

# **The Portable Beat Reader Study Guide**

## **The Portable Beat Reader by Various**

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# East Coast Beats and Jack Kerouac

## East Coast Beats and Jack Kerouac Summary

The book begins with a short introduction to the historical background of the Beat Generation written by editor Ann Charters. Charters writes that the Beat Generation started off as a very small literary movement in New York City, originally centered around Times Square. The Beats experiment with crime and drugs in an attempt to get outside of post-war American society, which the Beats see as fundamentally sick. The most important literary statement of the Beat Generation is Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," which renounces the cynicism of American intellectual life.

Charters begins the section on Jack Kerouac by giving some biographical information on Kerouac and explaining Kerouac's major works.

The excerpt from "On the Road" begins with Kerouac describing his first meeting with Neal Cassady known as Dean Moriarty in the book. Kerouac finds Dean immediately intriguing but dislikes his girlfriend. After Dean's girlfriend goes back to Denver, Dean seeks out Kerouac and asks Kerouac to teach him to write. Kerouac introduces Dean to Allen Ginsberg, referred to as Carlo Marx, and Dean and Carlo immediately begin spending all their time together. Dean leaves New York in the spring of 1947, and Kerouac resolves to follow Dean out West to gain material for his writing.

The excerpt skips ahead to Kerouac, known as Sal Paradise in the book, riding with Dean and two college boys through Nebraska in a Cadillac limousine bound for Chicago. Dean tells Kerouac stories of his past adventures as he drives through Nebraska and Iowa at incredibly high speeds, once even getting into a race. In Des Moines, Dean hits a car in front of them at low speed and have to explain the situation to the police a few miles down the road. Kerouac is sometimes unnerved by Dean's driving and takes refuge in the backseat.

After arriving in Chicago in record time, Dean and Kerouac drop off the college boys and go out on the town and listen to jazz music on Clark Street. Kerouac imagines the jazz band they watch as being part of a line from John Philip Sousa to Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker. The band leaves the first bar, and Dean and Kerouac follow the band to another bar and watch them play until nine in the morning. Dean and Kerouac drop off the limousine at its owners business and leave town for Detroit.

On the bus to Detroit, Dean sleeps and Kerouac talks to an innocent young girl from Michigan, but she bores Kerouac. Dean and Kerouac go to an all night movie theater in Detroit, where Kerouac falls asleep. The next day, they find a ride back to New York through a travel bureau. Dean and Kerouac arrive back in New York and go to Kerouac aunt's apartment. Dean impregnates a girl in New York despite having another child on the way by his soon to be ex-wife.



In the excerpt from part four, Kerouac, Dean, and Stan are driving through Mexico into Mexico City. Along the way, they stop to sleep in a Mexican village where Kerouac feels that he becomes part of the jungle. Further south on the road, Dean buys a crystal from some young Indian girls in exchange for a watch. When Kerouac, Dean, and Stan arrive in Mexico City, they find it to be a whirlwind of constant activity. However, Kerouac soon contracts dysentery, and Dean leaves Kerouac and Stan in Mexico City to return to his girlfriend in New York City.

In the excerpt from "The Subterraneans," Kerouac begins by describing a jazz club where he meets a girl named Mardou. Kerouac soon starts a relationship with Mardou, who is half black and half Cherokee. Mardou tells Kerouac that men should just stay home with their women instead of going off to fight wars or prove themselves in other material ways, and Kerouac agrees in theory.

The excerpt from "The Dharma Bums" describes the character Japhy Ryder, who is based on the poet Gary Snyder. Kerouac finds Ryder more interesting than the other poets in the San Francisco literary scene because Ryder is not just an intellectual but is also someone who understands the outdoors and physical activity. Kerouac watches Ryder and a number of poets read at the Six Gallery before going to eat with them in Chinatown.

In the excerpt from "Mexico City Blues" Kerouac writes about the music of the jazz musician Charlie Parker who has recently died. Kerouac writes that after all his successes, the only thing left for Parker to do was die.

"Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" explains Kerouac's method of writing. Kerouac advises that the best writing is not thought about but pours forth from the writer.

## **East Coast Beats and Jack Kerouac Analysis**

In the editor's note, Charters probes into the Beat Generation's obsession with the possibility of nuclear apocalypse. Because nuclear weapons came out of the rationalistic pursuit of knowledge, the Beats reject rationalism in favor of spiritual enlightenment. The Beats are similar in this regard to the Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Great Britain, and the Beats recognize this. Allen Ginsberg, for instance, models much of his poetry after the Romantic poet William Blake.

In "On the Road," Kerouac's character is from Paterson, New Jersey, but in actuality, Kerouac is from Lowell, Massachusetts, and Allen Ginsberg is from Paterson. Although it is not mentioned in the text, after Kerouac introduced Ginsberg and Cassady, the two became lovers for a period of time. The excerpt from the first section of "On the Road" makes it clear that Kerouac also has an infatuation with Cassady, albeit a nonsexual one. Kerouac sees Cassady as a pure being that is not bogged down with the sterile intellectualism of Kerouac's other friends in New York.



In the excerpt from part three of "On the Road," Kerouac refers to the plains of the Midwest unfolding like a roll of paper. This may be a comparison to Kerouac's method of writing "On the Road" as Kerouac taped hundreds of pages together, so that he would not have to take the time to put a new piece of paper in his typewriter. The first edition of "On the Road" is, in fact, one enormous roll of paper. Kerouac also calls Dean Ahab, which is a reference to the obsessed whale hunter in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," suggesting Dean is determined but maniacal.

Kerouac's discussion with the girl on the bus to Michigan can be taken as symbolic of the whole Beat Generation's objection to mainstream American society. Kerouac believes the girl represses her natural desires, especially sexual ones, and therefore has no idea what she wants out of life. Kerouac believes this is the case with most Americans.

The section of "On the Road" dealing with Kerouac and Cassady's trip through Mexico reveals Kerouac's love for the primitive and rejection of modern America. Kerouac refers to the Mexican mountains where the Indians live as "the golden world that Jesus came from," indicating that Kerouac believes there is something pure and holy in the Indians' simple lives.

The excerpt from "The Subterraneans" reveals Kerouac to be unsure of his own writing. This theme is especially prevalent at the end of the excerpt when Kerouac writes that while his love for Mardou is the important thing, now that she is gone all he has is writing, but his writing can never actually capture her essence.

The Six Gallery reading which Kerouac describes in the excerpt from "The Dharma Bums" is one of the most famous events in the history of the Beat Generation. Most notably, this reading is the first time Allen Ginsberg reads his poem "Howl" publicly. Kerouac changes the name of Ginsberg's poem to "Wail" in "The Dharma Bums," however.

The excerpt from "Mexico City Blues" hints at the depression Kerouac struggled with for most of his adult life. In the 211th Chorus, for instance, Kerouac wishes to be freed from the material world through death.

In "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" Kerouac describes writing as an almost necessary biological process. In fact, at one point, Kerouac compares writing to defecating in the sense that it is relieving.



# Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs

## Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs Summary

Charters begins the section on Allen Ginsberg with a short biography and summation of Ginsberg's work. Charters notes that Ginsberg's poetry style takes after Kerouac's prose style.

The first section of "Howl" recounts numerous stories about Ginsberg and the other Beats in rapid-fire fashion. Ginsberg describes himself and his friends abusing their bodies and minds with every manner of drug imaginable and engaging in an amazing variety of sex acts with almost any willing partner. However, Ginsberg also portrays his numerous subjects as looking for some kind of spiritual redemption through these acts. The second section rails against an evil force called "Moloch" that is everywhere in the modern world. In the third section, Ginsberg writes to Carl Solomon in an insane asylum to tell him that he is about to be set free. Finally, in the "Footnote to Howl" Ginsberg declares everything in the universe to be holy.

"A Supermarket in America" describes Ginsberg grocery shopping with a vision of Walt Whitman.

In "Sunflower Sutra," Ginsberg sees a sunflower and marvels at its natural beauty but realizes that the sunflower is trying to be a locomotive, but it cannot.

"America" is a list of Ginsberg's political complaints about America, mainly centered on the Cold War with Russia, which Ginsberg sees as mad.

"Kaddish" is a poem Ginsberg writes to mourn the death of his mother Naomi. The first part of the poem begins with Ginsberg walking through Manhattan thinking of when Naomi first immigrated to New York from Russia around the turn of the century. Ginsberg imagines what Naomi's youth was like, and then he tries to imagine what comes after death but cannot settle on any answer. In section two, Ginsberg recounts the story of Naomi's descent into madness during Ginsberg's childhood. Naomi becomes paranoid and convinced that everyone is out to kill her, even her husband Lou. Ginsberg describes placing Naomi into an insane asylum and then her homecoming when she is eventually released. Naomi seems relatively well for a short period of time but is soon again convinced that a vast conspiracy is against her, so Naomi moves in with a new boyfriend who is a doctor. Naomi is forced to live with a string of relatives until her sister Elanor dies, and Naomi is again sent to a mental institution. Ginsberg describes his last visit to Naomi before her death as horrific because Naomi is completely incapacitated by a lobotomy and stroke. In the "Hymn" part of the poem, Ginsberg describes all things in Naomi's life as blessed. Section three describes Ginsberg's regret at not witnessing or remembering more of his mother's life, and in the fourth section Ginsberg wonders what he may have left out and says his final goodbyes to Naomi. Finally, the fifth section describes Naomi's burial place.



"Song" is a simple poem about love and Ginsberg's longing for it. Ginsberg describes love as the only worthwhile pursuit in life.

"On Burroughs' Work" is a poem Ginsberg wrote to describe the stark writing style of William Burroughs.

