

Kerouac's work lives on through modern readers

"You guys call yourselves poets, write short little lines, I'm a poet but I write lines paragraphs and pages and many pages long."

— Jack Kerouac

Summer memories are the ones that remain the longest. Even as winter reaches its prime, I still glance back to all the summers in this 22-year-old life with saccharin sentimentality,



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The poet's tree

holding the memories like little glass worlds. I've been learning that this can be both good and bad. Forgetting, however, doesn't seem like an appropriate column topic, where the goal is to fill the page with words and ideas. So for you, dear reader, I will flood my mind with memories again.

This last summer was unlike any other. For the first time ever, I was blissfully without work, school, a relationship (although that didn't feel so blissful at the time) or responsibility. This mixture could have been potentially devastating were it not for the months of saved-up Emerald pay in my bank account and a whole bunch of freaky friends — some new, some old, some since disappeared — surrounding me. One friend with whom I have had the pleasure of spending much of my last two summers goes by the name of John Kaiser.

Now, let me say that this Kaiser character is probably one of the most outgoing, mercurial cats you'll find this side of Springfield. To illustrate: Picture, if you will, a smiling, bearded man walking the streets of Eugene in the heat of a clear, red summer day. This man wears nothing but sandals, a stark white flowing galabia (this is a loose Egyptian garment) and a blue baseball cap with the word "Kerouac" emblazoned on it. He holds a copy of Jack Kerouac's "Book of Blues" in his left hand and takes long strides as he walks.

Less picturesque but equally memorable was the time John walked down the main strip of campus reading passages from "Mexico City Blues" for all to hear. I guess I was the only one.

So the common factor here is Jack. Compared to many other authors I adore, I haven't made some sweeping literary attempt to read everything he's written cover to cover; I haven't read any biographies or bothered to read chronologically, and I haven't made some attempt to construct his life outside his writing. He seems to be a writer whose life *was* his writing, entirely. Suffering, joy and everything in between was spilled in ink on the scrolls of paper he wrote upon, eventually for all to see.

One friend I know won't read him for this very reason. He says that he wants to have memories for himself and doesn't want to have Kerouac's escapades stuck inside of his head. One time I started trying to tell this same friend about Kerouac's adventures with Gary Snyder and other San Francisco beat poets in "Dharma Bums." It ended up making him angry.

Two summers ago I sat in during Paul "Beat" Dresman's beatnik literature class (this same class is being taught right now) and had the honor of meeting one of the most wonderful, beautiful people I now know. I remember how I didn't have enough money for a copy of "Dharma Bums," which Dresman had assigned, so I rode to Borders during the heat of the day to read in the bookstore's air-conditioned climate zone. A friend of mine, whom I had met, said she had already read it four times. Even now, no matter what I do, she always seems to be one step ahead.

There were other beat writers we read in the class. Like Diane DiPrima, whose biography we read and who is a worthy enough poet to talk about in another column. Or the aforementioned Gary Snyder, who never really considered himself a beat poet, or the booming orator Kenneth Rexroth, the transcendent Michael McClure and conscientious objector William Everson (although claims of his beatitude are also debatable).

During the last week of class, all of the students met at Tsunami Books and performed individual pieces. This marked the first time I had ever performed anything in front of a live audience, and the event turned out to be the moment of conception for a band I'm currently in.

So I write this because, for the first time, Kerouac and I connect in the dead of winter. I just finished reading his novel "Big Sur," which contains a poem called "Sea." Much like the sea itself, reading the poem was refreshing. It leads me to wonder how he was able to write these books while constantly inebriated with alcohol. Note that this is not a judgment of the author, who has long since passed from this temporal world but who is most certainly still somewhere out there, riding on the constant waves of birth and death.

Written works often reveal themselves to me as lessons to be learned, if I'm attentive enough to listen to them. This is the case with "Big Sur." And no, the lesson isn't some commercialized cliché like "Don't drink and do drugs, kids." For the worst points, the lesson is contained between the lines and within the flowing prose. It's something like, "Awareness can drive you to maddening levels of self-consciousness. Be down simple, and don't forget to eat, drink and breathe."

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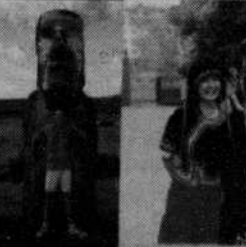
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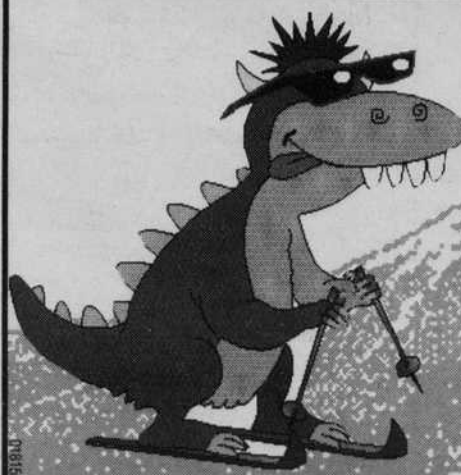
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