

## Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (They're Not What You Think)

By John Leland

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Legions of youthful Americans have taken *On the Road* as a manifesto for rebellion and an inspiration to hit the road. But there is much more to the book than that. In *Why Kerouac Matters*, John Leland embarks on a wry, insightful, and playful discussion of the novel, arguing that it still matters because it lays out an alternative road map to growing up. Along the way, Leland overturns many misconceptions about *On the Road* as he examines the lessons that Kerouac's alter ego, Sal Paradise, absorbs and dispenses on his novelistic journey to manhood, and how those lessons?about work and money, love and sex, art and holiness? still reverberate today.

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### Editorial Review

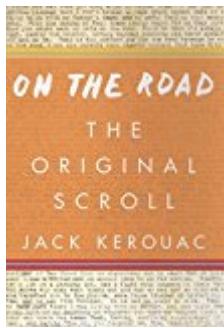
Amazon.com Review

**The author of *Hip: The History* reveals the lessons of the original hipster bible, *On the Road***

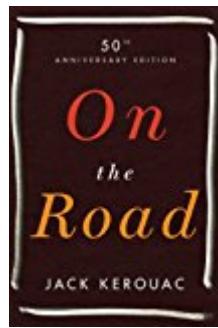
Legions of youthful Americans have taken *On the Road* as a manifesto for rebellion and an inspiration to hit the road. But there is much more to the novel than that.

In *Why Kerouac Matters*, John Leland embarks on a wry, insightful, and playful discussion of the novel, arguing that it still matters because at its core it is a book that is full of lessons about how to grow up. Leland's focus is on Sal Paradise, the Kerouac alter ego, who has always been overshadowed by his fictional running buddy Dean Moriarty. Leland examines the lessons that Paradise absorbs and dispenses on his novelistic journey to manhood, and how those lessons—about work and money, love and sex, art and holiness—still reverberate today. He shows how *On the Road* is a primer for male friendship and the cultivation of traditional family values, and contends that the stereotype of the two wild and crazy guys obscures the novel's core themes of the search for atonement, redemption, and divine revelation. *Why Kerouac Matters* offers a new take on Kerouac's famous novel, overturning many misconceptions about it and making clear the themes Kerouac was trying to impart.

### Celebrating 50 Years of *On the Road*



In three weeks in a Manhattan apartment in April 1951, Jack Kerouac wrote his first satisfactory draft of *On the Road* as a single, 120-foot scroll. *On the Road: The Original Scroll* prints the text of this remarkable literary artifact in book form.



A 50th anniversary edition of Kerouac's classic novel that defined a generation. *On the Road* is the quintessential American vision of freedom and hope, a book that changed American literature and changed anyone who has ever picked it up.

### Questions for John Leland

**Amazon.com:** There is a great legend around the composition of *On the Road*. What parts are true and what parts aren't?

**Leland:** The legend is that Kerouac wrote the book in three frenzied weeks on a scroll of tracing paper. In truth he had already written a couple drafts, and had written and re-written many of the scenes in his notebooks and letters to friends, which he kept in scrupulous order. I liken the three-week spree to a jazz musician improvising a solo using riffs and phrases he has worked out in the woodshed: it's part spontaneous composition, but building on mountains of practice and planning.



**Amazon.com:** In *Why Kerouac Matters* you make the against-the-grain argument that *On the Road* is not an ode to permanent adolescent transience and rebellion but rather a guide in moving toward adult responsibility. Could you explain?

**Leland:** Like any good book, *On the Road* sustains at least two threads. The one that gets the most attention is the book of Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), the wild, yea-saying overburst of American joy who sounds an irresistible call to adventure. Dean is the circus that every boy dreams of joining. Dean's road is pure carnal excitement, all speed and jazz and sex. But there's also the book of Sal Paradise, the narrator, who follows Dean out onto the road but then ultimately outgrows him, finishing the book off the road. Sal comes to recognize Dean's road as destructive and limiting--as long as Dean keeps going through the same motions, leaving a new baby and a new ex-wife in every town, he isn't really on the road, he's stuck in a rut. Sal, by contrast, is learning to be a man and a writer, searching for meaning and a home. For all its frantic adventures, the book ends with Sal nesting with his new love, Laura (Joan Haverty, Kerouac's second wife) and ready to write the book we're still reading.

