

On the Collecting Road with Writers of the Beat Generation

By Donald W. Miller, Jr.

Presented at the Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies Annual Symposium, Seattle, Washington May 13, 2006

Slide 1

The Beat Generation launched a movement in the 1940s that has had a telling effect on our culture. This generation of young Americans, seeing the ovens of Auschwitz and what atomic bombs did, sought escape and enlightenment through sex, drugs, modern jazz, and Eastern mysticism.

They also wrote books, most notably *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, and *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs. This year is the 50th anniversary of *Howl*. The golden anniversary of *On the Road* will be celebrated next year and that of *Naked Lunch*, in 2009.

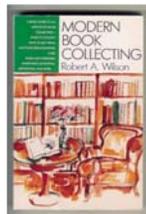
Slide 2: Mary Lyde Williams



My interest in collecting books by the Beat Generation came about this way: Under the spell of my great-grandmother, Mary Lyde Williams, I succumbed to the “gentle madness of loving books” at an early age. Mary Lyde was born less than a year after the Civil War ended, in North Carolina. She was an artist and a bibliophile. When I was growing up my family would visit her each summer, and I always looked forward to spending time with her in her library. She died in 1959, when I was 18 years old.

Following Mary Lyde’s example, I first started collecting books about the Civil War.

Slide 3: The Wilson 50



Then, in 1980, I read *Modern Book Collecting*, by Robert Wilson, proprietor of the Phoenix Book Shop in New York. Along with covering the basics of book collecting, it contains his own list of the fifty most important and influential books of American literature published after World War II—from 1945 to 1980.

Slide 4: Titles in the Wilson 50



I began collecting the 50 titles on his list. These are some of them (the handout has the complete list). With a cover price ranging from \$2.50 to \$4.00, today first editions of the books in near fine condition on this row are priced in four figures, and the titles here, in five figures

Slide 5: Beat Literature in the Wilson 50

I was particularly interested to find that 12 of the titles in the Wilson 50 were by Beat writers, 9 books of poetry and 3 novels. I read *On the Road* when it was published; and it induced me to

spend the summer before going to medical school, in 1961, hitchhiking around Europe. I studied art and, saxophone in hand, played with jazz groups in clubs on the Left Bank in Paris and in Munich. Already inclined in that direction, Robert Wilson helped launch me on the collecting road with the Beats.

Slide 6: Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs

The Beat movement began in 1944 when Kerouac and Ginsberg, at Columbia University, met William Burroughs, a Harvard graduate who was ten years their senior. (This photograph of Burroughs is from the Harvard yearbook.)

Slide 7: On Riverside Drive

Here they are carvorting on Riverside Drive—and Burroughs is tutoring Kerouac.

Slide 8: Neal Cassady



For Kerouac and Ginsberg, the inspiration and guiding light of the movement was Neal Cassady. They met him in 1946 when he came to New York to visit a friend at Columbia. Neal was raised in the slums of Denver by a quote wino hobo unquote father, his mother having died when he was an infant. He was a live wire—as Kerouac puts it, a sinner but also a kind man who always picked up the worst helpless hitch hikers he could find.

Slide 9: Ginsberg, Cassady, and *Howl*



In Ginsberg's *Howl*, Neal Cassady is "N.C.," the "secret hero of these poems," whose ultimate purpose in "ecstatic and insatiate" copulation is to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

The Beat movement started in New York, but when Cassady settled in San Francisco with his wife Kerouac and Ginsberg went there to see him.

Side 10: Six Gallery Reading



On October 7, 1955 Beat writers in San Francisco held their first poetry reading, at the Six Gallery. It was a signal event in the history of American letters. Ginsberg read *Howl*. Kerouac and Cassady were there, urging the poets on and passing around jugs of wine. Describing the event in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac writes, "I followed the whole gang of howling poets to the reading...that night, which was, among other things, the night of the birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. Everyone was there."

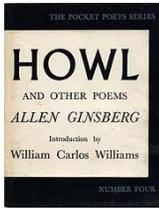
The *New York Times* sent Richard Eberhart, who was the Poet in Residence at Dartmouth College when I was a student there, to write a report on this "Renaissance." In an article titled "West Coast Rhythms," published in the September 2, 1956 *New York Times Book Review*, he writes, "The most remarkable poem of the young group is *Howl*... a howl against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit."

