

# JACK'S BOOK

AN  
ORAL  
BIOGRAPHY  
OF

JACK KEROUAC

BARRY GIFFORD AND LAWRENCE LEE



PENGUIN BOOKS

## JACK'S BOOK

Barry Gifford's fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been published in twenty-eight languages. His novel *Night People* was awarded the Premio Brancati, established by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alberto Moravia, in Italy and he has been the recipient of awards from PEN, the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Library Association, the Writers Guild of America, and the Christopher Isherwood Foundation. His books *Sailor's Holiday* and *The Phantom Father* were each named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*, and his book *Wyoming* was named Novel of the Year by the *Los Angeles Times*. He has written librettos for operas by the composers Toru Takemitsu, Ichiro Nodaira, and Olga Neuwirth. Gifford's work has appeared in many publications, including the *New Yorker*, *Punch*, *Esquire*, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, *El País*, *La Repubblica*, *Rolling Stone*, *Brick*, *Film Comment*, *El Universal*, *Projections*, and the *New York Times*. His film credits include *Wild at Heart*, *Perdita Durango*, *Lost Highway*, *City of Ghosts*, *Ball Lightning*, and *The Phantom Father*. Barry Gifford's most recent books are *Sailor & Lula: The Complete Novels* and *Sad Stories of the Death of Kings*. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. For more information, visit [BarryGifford.com](http://BarryGifford.com).

Lawrence Lee, a Peabody Award–winning journalist, worked for United Press International, Associated Press, and a number of television stations in San Francisco. He coauthored *Saroyan: A Biography*. Mr. Lee died in 1990.



Photo of Jack Kerouac © 1950 by Arni. According to Kerouac's widow, this was the way he wanted to be remembered.

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To Marshall Clements, the book we always wanted

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And to Mary Lou, as always

—*B.G.*

To John and to the memory of Robert Goodman

—*L.L.*

THE AUTHORS WISH to thank all of those persons who participated in this project—“An Adventurous Education” as surely as was Jack’s *Vanity of Duluoz*—and thank especially those who personally assisted us: Carolyn Cassady, James Grauerholz, Les Pockell, Marshall Clements, Pat and Liz Delaney, Ken and Tony Anderson, Lorna Goodman, Don Ellis, Deirdre Tabler, Dennis McNally, Duane BigEagle, Ray Neinstein, Sarah Satterlee, Bill Alexander, Paul DeAngelis, Mary Lou Nelson, the officers of KSAN-FM radio and Julie Lyon, for her indefatigable transcription of the nigh-untranscribable.

—*B.G. and L.L.*



“All your America ... is like a dense Balzacian hive in a jewel point.”

—Jack Kerouac  
in *Doctor Sax*

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

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by Barry Gifford

On May 30, 1936, in a letter to Arnold Zweig, Sigmund Freud wrote: “To be a biographer, you must tie yourself up in lies, concealments, hypocrisies, false colorings, and even in hiding a lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and if it were to be had, we could not use it.... Truth is not feasible, mankind doesn’t deserve it....”

Heeding Freud’s admonition, Larry Lee and I chose the rather unorthodox (for that time, 1975) method of “oral history” to capture on record the brief life of Jack Kerouac. Larry called it “a rather more immediate form of biography”; the idea being that since most of Kerouac’s cronies and family members were still alive (he having died of alcoholism at the early age of forty-seven), if we could find and then persuade them to talk candidly about the subject, it would be left to us—and the reader—to sort through the revisionism and decide whose version most closely approximated the ineluctable “truth.” It was Jack’s longtime cohort, the poet Allen Ginsberg, who pronounced, upon completion of his reading of the uncorrected galleys of the book: “My god, it’s just like *Rashomon*—everybody lies and the truth comes out!” Allen’s words are branded in my memory; I am not paraphrasing.

It was Allen’s well-meaning desire to see Kerouac presented in the “best” light, owing, no doubt, to the disrespect and disservice that Jack—and Allen, among other contemporaries—had received from critics and the news media during the heyday of the “Beat Generation.” Though *Jack’s Book* surely presents Kerouac warts and all, it was Larry Lee’s and my intention to get people busy reading JK’s eleven mostly ignored novels and other works. When we began our research for this biography, only three of Kerouac’s books were in print: *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Book of Dreams*. By 1980, two years after the publication of *Jack’s*

*Book*, at least eight titles were available. In 2012, virtually all of Kerouac's work can be found in new editions, films of his novels *On the Road* and *Big Sur* have been made, and he has become something of an industry.

