

Book Review: On The Road

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I

[On the Road](#) is a terrible book about terrible people. Jack Kerouac and his terrible friends drive across the US about seven zillion times for no particular reason, getting in car accidents and stealing stuff and screwing women whom they promise to marry and then don't.

But this is supposed to be okay, because they are *visionaries*. Their vision is to use the words “holy”, “ecstatic”, and “angelic” at least three times to describe every object between Toledo and Bakersfield. They don't pass a *barn*, they pass a holy vision of a barn, a barn such as there must have been when the world was young, a barn whose angelic red and beatific white send them into mad ecstasies. They don't almost hit a cow, they almost hit a holy primordial cow, the cow of all the earth, the cow whose dreamlike ecstatic mooing brings them to the brink of a rebirth such as no one has ever known.

Jack Kerouac and his terrible friends are brought to the brinks of a lot of things, actually. Aside from stealing things and screwing

women whom they promise to marry and then don't, being brought to the brink of things is one of their main pastimes. Enlightenment, revelation, truth, the real meaning of America, the ultimate, the sacred – if it has a brink, they will come to it. Crucially, they never cross that brink or gain any lasting knowledge or satisfaction from the experience. Theirs is a religion whose object of worship is the burst of intense emotion, the sudden drenching of their brain in happy chemicals that come and go without any lasting effect except pages full of the words “holy”, “ecstatic”, and “angelic”.

The high priest of this religion is Kerouac's friend Dean Moriarty. Kerouac cannot frickin shut up about Dean Moriarty. Obviously he is “holy” and “ecstatic” and “angelic” and “mad” and “visionary”, but for Dean, Kerouac pulls out all the stops. He is “a new kind of American saint”, “a burning shuddering frightful Angel”, with intelligence “formal and shining and complete”.

Who is this superman, this hero?

His specialty was stealing cars, gunning for girls coming out of high school in the afternoon, driving them out to the mountains, making them, and coming back to sleep in any available hotel bathtub in town.

Okay, but you have overwrought religious adjectives to describe all of this, right?

[Dean's] "criminality" was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming.

I feel like once you steal like a dozen cars in the space of a single book, you lose the right to have the word "criminality" in scare quotes.

But please, tell us more:

[Ed and Dean] had just been laid off from the railroad. Ed had met a girl called Galatea who was living in San Francisco on her savings. These two mindless cads decided to bring the girl along [on one of their seven zillion pointless cross-country trips] and have her foot the bill. Ed cajoled and pleaded; she wouldn't go unless he married her. In a whirlwind few days Ed Dunkel married Galatea, with Dean rushing around to get the necessary papers, and a few days before Christmas they rolled out of San Francisco at seventy miles per, headed for LA and the snowless southern road. In LA they picked up a sailor in a travel bureau and took him along for fifteen dollars' worth of gas... All along the way Galatea Dunkel, Ed's new wife, kept complaining that she was tired and wanted to sleep in a motel. If this kept up they'd spend all her money long before Virginia. Two nights she forced a stop and blew tens on motels. By the time they got to Tucson she was broke. Dean and Ed gave her the slip in a hotel

lobby and resumed the voyage alone, with the sailor, and without a qualm.

All right, Jack, how are you gonna justify *this* one?

Dean was simply a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him.

I too enjoy life. Yet somehow this has never led me to get my friend to marry a woman in order to take her life savings, then leave her stranded in a strange city five hundred miles from home after the money runs out.

Jack Kerouac's relationship with Dean can best be described as "enabler". He rarely commits any great misdeeds himself. He's just along for the ride [usually literally, generally in flagrant contravention of all applicable traffic laws] with Dean, watching him destroy people's lives, doing nothing about it, and then going into rhapsodies about how free-spirited and unencumbered and holy and mad and visionary it all is.