Charters introduces Burroughs' work by saying that Burroughs did not originally conceive of himself as a writer but as a criminal.

The excerpt from "Junky" begins with Burroughs explaining how he first came to use morphine, also known as junk. Burroughs use of morphine began when an acquaintance named Norton asked Burroughs to sell a Tommy gun and several boxes of morphine. Burroughs locates a morphine user named Roy through a mutual acquaintance named Jack. Roy begins buying morphine from Burroughs on a regular basis, but Burroughs begins to keep some of the morphine for himself. Soon, Burroughs is buying morphine from Roy and each of them are seeking out doctors to write prescriptions for them. Burroughs attempts to make some money for himself by selling marijuana, or "tea" as he often calls it. Burroughs soon discovers that selling marijuana is not a very profitable business because it is bulky and the people who smoke it are annoying. However, Burroughs downplays the supposed dangers of the drug.

In the excerpt from "The Yage Letters," Burroughs describes his travels through South America. In Macoa, Burroughs is initially treated well because people believe he is a representative of the Texas Oil Company. It is also in Macoa where Burroughs first experiments with the drug Yage. Burroughs' first experiment is largely unpleasant, but Burroughs takes it again using a different preparation and finds it similar to marijuana. When Burroughs travels to Puerta Espina, he is treated suspiciously by nearly everyone there and finds the food disgusting. Once Burroughs returns to Bogota, he extracts the active alkaloids from Yage but finds the extract more of a depressant than a stimulant. Burroughs writes again from Lima and uses most of the letter to complain about how awful Ecuador is.

The excerpt from "Naked Lunch" begins with Burroughs running to catch a subway train to avoid a narcotics detective. Burroughs begins to talk to a gay man on the train and thinks about conning him on a marijuana deal. Burroughs is convinced that the police are after him and have a drug addict called Willy the Disk searching him out, so Burroughs buys a lot of heroin and a car and heads west. Burroughs and his traveling companions are arrested in Philadelphia, and after this Burroughs abandons one of them known as the Rube because he is a liability. Eventually, Burroughs reaches New Orleans where he buys some heroin and heads for Mexico.

"Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness" is Burroughs' condemnation of opiate use and explanation of how he quit using them. Burroughs admits to using opiates in every manner possible and stringently maintains that they are very different drugs from hallucinogens. Burroughs maintains that opiate addiction will never end until people focus on the addicts desire for opiates. Burroughs recommends using a drug called to



apomorphine to beat opiate withdrawals. In the article's post script, Burroughs expresses his hatred for the repetitive talk of junkies.

## Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs Analysis

In the first section of "Howl," Ginsberg refers to "N.C., secret hero of these poems," and this refers to Neal Cassady (Ginsberg, p. 65). Ginsberg also twice refers to Tangiers, which is a city in Morocco where William Burroughs fled from the law in the early-1950s. Finally, this section contains numerous religious references, primarily Judaic and Christian, which indicate that Ginsberg believes his friends to be in some way saintly. Moloch in the second section refers to an evil god in Judaic tradition, and it is clearly a metaphor for what Ginsberg sees as the alienating aspects of modern society. The third section of the poem suggests that insanity may be the correct response to this Moloch. In "Howl's" footnote, Ginsberg seems to endorse a the Hindu and Buddhist concept that everything is part of god and therefore holy.

In "A Supermarket in America" Ginsberg questions what kind of America has been lost since the time of late nineteenth century poet Walt Whitman. Ginsberg also insinuates that Whitman was a homosexual, which remains a matter of contention.

"Sunflower Sutra" is essentially an argument by Ginsberg that modern life attempts to force people into certain roles other than those assigned by nature, and those roles should therefore be rejected.

"America" reveals a great deal of Ginsberg's left-wing politics. For instance, Ginsberg writes that he feels sympathetic for the Wobblies, which was an anarchistic labor union that advocating overthrowing the government and all corporations with one enormous strike.

"Kaddish" takes its name from a Jewish prayer of mourning, which Ginsberg is attempting to emulate throughout the poem. In the poem's third stanza, Ginsberg writes that he read "Adonais," which is a poem written by the Romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley to mourn the death of his friend and fellow poet John Keats. In section two, Ginsberg calls sanity "a trick of agreement." Ginsberg is likely suggesting by this that we are all equally insane, but since we agree that most others are not insane, they do not get labeled as such. Later in the section, Ginsberg seems to wish that Naomi was dead instead of insane by referring to her being safe in a coffin. This line reflects the internal turmoil Ginsberg faced watching someone he loved be destroyed by madness. At the end of the section when Ginsberg describes his last visit to Naomi, he repeatedly writes "The Horror," which is almost undoubtedly a reference to the last words of Mr. Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's novel "The Heart of Darkness."

"Song" likely represents many of Ginsberg's romantic frustrations because he frequently found himself falling in love with heterosexual men, such as his friends Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady.





"On Burroughs Work" should definitely be seen as praise for Burroughs' style of writing, but the last stanza is also something of a criticism as Burroughs work does often contain sections that can be read as allegories.

Burroughs explanation of marijuana's effects near the end of the "Junky" excerpt are the most significant part of the section because at the time marijuana was widely believed to be one of, if not the, most dangerous drug in the country. People very commonly believed that marijuana use led directly to insanity, but Burroughs' own experiences quickly dispel that notion. However, Burroughs still believes that marijuana can cause insanity but only in extremely high doses.

The fact that Burroughs first terrible experience with Yage does not prevent him from trying it again speaks a great deal about him and the Beats more generally. Although they clearly used drugs for pleasurable experiences at certain times that was not all they were seeking through drug use. Burroughs is obviously not just trying to have fun but to achieve some kind of otherworldly enlightenment. Burroughs also writes that although the South American jungle may initially seem romantic, it is actually very terrible once a person actually lives through it. In this rejection of the romanticism of nature, Burroughs sets himself apart from most of the other Beats as a cynic.

Burroughs' prose in "Naked Lunch" is clearly unrealistic in its descriptions of people. For instance, Willy the Disk is described as physically mutated from heroin use to the point that he can track users like a bloodhound. Burroughs exaggerates frequently in this way, and is something of a model for future writers such as Hunter S. Thompson, who also blend gritty realistic descriptions with the absurd. Also in "Naked Lunch," Burroughs describes the American "drag" as being the worst of them all, but he never openly explains exactly why. A close reading of the text, however, shows that Burroughs is disgusted by the sameness of American towns and places. This is a complaint echoed by many Beat writers.

Although Burroughs' style is more straight-forward in "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," he is still relying upon exaggeration to prove his point. Many opiate addicts do successfully quit without any specialized therapies even if Burroughs himself was not capable of doing so. Also, at the end of the article's post script, Burroughs writes that the opium addicts of the world should unite because they have nothing to lose but their drug dealers. This is a clear reference to Karl Marx's phrase "Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains."



# Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon, and Gregory Corso

## Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon, and Gregory Corso Summary

In the section on Herbert Huncke, Charters mentions that while Huncke was a major influence on other Beats, he was not a major writer himself. Huncke's first story in the book is about a tall hermaphrodite named Elsie John, whom Huncke does heroin with. Elsie John begins to sell heroin and is eventually arrested and taunted by the police and other inmates for his physiology and gender. Huncke's other story is about a young heroin addict named Joey Martinez. Martinez tells Huncke about his first love affair that did not last because of the girl's father.

Charters explains that John Clellon Holmes' novel "Go," which is excerpted here, initially angered both Kerouac and Ginsberg because of how they were portrayed in the book. The excerpt begins with Holmes' character named Hobbes meeting Neal Cassady's character Hart Kennedy. At the first meeting, everyone is nervous until Cassady puts on a bop record, which relaxes everyone. Everyone leaves Holmes' apartment to go look for Herbert Huncke, known as Albert Ancke in the book, so that they can buy some marijuana from him. They search for Huncke in several bars but never find him and eventually go to a diner where Holmes and Kerouac, called Gene Pasternak, talk about writing and the meaning of life. Kerouac is convinced that Cassady has figured out the key to life is to enjoy everything. The group cannot find any marijuana at the diner, so they drive to Columbia University because Ginsberg (a.k.a. David Stofsky) claims Burroughs might have sent him some marijuana by mail.

The section on Carl Solomon explains that Solomon had himself committed to a mental institution where he met Allen Ginsberg. The three selections of Solomon's writings all focus on his generation, which he believes is full of criminals and other misfits.

Gregory Corso is a poet who grew up in New York City and is substantially younger than most of the original Beats like Kerouac and Ginsberg. In "I Am 25," Corso declares his dislike for older poets and says that he will go to their homes to steal their poems. In "Vision of Rotterdam," Corso imagines the Dutch city Rotterdam after it was bombed by the Nazis in May of 1940. Corso's poem "Bomb" attacks the possibility of nuclear annihilation in the Cold War. Corso imagines the entire world being destroyed by a bomb and occasionally even revels in the possibility. In the poem "Marriage," Corso imagines what it would be like for him to get married, and Corso ultimately concludes that he is not nearly traditional enough to get married. Finally, in the excerpt from "Variations on a Generation," Corso questions what it means to be Beat and if there is even such a thing as the Beat Generation. Corso concludes that the Beat Generation indeed exists, but it is nearly impossible to define.



## Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon, and Gregory Corso Analysis

In Huncke's stories, there is a sexual implication in his relationships with both Elsie John and Jose Martinez that is never fully acknowledged. Huncke himself was bisexual, but he never makes clear if he had a sexual relationship with either of the characters. However, it should be assumed that there was some sexual attraction in both cases given Huncke's language.