Larry and I did not intend that *Jack's Book* be a “definitive” study. We assumed that more scholarly approaches would follow ours—“*Après moi*,” wrote JK, “*le deluge*”—and, true enough, that avalanche fell in short order. In fact, it's still falling. We wanted to create a conversational, novelistic (in terms of dialogue) reckoning of this man's life. We wanted the people he knew and loved and hated, and who knew and loved and hated him, to say whatever they had to say without being given too much time, too many years, to think about it. In most cases, these people had not yet spoken on the record about Jack Kerouac. Their thoughts were fresh—they didn't know what they thought until they'd told us, until they'd said it out loud. One reviewer declared, “If you're interested in listening to what the talk of the fifties sounded like, and if you believe that literature may just have something to do with life, then read this book.” *That* was what we were after, the *talk*.

The novelist and journalist Dan Wakefield, later to himself chronicle the period in his memoir, *New York in the 50s*, magnanimously described our effort as “a fascinating literary and historical document, the most insightful look at the beat generation.” The key word there, for us, is *document*. *Jack's Book* is constructed like a documentary, what Kerouac, in his novel *Doctor Sax*, called a “bookmovie.” Others of Mr. Wakefield's generation decried the new attention being paid to Kerouac; they had disliked him and/or his work then, and they disliked him and it—and, by association, Larry Lee and me—now. That was all right with us; we, who cared enough about his writing to devote two years of our lives in an effort to get the Kerouac ball rolling again, expected as much.

We knew that just the mention of the name Jack Kerouac was enough to aggravate some people. We also knew that his novels had inspired thousands and thousands of readers—especially youthful readers—to get the hell out of whatever boring or dead-end situation they were in and take

a chance with their lives. I'll always respect the writer Thomas McGuane for going on record about JK, saying in an essay that he, McGuane, never wanted to hear a word against Kerouac because Jack had indeed worked a kind of salutary magic on more than a few. "He trained us in the epic idea that ...you didn't necessarily have to take it in Dipstick, Ohio, forever," McGuane wrote. "Kerouac set me out there with my own key to the highway." Kerouac's literary standing aside, the man had the power to *move* others.

Jack Kerouac was no avatar and *Jack's Book* was not meant as hagiography. This book—biography, reportage, collage, holy mosaic, unholy mess, however it's been and will be characterized—contains some extremely emotional, confessional material; it's not dull. Dr. Freud notwithstanding, there is at least a sort of truth to be found here. The book belongs to those persons who bared their souls in conversations with us about their dead friend or adversary. Therefore, it belongs to Kerouac, which is why I titled it *Jack's Book*. These are letters to a dead man from people who for one reason or another didn't tell him what they really thought of and about him while he was alive. It was Larry's and my pleasure to provide them the belated opportunity.

I'll never forget sitting with Jimmy Holmes, the hunchbacked pool-shark of Denver, in the stuffy parlor of his elderly aunt's apartment, where he lived, and him saying to me, after I'd read aloud a lyrical passage from *Visions of Cody* that Kerouac had based on his life, and which Holmes had never read, "I didn't know Jack cared about me that way. He really *cared*, didn't he?" Or stumbling drunkenly along the Bowery in the wee hours one frozen February morning with Lucien Carr, who kept repeating, "I *loved* that man. I *loved* Jack, goddam it, and I never *told* him!"

This new edition is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Lawrence Lee who died on April 5, 1990.

—BG, 2012

America makes odd demands of its fiction writers. Their art alone won't do. We expect them to provide us with social stencils, an expectation so firm that we often judge their lives instead of their works. If they declare themselves a formal movement or stand up together as a generation, we are pleased, because this simplifies the use we plan to make of them. If they oblige us with a manifesto, it is enforced with the weight of contract.

So it happens that, from Henry James on, Europe is regarded by Americans as a large lending-library of inspiration, and expatriation becomes something of a duty, whether fulfilled or not. Ernest Hemingway makes a market for wineskins. Mr. and Mrs. Scott Fitzgerald certify a dip in the Plaza Fountain as apt behavior for young Americans of a certain class and time.

Having derived an etiquette from their works, we hold these writers in our minds as creatures of the moment in which we noticed them. If they abandon our expectations, the literary critics and chroniclers put them in their place, like stamps that have been stuck onto the wrong page of the album. In this way we sometimes deny artists the ordinary chances at growth and change that are among art's bare necessities.