There's a weird tension here, because Jack is determined to totally ignore the moral issues. He brings this kind of stuff up only incidentally, as Exhibits A and B to support his case that Dean Moriarty is the freest and most perfect and most wonderful human being on Earth, and sort of moves past it before it becomes awkward. An

enthusiastic reader, caught up in the spirit of the book, might easily miss it. The only place it is ever made explicit is page 185, when Galatea (who has since found her way back to San Francisco) confronts Dean about the trail of broken lives he's left behind him, saying:

You have absolutely no regard for anybody but yourself and your damned kicks. All you think about is what's hanging between your legs and how much money or fun you can get out of people and then you just throw them aside. Not only that, but you're silly about it. It never occurs to you that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time."

This, 185 pages in, is the first and last time anyone seriously tries to criticize Dean. Dean has stolen about a dozen cars. He has married one woman, had an affair with another, played the two of them off against each other, divorced the first, married the second, deserted the second with a young child whom she has no money to support, gone back to the first, dumped the first again so suddenly she has to become a prostitute to make ends meet. Later he will go back to the second, beat the first so hard that he injures his thumb and has to get it amputated, break into the second's house with a gun to kill her but change his mind, desert the second again also with a child whom she has no money to support, start dating a third, desert the third *also* with a child whom she has no money to support, and go back to the second, all while having like twenty or thirty lesser affairs on the side. As quoted above, he dumped

poor Galatea in Tucson, and later he will dump Jack in Mexico because Jack has gotten deathly ill and this is cramping his style.

So Galatea's complaint is not exactly coming out of thin air.

Jack, someone has just accused your man-crush of being selfish and goofing off all the time. Care to defend him with overwrought religious adjectives?

That's what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF... he was BEAT, the root, the soul of beatific. What was he knowing? He tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing, and they envied that about me, my position at his side, defending him and drinking him in as they once tried to do

Right. That's the problem. People are just *jealous*, because holy ecstatic angelic Dean Moriarty likes you more than he likes them. Get a life.



But of course getting a life – in the sense of a home, a stable relationship, a steady job, et cetera – is exactly what all the characters in *On The Road* are desperately trying to avoid.

“Beat” has many meanings, but one of them is supposed to be “beaten down”. The characters consider themselves oppressed,

on the receiving end of a system that grinds them up and spits them out. This is productively compared with their total lack of any actual oppression whatsoever.

I don't know if it's the time period or merely their personal charm, but Kerouac et al's ability to do anything (and anyone) and get away with it is astounding. Several of their titular cross-country trips are performed entirely by hitch-hiking, with their drivers often willing to buy them food along the way. Another is performed in some sort of incredibly ritzy Cadillac limo, because a rich man wants his Cadillac transported from Denver to Chicago, Dean volunteers, and the rich man moronically accepts. Dean of course starts driving at 110 mph, gets in an accident, and ends up with the car half destroyed. Once in the city, Dean decides this is a good way to pick up girls, and:

In his mad frenzy Dean backed up smack on hydrants and tittered maniacally. By nine o' clock the the car was an utter wreck: the brakes weren't working any more; the fenders were stove in; the rods were rattling. Dean couldn't stop it at red lights; it kept kicking convulsively over the roadway. It had paid the price of the night. It was a muddy boot and no longer a shiny limousine... 'Whee!' It was now time to return the Cadillac to the owner, who lived out on Lake Shore Drive in a swank apartment with an enormous garage underneath managed by oil-scarred Negroes. The mechanic did not recognize the Cadillac. We handed the papers over. He scratched his head at the sight of it. We had to get out fast. We did. We took a bus back to downtown Chicago and that

was that. And we never heard a word from our Chicago baron about the condition of his car, in spite of the fact that he had our addresses and could have complained.

Even more interesting than their ease of transportation to me was their ease at getting jobs. This is so obvious to them it is left unspoken. Whenever their money runs out, be they in Truckee or Texas or Toledo, they just hop over to the nearest farm or factory or whatever, say “Job, please!” and are earning back their depleted savings in no time. This is really the crux of their way of life. They don’t feel bound to any one place, because traveling isn’t really a risk. Be it for a week or six months, there’s always going to be work waiting for them when they need it. It doesn’t matter that Dean has no college degree, or a criminal history a mile long, or is only going to be in town a couple of weeks. This just seems to be a background assumption. It is most obvious when it is violated; the times it takes an entire week to find a job, and they are complaining bitterly. Or the time the only jobs available are backbreaking farm labor, and so Jack moves on (of course abandoning the girl he is with at the time) to greener pastures that he knows are waiting.

