

LITERATURE OF THE BEAT GENERATION

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"NOBODY KNOWS WHETHER WE WERE CATALYSTS OR INVENTED SOMETHING, OR JUST THE FROTH RIDING ON A WAVE OF ITS OWN. WE WERE ALL THREE, I SUPPOSE."

—Allen Ginsberg, quoted in *Great Poets Howl: A Study of Allen Ginsberg's Poetry, 1943–1955*

AT SAN FRANCISCO'S SIX GALLERY on October 7, 1955, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, then 29, performed his first public reading of "Howl." A confessional rant against the nation's social establishment and Eisenhower's America, its profanity and jazz-like rhythms forged a new poetic conscience. Published the next year by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Pocket Poets Series, "Howl" initiated a censorship trial that not only established Ginsberg as a symbol of social and sexual defiance but also brought the Beat Generation to the forefront of public attention.

The Beat writers emerged in the late 1940s, when a group of intellectuals—among them Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady—converged in the neighborhoods around Columbia University in New York City. Fast friends, they possessed countercultural leanings that led them to psychedelic drugs, jazz, literature, sexual experimentation, and spiritual enlightenment. Their bohemian lifestyles bucked the stifling social conventions of mid-century America and earned them notoriety—and fame. Kerouac described the Beats as a "generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way ... staring out the dead wall window of our civilization" (*Esquire*, 3/58).

Ginsberg characterized the Beats as a group searching for an antidote to the materialistic postwar era.

Often collaborative, the Beat writers' literary works mirrored their nonconformist lifestyles. They transformed their conversations, letters, and experiences into a new kind of art: uncensored, improvisational writings and apologies to their generation. "Howl" led the way; a year later, Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) incorporated the rhythms of bebop and jazz into spontaneous prose that reflected his generation's yearnings; Burroughs, in the banned *Naked Lunch* (1959), developed a "cut-up," collagelike style to describe his heroin addiction. While controversial, the work of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs exerted a broad impact on American literary conventions, culture, and consciousness.

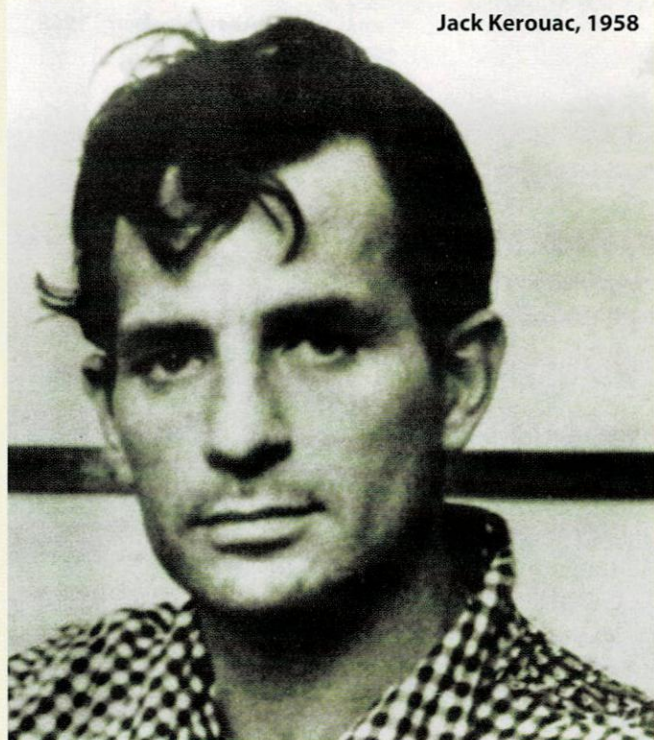
Although Kerouac reputedly coined the phrase "Beat Generation" in 1948 to describe his cohort of New York friends,

the term grew to encompass a larger group of poets, writers, artists, and activists with similar goals. In San Francisco, writers Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, and others forged a new cultural renaissance. Their work, in turn, spawned countercultural icons such as Ken Kesey, who bridged the gap between the Beats of the 1950s and the counterculture of the 1960s.