Before the publication of "On the Road," Holmes is typically considered the chronicler of the Beat Generation and "Go" is the primary chronicle. This is a sore spot in Holmes and Kerouac's friendship for many years because Kerouac is always of the belief that he is the superior writer. Holmes' style is far more direct than Kerouac's in that Holmes rarely engages in long, free-flowing sentences, but for the same reason it does not stand out as readily. Perhaps this partially explains why Kerouac is now far more widely remembered than Holmes.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Solomon is perhaps the most negative Beat writer about the Beats themselves but the only one to have spent considerable amounts of time in a mental hospital.

Corso's poetry is rebellious even by the standards of the Beats. Although Ginsberg often gave deference and respect to older poets, Corso openly mocks them in "I am 25." Furthermore, Corso even rebels against the concept of a Beat Generation, at times rejecting the label. Ultimately, Corso does accept that there is a Beat Generation, but Corso maintains that it is about individualism, so he still refuses to be labeled himself.



# Enter Neal Cassady

## Enter Neal Cassady Summary

In the introduction to part two, Charters writes that Neal Cassady is a major inspiration for many Beat Generation writers. Although Cassady is not himself a major writer, he did write a number of letters that other writers, especially Jack Kerouac, found inspiring. Cassady begins writing an autobiography but dies before he is able to finish the first section.

In Cassady's letter to Kerouac from Kansas City, Cassady explains how he met a girl named Patricia on a bus and almost slept with her but was unable to because Patricia's sister met her at the bus station in Saint Louis.

The next letter explains the different times Cassady has been arrested and is used in part of "On the Road." Mostly, Cassady is arrested for hitchhiking and stealing cars for joyrides.

The fragmentary letter to Kerouac describes Cassady seeing a man killed trying to jump from train to train.

In the next letter, Cassady writes to Kerouac after leaving him in Mexico City and tells Kerouac about the incredible sights of the trip back to America.

The longest letter in the section is Cassady's description of how he lost his old girlfriend Joan in Denver. Cassady begins by telling of visiting Joan in the hospital after Joan attempts suicide. Joan and Cassady are reunited a few weeks later by a rich couple who promise to get Cassady a job. The next day, Cassady goes to get new clothes, but on his way back to see Joan, sees his brother drinking in a bar. Cassady joins his brother who begins buying him drinks. Cassady digresses from the main story to explain that before seeing Joan, he had been sleeping with a girl named Mary. Mary's mother does not like Cassady, however, and after Cassady and Mary are no longer seeing each other is anxious for revenge. Mary's mother hears that Cassady is in the bar drinking and has him arrested, so Cassady is unable to make it back to Joan's and never sees her again.

The final letter is from Kerouac to Cassady, and in it Kerouac explains that the Joan letter convinced him that Cassady is the best writer of the generation and maybe for the last several generations. Kerouac asks Cassady to move to Mexico with him.

In the excerpt from Cassady's unfinished autobiography "The First Third," Cassady writes about how his father Neal met his mother Maude already has eight children and is soon pregnant with Neal. Maude gives birth to Neal in Salt Lake City as the family is traveling to Los Angeles. Neal Senior opens a barbershop in Los Angeles but loses the business because he drinks too much. The family is forced to move to Denver, and in 1932



Maude divorces Neal. Both Neal Senior and Junior are soon living on the streets, where Cassidy is the youngest person around and is treated like all the hobos' son.

The excerpt of "Visions of Cody" is Kerouac's telling of Cassidy's youth under the name Cody Pomeray. Kerouac portrays Cassidy as a vibrant young man but one who anyone can tell is involved in some kind of trouble. Kerouac's Cassidy is an excellent pool player and makes everyone in the Denver pool scene take notice. In Kerouac's telling, Cassidy's mother dies before Cassidy even knows her.

## Enter Neal Cassidy Analysis

Cassidy's letters clearly reveal Cassidy to be a very sexual person and also very skilled at seducing women, but it is also possible that Cassidy enjoyed inflating his own image. In the letter concerning Cassidy's arrests, Cassidy begins by writing about remembering things past, which is a reference to Marcel Proust's work "Remembrance of Things Past." In the same letter, Cassidy writes about a cop who asks if Cassidy and his traveling companion "punked each other," which means to engage in homosexual anal sex.

Kerouac's letter to Cassidy shows the immense influence Cassidy had on Kerouac. Although Cassidy has not demonstrated the ability to write anything longer than a letter, Kerouac is already certain that Cassidy is the best writer of the generation. It should not be surprising then that Kerouac attempted to emulate Cassidy's writing style in "On the Road." Kerouac also again shows his romanticism for the primitive when he asks Cassidy to become an Indian with him.

Although Cassidy's early life is undoubtedly a hard one, Cassidy does not dwell for very long on how unpleasant the experience must have been. In fact, Cassidy does not seem to think his early life was that terrible. Kerouac's telling of Cassidy's early life is far more melodramatic with Cassidy's mother dying of some kind of heartbreak. Furthermore, Kerouac seems to romanticize Cassidy's father as some kind of holy bum, while Cassidy just shows him to be a drunk incapable to taking care of his family.



# Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part One

## Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part One Summary

After Ginsberg moves to Berkeley, the entire Beat Generation shifts to the West, and this shift culminates with the Six Gallery reading of six different poets in 1955.

Kenneth Rexroth is an older influence on the poets of the Beat Generation and features anarchist themes in much of his poetry. Rexroth's poetry "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is written to mourn the early death of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. In the poem, Rexroth claims that the young men of the world are constantly being killed because they are willing to speak against their societies. Rexroth names off a long list of writers who died or gave up writing at a young age and specifically mourns Thomas as the "canary of Swansea" and other flattering names. Rexroth blames the rich and powerful for all these deaths.

In the excerpt from "Rexroth: Shaker and Maker," William Everson credits Rexroth with launching Beat poetry more so than William Carlos Williams, who is usually given that credit.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is an important Beat poet and also prominent in the Beat movement because he is the owner of City Lights Bookstore, which publishes Ginsberg's "Howl." Ferlinghetti's poem "Dog" tells a story about Ferlinghetti's dog walking through the streets of San Francisco, unconcerned with what policeman and politicians do. "Constantly Risking Absurdity" is a statement on the emotional danger poets place themselves in by writing. "Goya's Greatest Scenes" explains that poets' best poems show the horrors of their culture. In "One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro," Ferlinghetti is convinced that Castro's cause is just but equally convinced that the United States government will overthrow him. Finally, in "Horn on Howl," Ferlinghetti explains his arrest for publishing "Howl" and the trial. The poem is initially ruled obscene, but many literary magazines and writers come to defend the poem from censorship. Also, during the trial the defense calls numerous professors of literature to testify to "Howl's" social significance. The judge rules "Howl" is not obscene and that all material with any social importance cannot be called obscene.

Michael McClure is one of the youngest Beat poets, and he took part in the Six Gallery reading. In "Peyote Poem," McClure describes the experience of taking peyote. Despite experiencing stomach problems through most of the trip, McClure remains convinced that he knows everything he needs to know. McClure occasionally has the feeling of being able to alter physical reality with his mind. This is followed by an excerpt from "Scratching the Beat Surface," which primarily recounts the Six Gallery reading and reprints several of the poems read there. McClure remembers that no one had heard anything like "Howl" before, but they were all ready to go where it took them: "beyond a



point of no return" (McClure, p. 274). McClure reprints Gary Snyder's "A Berry Feast" that describes animals eating berries and taking part in the cycle of life while humans remain outside of it. Next, McClure comments upon Philip Whalen's poem "Plus Ca Change," which shows a human couple transforming into birds. McClure's poems "Point Lobos: Animism" and "For the Death of 100 Whales" both deal with nature; the first celebrates it, while the second condemns man for destroying it.

## Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part One Analysis

Rexroth's poem "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is filled with religious imagery. Obviously, the title is a reference to the Ten Commandments, but Rexroth also mentions stoning Stephen, which refers to Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death. Rexroth also writes that a young man will offer his flesh to be eaten, which invokes the eating of Christ's body in Communion. In the second section of the poem, Rexroth repeats the phrase "Timor mortis conturbat me," which is part of a Catholic prayer and translates from Latin as "fear of death disturbs me." Finally, in the second section, Rexroth also refers to Edna Millay's last straight whiskey, and this is a comment on Dylan Thomas' death as he allegedly made some comment about the number of straight whiskeys he drank shortly before dying.

In the poem "Dog," Ferlinghetti refers to the dog looking questioningly into a gramophone. At the time, this calls to mind the RCA record label, which showed a dog and an old fashioned gramophone. The Goya Ferlinghetti references in "In Goya's Greatest Scenes" is an eighteenth century Spanish painter best known for painting extremely dark images. Ferlinghetti repeats the phrase "in the course of human events" repeatedly in the opening stanzas of "One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro." This is clearly an allusion to the United States' Declaration of Independence and is meant to compare Castro's struggle with the American Revolution.

In McClure's "Peyote Poem," McClure frequently plays with the word "stomach" to also indicate that his stomach aches. An upset stomach is a common side effect of peyote, so this is likely why McClure refers to it so frequently. Snyder's poem "A Berry Feast" attacks humanity not simply for withdrawing from nature but also for distorting nature by, for instance, domesticating oxen. The name of Philip Whalen's poem "Plus Ca Change" is meant to invoke a French phrase meaning "the more things change, the more they stay the same."





# Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part Two

## Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part Two Summary

Gary Snyder is a poet from Oregon who studies Indian cultures and Buddhist traditions. Snyder gives his impressions of working by himself at a mountain lookout camp in "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout." In "Milton by Firelight," Snyder questions the usefulness of Milton's stories when everything will be fundamentally changed through time. Snyder sympathizes with infertile women in "In Praise of Sick Women." In "Night Highway Ninety-Nine," Snyder describes hitchhiking from the far northwest to San Francisco. Snyder writes small details of each town he passes through such as drunk Indians in Mount Vernon and buying buttermilk in Portland. Snyder also describes the people he travels with at different points, like a whore from Los Angeles and two Pentecostal boys. Snyder becomes excited as he approaches San Francisco but feels anonymous as soon as he arrives. In his "Note on the Religious Tendencies," Snyder explains Beat notions of religion and credits them for celebrating life but criticizes that they do not also celebrate death.

Philip Whalen is another poet who attended Reed College in Oregon with Snyder. Whalen also has a poem about Sourdough Mountain but his is titled more simply than Snyder's as "Sourdough Mountain Lookout." The poem tells of Whalen's reluctance to go up the mountain again, but once he is there, he begins to contemplate philosophy and eventually feels peaceful. When Whalen comes down the mountain, he keeps the feeling of peace. Whalen rails against the conformity and boredom of 1950s college life in "A Dim View of Berkeley in the Spring." Whalen writes about drinking with Kerouac and accepting the northwest rain in "Prose Take-Out Portland 13:ix:58."

Philip Lamantia is one of the few Beat poets born in San Francisco. Lamantia's poem "High" is a reflection on the feeling of intoxication. "The Night Is a Space of White Marble" describes a wild experience in Mexico. "I Have Given Fair Warning" is Lamantia's claim that he is abandoning the United States for a country to the south. In "There Is This Distance between Me and What I See," Lamantia writes of an indescribable yearning. "Fud at Foster's" describes annihilating reality through drugs.

Lew Welch is another classmate of Gary Snyder. Welch's "Chicago Poem" explains why Welch abandoned large cities. "When I Drive a Cab" tells of Welch driving his cab in San Francisco like a kind of wild predator.

Bob Kaufman becomes a poet only in the late-1950s and is frequently arrested for reading obscene poems in public. Kaufman's poems like "Round About Midnight" and "Jazz Chick" center mainly on the power and sexuality of jazz music.





## Some San Francisco Renaissance Poets Part Two Analysis

The Highway Ninety-Nine Snyder refers to in "Night Highway Ninety-Nine" runs from the United States border with Canada in central Washington south to the border with Mexico in California, and it is the next to last United States highway before the Pacific Ocean. In the second section of the poem, Snyder writes of "B.C. drivers" and the B.C. here almost assuredly refers to British Columbia, the Canadian province just north of Washington. This poem also shows Snyder's sympathy with left-wing and anarchistic politics. Snyder refers sympathetically to Wobblies being driven out of Everett by the sheriff and even writes that he was fired by the Ranger Service for being a suspected Communist. In another passage, Snyder refers to Sujata and Gautama. Gautama is the Buddha, and Sujata is a maiden who served the Buddha milk.

In "Sourdough Mountain Lookout," Whalen calls a landscape "Byronic," which alludes to the nineteenth century English romantic poet Lord Byron. Towards the end of "A Dim View of Berkeley in the Spring" Whalen calls someone "Mr. Dullness," and this is most likely in reference to John Foster Dulles, who served as Secretary of State under President Dwight Eisenhower.

Lamantia's "The Night Is a Space of White Marble" carries a reference to Dionysus, who is the Greek god of wine and revelry. In "I Have Given Fair Warning," Lamantia mentions Albion, which is another name for England. The last lines of "Fud at Foster's" seem to describe a person injecting heroin into his arm.

Welch's "Chicago Poem" portrays the cities and therefore mankind as evil. Welch believes people cannot blame some god for the mistakes of civilization because people are clearly at fault.

Kaufman's "On" is an indictment of modern American culture and refers to "rockwells," which is undoubtedly about the paintings of Norman Rockwell, who painted scenes of everyday American life.



# Other Fellow Travelers Part One

## Other Fellow Travelers Part One Summary

By the late 1950s and 1960s, Beat came to mean anyone who is counterculture, so many people who were not part of the original Beat groups come to be associated with them. Some of these writers and artists found a greater sense of community after reading Ginsberg's "Howl." Two of these writers, Diane DiPrima and LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), found "Floating Bear," which is a literary newsletter. The newsletter is once seized for obscenity charges, but Jones succeeds in getting the charges dropped by reading other formerly banned works like "Ulysses" to the grand jury.

Amiri Baraka is a writer from Newark, New Jersey who in the 1960s embraces Islam and black nationalism. Baraka describes the experience of listening to radio shows as a small child in "In Memory of Radio." In "Way Out West," Baraka ponders his own mortality. The excerpt from "The Screamers" describes the black music scene in Newark in the early-1960s. The music is incredibly sexual and often leads to sexual encounters in the music halls. Baraka sees this music as his rebellion against America, and he sees it as fueled by anger and hatred. At one show, a musician plays very wildly and eventually leads the crowd outside into the streets. Although there is no violence in the activity, the police come and break up the crowd with clubs and fire hoses. Baraka's letter to "Evergreen Review" about Kerouac's rules for spontaneous prose praises Kerouac's style of writing but criticizes Kerouac from occasionally deviating from his own rules. Baraka believes that all writers are most truthful when writing spontaneously but become untruthful when they try to reflect on the material, and Baraka finds several incidences of Kerouac doing this in Kerouac's books.

Ray Bremser is poet who came to his profession while locked in jail. In "Funny Lotus Blues..." Bremser writes about smoking marijuana and thinking back on his early sexual experiences. Bremser then reflects upon several different musicians, concluding that Ray Charles is simultaneously hip and corny. Bremser ends laughing at his own poetry.

Diane DiPrima is from New York City and roughly a decade younger than most of the original Beats. DiPrima's "Three Laments" are brief, funny plays on words. "Song for Baby-O, Unborn" describes the extent of DiPrima's love for her unborn child. "The Practice of Magical Evocation" is an attack on Gary Snyder's conception of women as mere carriers of children. DiPrima sorts through her feelings of loss and betrayal after an abortion in "Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion." At one point, DiPrima imagines the baby as if it were alive and simply living some place else. Other times, DiPrima thinks about how old the child would be if he had not been aborted. In the end, DiPrima apologizes to the baby and prepares for him to come again.

Bob Dylan is a famous singer and songwriter who took inspiration from several Beat writers. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" asks when African Americans will be free. "The



"Times They Are A-Changin'" describes a society that is in turmoil where people must choose sides. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" tells of a world that is teetering on the brink of apocalypse. In the excerpt from "Tarantula," Dylan writes about trying to get his piano fixed by a lazy, unionized piano tuner. Dylan later writes about singing a song about meat at a vegetarian convention.

## Other Fellow Travelers Part One Analysis

The first line of Baraka's "In Memory of Radio" mentions Lamont Cranston, who is the alter ego for the detective super hero the Shadow in an old cartoon strip and radio show. Baraka refers to Cranston as being divine, indicating that Baraka was deeply influenced by super hero stories as a small child. In the third stanza of the poem, Baraka writes about Oral Roberts, who is a popular Christian evangelist in the 1940s and 1950s teaching that God rewards Christians with a good life on Earth and in heaven. "The Screamers" clearly shows that Baraka views himself as an outsider in America. Baraka once mentions America killing great musicians and later says that he desperately tried to escape the country as soon as possible.

Ray Bremser's poem "Funny Lotus Blues..." compares the singer Nat King Cole to Dial Soap, which makes Cole suspect. Bremser is here likely implying that Cole is himself a kind of commercial product, so Cole's music is not necessarily to be trusted as authentic artistic expression.

In "Three Laments," DiPrima writes about the Elysian fields, which was the eternal resting place for the souls of great heroes in Greek mythology. Similarly, in "Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion," DiPrima mentions "sybil," which was a name given to female prophets in Greek history. This poem does seem to imply that no matter how bad the world is, DiPrima believes birth would still have been better for her unborn child.

In "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" Dylan is clearly writing about the possibility of nuclear annihilation in the Cold War. This is by no means the song's only topic, but lines such as "a wave that could drown the whole world" must be taken to be about nuclear war. The excerpt from "Tarantula" shows Dylan to have some misgivings about labor unions despite his idol Woody Guthrie's love of them.



# Other Fellow Travelers Part Two

## Other Fellow Travelers Part Two Summary

Brenda Frazer is a poet and former wife of Ray Bremser. Frazer's "Poem to Lee Forest" describes Frazer's imagination of Forest traveling across North America. Even as Forest's physical body breaks down from wear, her soul remains full of love for all things.

Tuli Kupferberg is writer and one of his main works is on society's war against the Beats. In Kupferberg's poem "Greenwich Village of My Dreams," Kupferberg imagines the area as being a place of total love and harmony. In the excerpt from the pamphlet "1001 Ways to Beat the Draft," Kupferberg lists numerous ways to avoid serving in Vietnam. Several themes recur a number of times on this list. Attaining a position of political power is a definite way to avoid combat along with practicing some kind of abnormal sexuality, including homosexuality. The other primary method for avoiding military service that Kupferberg recommends is contracting some type of chronic and contagious disease.

Jack Micheline is a poet who associated with some of the Beats, but Micheline did not consider himself to be a Beat. In "Poet of the Streets," Micheline describes walking around New York City contemplating the enormity of existence and the small amount that most people actually see.

Frank O'Hara is part of the so-called New York School of poetry separate from the Beats. "Les Luths" tells of O'Hara reading a newspaper and wondering what Gary Snyder is doing. "Post the Lake Poets Ballad" describes O'Hara's self-pity, which he compares to that of Ginsberg. "The Day Lady Died" is a description of everything O'Hara does the day legendary jazz singer Billie Holiday died.

