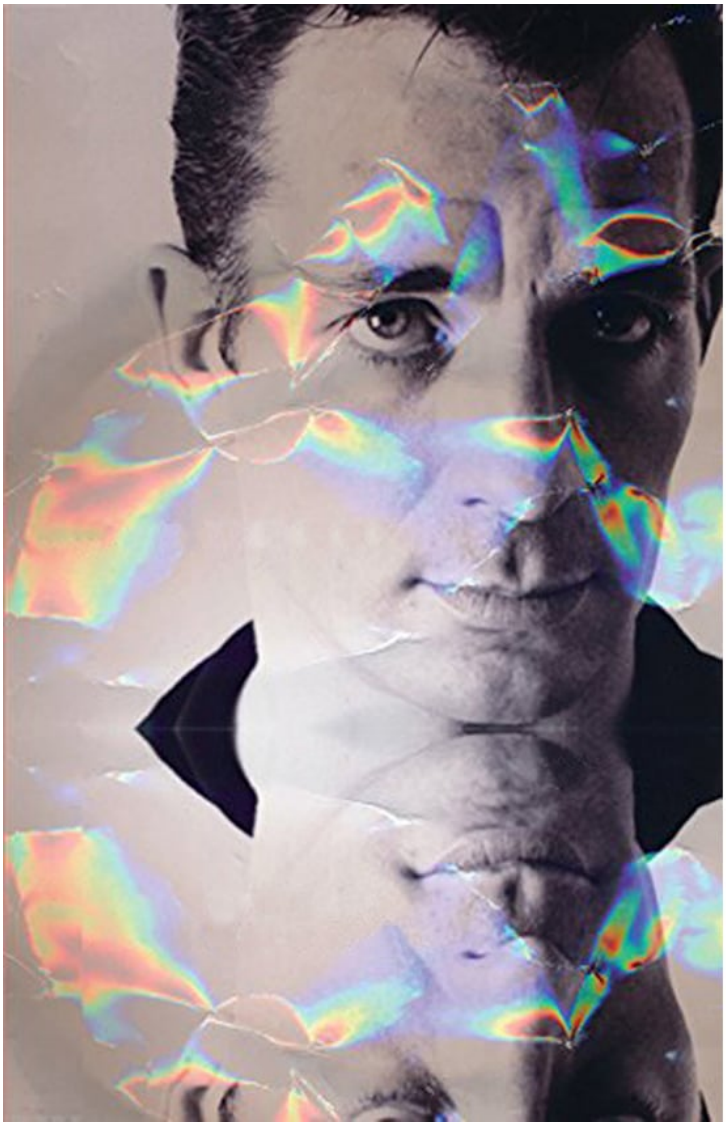
Kerouac: Searching for the Road

by Kirby Olson (May 2021)



At the End of the Road: Jack Kerouac in Mexico, by Jorge Garcia-Robles
Trans. By Daniel C. Schecter
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

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Passages on Mexico drift through the ending of Kerouac's most famous book, *On the Road.*

> "In downtown Mexico City, thousands of hipsters in floppy straw hats and long-lapeled jackets over bare chests padded along the main drag, some selling crucifixes and weed in the alleys, some of them kneeling in beat chapels next to Mexican burlesque shows in sheds . . . " (Kerouac 287).

Garcia-Robles argues that "there was definitely something Christian about his [Kerouac's] interpretation of Mexico" (38). In the brief passage quoted from Kerouac's novel, there are crucifixes and chapels mentioned. Whereas Kerouac saw himself as a Catholic, and not as the starter of some new religious faith, he was not the nicest house guest—smoking marijuana at William Burroughs' apartment in Mexico City during Burroughs' investigation for the possible murder of his wife. (In addition to this volume, Garcia-Nobles has published a volume on the accident in which William S. Burroughs shot his wife Joan – The Stray Bullet: William S. Burroughs in Mexico). Mexico made Burroughs into a writer, and his first important novel, *Junky,* was written there. Garcia-Robles argues that Kerouac was formed as a writer in Mexico, too. The two Beats spent a lot of time in Mexico, and some of it they spent together.