This book is about a man who was a victim of this spirit of literary utilitarianism. Jack Kerouac is remembered as the exemplar of "the Beat Generation." But the Beat Generation was no generation at all. The label was invented as an essay in self-explanation when journalists asked questions, but it was accepted at face value. Kerouac used the phrase above one of the first samples of *On the Road* to reach print ("Jazz of the Beat Generation," 1955) and his friend John Clellon Holmes, who had described the same world in his novel *Go*, obliged the *New York Times Magazine* and *Esquire* with think-pieces about this new generation written in the style that the readers of those journals expected.

Kerouac was a writer whose belated success depended upon a new pros

method, which he applied to a sturdy old form, a young man's varied adventures. It was Kerouac's misfortune that his fame—as distinct from his literary standing, a matter yet to be determined—owed more to the people and events he portrayed than to the way in which he portrayed them, as he later insisted he would have preferred.

Cutting away the amateurs, the opportunists, and the figures whose generational identification was fleeting or less than wholehearted on their own part, the Beat Generation—as a literary school—pretty much amounts to Kerouac and his friends William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. In life and in art the three relied upon one another in strong and complex ways, and, more than four decades after his death, Kerouac's prose style lives on in the forms Ginsberg adopted to become the world-poetry voice he is today. Ginsberg shed his role as the earnest, necktie-wearing "Ginsy" of the 1940s and managed to utilize the dangerous energy of publicity in projecting an image useful to his motives as a poet. Burroughs, whose frosty distance and Coolidge-like silences evidently have been in his repertoire since boyhood, saw to it that he was left alone. A fourth figure, Gregory Corso, entered the circle late, and continues to play the *poète-maudit*, lately in France, where that role is a matter of accepted tradition. Kerouac's failure to adopt any of his former cohorts' survival tactics or to find a successful one of his own is the sad heart of the last part of this book.

When *On the Road* appeared in 1957, after languishing in Kerouac's rucksack for years, Jack won the literary and commercial success he had wanted desperately, but had failed to achieve with his first novel, *The Town and the City*, published in 1950. Ginsberg asked him to write a brief explanation of his technique, and it was printed in *The Black Mountain Review*, the journal of that resolutely advanced Southern college, as "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose." Kerouac's method was a war on craft, but his notes were adopted as the excuse for a torrent of bad stream-of-consciousness prose and poetry. Kerouac, unwillingly, was set up as the avatar of a movement that he had no desire and little ability to advance.

Suddenly, he found himself placed by the media at the center of a stage dressed with props from French existentialism (black sweaters, berets), late romanticism (footloose hedonism) and the whole race-hoard of ideas about drugs, from De Quincey to Anslinger.

Kerouac realized the threat of this role at once, but he reacted with an odd mixture of shyness and belligerence. He accepted the attention, at first, as a compliment. Its focus was an insult. Why didn't the journalists examine the books as well as the man? As he told *The Paris Review* in 1967:

I am so busy interviewing myself in my novels, and I have been so busy writing down these self-interviews, that I don't see why I should draw breath in pain every year of the last ten years to repeat and repeat to everybody who interviews me what I've already explained in the books themselves.... I beggars sense.

He began to say forthright things about his essential conservatism and religiousness, and they were duly quoted with the feature-writer's skill at synthetic irony. *Esquire* portrayed him as a pathetic class-traitor, a hipster as-Bircher. Although that particular insult was delivered only after his death, Kerouac did live long enough to recognize the imminent fulfillment of this prophecy he had delivered in 1951 across a midnight kitchen table to Neal Cassady:

A Ritz Yale Club party where I went with a kid in a leather jacket, I was wearing one too, and there were hundreds of kids in leather jackets instead of big tuxedo Clancy millionaires ...cool, and everybody was smoking marijuana, wailing a new decade in one wild crowd.

He saw it coming before anyone else, and he got blamed for its coming at all.

This confusion between some of the social forms of the late sixties and the content of Kerouac's work continues to do his reputation damage. In *Exile's Return*, his book about the social side of American letters between the world wars, Malcolm Cowley describes *The Saturday Evening Post's* thirty-year grudge against Greenwich Village, a vendetta replicated by the *New York Times*, which still maintains a specialist in critical attacks on "the Beats." Students of English literature waited twenty years for the first



scholarly edition of *On the Road*, and only in recent years has Kerouac's work begun to prevail over what poet Jack Spicer called "the great, gray English Department of the skull."