Slide 11: City Lights Bookstore



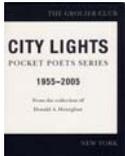
The City Lights Bookstore, run by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, was a magnet for Beat writers in San Francisco. Ferlinghetti published *Howl* in a first printing of 1,000 copies, printed in England, in October 1956. Sold only in San Francisco and New York, it attracted little notice until a second printing six months later was seized by U.S. Customs and local police arrested Ferlinghetti for publishing and selling obscene material. A highly publicized court trial followed, which ruled that the book was not obscene. As Ferlinghetti put it in an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "It is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed as obscene. The great obscene wastes of *Howl* are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalisms."

Slide 12: *Howl*



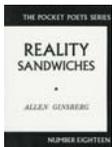
This pocket-sized, 44-page paperback cost 75 cents. Today a signed, first printing in fine condition is priced at more than 10,000 times its original cover price (\$7,500.00). The copy in my collection has the date of purchase, “10/10/56,” written at the bottom on the title page next to the owner’s name. Ginsberg was in New York at the time and probably signed it at the Eight Street Bookshop, which carried most of the copies sold in that city.

Slide 14: Pocket Poet Series



Howl is Number 4 in the City Lights’ Pocket Poet Series. Three other titles in the Series, shown here, are in the Wilson 50. Last year fellow collector Donald Heneghan exhibited his collection of all 56 titles in the Pocket Poet Series at the Grolier Club.

Slide 15: Other Ginsberg



These are three other important books by Allen Ginsberg. *Reality Sandwiches* contains “The Green Automobile,” a fantasy about Neal Cassady.

Slide 16: Dedication to *Howl*



Ginsberg tirelessly promoted his fellow beat writers, as this dedication for *Howl* shows: **To Kerouac**, who he called the new Buddha of American prose; **Burroughs**, whose Naked Lunch will drive everyone mad; **Cassady**; and Lucien Carr. Carr asked to have his name removed from the dedication, which Ginsberg did in later printings. This heretofore underground movement now entered its public phase, which lasted until the Vietnam War began in 1965.

Slide 17: Cassady and *On the Road*



Neal Cassady is the central character in *On the Road*. Kerouac writes that he is “tremendously excited with life” and generates “a kind of holy lightning...flashing from his excitement and his visions.” Named Dean Moriarty in the novel, Kerouac says he has “got the secret we are all trying to find.” He is “the HOLY GOOF” and “a new American Saint.”

Slide 18: *On the Road*



Kerouac employed a writing style he termed “spontaneous bop prosody,” inspired by the improvisations of bop jazz musicians, notably Charlie Parker. He famously typed *On the Road* onto a 120-foot long scroll of Japanese tracing paper over a three week period. But in fact he spent years working on it, beginning with penciled notes in 3 x 5 inch pocket notebooks that he always carried with him. He prepared multiple drafts before typing the scroll and wrote other versions after the scroll that publishers rejected. One-fourth of the Kerouac Archive, now in the New York Public Library, is related to *On the Road*.

Gilbert Milstein wrote a glowing review of the book for *The New York Times*, calling it “an authentic work of art” and its publication “an historic occasion.” Most reviews, however, panned it, including one in the *New York Times Book Review* the following Sunday. This critic (David Dempsey) deplored the book’s

subject matter and claimed that what Kerouac called the Beat Generation was only a “sideshow” of “freaks.” Kerouac retorted, “the critics only noticed the freneticism and overlooked the mild Huckleberry Finn spinebone of the story.” He said *On the Road* a “sad and tender book... about goodhearted kids in pain of soul doing wild things out of desperation.”

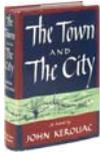
As it turns out, Milstein, a substitute reviewer for the *Times*, was right. *On the Road* arguably has had a greater impact on its readers than any other work of fiction in the 20th century. Booksellers in the UK, polled by Blackwell Online, rank it as one of the 50 Books that have had a significant and lasting impact on the world, alongside the *Bible*, the *Koran*, and Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex*.

Slides 18 and 19: Translations



It has been translated into 33 languages. These are some of the dust jackets for them. Interestingly, the Polish and Czech ones, for example, focus on the road itself, the Russian one on the booze, the Chinese one on the women, and the dust jacket for the Finnish translation, on Kerouac’s introspection.

Slide 20: *The Duluoz Legend* (Book 1)



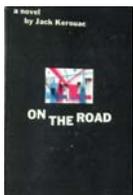
Kerouac’s novels are autobiographies in fictional form, like those by Goethe and the German romantic novelists. He called them his “true-story novels.” He wrote 14 novels that he viewed as “chapters” of “one vast book,” which he named *The Duluoz Legend*. Its central theme is the loss of life as it is lived, the end result being, as one of my cardiac surgery colleagues puts it, that “No one gets out of this life alive.”