Peter Orlovsky is Allen Ginsberg's lover for much of both of their lives and a minor poet in his own right. Orlovsky's poem "Lepers Cry" details his attempts to help a leper in India. Orlovsky cleans the maggots from one of the woman's sores, but she soon dies anyway, which causes Orlovsky to feel a great deal of guilt.

Ed Sanders is a political activist and sometime poet. In "Poem from Jail," Sanders writes about the necessity of banning nuclear weapons and the end of the Cold War. Sanders wonders why there is no great bird like the eagle to represent American pacifism, but Sanders believes the lamb is an appropriate symbol. In the second part of the poem, Sanders writes of Napoleon's conquests as if they are still ongoing and always will be. Sanders argues that anyone who has spent time in jail disapproves of both capital punishment and keeping animals in cages. Sanders finally describes a traveler leaving the human world and entering the world of the dead. "The Cutting Prow" is a description of the work of Henri Matisse in his last years when he was almost entirely disabled. Sanders writes of Matisse cutting out beautiful shapes with his



scissors and giving them to a helper to pin on the wall. Sanders ends the poem with a final encouragement for Matisse to keep working.

Anne Waldman is a poet who grew up in Greenwich Village seeing figures like Gregory Corso and Bob Dylan regularly. Waldman's poem "Our Past" is about a couple who comes together traveling the country but drifts apart and breaks up. The former lovers still talk regularly, but the relationship is awkward.

John Wieners studies poetry at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and then moves to San Francisco to write. "A Poem for the Record Players" describes listening to music in the morning. "A Poem for the Tea Heads" is about searching out and smoking marijuana. "A Poem for the Museum Goers" and "A Poem for the Insane" describe the work of Edvard Munch and other pieces of art hanging in a San Francisco museum. In "Feminine Soliloquy," Wieners' grapples with homosexual "Children of the Working Class" questions how God could make some things so beautiful and yet some people so unfortunate and ugly.

## Other Fellow Travelers Part Two Analysis

The style of Frazer's "Poem to Lee Forest" is very unusual in that it contains a number of unnecessary punctuation marks such as slashes, which are likely meant to slow down the pace of reading.

Many of the things that Kupferberg imagines in "Greenwich Village of My Dreams" are exact opposites of what exists. In one case, Kupferberg writes of "Blues in the Soviet Union," which is a both a reference to the music and also to blue as being the opposite of red, or Communist (Kupferberg, p. 385). Kupferberg also discusses Khrushchev in the poem. This refers to Nikita Khrushchev, premier of the Soviet Union at the time the poem is written.

Towards the end of Micheline's "Poet of the Streets," Micheline seems to make the case that a single unconquered poet is the most worthwhile thing imaginable.

In "Personal Poem," O'Hara writes about Miles Davis being beaten by a police officer outside of Birdland. Davis is a famous jazz musician, who often played at Birdland, a club named after Charlie Parker's nickname.

Orlovsky's regret at being unable to save the leper's life reveals a strange contradiction. Orlovsky feels guilt because he intervened and could not save the woman's life, but if Orlovsky had done nothing, he likely would never have thought about the woman again or felt any guilt when she died.

Sanders briefly mentions the "A.E.C." in "Poem from Jail," and this acronym stands for the Atomic Energy Commission, which Sanders opposes. Later in the poem, Sanders writes about Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who is the former wife of Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and a favorite figure of American anti-Communists. Sanders

also refers to Rouault meaning Georges Rouault, a turn of the twentieth century French expressionist painter famous for painting Christ.

Around the middle of "Our Past," Waldman writes that she is unsure if the country sheds the city or the other way around. This reflects a common theme in Beat writing: the tension between the country and the city. Although much Beat writing romanticizes the wilderness, almost all the Beat writers constantly return to large cities to live.

In "A Poem for the Museum Goers," Wieners references the works of Edvard Munch and writes that Munch put a shriek in his subjects ears. This refers to Munch's most famous painting "The Scream."



# Tales of Beatnik Glory

## Tales of Beatnik Glory Summary

Charles Bukowski writes a weekly column for the Los Angeles paper "Open City" and one of his articles is about his meeting with Neal Cassady shortly before Cassady's death. Bukowski is amazed by Cassady's ability to drive and constantly miss hitting other cars by a hairline. Bukowski feels Cassady's death isolated in Mexico is entirely inappropriate to Cassady's character.

William Burroughs Junior writes about his experiences visiting his father in Tangier in 1961 when William Junior is just fourteen. The elder Burroughs takes his son to a bar where he must immediately fend off the sexual advances of a much older man. The next day, William Junior smokes marijuana and kif for the first time and has very odd dreams when he sleeps that night. William Junior notices that his father spends all of his time either staring at the sunset on the roof, smoking marijuana, or writing in his room, which leaves little time for his son.

Caroly Cassady is a former wife of Neal Cassady who wrote about her experiences with Cassady and other beats in "Off the Road." The excerpt from that book begins with Kerouac living with the Cassadys and writing "On the Road." One day, Cassady is forced to travel to San Luis for two weeks for a railroad job. Before he leaves he insinuates that Carolyn and Kerouac should sleep together. Kerouac and Carolyn do not sleep together at first, but after Cassady makes it clear he does not care, they do. Carolyn finds that her situation improves dramatically after sleeping with Kerouac as both men lavish attention on her.

The excerpt from Diane DiPrima's "Dinners and Nightmares" describes a selection of the food DiPrima eats in New York. DiPrima remembers eating a mixture of mashed potatoes and tomato sauce, which she calls "menstrual potatoes," when she lived on Fifth Street. DiPrima also recalls drinking iced coffee with her friends in high school and a winter when she ate nothing but Oreos with her neighbors who always stayed in bed and painted.

Brenda Frazer is the former wife of Ray Bremser with whom she traveled to Mexico City in the 1960s. The two board a bus in the United States and stop inside the Mexican border at a late night diner where Bremser orders Mexican style eggs. The bus arrives in Mexico City at two o'clock the following morning, and Frazer and Bremser take a cab to Philip Lamantia's house. At Lamantia's house everyone smokes marijuana, and it is decided that Frazer and her baby will go ahead of Bremser to Veracruz.

Brion Gysin is the person who developed the "cut-up" method of writing used by William S. Burroughs. Gysin also lives for a long period at what is called the Beat Hotel in Paris and describes it a great refuge because the owner, Madame Rachou will not allow the police onto her property if at all possible.





Joyce Johnson is a former girlfriend of Jack Kerouac who writes a book called "Minor Characters" about some of the lesser known people in Beat circles. The excerpt from the book discusses Kerouac and Johnson reading the first reviews of "On the Road" and being pleased that they are good. However, as soon as Kerouac becomes famous, he finds it nearly impossible to explain the concepts of the Beat Generation to reporters.

Hettie Jones is the wife of LeRoi Jones and a writer in her own right. Hettie describes working with LeRoi on the literary magazine that he edits "Yugen." They prepare the fourth issue of the magazine, which contains work by Kerouac, Corso, and Ginsberg, to be published in the winter of 1959. Many other writers come over to the Jones' apartment to help put together the magazine, and Hettie cooks for all of them.

Jan Kerouac is the daughter of Jack Kerouac and wrote a book about her experiences. Jan only meets her father twice: once when she is nine and again when she is fifteen. The first time, Jan is proud because it feels like she has her own father, but the second time is more awkward with Jack too drunk to do much of anything.

Ken Kesey is the former leader of the Merry Pranksters who had traveled around the country using LSD in a bus that Neal Cassady drove. In his story, Kesey (called Deboree in the story) is attempting to find accomplishments from radical writers over the past year but cannot think of any when a woman named Sandy comes to his house to tell him Neal Cassady (called Houlihan) has died in Mexico. Kesey spends a lot of time making small talk with Sandy, whom he dislikes, before eventually asking if Cassady had any last words. Sandy tells Kesey that Cassady's last word was "sixty-four thousand nine hundred and twenty-eight."

Michael McClure's "The Mad Cub" is an autobiography written in Kerouac's style of spontaneous prose. In the excerpt, McClure describes talking to an old friend to say that he will pursue a doctorate in biochemistry. McClure also vows to give up drugs but struggles to get rid of the long term effects of earlier drug use.

Ed Sanders' "A Book Verse" describes Sanders' first experience reading "Howl" as a high school senior in a small Missouri town. Sanders tries to read the poem to his classmates, but they do not understand it. Sanders is suspended from school for three days for reading the poem, and eventually Sanders resolves to move to New York to become a poet.

## Tales of Beatnik Glory Analysis

Bukowski calls Kerouac Cassady's "destructor," by which Bukowski likely means that Kerouac forced Cassady into the role of Dean Moriarty for the rest of his life. Also, Bukowski writes that Cassady has not seen Kerouac since 1962 or 1963. This is incorrect because Cassady saw Kerouac in the summer of 1964 while Cassady was driving the bus Furthur with the Merry Pranksters. However, it is not clear if this is Bukowski's or Cassady's mistake.





The final paragraph of William Burroughs Junior's excerpt shows the level of alienation between father and son. William Junior is considering leaving Tangier and he does not even know where his father is.

Carolyn Cassady raises an excellent question about Neal Cassady's motivation for treating her better during her affair with Kerouac. Carolyn is unsure if Cassady is jealous of Kerouac or relieved that he no longer has to shoulder all the responsibilities of being a husband.

Diane DiPrima paints a bleak picture of New York City in the winter when she writes that it is almost impossible to make it through both January and February in the same year.

Frazer's writings about Mexico reveal a common theme among Beat writers that Mexico is in many ways freer than the United States. For instance, Frazer revels in the easy availability of marijuana in Mexico. This freedom serves as a great attraction for the Beats.

