breast cancer, a few years after Ostriker. Some, only some, of the contemporary American writers who are living with, or who have succumbed to, breast cancer are, in no particular order: Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Susan Sontag, Maxine Kumin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Penelope Austin, Edith Konecky, Hilda Raz, Patricia Goedicke, June Jordan, myself; black, white, Jewish; fat, thin and middling; lesbian, straight (and middling); childless and multiparous “And”—to borrow the title of a poem by Melvin Dixon about friends lost to AIDS—"These Are Just a Few."

The Crack in Everything: Is it a shift in the earth’s tectonic plates, the purposeful Zen flaw in a ceramic vase that individualizes its perfection, the long pink keolied ridge on a newly flat chest? All of the above. This is not a polemic, a book with an aim, a recovery manual. It reaffirms the poet’s unique and contradictory role, at once storyteller and witness, s/he who makes of language not a prison but a prism, refracting and re-combining the spectrum of human possibilities.

Dharma Bum

ANN DOUGLAS


"Why did I dignify their madness? Why does everything else seem spiritually impoverished?" asks Paul Hobbes, the troubled middle-class narrator of Go (1952), the first novel about the Beat Generation. Hobbes was a self-portrait of the author, John Clellon Holmes, who had met Jack Kerouac in New York in 1948 and fallen in love with him. “He was the only man I ever loved. He changed my life irrevocably,” he said later.

The Beat movement was about gender-bending and sexual “deviance,” as it was then called. Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs were openly gay in an age that equated homosexuality with communism and other un-American proclivities, and the more or less heterosexual Kerouac, like his womanizing alter ego Neal Cassidy, had intermittent homosexual experiences. But Holmes was not gay, nor interested in sexual experimentation; he was drawn rather by Kerouac’s “eye for the sad non-nonsense of life,” his “charisma” and “fraternal warmth,” his extraordinary gift for empathy. Ginsberg, who met Kerouac in 1944, early realized that “if I actually confessed the secret tendencies of my soul, he would understand nakedly who I was.” Like Ginsberg, Holmes believed fiercely in Kerouac’s gift; no other writer, he thought, had found a language “commensurate” with their times, and he regretted until his own death from cancer in 1988 that Kerouac “remained an essentially unknown element in our literature.”

Perhaps I cite these tributes because I am sometimes hard put to explain why I

Ann Douglas, the author of Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (Noonday), is working on a cultural history of the cold war.
looking—Salvador Dali later proclaimed him “more beautiful than Marlon Brando”—and extremely smart, he was a dedicated, at moments brilliant, athlete, a star in track, baseball and football. Recruited by Columbia’s football coach, he came to New York in 1939, first to Horace Mann, then to Columbia, but left school for good in 1944. He had already met Allen Ginsberg, then a student at Columbia; Herbert Huncke, the drug-addict con man of Times Square who introduced the word “beat” to Kerouac’s circle; and the sophisticated William Burroughs, who set his younger friends on a course of Spengler, Kafka, Gide and Céline. Burroughs proved far more influential than any of Kerouac’s professors; as Ginsberg explained, “college was the American Empire, and this was the decline of Empire.” Neal Cassady, the charismatic, fast-talking “jail kid” from Colorado, who became the inspiration for Dean Moriarty in On the Road and Cody Pomeray in Visions of Cody (1960), arrived in New York in 1946, shortly after the death of Kerouac’s father, Leo. With the addition of Gregory Corso to the Beats in 1951, Kerouac’s cast of characters was complete.

After serving sporadically in the Navy and merchant marine in World War II (he had serious difficulties with military discipline), Kerouac began to crisscross the country with Cassady, drinking, taking drugs (largely Benzedrine, then legal), talking to hundreds of significant strangers and having affairs with many women, including a Mexican migrant worker he portrayed, as “Terry” in On the Road and the hip African-American Alene Lee, the original of “Mardou Fox” in The Subterraneans. Kerouac married three times, producing a daughter (the lately deceased writer Jan Kerouac) by his second marriage. Jan, however, didn’t speak to her father until she was a teenager, and Kerouac never acknowledged that he had a child. The Beat revolt, as Barbara Ehrenreich has noted in The Hearts of Men (1984), was a masculine one, a protest against conventional fifties suburban life and breadwinner roles for men. Even those Beats who spent most of their adult lives as husbands and fathers, as Cassady did, never entered the marriage plot, never defined themselves primarily as family men. Kerouac, in any case, had room for only one woman in his life—his immensely shrewd and compelling mother, Gabrielle, who supported him by working in shoe factories until the late fifties.