WHERE TO START

Since Jack Kerouac's **ON THE ROAD** is considered a reflection of the zeitgeist of the Beat Generation, it's easy to overlook other, equally influential works—none of them for the timid or puritanical reader. Allen Ginsberg's **"HOWL"** changed his generation—and American poetry—while William S. Burroughs's **NAKED LUNCH** offers an honest, if obscene, exploration of drug addiction.

Jack Kerouac, 1958



JACK KEROUAC (1922–1969)

Fifty years after the publication of *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac remains one of the Beat Generation's central cultural icons and one of the 20th century's most important authors. Seen as the spokesman for his era, he is best known for his semiautobiographical *On the Road*, his generation's colorful, confessional zeitgeist.

Born in the working-class town of Lowell, Massachusetts, to French-Canadian parents, Kerouac attended a parochial school before entering Columbia University in 1939 on a football scholarship. After dropping out, he became a merchant seaman and then joined the navy, but psychiatric problems led to his discharge. When Kerouac returned to New York, he befriended a group of intellectuals that included Columbia students Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, and a joyful Neal Cassady. He also met Edie Parker, whom he briefly married.

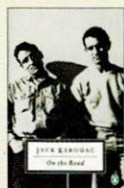
Inspired by Thomas Wolfe, Kerouac published his first novel, *Town and Country* (1950), about life in Lowell and New York City. The novel received some critical acclaim but registered poor sales. A year later, he began *On the Road*, which narrated his drug-fueled, 1940s car adventures with Cassady across the United States and Mexico. In the early 1950s, Kerouac followed Ginsberg and Cassady to San Francisco, befriended Gary Snyder, and immersed himself in Buddhist philosophy. He also spent time with Ginsberg in Mexico City and Burroughs in Tangier, helping with the manuscript of the latter's *Naked Lunch*.

The Dharma Bums (1958), another popular success, heralded Zen Buddhism as the bohemian community's new religion. But Kerouac, who never envisioned himself as the patron saint of the Beat Generation and, in fact, was more

conservative than his cohorts, returned to live with his ailing mother in Long Island. "It is not my fault that certain so-called bohemian elements have found in my writings something to hang their peculiar beatnik theories on," he said. The pressure of living up to his legendary reputation took its toll. While battling alcoholism, he married a local Lowell woman and wrote a series of autobiographical novels—about the death of his older brother as a child (*Visions of Gerard*, 1963), his quest to understand his ancestry (*Satori in Paris*, 1966), and, of course, himself (*Big Sur*, 1962). He died in 1969 in St. Petersburg, Florida, after an abdominal hemorrhage caused by heavy drinking.

ON THE ROAD (1957)

- ◆ AMONG TIME MAGAZINE'S ALL-TIME BEST NOVELS
- ◆ # 55, MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Over a period of 20 days in 1951, Kerouac wrote *On the Road* on rolls of teletype paper. Intended as a literary jazz composition and experimental in its spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness style, the work recalled his drug-addled travels with Neal Cassady. Upon publication six years later, it drew great acclaim from anti-establishment hipsters, criticism from some literary circles, and chagrin from Kerouac, who, though he had lived his wild days many years before the novel's publication, was now the unwilling spokesman of his generation.

THE STORY: Young writer Sal Paradise (Kerouac) falls under the spell of the restless Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), a magnetic, hip womanizer fresh out of jail, and he hits the road. Starting from New York City, Sal meets Dean in Denver and zigzags frantically across the United States and Mexico. In search of freedom, Sal, Dean, and Carlo Marx (Allen Ginsberg) encounter drugs, jazz joints, Mexican warehouses, and mysticism, and befriend a wide range of characters. "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," Sal writes as he gains a new outlook on life.