Gysin is very concerned in writing about the Beat Hotel that if it becomes popular the place will be ruined. This is compatible with the sense of exclusivity in Beat writings. Although they often portray themselves as excluded from mainstream America, the Beats equally excluded those they thought of as "square."

In the same vein, Kerouac's popularity after "On the Road" in many ways destroyed the Beat Generation by giving America the beatnik. While the ideas of the Beat Generation becomes more popular than ever, the small niche culture is ruined.

The biographical section on Hettie Jones describes "Partisan Review"—a journal for which Jones worked—as "conservative" when in fact the journal's politics were well to the left and sometimes bordered upon communism.

At one point in Jan Kerouac's memoir she writes that Jack Kerouac had married a woman to be another mother after his own mother suffered a stroke. This opinion is one that many of Jack Kerouac's friends and acquaintances shared as Kerouac frequently avoided commitment to women so he could always return to his mother.

In Kesey's story, Sandy runs over a dog before reaching Kesey's farm and wounds it mortally, so it must be shot to put it out of its misery. This part of the story is likely a metaphor for Cassady's life with Kesey taking the position that Cassady was destroyed by the lesser people he surrounded himself with.

McClure's "The Mad Cub" reflects the common Beat concern about a person striving to achieve enlightenment through excess and drugs but typically ending up in an even greater state of confusion than when he started.

The excerpt from Ed Sanders' "A Book of Verse" shows poetry to be an incredibly transformative in Sanders' life as it was for many Beats. Before Sanders reads "Howl" he is very much like his fellow students, but after reading it, Sanders decides he is nothing like the others and must leave.



# The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual

## The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual Summary

This section covers the later work of the Beats, primarily written after the deaths of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady.

The excerpt from William S. Burroughs' "Nova Express" describes a sinking ship and the frantic actions the people aboard take to get away safely. Many of the passengers resort to violence in the panic. At the end of the excerpt, a handicapped man cuts off the fingers of another passenger attempting to board a lifeboat.

In "Columbia U Poesy Reading—1975" Gregory Corso reflects on reading poetry at Columbia University sixteen years earlier. Later in the poem, Corso discusses his use of opiates, particularly heroin. In "The Whole Mess...Almost" Corso describes getting rid of all the supposed values in his life.

Diane DiPrima's "April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa" is a memory of DiPrima's Italian anarchist grandfather and DiPrima spending time with him in the Bronx. The excerpt from DiPrima's "Loba" describes a powerful mother wolf that inspires DiPrima but is not actually a god.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti in "The Canticle of Jack Kerouac" describes Kerouac's hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts both as it is in the present and when Kerouac was young and before he was born. Ferlinghetti writes about Kerouac's attempts to return home emotionally through his work and also Kerouac's massive impact on American culture. In "Uses of Poetry" Ferlinghetti wonders what the function of a poet is in modern society and determines that is to relate otherworldly truth to people. "Short Story on a Painting of Gustav Klimt" describes "The Kiss" by Klimt and imagines that the woman will not kiss the man because he is unworthy of her.

Allen Ginsberg's "First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels" describes a wild party with many intoxicated people that is silently watched over by the police from across the road. "Wichita Vortex Sutra" is about a vision Ginsberg has while traveling through Kansas. Ginsberg envisions middle American society freeing itself from its inhibitions and embracing an attitude of freedom and love. In "Mugging," Ginsberg discusses leaving his apartment in New York City and being robbed. Ginsberg chants mantras at the robbers, but it does not stop them to Ginsberg's disappointment. In "White Shroud" Ginsberg is again walking the streets of New York when he encounters his dead mother living on the streets. However, this experience turns out to be a dream.



In "The Death of Kin Chuen Louie" Michael McClure writes about a young Chinese man who is murdered while getting into his car. McClure sees the dead body, and the sight haunts him.

Ed Sanders' "Hymna to Archilochus" describes an ancient Greek poet who was criticized for being too erotic and unwilling to fight in war. Sanders writes about having some of his books destroyed in a fire, and this makes him question the purpose of trying to preserve writing. Archilochus' writings are all destroyed, but Sanders still remembers Archilochus as a hero. In "What Would Tom Paine Do?" Sanders asks himself what is the best way of changing the world for the better and concludes that it is to protest for peace.

Gary Snyder writes in "Smokey the Bear Sutra" that Smokey the Bear is the Great Sun Buddha and will protect all that love nature and destroy all those who destroy nature. "The Bath" describes Snyder bathing his son Kai in a sauna and then making love to his wife Masa afterward. During these activities, Snyder feels that he is one body with both his son and his wife. In "Axe Handles" Snyder describes teaching Kai to throw a hatchet, and Snyder realizes that he is an axe shaping Kai into another axe, who will shape yet another and so forth.

## The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual Analysis

By pairing the "Star Spangled Banner" with the sinking of the ship in "Nova Express," Burroughs suggests that the United States is as doomed as the ship itself.

In the prologue of "Columbia U Poesy Reading—1975" Corso writes that Kerouac "poofed into fat air" (Corso, p. 524). This is a reference to Kerouac's weight gain in the later years of his life.

DiPrima refers to Sacco and Vanzetti and Kropotkin in "April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa." All three are anarchist figures. Sacco and Vanzetti are Italian immigrants to America, who are executed for a murder many believe they did not commit. Peter Kropotkin is one of the founders of Russian anarchism.

Ferlinghetti refers to "Whistler's Mother" in "The Canticle of Jack Kerouac," and this is a famous painting by James McNeill Whistler of his mother dressed in black and sitting in a chair. Ferlinghetti also writes several times of the Brittany region of France, which is where Kerouac believed his family originated. In "Uses of Poetry" Ferlinghetti twice writes of "Autogeddon," which is certainly a combination of "automobile" and "Armageddon" showing the Beat resistance to modern American culture.

The final two lines of "First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels" mentions the police cars parked across the street from the party, and it is in sharp contrast to the rest of the poem, which indicates that Ginsberg sees the police presence there as unnecessary and even absurd. The first section of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" mentions a person named Walt, and this is almost certainly the poet Walt Whitman. Near the beginning of mugging, Ginsberg writes about posters for Coca-Cola and Mylai. My Lai is a famous

massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers, and by invoking it at that point in the poem, Ginsberg is likely both condemning commercialism and setting a foreboding tone for the violence that is about to occur.

In "The Death of Kin Chuen Louie" McClure compares Louie's appearance after being shot to a close-up from a Sam Peckinpah film. Peckinpah is a legendary director, primarily of Westerns such as "The Wild Bunch."

Sanders' "Hymna to Archilochus" contains a reference to Plutarch, who is a Greek historian from the time of the Roman empire writing about the golden age of Greek culture. Sanders questions the use of pamphlets in "What Would Tom Paine Do?" in an age when most communication is electronic. This again reveals a suspicion of technology among many Beat writers.

In "Smokey the Bear Sutra" Snyder refers to natural places like Walden Pond and Mount Ranier as great centers of power, which implies that the Earth is a living being. "Mother Earth: Her Whales" mentions Margaret Mead and asks if she dreams of Samoa. Mead is an anthropologist first made famous for writing a study called "Coming of Age in Samoa."



# Three Commentators on the Beat Generation

## Three Commentators on the Beat Generation Summary

Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro" begins with Mailer arguing that World War II forced all of humanity to confront the darkest parts of the human condition. Mailer writes that Beats, or "hipsters" as he calls them, originate by rebelling from the postwar conformity. To avoid conformity, hipsters adopt the styles of African-Americans who are kept out of mainstream American culture by force. Mailer contends that hipsters are psychopathic but also philosophically aware of the fact that they are psychopathic. Hipsters and African-Americans are forced into this position because they are hated by American society. Hipster slang is focused on movement because nothing good for the hipster is static. According to Mailer, the ultimate morality for the hipster is to do what he wants when he wants to do it.

In his essay "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" the famous Western Buddhist Alan Watts argues that in order to truly accept a foreign religion like Zen Buddhism, Westerners must know their first religions very well. If not, they will simply be rebelling against their society (i.e., Beat Zen) or seeking a new set of cultural rules (i.e., Square Zen).

John Clellon Holmes writes in the excerpt of "The Game of the Name" that the Beats resented the label beatnik but did mainly occupy themselves with trying to shock "squares." However, Holmes firmly believes that the Beats served a useful function in making society freer in areas such as racial integration and free speech.

## Three Commentators on the Beat Generation Analysis

Mailer argues that the Beats are American existentialists. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with the purpose of existence, and it usually argues that a person's choices are profoundly important as they determine who that person is and will be in the future. Although Mailer is typically thought of as a leftist thinker and therefore sympathetic to African-Americans, the notion that most African-Americans are psychopathic can easily be construed as racist. Mailer seems to misunderstand how many hipsters used the term "beat." Mailer argues that it is the worst thing for a hipster to be, but Kerouac and others believed to be "beat" was to be in some sense holy.

Watts argues in "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen" that Beat and Square Zens are merely the extremes of the same thing, which implies that Zen can be almost whatever people want to make of it.

Despite Holmes' basic optimism about the impact of the Beats, his writing still reveals a number of reservations about his generation, foremost among them that they never lived up to their own expectations.



# Characters

## Neal Cassady appears in Parts 1, 2, and 5

Neal Cassady is the most important of all the Beats because he is the inspiration for so many of the famous Beat works of literature. Most obviously, Cassady is the basis for Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," but Cassady appears in numerous other works. In "Howl," Allen Ginsberg refers to him as the "secret hero" of the poem, and Cassady is the major character in the excerpt from John Clellon Holmes' "Go." Although Cassady never finishes a book, he writes part of his autobiography and numerous letters. Kerouac credits the so-called "Joan Anderson" letter from Cassady for teaching him the key elements of spontaneous prose.