The Town and the City serves as the prelude to *The Duluoz Legend*. In this novel, Kerouac, as Peter Martin, grows up in a working class home in a small mill town, weathers the death of his older brother, becomes a football hero, and goes off to an Ivy League college. At the end of the novel Peter renounces his athletic and educational ambition and sets out on a “long journey” seeking self-definition and spiritual enlightenment.



A letter from the publisher folded in my advance review copy of *The Town and the City* informs the reviewer that “This is a big, new novel by John Kerouac—a name you have never before heard—one of the most exciting new talents to come to American readers since Thomas Wolfe.”

Slide 21: *The Duluoz Legend* (Books 2 and 3)



The journey continues in *On the Road*. Gregory Stephenson describes it this way: “[For Kerouac] the journey is a quest, the road a mode of initiation. The objects of the quest (selfhood, love, God, community) are elusive; they are grails that appear and vanish, are recovered and lost again.” *Visions of Cody* was not published until after his death. It explores in greater detail his relationship with Neal Cassady (here named Cody Pomeray).

Slide 22: *The Duluoz Legend* (Book 4)



Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three, is the keystone of *The Duluoz Legend*. Kerouac's inspiration for it was the radio program, *The Shadow*. The book is about boyhood fantasies, growing up, confronting death, and dealing with pubescence and its attendant sexuality. Count Condu in the novel is a vampire. Doctor Sax is modeled on William Burroughs and himself. And there is a monstrous snake.



Fifteen years ago I had the opportunity to acquire Kerouac's own uncorrected page proof copy of *Doctor Sax*. It contains 14 textual corrections that he made and seven full-page drawings. Kerouac did the drawings in pencil and signed some of them with his French-Canadian name, "Jean Louis Kerouac." After completing *The Duluoz Legend* he had planned to stop writing and take up painting full-time.

Slide 23: Kerouac as Painter



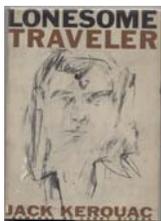
Two years ago the estate published a book of Kerouac's paintings and line drawings, which contain ones from his notebooks like this.

Slide 24: *The Duluoz Legend* (Books 5-7)



Novels 5-7 in the series deal with Kerouac's love affairs, beginning with Mary Carney, as Maggie Cassidy, his first love. .

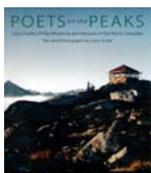
Slide 25: *The Duluoz Legend* (Books 8-11)



Visions of Gerard is about the life and death of his older brother, who died at the age of 9 from rheumatic fever when Jack was 4 years old; *The Dharma Bums* recounts the Six Gallery poetry reading and time Kerouac spent in Seattle. *Lonesome Traveler* is a collection of essays on traveling.

My copy of *Lonesome Traveler* is the one Kerouac gave to his sister Caroline on her birthday. It contains the inscription, "To My Sister Ti Nin [her family nickname], Happy Birthday, Jack, with 3 Xs." Kerouac lived with his sister and her family on and off while he was writing until her death four years later, from a heart attack. Now having lost both of his siblings, his biographer Gerald Nicosia writes, "For months afterward he wept almost daily." *Desolation Angels* comes next.

Slide 26: Poets on the Peak



Kerouac and two other Beat poets, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, spent time in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State where they lived in solitude manning fire lookouts. Kerouac spent a summer (63 days) in this one, on Desolation Peak. *Desolation Angels* focuses on his time alone there.

Slide 27: *The Duluoz Legend* (Books 12-14)



These are the last three “chapters” in *The Duluoz Legend*. *Big Sur* is a chronicle of Kerouac’s six weeks in California after leaving Desolation Peak. It deals with his alcoholism and his breakdown at Ferlinghetti’s cabin on the Pacific coast. As Gregory Stephenson puts it, alcohol was Kerouac’s “last refuge from and the remedy against the horror and pain of life.”

Satori in Paris is a pivotal work in *The Duluoz Legend* because it recounts Kerouac’s shift from Buddhism back to Christianity, with its emphasis on loving-kindness. In this book, Kerouac travels to France to learn the origin of the name “Kerouac.” As this quote from the book shows, he found that Ker means House and ouac, in the field.

Slide 28: *Satori in Paris*



Twenty-three years ago, I was fortunate to be able to acquire the original typed manuscript of *Satori in Paris*, along with its galley proofs and correspondence between Kerouac and the publisher.