"There are details of a trip to Mexico (and an interlude in a Mexican bordello) that are by turns, awesome, tender and funny. And, finally, there is some writing on jazz that has never been equaled in American fiction, either for insight, style or technical virtuosity. *On the Road* is a major novel."

GILBERT MILLSTEIN, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/5/57

"Whatever else it is, and whether good or bad, this is pretty sure to be the most 'remarkable' novel of 1957. ... The subject may be catchy, the publication may be timely, but what keeps the book going is the power and beauty of the writing." SAN

FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 9/1/57

THE BOTTOM LINE: In its representation of a new generation, a true American classic.

THE DHARMA BUMS (1958)



Although he remained a devout Catholic much of his life, in 1954—inspired by close friend Gary Snyder—Kerouac immersed himself in Zen Buddhism. *The Dharma Bums* chronicles this journey, his enchantment with Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, as well as his experiences with Snyder and other San Francisco poets. Some critics call this novel a sophisticated sequel to *On the Road*. Largely autobiographical, it is based on Kerouac's experiences while manning a remote fire lookout point in Washington State in 1956.

THE STORY: Engaged in the search for dharma, or truth, narrator-poet Ray Smith (Kerouac), Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), and Morley the yodeler ascend the High Sierras to experience the Zen way of life. Japhy dreams of “a world of ... dharma bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume, work, produce, consume. ... [A] great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans ... going up to the mountains.” Of course, San Francisco's wild, bohemian lifestyle—with its partying, poetry jam sessions, and experiments in “yab-yum”—offers a different way to achieve enlightenment.

“Kerouac really comes close to the terse, equivocal, suggestive shorthand of Japanese poetry—which he has obviously been studying. ... In his often brilliant descriptions of nature one is aware of exhilarating power and originality.”

NANCY WILSON ROSS, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/5/58

“What makes *The Dharma Bums* a pleasure to read, forty years after its publication, is the way Kerouac, in the guise of his ordinary-Joe narrator, undercuts Japhy Ryder's humorless, self-satisfied ethos.” CHRISTOPHER BENFEY, THE NEW REPUBLIC, 3/24/97

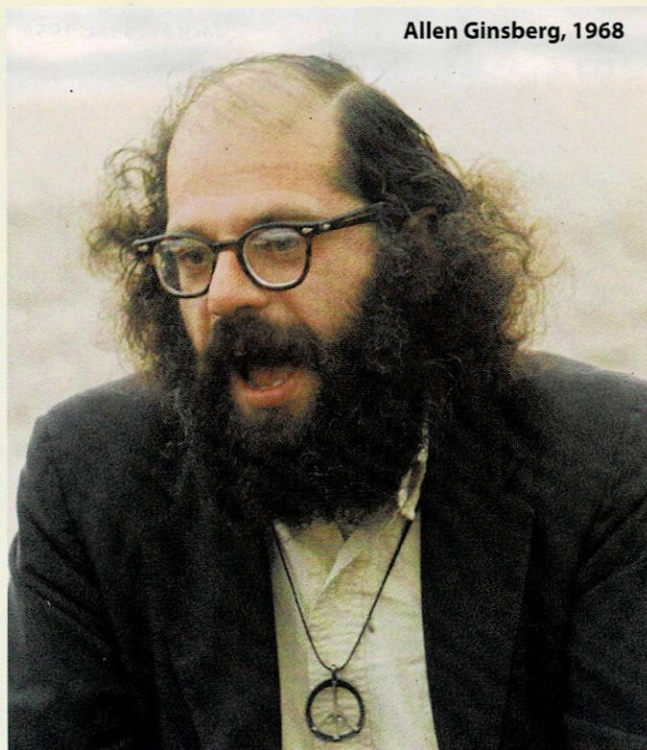
THE BOTTOM LINE: Another semiautobiographical novel, with just as much spirit as *On the Road*.

ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,” begins Allen Ginsberg's revolutionary poem “Howl” (1956). Crowned the poet laureate of the Beat Generation, Ginsberg captured that generation's anger, rebelliousness, and defiant criticism of mainstream society and profoundly influenced the development of American poetry.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1926 to second-generation Russian-Jewish immigrants, Ginsberg grew up surrounded by radical ideals. He enrolled at Columbia University in 1943, intending to study law; met former student Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady (whom he took as a lover), and William Burroughs; and soon became the central force of the group. Along with Kerouac, he suffered from his as-

Allen Ginsberg, 1968



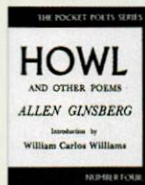
sociation with Lucien Carr and was briefly jailed. In 1948, while living in a Harlem apartment, he experienced what he called his “William Blake vision”: while reading some of Blake's poems, he claimed to have heard the voices of Blake and God, which gave him a new understanding of the nature of the universe. Inspired, he began to write seriously while frequenting gay bars and experimenting with drugs. In 1949 he pleaded insanity after he'd been connected with Herbert Huncke, who stored stolen goods in their shared flat. Ginsberg knew about the goods and, given his hallucinatory visions, he subsequently spent eight months in a psychiatric hospital, where he met kindred spirit Carl Solomon, the hero of “Howl.”

After working briefly at a New York advertising agency, Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in 1954, where he joined the bohemian scene of North Beach and met his lifelong love Peter Orlovsky. “Howl” made him a cause célèbre and an ambassador for free speech. He gladly adopted this role as, over the next decade, he traveled with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, studied with Zen masters, joined love-ins, protested the Vietnam War, experimented with LSD, turned to Buddhism, defended homosexuality, and advocated marijuana legalization. In 1961 he published “Kaddish,” a lengthy confessional poem that explored his relationship with his mother. *Planet News* (1968) chronicled his antiwar sentiment. Ginsberg also recorded poems set to jazz and later recorded with Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Leonard Cohen.

In the 1970s, the literary establishment accepted Ginsberg as one of its own. He won a National Book Award for his collection of poetry, *The Fall of America* (1973). In 1994 he sold his personal letters and journals to Stanford

University. He died three years later of liver cancer in his apartment in New York's Lower East Side.

HOWL AND OTHER POEMS (1956)



When Ginsberg read "Howl" at San Francisco's Six Gallery, critics lauded its spontaneous, disorienting, free-verse rhythm. Influenced by American transcendentalists, Old Testament cadences, and mysticism, this antiestablishment poem broke all social taboos. In 1957, San Francisco authorities prosecuted Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who ran City Lights Bookstore and City Lights Press, for selling obscene materials. He was found innocent in 1957 after the judge ruled that the poem had "redeeming social importance." "Howl" is one of the most widely read and translated poems today.

THE POEM: "Unscrew the locks from the doors!/ Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" reads the poem's epigraph, which aptly reflects the antiestablishment tone of the work. Part I explores Ginsberg's relationships with poets, musicians, druggies, and psychiatry patients. Part II rants against industrial society, which is represented by Moloch. Ginsberg addresses the last part to a fellow psychiatric patient at Columbia Psychiatric Institute. Images of state coercion, despair, suicide, straight and gay sex, drug

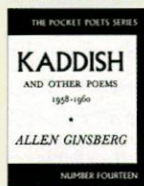
use, and jails pervade the poem, which ends with an understanding of who Ginsberg has become.

"He proves to us, in spite of the most debasing experiences that life can offer a man, the spirit of love survives to ennoble our lives if we have the wit and the courage and the faith—and the art! to persist. ... He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt." WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, "INTRODUCTION," HOWL AND OTHER POEMS, 1956

"It is a howl against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit, assuming that the louder you shout the more likely you are to be heard. ... Its positive force and energy come from a redemptive quality of love." RICHARD EBERHART, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 9/2/56

THE BOTTOM LINE: Ginsberg's classic poem launched a new American form and spirit.