Cassady is born in 1926 and he is raised by his alcoholic father on the streets of Denver from the age of ten. Cassady spends most of his adolescence in and out of reform schools and jail because he frequently steals cars to pick up girls and joyride. In 1947, Cassady moves to New York City where he meets Kerouac and Ginsberg. Ginsberg and Cassady become lovers for a time, and Cassady travels across the country and into Mexico with Kerouac. Later in his life, Cassady drives the bus Furthur for Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Cassady dies in 1968 of exposure after passing out next to the train tracks in the Mexican desert. In all descriptions, Cassady is portrayed as a fast talking man with almost super human driving skills and a near boundless enthusiasm for life.

## Jack Kerouac appears in Parts 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and Appendix

Jack Kerouac is the best known chronicler of the Beat Generation, primarily in his book "On the Road," which documents his travels across the United States and Mexico with Neal Cassady. Kerouac is the author of numerous other works including "The Dharma Bums" about the Buddhist poet Gary Snyder and a slightly fictionalized biography of Neal Cassady "Visions of Cody." Kerouac is born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1922 and moved to New York City in 1940 to attend Columbia University.

While at Columbia, Kerouac meets Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs who both encourage Kerouac in his literary endeavors. Kerouac writes ferociously throughout the 1940s but only publishes a single book—"The Town and the City"—a somewhat fictionalized account of Kerouac's own childhood in Lowell.

In 1947, Kerouac meets Neal Cassady, who serves as the inspiration for much of Kerouac's work from that point onward. Kerouac is in many ways the opposite of the talkative and self-confident Cassady. Kerouac is often withdrawn, suffers from long bouts of depression, and is awkward with women. Although Kerouac marries twice, the



most important woman in his life is undoubtedly his mother who he lives with off and on until his death.

Kerouac drinks heavily his entire adult life and suffers from severe alcoholism and cirrhosis of the liver for the last decade. In 1969, Kerouac dies from a hemorrhage in his liver.

## **Allen Ginsberg appears in Parts 1, 3, 4, 6, and Appendix**

Allen Ginsberg is the most important poet of the Beat Generation, primarily known for his poem "Howl." Ginsberg is born into a Jewish family in 1926 and grows up in Paterson, New Jersey. Ginsberg's father Louis is a poet and his mother Naomi is an active member of the Communist Party. When Ginsberg is an adolescent, his mother has a mental breakdown and is forced to live in a mental institution for several years. Ginsberg writes about the experience and living with his mentally ill mother after her death in the poem "Kaddish." Ginsberg attends Columbia University beginning in 1944, where he meets Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs.

In 1947, Ginsberg meets Neal Cassady and falls in love with him; the two carry on a love affair for a period of time before Cassady breaks it off. In 1948, Ginsberg experiences a vision of William Blake reading poetry to him, which convinces Ginsberg to write poetry for a living. Ginsberg moves to Berkeley, California in the early-1950s and becomes a leading voice in the San Francisco Renaissance along with Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder. Ginsberg meets Peter Orlovsky in California, and the two become lovers and remain together until Ginsberg's death.

On October 7, 1955, Ginsberg reads "Howl" for the first time at the famous Six Gallery Reading, and this establishes his reputation as the leading Beat poet. "Howl" is later banned due to its obscenity, but Ginsberg wins the trial and the charges are overturned. Although Ginsberg's poetry may seem vulgar or disgusting at times, it is almost always happy and optimistic.

## **William S. Burroughs**

William S. Burroughs is born in Saint Louis in 1914, heir to the Burroughs Adding Machine Company fortune. Burroughs attends college at Harvard and graduates in 1936. During World War II, Burroughs moves to New York City with his friend from Saint Louis Lucien Carr. In New York, Burroughs meets Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Herbert Huncke, who introduces Burroughs to morphine and heroin. Burroughs is soon an opiate addict and writes his first published book, "Junky," about his experiences with the drugs.

Burroughs moves with his common law wife Joan Vollmer to Texas to raise marijuana but is arrested after police find a letter from Allen Ginsberg concerning the crop.





Burroughs flees to Mexico where he accidentally kills Vollmer in a William Tell act. This forces Burroughs to flee again, this time to South America, where he spends most of his time searching for a hallucinogenic plant called Yage. His South American experiences are described in "The Yage Letters." In the early-1950s, Burroughs moves to Tangier, Morocco where he writes his most famous work "Naked Lunch" using his "cut-up" method to rearrange words into new sentences. Burroughs is by far the most cynical and pessimistic of the Beats in his writing, but he lives longer than almost any of them, dying in 1997 at age 83.

## **Gregory Corso appears in Parts 1 and 6**

Gregory Corso is a major Beat poet and also the basis for Jack Kerouac's romantic rival in his novel "The Subterraneans." Corso is born in 1930 in Greenwich Village and spends much of his youth in foster care and a home for juvenile delinquents after he steals a radio at 12. Corso meets Ginsberg in 1950, and Ginsberg encourages Corso in his writing. Corso publishes his first book of poems—"The Vestal Lady on Brattle and Other Poems"—in 1955. The collection includes "I Am 25," Corso's attack on older and more tradition bound poets.

## **Gary Snyder appears in Parts 3 and 6**

Gary Snyder is one of the major poets to emerge out of the San Francisco Renaissance in the mid-1950s. Snyder is also well known for his study of Zen Buddhism, especially the Zen Buddhism of Japan where he lived for a time as a monk. Snyder is born in 1930 in San Francisco but is raised in Washington and Oregon. Snyder is an avid mountain climber and spends many summers working as a lookout on mountains across the Northwest. Snyder is immortalized as the character Japhy Ryder in Jack Kerouac's "The Dharma Bums."

## **Herbert Huncke appears in Part 1**

Herbert Huncke is not primarily known as a writer but for his impact on other Beats. Huncke meets William S. Burroughs in 1944 and introduces him to heroin and the New York City underworld. Burroughs sees Huncke as the original hipster and something of an inverse role-model. Burroughs introduces Huncke to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, who both encourage Huncke to write. Huncke's stories focus on the strange people Huncke meets in his experience using drugs, going to jail, trying to quit in rehabilitation, etc. Kerouac credits Huncke with originating the term "beat" as the Beats use it.

## **John Clellon Holmes appears in Part 1 and Appendix**

John Clellon Holmes is the author of the of the 1952 book "Go" that chronicles the lives of many of the New York Beats including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S.



Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, Neal Cassady, and Holmes himself. Before the publication of Kerouac's "On the Road," Holmes is considered the primary voice of the Beat Generation. Holmes claims that his own writing is not about trying to capture an entire generation but attempting to work through his own shortcomings. However, Holmes still sees the Beat Generation as a positive force in history.

## **Lawrence Ferlinghetti appears in Parts 3 and 6**

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is a poet of the San Francisco Renaissance and the founder of City Lights bookstore in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. City Lights is the primary outlet for Beat authors in the 1950s and 1960s, and it publishes Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" in 1957. Ferlinghetti is brought to trial on obscenity charges for publishing the poem in 1957 but is found not guilty when the poem is determined not to be obscene. Ferlinghetti's own poetry often centers on his left wing politics.

## **Michael McClure appears in Parts 3, 5, and 6**

McClure is a San Francisco Renaissance poet, and his poems are typically about nature and psychedelic drug experiences. McClure also writes one of the more famous accounts of the Six Gallery reading. McClure publishes his autobiography as a novel entitled "The Mad Cub" in 1970, and is disappointed that the book is marketed as the misadventures of a very foolish person.

## **Kenneth Rexroth appears in Part 3**

Kenneth Rexroth is a San Francisco poet from the generation before the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance. Rexroth is instrumental in spotting the talented young poets that would eventually lead the renaissance, however. Rexroth's poetry is often very political, reflecting his anarchist beliefs.

## **Carl Solomon appears in Part 1**

Carl Solomon is a minor Beat writer but is a major influence on Allen Ginsberg. Solomon meets Ginsberg in an insane asylum where they are both voluntary patients, and the two of them become quick friends. Ginsberg devotes "Howl" to Solomon and refers to him repeatedly in the third section of the poem.



## Objects/Places

### **New York City appears in Parts 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and Appendix**

This is where the Beat Generation first starts with the meeting of major figures such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, and William S. Burroughs.

### **Columbia University appears in Part 1**

Both Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg attend Columbia University in the early-1940s and the two meet here for the first time.

### **San Francisco appears in Parts 1, 3, 5, and 6**

San Francisco is the second most important city for the Beats, and in the 1950s probably the most important. The Six Gallery reading, which made Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti famous poets, occurs in San Francisco setting of the San Francisco Renaissance.

### **City Lights Bookstore appears in Part 3**

City Lights is founded by Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. City Lights publishes Allen Ginsberg's famous poem "Howl" and is raided by the police when the poem is deemed obscene.

### **Denver appears in Parts 1 and 2**

Denver is the boyhood home of Neal Cassady and a common destination for Beats as they travel across the country as mentioned by Allen Ginsberg in "Howl."

### **Mexico City appears in Part 1**

Mexico City is where Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady travel in part four of "On the Road." It is also a temporary home to a number of Beats over the years including Kerouac and William S. Burroughs.



## **Tangier, Morrocoappears in Parts 1 and 4**

William S. Burroughs lives in Tangier after fleeing the United States, and it is here that he writes "Naked Lunch."

## **Times Squareappears in Part 1**

Times Square is where the early New Your Beats typically congregated to go to bars and search for drugs.