Even more interesting than their ease of employment is their ease with women. This is unintentionally a feminist novel, in that once you read it (at least from a modern perspective) you end up realizing the vast cultural shift that had to (has to?) take place in order to protect women from people like the authors. Poor Galatea Dunkel seems to have been more of the rule than the exception – go find a pretty girl, tell her you love her, deflower her, then steal a

car and drive off to do it to someone else, leaving her unmarriageable and maybe with a kid to support. Then the next time you're back in town, look her up, give her a fake apology in order to calm her down enough for her to be willing to have sex with you again, and repeat the entire process. Here is a typical encounter with a pretty girl:

Not five nights later we went to a party in New York and I saw a girl called Inez and told her I had a friend with me that she ought to meet sometime. I was drunk and told her he was a cowboy. "Oh, I've always wanted to meet a cowboy."

"Dean?" I yelled across the party. "Come over here, man!" Dean came bashfully over. An hour later, in the drunkenness and chiciness of the party, he was kneeling on the floor with his chin on her belly and telling her and promising her everything and sweating. She was a big, sexy brunette – as Garcia said, something straight out of Degas, and generally like a beautiful Parisian coquette. In a matter of days they were dickering with Camille in San Francisco by long-distance telephone for the necessary divorce papers so they could get married. Not only that, but a few months later Camille gave birth to Dean's second baby, the result of a few nights' rapport early in the year. And another matter of months and Inez had a baby. With one illegitimate child on the West somewhere, Dean then had four little ones, and not a cent, and was all troubles and ecstasy and speed as ever.

In case you're wondering, Dean then runs off to Mexico, leaves Inez behind, screws a bunch of Mexican women, and eventually gets back with Camille, who is happy to have him. Seriously, if I had read this book when I was writing [Radicalizing The Romanceless](#), Dean (and his friends) would have been right up there with Henry as Exhibit B. The only punishment he ever gets for his misadventures is hitting one girlfriend in the face so hard that he breaks his own thumb, which gets infected and has to be amputated. Human justice has failed so miserably, one feels, that God has to personally step in.

As bad as the gender stuff is, the race stuff is worse. This is 1950-something, so I'm prepared for a lot of awful stuff regarding race. But this is totally *different* awful stuff regarding race than I expected. I have never been able to get upset over "exoticization" and "Orientalism" before, but this book reached new lows for me:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. I stopped at a little shack where a man sold hot red chili in paper containers; I bought some and ate it, strolling in the dark mysterious streets. I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley... a gang of colored women came by, and

one of the young ones detached herself from motherlike elders and came to me fast – “Hello Joe!” and suddenly saw it wasn’t Joe, and ran back blushing. I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America.

Negroes are holy and ecstatic. But only in the same way barns and cows are holy and ecstatic. One gets the suspicion that Jack Kerouac is not exactly interacting with any of this stuff, so much as using it as something he can have his overwrought religious feelings about.

The “heroes” of *On The Road* consider themselves ill-done by and beaten-down. But they are people who can go anywhere they want for free, get a job any time they want, hook up with any girl in the country, and be so clueless about the world that they’re pretty sure being a 1950s black person is a laugh a minute. *On The Road* seems to be a picture of a high-trust society. Drivers assume hitchhikers are trustworthy and will take them anywhere. Women assume men are trustworthy and will accept any promise. Employers assume workers are trustworthy and don’t bother with background checks. It’s pretty neat.

But *On The Road* is, most importantly, a picture of a high-trust society collapsing. And it’s collapsing precisely because the book’s protagonists are going around defecting against everyone they meet at a hundred ten miles an hour.