KADDISH AND OTHER POEMS: 1958–1960 (1961)



As a young boy in New Jersey, Ginsberg witnessed his mother, Naomi, succumb to psychotic episodes. Despite treatment at mental hospitals, Naomi degenerated. Ginsberg and his brother authorized a lobotomy in 1956; she died shortly thereafter. Ginsberg later learned that the Jewish mourner's prayer had not been read

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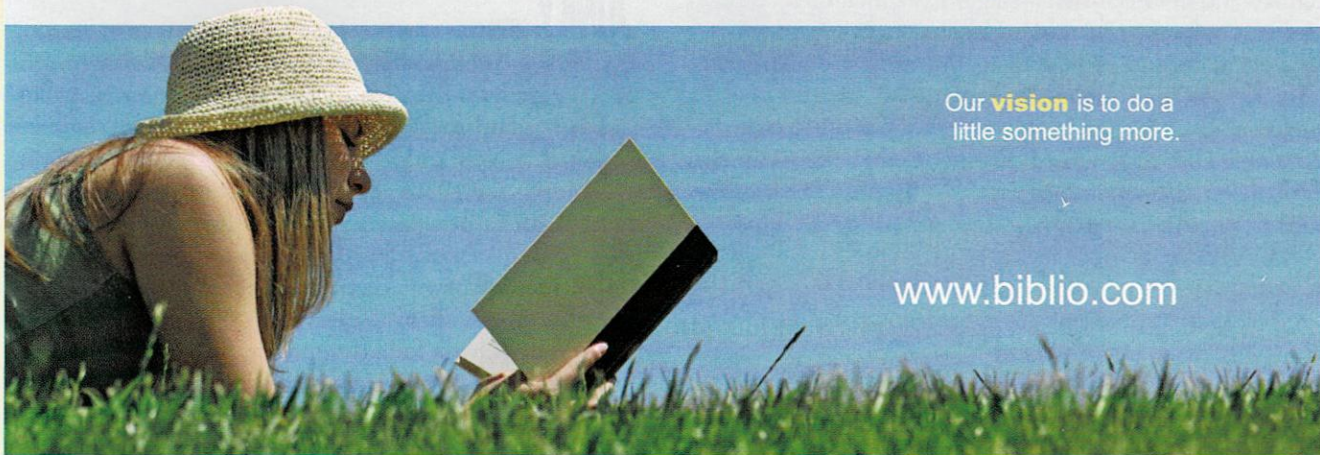
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at her funeral. A few years afterward, he began "Kaddish," his moving, compassionate elegy to his mother, which many critics consider his finest poem.

THE POEM: Starting with a walk in Naomi and Louis Ginsberg's Lower East Side neighborhood, "Kaddish" offers images of Ginsberg's brother, father, and mother: "Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village, downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph." Ginsberg chronicles his mother's endless bus quests, tantrums, and hospital stays, while preserving her memory: "Only to have not forgotten the beginning in which she drank cheap sodas in the morgues of Newark, only to have seen her weeping on gray tables in long wards of her universe."

"[A] strewn, mishmash prose consisting mainly of assertions that its author is possessed, is often if not always in 'holy ecstasy,' and so on." JAMES DICKEY, NEW YORK TIMES, 7/9/61

"Kaddish, about Ginsberg's insane mother, who died in 1956, is a masterpiece of candor and emotional persuasion." R. Z.

SHEPPARD, TIME MAGAZINE, 2/4/85

THE BOTTOM LINE: Second only to the power of "Howl" in its raw, honest exploration of mental illness.