Kerouac’s first novel, The Town and the City, a conventional, autobiographical Bildungsroman written in ecstatic Wolfian prose, was published in 1950 to respectable reviews and no sales. Although he wrote nine novels and two books of poetry in the next six years, he was unable to find a publisher for his work until Malcolm Cowley persuaded Viking to publish On the Road in 1957. Inspired by the stream-of-consciousness methods of Joyce, the anarchic extremes of Melville’s most experimental prose and, above all, the breathtaking stylistic innovations of his idol, the great bop pioneer Charlie Parker, Kerouac had embarked in 1951 on what he called “spontaneous prose,” a virtually unpunctuated and unrevised flux of images and words, a kind of performance art designed to capture the oral tradition on the written page. In his words, he had submitted himself to the “heart-breaking discipline of the veritable fire ordeal when you can’t go back...all of it innocent go-ahead confession...making the mind the slave of the tongue with no chance to lie or re-elaborate.” He wanted his work to read like a private letter made public, to de-
liver “telepathic shock and meaning-excitement.” “Spontaneous prose” was a protest against the calculated sterilities of academic poetry and the cerebral pseudo-profundities of the New York intellectuals, a desperate wager that uncensored self-expression—“first thought, best thought”—could not only produce great art but save a nation drowning, as he saw it, in hypocrisy, deception and falsehood.

Kerouac had his own methods of revision, using his copious journals and letters as rehearsal space; but only someone as genuinely naïve and totally self-involved as he was could have been so unprepared for the deluge of criticism that greeted *On the Road* and its sequels over the next ten years. He had told the literary establishment that there was no truth, no meaning and no hope in their polished phrases and brilliant ideas; in turn, they called him a “Know-Nothing Bohemian” (Norman Podhoretz) and the “la-trine laureate of Hobohemia” (Time). Kerouac tried to explain on television that he was “waiting for God to show his face.” He went on writing to the end, but dazed and embittered by what he saw as abuse—frantically trying to draw on inner reserves of fortitude long since depleted and perhaps always scant—he retreated further and further into alcoholism and despair. His writing lost its power; with grim determination, he finally drank himself to death in October 1969 while he was living with his third wife, Stella, and, of course, his mother in Florida.

It’s one hell of a story, the kind of nightmare version of the American dream that has always played well in this country, and it has produced some extraordinary biographical tributes, most notably Holmes’s essay “The Great Rememberer” in *Representative Men* (1988), Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters* (1983), Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee’s *Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography* (1978) and Jack Kerouac: *A Chicken Essay* (1972), a dazzlingly insightful homage by a fellow French Canadian, the novelist Victor-Lévy Beaulieu. We also now have the first volume of Kerouac’s *Selected Letters* (1995), edited by Ann Charters.

Unfortunately, Kerouac’s ethos of unguardedness, the apparent casualness with which some of his books seem to have landed between covers (as Seymour Krim put it), has occasionally served as justification for equal laxity in biographers infinitely less gifted as writers and, I might add, as researchers than he.

In *Angelheaded Hipster*, Steve Turner, a British rock-and-roll journalist who has written books on Van Morrison and Eric Clapton, supplies the biographical text for a wealth of photographs illustrating Kerouac’s life, some of them new to the public eye. Here is a photograph of Kerouac’s lover Alene, who chose to withhold her identity as “Mardou Fox” until her death in 1994. Turner has had access to the unpublished autobiography of Kerouac’s first wife, Edie Parker; he offers fresh insights into Kerouac’s pop culture influences (particularly *The Shadow* stories he devoured as a boy); and he announces a welcome emphasis on Kerouac’s spiritual quest. Kerouac can be understood only if he is seen as, in his own words, “a strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic.” “Life is drenched with spirit,” he wrote a friend; “it rains spirit. We would suffer were it not so.” Yet Turner never really discusses Kerouac’s work as art (though he mines it for biographical information), nor does he analyze his style. He appears surprised that Kerouac could dislike the ethos of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, a travesty of Kerouac’s own, and he does not
know that James Dean couldn’t have been invited to a 1957 Allen Ginsberg reading, since he died in 1955.

