On the Road

Jack Kerouac

About the author
Jack Kerouac lived a brief but full life. He was born in 1922 and died in 1969 at the age of only forty-seven. He was born into a family with French-Canadian roots, and did not speak English until he was six years old. It wasn’t long before he decided he wanted to be a writer. He started at the age of ten, writing a sports news sheet, and by eleven had written a complete novel.

After leaving Columbia University in New York early – he had gone there as a football scholar, but his success was not helped when he broke a leg – Kerouac joined the Marines for the latter part of World War II. He then took a succession of jobs while trying to make a living as a writer. By this time he had already decided he wanted to travel, and in writing On the Road he combined his desire to travel with his desire to write.

Despite writing some thirty published and unpublished books, including plays and poetry as well as novels, Kerouac never repeated the international success of On the Road. This may have been because subsequent novels such as Doctor Sax (1959) and Big Sur (1962) repeated the themes of On the Road, and he found it impossible to, or he didn’t want to, develop into other areas.

Kerouac’s style was spontaneous and unconventional, and it was this as much as the content that caused On the Road to be so well received.

After his travels in the 1940s and 1950s, Kerouac sought a more solitary existence in the 1960s. Dependent to some extent on alcohol and drugs throughout his life, he drank more and more. He then tried to beat his alcoholism, but died before the end of the decade of alcohol-related liver failure.

Summary
On the Road, first published in the United States in 1957, is the most famous of Jack Kerouac’s many novels. It is semi-autobiographical, and is based on events that took place in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This is when Jack Kerouac (Sal Paradise in On the Road) and his friend Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty in the novel) traveled throughout the United States, covering huge distances in a very short time.

The story begins with Sal meeting Dean when he comes to New York for the first time. They discuss traveling to the west of the United States or “going West.” At first, Sal goes traveling on his own. He goes to San Francisco, staying with friends on the way there and falling in love on the way back. He and Dean do not travel together until some time later, going from the East to the West and back again by car. Their adventures on the road involve meetings with girls, wild parties, getting drunk, taking drugs and enjoying sex. They never have much money and have to rely on delivering cars for people who don’t want to drive long distances themselves, doing casual work when they can, and sometimes stealing food, drink and gas.

The loosely structured writing style and the freedom of the behavior and lives of the young people involved captured the attention of the public at the time. On the Road has remained a cult classic.

Chapter 1: The narrator (Sal Paradise) meets Dean Moriarty in New York. Sal is a writer and Dean tells Sal that he wants to learn to write. Dean leaves for Denver. Sal prepares for his first trip west.

Chapter 2: Sal begins his journey to San Francisco where his friend Remi Boncoeur lives. Remi has talked about working on a ship and traveling the world. Sal begins his journey by taking buses and hitchhiking.

Chapter 3: Sal meets interesting characters while traveling on a flatbed truck. He gets off at Cheyenne, Wyoming with plans to travel south to Denver.

Chapter 4: Sal spends his money on a girl who leaves with someone else. He arrives in Denver and calls Chad King, his friend from college. He finds that Chad and his friends are no longer speaking to Dean.

Chapter 5: Sal stays with his friend Roland Major and meets Carlo Marx, another friend from New York, who takes him to see Dean. Dean is in Denver with Marylou, his first wife, and a new girl named Camille.
Chapter 6: Sal joins his friends for five days in the mountains. He borrows money from his aunt and buys a ticket for San Francisco. In San Francisco, he gets work as a guard with Remi. Remi loses all his money at the horse races and gets in a fight with his girlfriend Lee Ann. Remi borrows money and asks Lee Ann and Sal to join him for dinner with his father. Sal gets drunk and arrives late for dinner. Sal leaves San Francisco.

Chapter 7: Sal meets a Mexican girl named Terry on the bus to Los Angeles. She has left her husband and child. Sal and Terry plan to hitchhike together to New York. They have trouble getting rides and go to Terry’s hometown of Sabinal, California. They stay in a tent and pick cotton for low wages. Eventually, Sal goes back to New York and Terry returns to her family.

Chapter 8: At his aunt’s house in New Jersey, Sal finishes his book and begins college. He is visiting his relatives in Virginia for Christmas when Dean, Marylou, and Ed Dunkel arrive. Dean has bought a car and plans to bring Sal back to San Francisco with them.

Chapter 9: Dean decides they’ll move Sal’s brother’s furniture for him (from Virginia to New York).