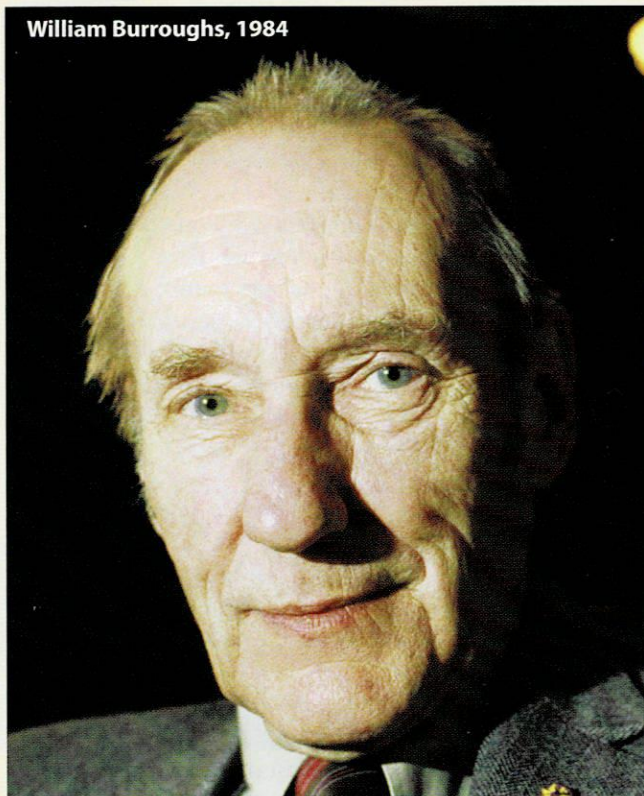
WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS (1914-1997)

William S. Burroughs, who had helped form the core Beat group, explored his own drug addiction and homosexuality in the semiautobiographical novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), a seminal work that spurred one of the last obscenity trials in the United States. The novel also introduced the "cut-up," or "collage," method, in which texts are randomly blended into a larger narrative.

Born in St. Louis in 1914 to a well-off family, Burroughs attended Harvard University and immersed himself in Harlem and in Greenwich Village's gay subculture. After graduation, he traveled around Europe and married a Jewish woman fleeing Nazi Germany. Burroughs joined the army in 1942, but claims of mental instability led to his discharge. Back in New York in the mid-1940s, he met the Columbia University crowd that included Herbert Huncke, Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Embracing their alternative lifestyles, he delved into the city's underworld. After divorcing his wife, he lived with Joan Vollmer in a common-law marriage in Manhattan. They moved to Texas in 1946 to grow cotton and marijuana but fled to Mexico to avoid legal problems.

In 1951, while drunk and playing a game, Burroughs accidentally shot and killed Vollmer. Although never tried for her death, he was charged with the equivalent of involun-

William Burroughs, 1984



tary manslaughter. Vollmer's tragic death inspired Burroughs's writing as he wandered throughout South America and eventually to Tangier. He had already collaborated with Kerouac on an unpublished work, and he had adapted his first novel, *Junky* (1953), from letters to Ginsberg. *Queer* (written in 1953; published in 1985) chronicles his drug addiction and homosexuality. With the help of Ginsberg and Kerouac, he wrote *Naked Lunch* (1959) while living in a male brothel in Tangier. His New York friends were then becoming famous as the "Beat Generation."

Burroughs returned to New York City in the 1970s and unsuccessfully attempted to shake his heroin addiction. He taught writing at City College of New York, and in 1981, he moved to Lawrence, Kansas, where he resided until his death.

JUNKY (1953)



Published under the author's pseudonym, William Lee, this autobiographical novel chronicles Burroughs's descent into the drug cultures of New York, New Orleans, and Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s. Encouraged by Ginsberg, Burroughs attempted to dispel stereotypes about degenerate members of society and to provide frank insights into his own experiences.

THE STORY: William Lee leaves his sheltered, middle-class life in the Midwest for adventures in New York City. During World War II, he becomes caught up in the city's criminal underworld. He pushes, "scores," and uses drugs—from marijuana to cocaine and heroin. Of course, a junkie's life

requires avoiding arrest, dealing with withdrawal, serving jail time, and finding ways (including sex) to finance more drugs. Nothing is easy; nothing is glamorous. Heroin, Burroughs stresses, is not “a kick, or a means to increased enjoyment of life. It is a way of life.”