## **The Beat Hotelappears in Part 5**

A hotel in Paris that is frequented by many Beat writers including Gregory Corso, Williams S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac.

## **Sourdough Mountainappears in Part 3**

This a mountain in Washington state that the Beat poets Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen both write poems about after serving as lookouts there.



# Themes

## Spontaneity

The Beats pride themselves on being spontaneous and see spontaneity as part of a person being true to who they really are. For a person not to act on his spontaneous desires is to give in to the rules of society and become "square." Commenting on the Beat Generation, Norman Mailer writes that their morality consisted purely in doing what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it, which is precisely what the Beats thought of as being spontaneous. The idea of spontaneity is also deeply important for the Beat's aesthetic ideas because for the Beats self-expression must be honest to be worthwhile. The most radical example of spontaneity in Beat work is Jack Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose." Kerouac advises eliminating periods because they slow down spontaneous expression and not revising first drafts because that would take away from the emotional honesty of the prose.

Kerouac follows his own rules in writing "On the Road," which is typed on one continuous roll of paper, so Kerouac does not have to stop to put a new piece of paper into the typewriter. The affinity for spontaneity is also why Neal Cassady is such a hero to the Beats. Cassady is seen as completely uninhibited by society and therefore free to act precisely as he desires.

## Romanticization of the Natural

Beats write romanticize the natural both in the sense of the natural world but also natural human instincts. A great deal of Beat poetry focuses on the natural world. This is particularly true of the Western poets such as Gary Snyder but Eastern poets like Ginsberg also praise the natural world and condemn industrialization. Snyder spends much of his time in outdoor activities such as mountain climbing and writes many poems such as "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" about the experiences. Snyder is acclaimed as a Beat not just because of his poetry but also because he lives "naturally" by being comfortable in nature.

Ginsberg's life, however, is far more centered on cities than Snyder's, but still his poem "Sunflower Sutra" praises a sunflower for being exactly what it is in nature and not trying to be anything else, which Ginsberg uses as an analogy to people. Furthermore, Ginsberg rails against industrialization in the second section of "Howl," comparing many aspects of modern society to the evil demon Moloch. The romanticization of the natural also ties in with the Beat's obsession with spontaneity in that they believe whatever is spontaneous must come naturally and is therefore good. The only Beat who really questions this vision of nature is William S. Burroughs, who on his trip through South America discovers that nature is not very pleasant, but this is in keeping with Burroughs' generally more cynical outlook than his fellow Beats.



## Excess as Means to Enlightenment

The Beats use numerous drugs but not typically for the purpose of simple intoxication. Instead, most Beats use drugs, especially hallucinogens and stimulants, as means to finding greater truth about themselves and the world. For instance, Kerouac frequently writes under the influence of the stimulant Benzedrine, which he believes makes him more spontaneous and therefore makes his writing more true. The first part of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" describes Beats taking all kinds of excessive actions including usage of a multitude of different drugs in a desperate attempt to escape from the evil madness of modern American life.

Although the actions portrayed in "Howl" are escapist in nature, they also deal with the idea of building a better society than the one currently in existence. The Beat poet Michael McClure writes that his use of peyote causes light to shine out of objects, which implies that he is for once seeing their true beauty. The Beats believe that by consuming drugs or pushing the body to its limits on long trips or mountain hikes, they can strip away the restrictions imposed on their minds by society and reach the true or "natural" person that they really are underneath. Again, William S. Burroughs is the most skeptical of the Beats about this attitude as his use of heroin is driven by nothing more than pure addiction.



# Style

## Point of View

The overwhelming majority of the time, the authors in this book employ a first person point of view. The Beats prefer first person autobiographical stories to third person or fiction because they believe it to be truer as the one source of authoritative knowledge they have is their own experiences. However, though the stories are autobiographical, the authors typically invent fictional names for the characters, often for legal reasons. One of the major exceptions to the first person rule is John Clellon Holmes' "Go." Holmes employs third person in his book providing emotional distance from the work for both the reader and author. Holmes writes in an essay at the end of the book that he does not believe "Go" is as much a Beat Generation manifesto as his attempt to work through his own shortcomings, literary and otherwise, and this explains why Holmes' work is so different in point of view from that of most other Beats. A particularly strange form of first person is employed by William S. Burroughs in "Naked Lunch." Although the story is told from the narrator's point of view and the narrator is part of the story, he still seems to be omniscient in many ways. Furthermore, Burroughs in "Naked Lunch" almost always refers to characters with some form of nickname like "the Rube" or "the Shoe Store Kid" likely in reference to the slang of heroin users.

## Setting

The book is set in numerous different places as the Beats traveled a great deal and were often scattered across the world. The first section of the book is largely set in New York City during the late-1940s when the Beats main areas of activity were Columbia University and Times Square. The first section also discusses Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady's travels through the Midwest to Chicago and Mexico to Mexico City, which is described as a city of constant motion. Finally in the first section, William S. Burroughs writes of his travels through the jungles of South America. The second section is primarily set in Denver in the early-1940s when Cassady is growing up there.

Part three switches focus to San Francisco during the mid-1950s during the poetic San Francisco Renaissance. A number of the poems, however, are also set in the Pacific Northwest, especially those by Gary Snyder who grew up in that area. Most of the remainder simply revisits these locations except two chapters of section five. The first is William Burroughs Jr.'s story of visiting his father in Tangier, Morocco where he lived and wrote for a number of years. The other is Brion Gysin's article on the Beat Hotel in Paris, which was a popular destination for Beats such as Gregory Corso, Kerouac, and Burroughs.



## Language and Meaning

The language for almost all the authors in the collection is very loose and informal affecting a conversational style. Kerouac, for instance, with his emphasis on spontaneity in writing writes long sentences frequently connecting them with semicolons to form one long flowing thought that might take up an entire paragraph. Kerouac also frequently employs slang like "dingledodies," which makes his writing feel more like someone telling a story out loud. A large portion of Neal Cassady's writings in the book are letters to other Beats, and their language reflects a very casual style, which Kerouac and others later tried to emulate. Cassady uses a number of parenthetical asides to digress from his main point as if in a conversation with the other person. The letters also have many abbreviations such as "yr." for "your" showing the haste in which Cassady wrote them. Finally, William S. Burroughs tends to use an abundance of large or obscure words, which shows the more traditional and formal style that he writes in as an elder member of the Beats. For example, the excerpt from "Naked Lunch" uses such words as "lariat" and "decorticated." However, even with these slight differences in language, the Beats all use extremely direct language that seeks to communicate as directly and bluntly as possible.

## Structure

The book is broken up into six parts and an appendix. Part one is by far the longest at almost two hundred pages and is about the first Beats such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs and their first meetings in New York City. Part two concerns Neal Cassady and the dramatic influence he had over the Beats in New York. The third part details the rise of Beat poets in San Francisco during the so-called San Francisco Renaissance in poetry. Part four emphasizes the writings of people who may not have been Beats themselves but worked with or around the major Beat writers or were simply influenced heavily by the Beats. Examples of these artists include Allen Ginsberg's long time lover Peter Orlovsky and the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. Part five contains biographical portraits of the major Beats, mostly written by family members such as William Burroughs Jr. and Neal Cassady's wife Carolyn Cassady. The sixth part contains the work of the remaining Beats, primarily written after the late-1960s deaths of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac. The last section is an appendix of three essays written about the Beat Generation by the novelist Norman Mailer, the Western Buddhist thinker Alan Watts, and John Clellon Holmes.





## Quotes

"The burden of my generation was to carry this in utter helplessness—the genocide, the overkill—and still seek love in the underground where all living things hide if they are to survive our century."

East Coast Beats, p. 4

"In the West he'd spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library."

Jack Kerouac, p. 14

"But then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!'"

Jack Kerouac, p. 14-15

"They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way."

Jack Kerouac, p. 40

"Poor! I wish I was free/ of that slaving meat wheel/ and safe in heaven dead."

Jack Kerouac, p. 53

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving/ hysterical naked,"

Allen Ginsberg, p. 62

"America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel."

Allen Ginsberg, p. 77

"O mother/ what have I left out/ O mother/ what have I forgotten"

Allen Ginsberg, p. 96

"The weight of the world/ is love."

Allen Ginsberg, p. 98

"I have precise instructions for Auca raiding. It's quite simple. You cover both exits of Auca house and shoot everybody you don't want to fuck."

William Burroughs, p. 125

"Hustlers of the world, there is one Mark you cannot beat: The Mark Inside."

William Burroughs, p. 133



"The tendency toward crime among the young men of my generation is impossible to surmount. We are all guttersnipes. Gratuitousness is the spirit of the age."

Carl Solomon, p. 169

"Those who can't find anything to live for,/ always invent something to die for./ Then they want the rest of us to/ die for it, too."

Lew Welch, p. 324

"'Beat Generation' had implied history, some process of development. But with the right accessories, 'beatniks' could be created on the spot."

Joyce Johnson, p. 480



## Topics for Discussion

Given the early deaths of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, were the Beats correct in living to such excesses? Could they have lived any other way?

Why is Neal Cassady such a hero to the other Beats?

Why does Jack Kerouac recommend writing spontaneously?

Explain the themes of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." Why did Judge Clayton Horn rule that the poem is not obscene?

What kind of religious ideas did the Beats have? Why were so many Beats attracted to Buddhism?

Why did the Beats use drugs and pursue extreme experiences?

Summarize the Beat criticisms of modern American society. Do you agree with these criticisms? Why or why not?

How did the Beats view the natural world? How does that outlook impact their view of humanity?

Given the vastly different outlooks of some of the Beats (e.g., Gary Snyder vs. William S. Burroughs), is it even appropriate to group them together as a generation?