Slide 29: *Satori in Paris-2*

Although Kerouac was drunk most of the time in 1965 when he wrote this book, and would die four years later from complications of alcoholism, he nevertheless paid close attention to how the book was being edited, as his correspondence with the publisher shows. He wrote, with regard to Galley 45, “Only important change I want to make, because my recent studies ... shows that Ker might mean stone or stone fortress, and ouac ‘on the sea.’ So stick this in, and in parentheses, to complete the book.” The published book does not incorporate this change.

Slide 30: *Satori in Paris-3*



He also didn’t like the dust jacket the publisher wanted to use, as he points out in this letter, citing the importance of art.

Slide 31: *The Duluoz Legend*

The last novel in the series, *Vanity of Duluoz* is the coda to the *Legend*. Kerouac, is off the road, married to the sister of a childhood friend, and, once again, embracing Catholicism. Kerouac ends the *Legend* with, “*Hix calix!*... ‘Here’s the chalice,’ and make sure there’s wine in it.”

Slide 32: Other books by Kerouac

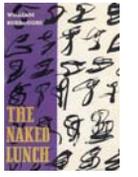
These are the other books that Kerouac wrote, which is in the handout. Only four of them, the ones in yellow, were published during his lifetime.

Slide 33: Specially Bound and Signed Editions of Kerouac’s Books



There are four specially bound and signed editions of Kerouac’s books that a collector will want to have, 2 lettered and 2 numbered editions.

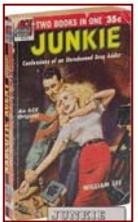
Slide 34: *The Naked Lunch*



The third book in the Beat triumvirate, William Burrough's *The Naked Lunch*, was published July, 1959 in France by Olympia Press, as number 76 in its English language "Travellers Companion Series." Six months later President Charles De Gaulle devalued the franc and issued a new franc worth 100 old francs. The first printing of *The Naked Lunch* (5,000 copies) has a green border on the title page and the price "1,500 Francs" printed on the back cover, above the disclaimer, "Not to be sold in the U.S.A. or U.K." Copies of the first printing that have the price in new francs stamped on the back cover, like mine, is a "Second Issue" of that printing. Grove Press published this book in the U.S. as *Naked Lunch* three years later.

On one level, *Naked Lunch* is a postmodern novel about drug addiction. But it is also, as Allen Ginsberg testified at the book's obscenity trial in Massachusetts, about addiction on a larger scale, namely, addiction to power, addiction to material goods, and addiction to controlling others. It weathered that trial, the last one held against a book in the United States and has become a modern classic.

Slide 35: Other Books by Burroughs



Three key books by Burroughs are *Junkie* (1953), his first novel, written under the pseudonym William Lee; *The Soft Machine* (1961), arguably his most important work, where he utilizes the "cut-up" method—the cutting up and rearranging of written material; and *Cities of the Red Night* (1981)

Slides 36-38: Other Beat Works

Other notable books of Beat poetry that Wilson did not include in his list are. Ferlinghetti's *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), Number 1 in the Pocket Poet series, Diane DiPrima's *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* (1958), and *Like I Say* (1960) by Philip Whalen. The first Beat novel, *Go* by John Clellon Holmes, published in 1952, is an essential title in a Beat collection, as are, among others, *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, and *The Holy Barbarians* by Lawrence Lipton. Another important thing to have, which is in the "C" section of Kerouac's bibliography, is his essay "The Origins of the Beat Generation" published in the June, 1959 issue of *Playboy*.

Slide 39: *Howl* Today

Relegated to the status of a literary artifact 25 years ago, *Howl* is now acknowledged to be one of the classic poems of the 20th century, as these recently published books attest. One can anticipate that books analyzing the literary and cultural significance of *Naked Lunch* will be published on its 50th anniversary three years from now.

Slide 40: *The Duluoz Legend*

Five years ago the executor of the Kerouac estate sold the scroll for *On the Road* at auction for \$2.43 million. Next year people will be celebrating the book's 50th anniversary, which will coincide with the release of Francis Ford Coppola's film version of it.

Western literature began with the Homeric epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Like Odysseus in Homer's poems, Kerouac in *The Duluoz Legend* is a restless adventurer that embarks on an epic journey—an Odyssean archetype of the indomitable wanderer in modern guise. On the 100th anniversary of *On the Road*,

bibliophiles will by then have put this book in its proper context as one chapter in *The Duluoz Legend*, which, in its entirety, will be celebrated as one of the great works of Western literature. The collecting road with writers of the Beat Generation has been an interesting journey so far, and it would appear that the journey has just begun.