Given the avowed slightness of his enterprise, it is hardly surprising that Turner makes no attempt to situate Kerouac in his historical era. Yet Kerouac’s belief in heroically uncensored subjectivity and “100% personal honesty” makes little sense outside its cold war context and the drastic restriction of information it entailed. In 1946, Lewis Mumford, protesting the Bikini bomb tests, wrote that “the President, the generals, the admirals, and the administrators have lied to us... they have lied by their statements and even more they have lied by their silences.” The title of Mumford’s piece, published in The Saturday Review of Literature, was “Gentlemen, You Are Mad!” Kerouac, too, was quite sure “the world was crazy,” and his ambition was to break its silences. Like Ginsberg and Corso, he was attempting to declassify human experience in the age that invented classified information. In a world where little was left to chance, amid creeds of preparedness and ever-encroaching tactics of surveillance, he asked, “What’s in store for me in the direction I don’t take?”

There’s a palpable streak of infantilism in Kerouac’s work, and it can degenerate into banal and self-indulgent formlessness, badly in need of just the kind of editing Kerouac refused. But maturity, the mania of cold war policy-makers and psychologists, held much the same dangers for him that integration posed for James Baldwin. “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” Baldwin asked. Or a “national security” state?

Kerouac belongs to the early stages of the cold war, to what the critic Andreas Huyssen calls “the pre-history of postmodernism,” an era of creative rebellion that produced a group of charismatic Third World leaders abroad and at home, bop, rhythm and blues, the Actors Studio, the Beats and the civil rights movement. Kerouac lived to see the cultural complications of postmodernism proper, though, of course, he didn’t use the term. In Vanities of Duluoz (1968), an angry, defeated but indispensable book, he dated the shift with typical precision to 1962 and the advent of the phrase, “You’re putting me on.” What was new was not that people lied but that people now assumed that everyone else was lying too; the adversarial position had disappeared, and truth-telling was not recognized except as another form of deceit. He was especially upset by a letter from a woman, a proto-deconstructionist apparently, who claimed that Kerouac had not written his books—that there were, in fact, no books, no “Jack Kerouac” at all. Did she think the books “just suddenly appeared on a computer?” he fumed. He is still sure that “lying is a sin... and being a false witness is a mortal sin.” His ground has been cut out from under him, but against the odds, he takes up the task of “true story” narrative yet again. “My name is Jack (‘Dufoz’) Kerouac and I was born in Lowell, Mass. on 9 Lupine Road on March 12, 1922.” Specific times and places, as I tell Columbia undergraduates trying to write in the Kerouac manner, provide the only anchor from which “spontaneous prose” can swing. “The object is set before the mind” is the first rule Kerouac gives the writer struggling for a breakthrough. “Details are the life of it.”

Kerouac seldom directly addressed the official events of his day, as Norman Mailer took the 1967 March on the Pentagon and the 1968 presidential conventions as literary subjects. But Hemingway, another key Kerouac influence, didn’t directly portray the new technological and psychological horrors of the Great War (of which he was a veteran) in his masterpiece In Our Time (1924), either. Rather, he translated the war’s meaning into a new literary style—bare, understated and eloquent—that reflected the realities the war represented; he alone got the new rhythms and knowledge of the age into language. So, twenty-odd years later, in a very different war, with a very different but equally remarkable style, did Kerouac.

What Kerouac had to offer was his gift for expressiveness, the mobility, excitement and sheer vulnerability of his prose. Writing about “the forest dense[ing] like a room,” about “the clash of the streets beyond the window’s bare, soft sill” or “my tragic closet” with its “incontestable clothes,” he makes the reader his confidant, inviting her into a heartbreakingly intimate chronicle of words and events, an all-absorbing, haunted world, rapturous and magical, as obstreperous, funny, hopeful and infinitely sad as our own bodies. He answers in full that insatiable question—in what it really like?—justifying the greed on which reading depends.

Kerouac once said that he wrote not from his imagination but from what he read in “the face of the person who opens the door,” out of compassion for “some one going beyond the street lamp into the dark.” Read his best books—Doctor Sax, On the Road, Visions of Gerard, The Subterraneans and Big Sur. You may become sure, as I am, that you are that person opening the door, going past the street lamp into the dark.
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.