But despite the gap on the assigned-reading list, students at any school of a certain size, whether in Ann Arbor, Chapel Hill, Austin, or Cambridge, have always been able to step across the street and find a big selection of Kerouac novels, often in British paperback editions. The books live. *On the Road* has never gone out of print. Ginsberg and fellow poets have created a Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Buddhist college in Colorado, Naropa Institute. Movie companies are exploiting Kerouac's novels again, and a play based on his life was produced in New York in 1976 and in Los Angeles in 1977.

As with Scott Fitzgerald, another drinking Catholic who gave out at the midpoint, there is a threat that Jack Kerouac's legend may supplant his work, rather than merely overshadow it. Had he lived unto silvery literary senior-statesmanship, it is possible that one publisher or another would have fulfilled his wish for corrected and uniform publication (with the names straight, once and for all) of his "one vast book ...an enormous comedy, like Proust's." He would have called it *The Duluoz Legend*. As it is, the one-vast-book notion cannot accommodate his first novel, *The Town and the City*, a fact Jack acknowledged. He would have set it aside. There are other problems. Tidy-minded publishers forced him to give the same characters exasperating strings of pseudonyms masking pseudonym and even, in *The Subterraneans*, to disguise New York as San Francisco in a hedge against libel suits. His work is scattered among foreign and American houses, individual volumes popping in and out of print.

The idea of this book is to provide the framework for a first or fresh reading of Kerouac as a man who succeeded in giving us his one vast book, but in the bits and pieces the marketplace demanded. The authors are men born during or shortly after World War II who at first knew their subject only through his work, where they found the energy for the undertaking of learning as much as they could of his life.

Kerouac died in 1969 at the age of forty-seven, young in the terms of  
our time. Most of his friends survived him. Our idea was to seek them out  
and to talk with them about Jack's life and their own lives. The final  
result, we hoped, would be a big, transcontinental conversation, complete  
with interruptions, contradictions, old grudges, and bright memories, all of  
them providing a reading of the man himself through the people he chose  
to populate his work.

The job took us back and forth across the country twice, mostly by  
airplane. The very roads have been replaced since Jack's travels by the  
homogenized culture of the Interstate Highway system, but the people of  
Kerouac's novels have survived. We talked to seventy or so individuals,  
thirty-five of whom speak here. We had no "Rosebud" to ask them about,  
like the friends and victims of *Citizen Kane*, nor, although more than one  
interviewee proposed the metaphor, did we feel much like the field  
investigators in the Roman Catholic Church's saint-making procedures.  
Much of what we learned from these conversations has been used in the  
text that binds the excerpts from them together. We have let Kerouac's  
friends speak a good deal about themselves because it seemed to us both  
possible and proper to provide a group portrait as well as a close-up of the  
man who stands at its center. Because the cast reached Russian-novel  
proportions, we provided the character key as an aid to following their  
appearances in this book and those of their fictional shadows in Kerouac's

In what follows you will read again and again, in many voices, that  
Kerouac's novels were fiction, not reportage. We agree. It is fascinating to  
see the way in which real people, places, and events are utilized in the  
books, which then fed back to alter reality, but the technical leaps and the  
heartbreaking beauty of Kerouac's prose take his novels into a realm far  
beyond that of the reporter or diarist. His books are the product of a genius  
at recollection. When he was a boy in Massachusetts Jack's friends  
nicknamed him "Memory Babe." To the editor who brought *On the Road*  
to light he was the recording angel. To his friend and fellow novelist, John  
Clellon Holmes, he was "the great rememberer." And to a great many of

those with whom we spoke, memories of Jack were mixed up with notions of sainthood. If miracles are required as evidence of his life, his books themselves should suffice.

# JACK'S BOOK

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*One hundred feet above sea level,  
on a plateau where the powerful  
Merrimack joins the sluggish  
Concord River, stands Lowell,  
one of the leading manufacturing  
cities of New England. Canals and  
grassy plots criss-cross the crowded  
metropolitan business section.*

*On the hills beyond are a city's  
homes from mansion to tenement.*

—MASSACHUSETTS  
FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT, 1937

## THE TOWN



“Jacky Duluoz’s home was in a tenement.... He lived with his mother, father and sister; had a room of his own, with the fourth-floor windows staring on seas of rooftops ...” (*Maggie Cassidy*, pp. 21–22). Moody Street, showing Textile Lunch. Vinny Bergerac’s apartment was third floor of building next to vacant lot. Photo by Marshall Clements.