Burroughs wrote to a friend of his that Kerouac was a congenial person until he needed something. "For example, when we were out of money and food, I could always count on him to eat all the food there was if he got the chance. If there were two rolls left, he would always eat both of them. Once he flew into a rage because I had eaten my half of the remaining butter. If anyone asks him to do his part or to share on an

equal basis, he thinks they are taking advantage of him" (Garcia-Robles 64).

Even if he was no Mother Theresa, Kerouac was a Catholic from birth, and never relinquished this religious identity, or its basis in the Sermon on the Mount. While in Mexico, Kerouac cottoned to the prevailing Catholicism:

> "Here Holy Spain has sent the bloodheart sacrifice of Aztecs of Mexico a picture of tenderness and pity, saying, 'This you would do to Man? [referring to the crucifixion of Christ]. I am the Son of Man, I am of Man, I am Man and this you would do to Me, Who am Man and God—I am God and you would pierce my feet bound together with long nails with big stayfast points on the end slightly blunted by the hammerer's might—this you did to Me, and I preached Love?" (*Lonesome Traveler*, 34, cited in Robles-Garcia, 65).

Kerouac's understanding of Christianity was something of a bent nail. Love, to Kerouac, meant that the young and hip could sleep with one another's wives and girlfriends, and have it deepen rather than destroy their friendships. Kerouac, for instance, slept with the wife of his celebrated hero in *On the Road.* While Neal Cassady was the Dionysos to Kerouac's Apollo, the wife, Carolyn Cassady, finally told the writer that they had to stop, as it was hurting Neal. Kerouac wore out his welcome everywhere he went. His self-absorption was too much. *On the Road* is a depiction of the endlessly frayed friendships that resulted, and ends with Cassady dumping Kerouac in Mexico City leaving the novelist half-dead from malaria. In Berkeley, California, years after their Mexican forays in which Cassady abandoned Kerouac, Carolyn Cassady asked him to leave not just her, but her husband alone. "A hysterical Carolyn told Jack that his presence did harm to her innocent husband and that she was against their seeing each other" (111).

Kerouac fathered a daughter named Jan, and throughout Robles' account the erstwhile wife tries to garner child

support from him. “Jack never recognized his daughter Janet, whom he saw only twice, though he finally agreed to help her mother with a few dollars a month. The grown-up ‘Jan’ followed in her father’s slippery steps—much as Burroughs’ son had. From very early on, she consumed enormous quantities of drugs, took several risky journeys to Mexico, even whored herself, and wrote several novels in autobiographical style. She died in 1996 at age forty-four” (123).

The amazing industry of Kerouac’s literary production required that he neglect all other earthly matters. He lived with his mother on and off throughout his life, and finally died on October 21, 1969, at the age of 47, shortly after getting to the highway near her house in St. Petersburg, Florida, and attempting to hitchhike. He died of hemorrhage of the esophagus.

As a writer and person, Jack Kerouac could be insensitive, but then he could get down on himself. His friend the poet Gregory Corso was made of hardier stock. Corso survived endless beatings from his father, a three-year stint in Dannemora state penitentiary, and drug addiction, living to the age of 70. Corso accompanied Kerouac and Burroughs to Mexico, but had the sense to leave the corrupt and embittered country shortly thereafter, and went to mooch off the poet Randall Jarrell in Washington, DC, instead. Corso was always looking for places to crash, but had less shame and more resourcefulness in that regard, as he was homeless almost from birth. Not having a mother to rely on, Corso formed and left relationships without remorse. While most of the Beats took their pittance from royalties and moved to cheaper climes, Corso went toward the royalty, and mooched off them directly. Corso married a Rothschild, and befriended people with money, and moved in on them, helping himself to their refrigerator and telephone. Corso’s central note is comedy. Kerouac tended to linger, and look back longingly at his questionable forays, and imbue them with nostalgia. His viewpoint is almost

sentimental. The closing paragraph of *On the Road* is an example:

> "So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all the rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty . . . "

Kerouac was more romantic than many vagabonds of the nineteen-fifties, but he could also be exploitative. vTo tap the differential between American industrial might and ragged third-world economies, the Beats spent long periods in India (covered in a book called *The Blue Hand*