

## On the Road

by  
Jack Kerouac

### StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 9

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#### Discussion questions

Why do Sal and Dean and the other characters keep moving back and forth across the country instead of settling in one place? What purpose does this restlessness serve?

Both Sal and the author seem to have great admiration for Dean Moriarty, in spite of his many weaknesses. Why?

#### Additional reading

Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 1958.

Allen Ginsberg. *Howl and Other Poems*, 1956.

Henry Miller. *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 1958.

Anne Waldman, ed. *The Beat Book: Poems and Fiction of the Beat Generation*, 1996.

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Jack Kerouac was the central figure in a 1950s literary phenomenon known as the Beat movement. Kerouac coined the term “Beat Generation” to link the disillusionment and alienation these writers felt with the earlier “Lost Generation” writers, which included Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs were among the other writers associated with the Beat movement.

Though often maligned and misunderstood by literary critics of the time, Beat writers achieved public recognition and notoriety; *On the Road* became a best seller, and is generally recognized today as the classic representation of Beat spirit and thought. Although the ideas and attitudes of the Beats had few social or political ramifications at the time, Kerouac and his allies are now often credited with fathering the Hippie movement of the 60s, which led to broader political and social upheaval. Similarly, Kerouac’s freedom with language influenced 60s writers such as Ken Kesey, Charles Bukowski, Tom Robbins and Richard Brautigan. In *The Beat Generation*, Bruce Cook says:

***It is difficult, separated as we are by time and temper from that period, to convey the liberating effect that On the Road had on young people all over America. There was a sort of instantaneous flash of recognition that seemed to send thousands of them out into the streets, proclaiming that Kerouac had written their story, that On the Road was their book.***

For the reader half a century later, it may be difficult to empathize with Kerouac’s characters. Certainly the world has changed immensely in the intervening decades. Or has it? As long as there is pressure to conform to a status quo, there will be people who rebel against it. Readers might best appreciate Kerouac and his characters by considering how the attitudes and values of the Beat Generation, like generations before and after it, are reflections of a changing national identity. Examining the Beat Generation might shed some insight, decades later, on who we are today.

Jack Kerouac was born in 1922 and died in 1969; his personal life and world view were profoundly shaped by the Great Depression, World War II, the atomic bomb, and U. S. intervention in Korea and Southeast Asia. As thousands of troops returned home after World War II, many Americans longed for normal lives—marriage and family, a home in the suburbs. Material wealth became the measure of personal success for some; respectability meant “fitting in” by conforming to societal codes for appropriate dress and behavior.

Not all Americans were well suited for this conservative lifestyle. Some, like Kerouac and the Beats, found the conformity of the 50s dull and repressive. They longed for spontaneity and greater freedom of personal expression. They strained against prevailing social norms and marked themselves as “other” by dressing differently, experimenting with drugs and casual sex, and worshipping jazz. In jazz, which is unrestrained by formal composition and characterized by spontaneity; they found the rhythms (the “beat”) that best expressed their longing to break from the monotony of mainstream society.

Kerouac experimented with jazz technique in his writing. In 1951, he typed *On the Road* on a roll of paper fed into his typewriter, pecking out a 175,000-word first draft in 20 days. He preferred to type on a roll of paper so that he would not have to pause at the end of each page, believing that in this continuous frenzy of creation, his inner self would be expressed without constraint. He labeled this high-speed writing “spontaneous prose.” Some critics questioned whether it was art at all. “That’s not writing,” remarked Truman Capote. “It’s just typewriting.”

*On the Road* is the story of a deepening friendship between two friends, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Sal, an aspiring writer and a returned veteran with a bad case of wanderlust, is a stand-in for Kerouac himself. Dean, five years younger and the ringleader or focus for all the action in the book, represents Kerouac’s friend, Neal Cassady. As the embodiment of the “free spirit,” Dean persuades Sal to hit the road with him on a romantic quest for a more satisfying way of life.

Together, they turn their backs on conventional society and traipse back and forth between New York, Denver, and San Francisco, entangled with a series of cars and lovers and drugs and scrapes with the law. In part, Kerouac culled the style of the book from Neal Cassady’s letters, which were sometimes 40,000-word correspondences. He described his friend’s letters as “all first- person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed.”

In the apocalyptic world after the war, amidst the threat of nuclear disaster and the dull ache of the Cold War, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty set out on a wild and joyous quest to amend the American dream.

### About the author

Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Mass., in 1922, played football in high school and at Columbia University, and served in the merchant marine during World War II. A close friend of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in New York, and Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco, he used his extensive wanderings around the U.S. and Mexico as the basis for *On the Road* and other books such as *The Subterraneans* and *The Dharma Bums*. He died in New York at 47. Biographers and critics have been reinterpreting his life and importance ever since.