

2010

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Recommended Citation

Johns, Anna K. (2010) "The Birth of the Beat Generation," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 14, Article 20.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol14/iss2010/20>

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The Birth of the Beat Generation

Anna K. Johns

The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, Hipsters, 1944-1960. By Steven Watson. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1998. Pp. 399. ISBN 978-0375701535.)

For his contribution to the Circles of the Twentieth Century Series, Steven Watson offers a portrait of the Beat Generation through several media. His writing is more typical of a storyteller than a historian, but his sources are well documented and his research rather extensive. What makes his book unusual, however, are the other pieces of the story that his reader can access. Because the Beats inhabited a time in which photography was becoming more ubiquitous, the visual content of Watson's book is fitting and fascinating. Finally, Watson adds information to the margins of his book, including quotations, definitions of Beat slang, and various other short mantras. This format reflects the nature of the Beat generation itself – concerned with words more than meaning, image more than substance, and the moment over the future.

In the first pages of his book, Watson quotes W. E. B. Du Bois as saying, "The history of the world is the history not of individuals, but of groups" (xi). Though this assertion is not a universal truth, it makes sense in the two contexts in which it is presented: the civil rights movement (certainly a history of a group) and the development of the Beatnik (a movement fundamentally concerned with group identity). Despite the emphasis on the group as a whole, Watson takes time to develop each individual in his work, allowing the reader to see how personal histories colored the group history. For example, the death of Jack Kerouac's brother Gerard fundamentally changed the course of Jack's life. Many of his actions later in life were self-consciously motivated by a desire to find his lost brother, whether it be in other people or more abstractly,

as when he “found” his brother in the sea. If Kerouac’s story is not tragic enough, characters like Neal Cassady have horrifying personal stories; in Cassady’s case, he lived for a while with his alcoholic father in a whorehouse, sharing a room with a double-amputee named Shorty. He also later developed a relationship with a hermaphrodite circus sideshow freak who was addicted to heroin, the beginning of his own heroin habit. The question, then, is whether the group history is truly of primary importance, or whether the uniquely traumatic lives of its participants directed the dynamic to such an extent that the story is really a story of individuals, not one of the group. The same question could be asked of W. E. B. Du Bois in the context of his original quotation. To what extent did figures like Fred Shuttlesworth, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., bring a truly unique flavor to the “group”? In the case of Beatniks, could the movement have continued without William Burroughs or even Lucien Carr? If one finds the characters in the movement to be unique, then perhaps the “history of the world” is of individuals after all.

Though Watson takes the reader through stories of drug addiction, theft, murder, and sexual promiscuity, the author remains surprisingly neutral. He does not seem to take a definite side throughout most of the book, though the fact that he wrote the book at all suggests that these Beatniks were, at the very least, important in his eyes. On the other hand, he demonstrates without hesitation the descent into darkness that nearly every character follows. Drug binges ending in disaster are unhesitatingly catalogued. The loss of any sexual boundaries, not limited to one friend sleeping with another’s wife, but even one friend sleeping with another friend, and perhaps his wife at the same time. The tragic stories of the women who sought to stay close to this group of men is recorded in similar detail and neutrality. For example, Joan Burroughs (before marrying William Burroughs) swallowed so many Benzedrine-soaked inhaler strips that she had sores all over her body and spent a period of time in a mental asylum. Neal Cassady’s ex-wife LuAnne Henderson followed the group even long after her divorce, and Watson describes her as having dirty hair down to her waist. Late in Kerouac’s life, his wife hid his shoes to prevent his drunken escapades, but he was

still arrested, sometimes wearing no shoes. Watson portrays these stories from a distance. Still, the tragedy of these images cannot be ignored.

In the end, these original Beats took their ideas too far. The wake of destruction in the path, including not only physical destruction, but also the lives of people like their many wives and even their children, born drug-addicted into dysfunctional homes. The fact remains, however, that the Beat Generation was primarily a response to the kind of world catalogued in *Homeward Bound* by historian Elaine Tyler May. Where the normal world saw homosexuality as mental illness, the Beats celebrated it as a higher form of spirituality. Where the world condemned drunkenness and drug use, the Beats saw these things as elevating one to a higher plane. The case of Allen Ginsberg demonstrates this point. Ginsberg was hospitalized in a mental facility where his “therapists encouraged Ginsberg to conform to America’s legal and sexual rules” (114). These therapists insisted that Ginsberg was not a homosexual, that he was extremely ordinary, not a poet, and could live happily in the world as soon as he conformed to social norms. This offers little room for individual choice. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the other Beat poets offered a more comfortable environment. Despite everything, the Beat world was one where anything was acceptable – a direct contrast to the normative world.

The context of conformity in 1950s society also, in part, explains the tragedy faced by many women in the Beatnik world. It seems that for these women, a break with the normative world was never complete. Despite drug use and a partial removal of themselves from society, these women still desired to get married, to have children, and to live in some form of the domestic ideal. Instead, they accepted abuse and a world in which art and male bonding were elevated above all else. In a way, then these women were victims not only of the Beat culture, but of the 1950s as a whole.

Anna Katharine Johns is a recent Masters-level history student at UAB. She is currently battling the achievement gap as a Teach for America corps member in San Antonio, Texas. She graduated from Wellesley College in 2009 and plans to continue her graduate study in history after completing her teaching assignment. She and her loyal canine companion, Bama, enjoy long walks and kicking back with a murder mystery.