THE TENEMENTS WERE, and are, Little Canada. There are others like it in Burlington and Nashua and Portsmouth, neighborhoods in which the shop signs are in English but the French language and ways prevail. You can still see the young French-Canadian men lounging by the front door of the Pawtucketville Social Club, the bowling alley and beerhall where Jack’s father, Leo, went on afternoons when business was light at his Spotlight Printshop in the “crowded metropolitan business section” across the river.

Like many New England towns, Lowell has swallowed up a collection of villages, each with its own history. Jack Kerouac was born in

Centralville and grew up in a succession of rent-houses and flats in Dracut  
and Pawtucketville, all of them north of the Merrimack and the now-  
vanished mills that multiplied the Merrimack's power by that of the  
leisurely Concord, a river which is a river only as Lowell is a city, on an  
old scale—New England's.

During the early years of the industrial revolution Lowell was a  
wonder-town, literally a capital of industry. The mills spun Boston  
fortunes that survive to this day. Charles Dickens, a stern critic of factory  
slavery in his own country, visited Lowell and wrote home an approving  
report. He was impressed by the looks of the place and by the deportment  
of the farm girls who had come there to tend the looms, and he found no  
fault with their wage, two dollars a week. The mill owners gave the town  
Textile Institute on the north bank of the Merrimack, but they were less  
generous with their workers. As the nineteenth century rolled on, the  
“operatives” became relatively less and less well-paid. The farm girls went  
to Boston, instead, to work as stenographers or telephonists. Their places  
at the looms were taken by immigrants from Ireland, France (via Canada),  
Poland, and Greece.

The mills hummed until the end of World War I, when imported cloth  
and southern factories provided competition that began to close them  
down. By the time Jack was born—March 12, 1922—Lowell's splendid  
century was over. A hundred years of immigrants drawn by the mills had  
sorted themselves into a loose constellation of ethnic groups bound by a  
common Catholicism but separated by their loyalties to a particular parish  
or language. Every one of them was caught in an economic depression  
such as the rest of America would endure only ten years later.

Leo Alcide Kerouac and Gabrielle Ange L'Evesque met and married in  
New Hampshire, where their families had immigrated from Canada. Leo  
was a job printer who had tried his hand at selling insurance before he got  
the money to open his own press. As a youth he had worked in New  
Hampshire sawmills. Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac was the third and last  
child. His sister, Caroline, “Nin,” was three years older and his brother,

Gerard, five when Jack was born.

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Leo and Gabrielle lived in separate worlds when they were away from their rented hearth. Leo was a hearty, outgoing burgher whose shop was crowded with his friends. They found little difficulty in luring him away for an afternoon of billiards or political talk. At one point they proposed that he run for mayor of Lowell, but he declined the draft. Leo passed on to Jack a complicated notion of his ancestry on the Kerouac side, explaining that his own father, a carpenter who had immigrated from Brittany, was descended from Cornish Celts. Leo supplied a nobleman for one branch of the family tree, a coat-of-arms with three carpenter's nails and a motto which translated as "Love, work and suffer." Jack's father counted Greeks and Poles and Irishmen among his friends and customers, and he was entirely comfortable with English, the language that all of them could share. Gabrielle preferred French and conducted her household in that tongue, which was also the language of the parish where she performed novenas and sent her children to be taught.

When Jack was four, Gerard, then nine, died of rheumatic fever. Gerard was a bright, frail child who had treated Jack, his sister Nin, his pet cat, and the mice he rescued from traps with the same extraordinary kindness. Jack worshipped him and emulated him and was entirely bereft at his death, which was marked by ceremonious mourning by the teaching sisters. Gerard had been a favorite of the nuns. When he died, they thought over things that he had said and done in his brief life and spoke of him as saint-in-the-making. The boy was buried with Gabrielle's family in Nashua, New Hampshire, his soul consigned to a heaven which she sought to make comfortable and at-hand to Jacky and Nin. To Gabrielle there was no question that Gerard was a saint, and Jacky was told so again and again. The implication was that Jack, perhaps, was not.

The special, official saint to whom Jack was taught to pray was Thérèse of Lisieux, whose life provided something of a stencil for Jack's memories of Gerard's saintliness. Thérèse was the consumptive daughter of a watchmaker in Brittany, the region of France the Kerouacs considered



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