**Amazon.com:** Do you think its enduring popularity comes from the appeal of Dean's endless summer or from Sal's development? (In other words, do you think people like it for the wrong reasons or the right ones?)

**Leland:** Dean is one of the most compelling characters in American literature; we'll always be drawn to him. The speed of the prose encourages us not to ask to questions, just be cool and enjoy the ride. Sal is a much more recessive character, shambling behind his friends "as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me." Kerouac regretted that so many readers saw only Dean's wild ride. But I think much of the book's power comes from the tension between these two ideas of manhood.

**Amazon.com:** You quote a line from David Gates, "A 21-year-old applying to a writing program is as ill-advised to cite Jack Kerouac as an influence as O. Henry or H.P. Lovecraft." Has *On the Road* been a novel more for readers than for writers?

**Leland:** Writers who try to write like Kerouac are bound for trouble. More bad prose has been committed in his name than good. His famous dicta, "No revisions" and "You're a genius all the time," obscure the

discipline and erudition behind his work. But there's another way to read *On the Road*, as a tale of a writer in search of his voice. On Sal's first journey, he arrives in Denver and imagines himself in his friends' eyes, "strange and ragged like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only Word I had was 'Wow!'" He's not ready to tell his story. But by the end, after Dean abandons him with dysentery in Mexico, Sal receives his writerly mission, from a character Kerouac called the Great Walking Saint, who tells him, "Go moan for man." Now he's ready to write, and compelled to do so. Writers who take Kerouac's work as a license to develop their own voices have greatly benefited, even if they don't sound anything like Kerouac. For the others, there's always bongos and reruns of *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*.

**Amazon.com:** To what extent do you think *On the Road* is a different book to readers 50 years later?

**Leland:** We're now longer shocked by the sex and drugs. The slang is passé and at times corny. Some of the racial sentimentality is appalling, and we're revolted--in ways the characters aren't--when Dean busts his thumb on Marylou's head. There's a line in the book when the guys are driving into New York that now takes my breath away: "Dean had a sweater wrapped around his ears to keep warm. He said we were a band of Arabs coming to blow up New York." But the tale of passionate friendship and the search for revelation are timeless. These are as elusive and precious in our time as in Sal's, and will be when our grandchildren celebrate the book's hundredth anniversary. And the music still kicks.

From Publishers Weekly

Having immersed himself in Beat culture while writing *Hip: A History*, Leland, a *New York Times* reporter and former editor-in-chief of *Details*, makes a convincing case that Jack Kerouac's most famous novel has endured for half a century because it's a book about how to live your life. The lesson isn't about impulsive self-gratification, as many readers believe, aided by Kerouac's tendency to go vague in his most emotionally critical passages. Leland reminds us that narrator Sal Paradise was always looking to settle down into a conventional life, and Kerouac, Leland says, was generally of a conservative mindset. Framing *On the Road* as a spiritual quest, Leland deftly combines the biographical facts of Kerouac's life with discussions of his literary antecedents in Melville and Goethe, as well as the inspiration he took from contemporary jazz, finding in bebop's rhythms a new way to circle around a story's themes. Section headings like The 7 Habits of Highly Beat People get a little silly, but Leland's insights provide new layers of significance even for those familiar with the novel. (Aug. 20)

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* "On the Road is a book about how to live your life," writes Leland, the author of *Hip* (2004), in this sometimes arch, always discerning, and occasionally full-out brilliant reconsideration of a novel loved and maligned for all the wrong reasons. Leland carefully parses the inspiration Kerouac drew from Goethe, Melville, Twain, and Proust; charts the novel's jazz-based circular structure; and perceptively analyzes Kerouac's mystical Catholicism and exalted artistic mission. But most importantly, Leland interprets *On the Road* as a set of parables in which Sal Paradise (based on Kerouac himself) and Dean Moriarty (an improvisation on Neal Cassady, Kerouac's main muse and the devil incarnate) embody opposite approaches to existence. For these two seekers, one in search of God, the other on the prowl for sex, "the road is a penance, not an adventure." As Leland shrewdly explicates the novel's spiritual teachings within dynamic social commentary, he links Kerouac to such antithetical realms as the Christian Right and hip-hop, boldly recalibrating our understanding of an artist as immensely conflicted as he was gifted. Seaman, Donna

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Nicholas Walsh:**

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**Denise Swann:**

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