

## A 2009 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ASKS ABOUT JACK KEROUAC by Katie Marples and Walt Klappert

Katie Marples, a Junior at the Ursuline Academy, a private Catholic girls' High School in Cincinnati, interviewed Walt Klappert, Producer and Coauthor of the play "Beat," about Jack Kerouac. Here is how it went...

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Katie: In what ways do you think Kerouac's writing style affected his novels?

Walt: Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose" style was controversial among critics. Truman Capote remarked for example, "That's not writing, it's typing." However, the resulting casual style worked well for Jack's readers and he became popular as a result. For the record, Jack's first book "The Town and the City" copied the style of Thomas Wolfe and sold poorly.

Katie: What do you consider to be Kerouac's most important relationship and Why?

Walt: Neal Cassady and Jack's mother Gabrielle vie for a tie, Neal because of his role as Jack's muse, and Gabrielle as the woman in Jack's life who was there from the beginning to the end.

Katie: What did the word "beat" mean to Jack?

Walt: Kerouac used the term "Beat Generation" to describe himself and a handful of his friends including writers Allan Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs in 1948. The term simultaneously referred to being "beaten down" and "beatific."

On the other hand for the record, the term "beatnik" was a pejorative term made up by the press. "Sputnik," the communist satellite, was a threat from outside the USA. The "beatniks" were a threat from inside the USA.

Katie: Do you believe his upbringing and/or mother influenced his writing?

Walt: Absolutely. In my opinion, to a degree everything everyone writes is always autobiographical, even when it is called "fiction." How could anyone write anything uncolored by their own experience after all?

Katie: Do you think that Kerouac had an influence over the times or that the times had an influence over him? How so?

Walt: Jack's time helped kill Jack. If we define Jack's time as the 1950's, Jack had no influence over his time. Jack had influence over other people who influenced the times which followed Jack's, the 1960's, 70's and beyond.

Katie: Do you think that *On the Road* will ever be made into a movie?

Walt: A movie of "On The Road" is currently in the works by the Coppola family, as I understand it from an inside source. In spite of this, "On The Road" does not fit the formula for a Hollywood Movie, so they have a tough job on their hands.

Katie: How do you think Kerouac would respond to being called the "Father of the Hippies"?

Jack Kerouac responded himself to many questions about the "Hippies." For the record, some "ex-Hippies" preferred other names like "Freaks," "Yippies," "Flower Children," or to be known by some other local brand. Nevertheless, Jack Kerouac was never a "Hippie" and denied any parentage to younger people of the ilk frequently.

I highly recommend the DVD "What Ever Happened to Jack Kerouac" which may be available at your local library for at least one sample of his denials. Among the many great interviews and clippings on the DVD is an interview of Jack K -- with some others -- by the quintessential conservative television host of the period, William F. Buckley, Jack's friend. Even through Jack's on-camera drunkenness it is clear he has disdain and no attachment to this new fangled "Hippie" movement. Although his other Beat friends, Allan Ginsberg and Neal Cassady became icons in the "Hippie" period, other Beats like Jack and William S. Burroughs were just not built to go with the "trying to change the world" movement of the late sixties. During the 1950's, the Beats had a desire for the world to just leave them alone.

Hippies were said to have tried to visit "The King of the Beats" while he was living with his mother toward the end of Jack's life. The hippies who got past his mom were generally disappointed. One contributing factor was Jack's general state of depression late in life. After years of alcoholism, he drank himself to death at age 47.

Yet, Jack Kerouac probably had at least subliminal influence over everyone who read "On The Road," some of his other prose, his poetry or learned from a teacher who was influenced by him. Given that, not only "Hippies," but writers from lots of disparate movements point to Kerouac as their literary father. Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Waits all say they were influenced by Kerouac. They would probably at least broadly be considered part of the "Hippie" generation. In that light, Kerouac has a lot of offspring he never acknowledged as kin.

Katie: What do you consider to be Kerouac's most important scene in any of his novels and why?

This is a humbling question. Inspired by a letter from Neal Cassady, the real-life model for the character Dean Moriarty in "On The Road," Jack adopted a techniques he called "Spontaneous Prose." I think of it as "just-write-down-what-you-are-thinking-dammit!" The technique works great for me too by the way. However, it does not lead to great scenes. Great scenes probably more frequently come from preplanning and lots of

reworking.

Nonetheless, you asked. I think the answer should probably come from Kerouac's masterpiece "On The Road," so why not go with the opening lines? After all, they suck in the reader to go on the road with Jack and Neal. Here they are:

"I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road."

Hmm, not \*that\* spectacular...

Well, fellow poet Michael McClure felt Kerouac's "Mexico City Blues" was the greatest extended poem of the 20th Century, so here is excerpt from that I like:

There is a spectacular scene I understand in Jack's book "Big Sur" where a paranoid delusion climaxes in a painful orgasm of epiphany when Kerouac witnesses a vision of the cross. This could lead us into Jack's simultaneous beliefs in the Catholicism and Buddhism, but since I have not actually focused on "Big Sur," this answer is like naming the Twelve Apostles when asked to name the Seven Dwarves.

I think my first answer may be best: Jack K's style of writing is why I do not recall any specific great scenes, but instead many good scenes. His novels and other works are better when considered in their entirety.

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Isn't it great to know Jack Kerouac has made it into a mind of another generation?