

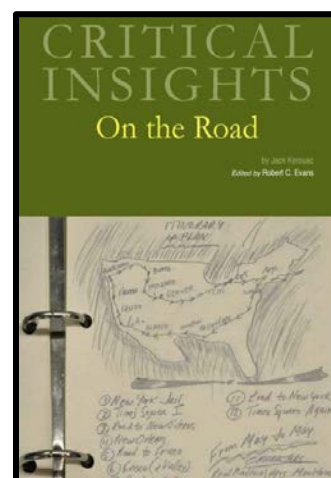
# Critical Insights: On the Road

FULL  
TEXT  
REVIEW

Salem Press has recently issued *On the Road*, a new entry in its *Critical Insights* series focusing on Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel. This volume, edited by Robert C. Evans, is, like others in the series, a collection of essays which aims to help students examine frequently studied literary works and place them in historical context. The book, Kerouac's most famous novel, was credited with establishing and defining the Beat Generation. Though initially widely panned, it gained a devoted following and proved to be highly influential, eventually paving the way for the counterculture of the 1960s and beyond. The work is a fictionalized chronicle of Kerouac's series of cross-country road trips in the late 1940s with his traveling partner, Neal Cassady, as they experience a rapidly changing America and search for enlightenment and meaning. Over the years, *On the Road* has come to be considered an American classic and is now widely studied and often taught in university classrooms.

Beat scholar Matt Theado's opening essay, "Jack Kerouac, On the Road, and the Myth of the West" introduces the book by placing Kerouac's fascination with westward travel in the context of the greater urge throughout American history to explore both the real, historical West as well as the mythic version depicted in books and Western movies. Theado considers *On the Road* to be a romanticized autobiography, featuring thinly veiled portraits of real people like Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. He suggests that readers seek out actual biographies of Kerouac, which he feels will help deepen and enrich the reading experience... *-Against the Grain*

Continued on Page Two



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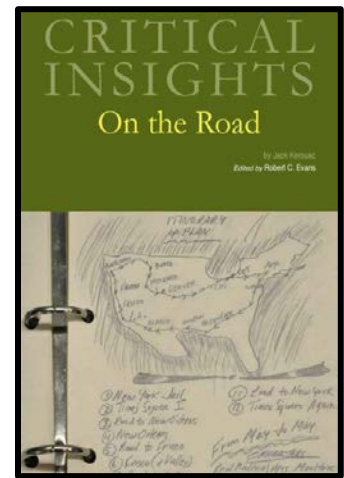
Theado's introduction is followed by several entries which look at *On the Road* in historical context. A pair of essays examine two of the main charges leveled at *On the Road* by critics when it was first published — that it promoted juvenile delinquency and glorified drug abuse. These essays, both written by Evans, present thorough looks at the subjects, using primary sources from the time period, to show the basis for each of these accusations. Two essays by Franco Manni look at how historical events converge with Kerouac's literary and philosophical influences to provide the atmosphere out of which Kerouac produced his novel. Jesse Gripko's contribution examines the clash between Kerouac's ideals and those of the majority of Americans at the time of the book's writing which he sees as ultimately resulting in the characters' failure to find enlightenment.

Evans contributes a long entry covering the early reviews of *On the Road*, drawing from a large number of national and regional publications. Though a bit tedious to read since many of the critics made similar points over and over, the collecting and summarizing of this vast number of articles represents a considerable undertaking and includes valuable information. One point that emerges from that essay is that many of the reviewers found fault with Kerouac's novel not because they found him to be a poor writer, but because of their concern about the impact his works had on society. In keeping with that idea, Lindsay Sears, working with a committee of several other writers, attempts to appraise *On the Road* by looking at Kerouac's considerable skills as a writer. In their entry, they closely examine a single paragraph from the book, commenting on the artistic decisions that Kerouac made, sentence by sentence and sometimes word by word.

Several essays look at *On the Road* in the context of other books and writers. Michael J. Martin argues that *On the Road* is a naturalist novel and draws connections particularly to the work of Jack London, a writer who Kerouac admired. David Stephen Calonne looks at *On the Road*'s debt to William Saroyan, while Evans compares *On the Road* to another novel about cross country travel, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939.....-***Against the Grain***

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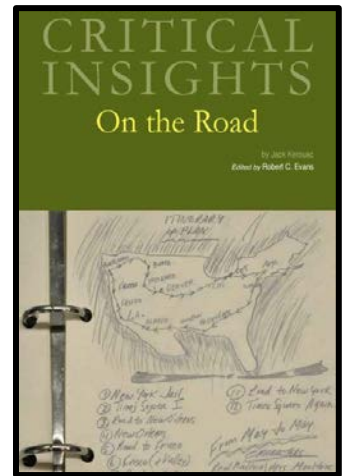
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*On the Road's* continuing presence in society is the subject of a few entries — first in S.G. Ellerhoff's entertaining piece about Cassady's influence on the 1960s hippie generation via his association with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and then in two essays by Jordan Bailey concentrating on the 2012 film version of *On the Road*, directed by Walter Salles....

...One of the strengths of this volume is that it shows how the reaction to Kerouac's work has changed significantly over the years, becoming deeper and more nuanced as we move further into the 21st century. While readers must now grapple with issues like Kerouac's treatment of women and minorities, the greater themes, like the search for enlightenment and the rejection of societal norms, continue to connect with readers. **This volume makes clear that, even as we enter the era of the electric car, Kerouac's book will continue to inspire road trips far into the future.**

**ATG Reviewer Rating: I need this in my library. (I want to be able to get up from my desk and grab this book off the shelf, if it's not checked out.)**



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