“After the bombast and the scissors-and-paste experimentalism of *Naked Lunch*, it is surprising to look back and discover that Burroughs is a rather good laconic-ironic observer when he can stir himself to make the effort.” ANATOLE

BROYARD, NEW YORK TIMES, 4/10/77

THE BOTTOM LINE: A seminal novel about heroin addiction.

NAKED LUNCH (1959)

♦ AMONG TIME MAGAZINE'S ALL-TIME BEST NOVELS



After accidentally shooting and killing his wife in Mexico and traveling throughout South America in search of the psychedelic drug *yage*, Burroughs settled in Tangier, where, despite his attempts to kick his drug habit, he let drugs guide his writing. Only when Kerouac, Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Alan Ansen come to his aid did Burroughs complete *Naked Lunch*. With its nonlinear, sci-fi, and “cut-up” technique and depictions of gay sex, drugs, and cannibalism, the book was banned in the United States until 1962.

THE STORY: As scenes shift from New York to Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, Mexico, and Tangier, Bill Lee (Burroughs) descends into hell. His drug and hustler addiction doesn't help, of course. Along the way, he meets the sadistic Dr. Benway and other dark, colorful characters, including the predatory Mugwumps, the Lobotomy Kid, an abortionist, racists, prostitutes, and others. When he reaches the Interzone, he finds a hallucinatory urban wasteland where individual freedom clashes with evil totalitarian forces.

“Burroughs fancies himself a satirist and occasionally resembles one when the diary's heroin fog clears a little.” TIME

MAGAZINE, 11/30/62

“The best comparison for the book, with its aerial sex acts performed on a high trapeze, its con men and barkers, its arena-like form, is in fact a circus. ... It is disgusting and sometimes tiresome, often in the same places.” MARY MCCARTHY,

NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 2/1/63

THE BOTTOM LINE: Lauded for its style and for its theme that drug addiction represents our existence.

THE MOVIE: 1991, starring Peter Weller and directed by David Cronenberg. ■

WOMEN OF THE BEAT GENERATION

ALTHOUGH KEROUAC, BURROUGHS, AND GINSBERG

became their generation's larger-than-life symbols, female Beat writers also contributed significantly to the larger movement. “In many ways, women of the Beat were cut from the same cloth as the men: fearless, angry, high risk, too smart, restless, highly irregular. They took chances, made mistakes, made poetry, made love, made history. ... [They were] [m]uses who birthed a poetry so raw and new and full of power that it changed the world” (Introduction, *Women of the Beat Generation*, ed. Barbara Knight, 1998).



DIANE DI PRIMA (1934–): Di Prima founded the New York Poets Theatre and the Poets Press and, with Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), edited *The Floating Bear: Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), an underground classic that captures her experiences with key Beat figures. Critics consider the long feminist poem *Loba* (or “she-wolf”) (1978) her masterpiece.



JOYCE JOHNSON (1935–): ♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD: *Minor Characters: A Young Woman's Coming of Age in the Beat Generation* (1983). Johnson's work explores her two-year romance with Jack Kerouac in the 1950s and details the experiences of women associated with Beat writers. *Come and Join the Dance* (1962) is often considered the first “female” Beat novel.



HETTIE JONES (1934–): Born in Brooklyn, Jones (née Cohen) met and married black poet LeRoi Jones and started the Beat-zine *Yugen*. *How I Became Hettie Jones* describes her marriage and involvement in the Beat community. *Drive* won the Norma Farber First Book Award in 1999.



ANNE WALDMAN (1945–): Best known for partaking in the late 1960s poetry scene in Manhattan's East Village, Waldman collaborated with Allen Ginsberg on the founding of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder, Colorado. *Fast Speaking Woman* (1975) contains her spells, chants, and laments.



LENORE KANDEL (1932–): Considered a major, if underappreciated, 20th-century poet, Kandel achieved infamy with *The Love Book* (1966), a short collection of erotic poetry that led to police raids on bookstores in San Francisco and a drawn-out obscenity trial. The ban on her collection was lifted in 1973. ■