III

The viewpoint of a character in a book is not necessarily the viewpoint of its author. One can write about terrible people doing terrible things and not necessarily endorse it. That having been said, it's very hard to read Jack Kerouac-the-author as differing very much from Jack-Kerouac-the-character in his opinions. He still has a raging man-crush on Dean and thinks that he is some kind of holy madman who can do no wrong.

The nicest thing I can say about *On The Road* is that perhaps it should be [read backwards](#). It is a paean to a life made without compromise, a life of enjoying the hidden beauty of the world, spent in pursuit of holiness and the exotic. Despite how I probably sound, I really respect the Beat aesthetic of searching for transcendence and finding it everywhere. There's something to be said for living your life to maximize that kind of thing, especially if everyone else is some kind of boring dispirited factory worker or something. Kerouac wrote around the same time as Sartre; it's not difficult to imagine him as one of the first people saying you needed to try to find your True Self.

Read backwards, there was a time when to spend your twenties traveling the world and sleeping with strange women and having faux mystical experiences was something new and exciting and dangerous and for all anybody knew maybe it held the secret to immense spiritual growth. But from a modern perspective, if Jack and Dean tried the same thing today, they'd be one of about a billion college students and aimless twenty-somethings with exactly the

same idea, posting their photos to Instagram tagged “holy”, “ecstatic”, and “angelic”. There’s nothing wrong with that. But it doesn’t seem like a good stopping-point for a philosophy. It doesn’t even seem like good escapism. I’d be willing to tolerate all the pointless criminality if it spoke to the secret things that I’ve always wanted to do in my hidden heart of hearts, but I’d like to think there’s more there than driving back and forth and going to what seem like kind of lackluster parties.

When I [read Marx](#), I thought that his key mistake was a negative view of utopia. That is, utopia is what happens automatically once you overthrow all of the people and structures who are preventing there from being utopia. Just get rid of the capitalists, and the World-Spirit will take care of the rest. The thought that ordinary, fallible, non-World-Spirit humans will have to build the post-revolution world brick by brick, and there’s no guarantee they will do any better than the pre-revolutionary humans who did the same, never seems to have occurred to him.

Kerouac was a staunch anti-Communist, but his beat philosophy seems to share the same wellspring. Once you get rid of all the shackles of society in your personal life – once you stop caring about all those squares who want you to have families and homes and careers and non-terrible friends – once you become a holy criminal who isn’t bound by the law or other people’s needs – then you’ll end up with some ecstatic visionary true self. Kerouac claimed he was Catholic, that he was in search of the Catholic God, and that he found Him – but all of his descriptions of such tend to be a couple of minutes of rapture upon seeing some espe-

cially pretty woman in a nightclub or some especially dingy San Francisco alley, followed by continuing to be a jerk who feels driven to travel across the country approximately seven zillion times for no reason.

Like the early Communists, who were always playing up every new factory that opened as the herald of the new age of plenty, in the beginning it's easy to tell yourself your revolution is succeeding, that you are right on the brink of the new age. But at last come the Andropovs and Brezhnevs of the soul, the stagnation and despair and the going through the motions.

Kerouac apparently got married and divorced a couple of times, became an alcoholic, had a bit of a breakdown, and drank himself to death at age 49. Moriarty spent a while in prison on sort-of-trumped-up drug charges, went through a nasty divorce with whichever wife hadn't divorced him already, and died of a likely drug overdose at age 47.

Overall I did not like this book.

If you're writing about a crime spree you were a part of, you ought to show at least a little self-awareness.

Mysticism continues to be a perfectly valid life choice, but I continue to believe if you want to pursue it you [should do it carefully and methodically](#), for example meditating for an hour a day and then going to regular retreats run by spiritual authorities, rather than the counterculture route of taking lots of drugs and having lots of sex

and reading some books on Gnosticism and hoping some kind of enlightenment smashes into you.

Professional writing should be limited to about four overwrought religious adjectives per sentence, possibly by law.

And travel and girls are both fun, but [*doctor voice*] should be enjoyed responsibly and in moderation.