cross-country trips with Neal Cassady, and experimented with writing about them in

unedited format on rolls of paper. He got seven years of rejections before *On the Road* was finally published in 1957. He eventually found enlightenment via Zen, and wrote about this in *The Dharma Bums*.

Ultimately, Ginsberg said, Kerouac was not a nice person, and became especially mean when drunk. *On the Road* was finally published partly because other Beat generation writers identified Kerouac as the most talented among them—but Kerouac did not deal well with sudden celebrity. His moral and spiritual decline in the next few years was shocking, and he was hurt by the rejection of Beat culture as a fad. Pursuing the wild image of his *On the Road* years, he developed a severe drinking problem which he tried unsuccessfully to control. His last novel, *Big Sur*, as well as other later works showed him lost in his own disillusionment. As the Beat generation faded and the hippie movement gained attention, Kerouac took conservative, anti-hippie political positions. He returned to Catholicism late in life, though his Buddhist-tinged Catholicism was unorthodox. He married three times, and lived with his third wife and his mother in Florida during the last part of his life. His life and work were influenced by jazz musicians. He continues to be written about, by critics with both positive and negative responses.

Joyce Kessler delivered the critical paper, “A Bit Further Down the Road,” starting with a question as to whether this work is worthy of being called an American novel. Is it, as some think, a narrative that captures the spirit of an American age? Or is it more a portrait of a “disjointed part of society,” which “promises a revelation” but fails to deliver on the promise?

Joyce noted that the recent rise of interest in Kerouac has more to do with his role as cultural icon than with his writing. But what standard of novelistic importance is relevant to *On the Road*? Joyce quoted Jane Smiley’s declaration that “Since *Don Quixote*, the essential subject of the novel has been geography” and Richard Chase’s assertion that the American novel has “defined itself by incorporating an element of romance.” These two elements are present in *On the Road*, but perhaps more important is the novel’s relation to cultural developments in mid-20th-century America, including the rise of the Beat poets and artists with their protests against the materialism and homogeneity of post-World War II culture.

A pair of characters (here, Sal and Dean) each looking for his own revelation is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in literature (Don Quixote and Sancho come to mind, Ishmael and Ahab, Huck and Jim, and many other pairs). If *Don Quixote* ends with a denial of the Holy Grail’s existence, does *On the Road* end with a similar denial of the “IT” sought by Sal and Dean, while still leaving a “hopeful afterimage of ...sympathy for the dispossessed, the hinted potential” of idealistic dreams?

Discussion centered on questions provided by Joyce:

1.Q: What understanding of the Beat generation does this novel give its readers? Do we have a broad sense of what is included in the term “Beat”? Do you think that Kerouac wrote the book to explain or justify the Beats?

Comments here suggested that the novel was about real people, but a certain non-mainstream group promulgating a new morality which saw irresponsibility as a positive characteristic—detached, living in the moment, unmotivated, perhaps existential. The “Beat” label hadn’t yet arisen while Kerouac was writing the book, but his writing seems related to gallery art developments of the 1950s as both reject the materialism and homogeneity of the 30s and 40s. As to meanings of the term, included were references to --“beat”= beaten down? “beat”= musical beat of jazz? “beat”=beatific [all of the above mentioned by Kerouac in recorded interviews].

2. Q (abbreviated): In re: Sal’s opinions of East v West—What is Sal trying to discover in the West? What excites him about the East? Do his distinctions resonate? **Comments** in this segment of the discussion ranged from noting that Sal’s distinctions between East and West are meaningless because he can’t stay put **anywhere** to a suggestion that the West represents the American urge to dominate the continent, as well as general American restlessness, and that the book in its energy and vulgarity suggests parallels to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Maybe, some suggested, *On the Road* is more of a document than a novel—a really important fragment or artifact about history, but not particularly a work of art.

3. Q: How does this novel speak to the high social value of the car in the 1950s? **Comments:** Cars are still worshipped now, but the 50s are likely when cars started to be **really** important. Ironically, the car was part of 1950s middle-class conventional success, yet in this book it becomes representative of rebellion against all of that.

4. Q: Is Old Dean Moriarty a figment in this novel’s imaginative arc? [Does he represent] a profound aspect of American character, or is he literally the lost paternal figure in Dean’s lost mind? **Comment:** He really comes into foreground in the end of the novel, as the lost father haunting both Dean and Sal.

5. Q: What do Sal or any of Dean’s women see of value in Dean? **Comments:** He is charismatic...possibly bi-polar? He is “a sick dude,”but he kept going—and a character like that generally will, as long as he has a support network.

Over all, there were strong differences of opinion on this book, from the idea that it is a descendant of *Don Quixote* and a precursor of the now-thriving genres of creative nonfiction and hybrid fiction, to the suggestion that it is an important document but not really literary art, to the notion that it is “quite a

terrible book written by a terrible boy.” When ten p.m. arrived, the meeting adjourned and members continued their conversations over last visits to the refreshment table and on their ways out the door.