Chapter 10: They attend several New Year’s parties in New York. Sal decides to take another trip west with Dean, Marylou and Ed. They get to New Orleans and meet Galatea, Ed’s wife. Dean, Marylou and Sal head off to California. Ed and Galatea stay behind.

Chapter 11: On their journey to San Francisco, they get stuck in mud, drive on snowy roads and run out of money. They travel to Tucson, Arizona, because Sal’s friend lives there and they can borrow money from him. Marylou tells Sal she’ll spend time with him in San Francisco.

Chapter 12: They get to San Francisco and Dean returns to Camille. Marylou leaves. Sal gets money from his aunt and prepares to return to New York. He thinks he won’t see Dean again.

Chapter 13: Sal goes to Denver and considers living there but all his friends are gone. A rich girl gives him money to go to San Francisco. Sal goes to see Dean who is with Camille and his daughter. Dean tells Sal about his problems with Marylou who has since married someone else. While Sal is visiting, Camille kicks Dean out. Dean and Sal decide to travel back to New York together and to Italy after that. They meet Galatea who tells Dean he has no sense of responsibility.

Chapter 14: Dean and Sal travel with others in a car to Denver. They stay with friends of Sal’s. Dean creates problems by chasing after a girl, stealing cars, and getting drunk.

Chapter 15: Dean and Sal go to a travel office in Denver and sign up to drive a Cadillac to Chicago with two college boys. Dean gets them into several near accidents. Dean and Sal go to Detroit and then catch a ride with a man to New York. Dean meets a new girl called Inez. Dean arranges for divorce papers with Camille (who has a second child by him) so that he can get married to Inez. Soon after, he has a child with Inez.

Chapter 16: Sal sells his book and prepares to travel to Denver without Dean. In Denver, Sal is preparing to go to Mexico with Stan Shephard (a new friend) when he hears that Dean has bought a car and is joining them. (Dean plans to get a quick divorce from Camille in Mexico.) Dean arrives and they have a big party in Denver before they begin another road trip.

Chapter 17: Sal, Dean and Stan arrive in Mexico and party with some girls along the way.

Chapter 18: In Mexico City, Sal gets a high fever. Dean gets his divorce papers. Dean leaves Sal and returns to New York to marry Inez.

Chapter 19: After getting to New York and marrying Inez, Dean leaves Inez to join Camille in San Francisco. Sal returns to New York. He meets Laura and they plan a trip to San Francisco. Sal arrives in New York to escort them. Dean hopes Inez will come to San Francisco as well, but she kicks him out. Sal leaves for a concert with his friend Remi (who has arrived in New York from his around-the-world trip). Remi doesn’t want Dean coming with them so Sal waves goodbye to Dean from their car. Sal doesn’t see Dean again but thinks of him often.

Background and themes

Four men who met at Columbia University, New York, in 1946 were to become firm friends and fellow travelers through life. Indeed, they are all characters in On the Road. They were the writers Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, the poet Allen Ginsberg, all three students at the university, and a wild young man who was on a visit there, Neal Cassady. They became key figures in an American social and literary movement known as the “Beat Movement.”
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It was Kerouac who invented the term “Beat,” which comes from the word “beautitude” (blessedness). The Beats, or Beatniks, expressed a mood that was common among young artists in the United States after World War II: a mood of anxiety and anger, of rootlessness, and of disillusionment with the “American Dream” and society at large.

They were perhaps the first literary group of “angry young men,” of rebels who led the way for later movements of artists expressing anger and dissatisfaction with the way society was – protest singers, hippies, the anti-Vietnam war peace movement, and punks. Their work encouraged young people to question rather than accept the values they were taught by their parents and teachers. They saw this not as a destructive influence but as something very positive. When Kerouac traveled he was looking for a positive experience, and wanted to find and describe the pure beauty of America, and the beauty of the “ordinary people” who inhabited it.

The Beat Generation’s unconventional views of life were reflected in their appearance and behavior. Life for them was certainly not about conforming, it was about being on the road, listening to jazz (a huge influence on their literary style with its free forms and spontaneity), having wild parties, being alive and living for the moment. Also, of course, life was about writing – not necessarily poetry or prose as such, but writing thoughts and feelings. These thoughts and feelings were also influenced by the Eastern religion of Buddhism, followed in particular by Kerouac and Ginsberg, which it is necessary to understand in order to fully appreciate the Beats themselves.

Those four men who met at Columbia University in New York over fifty years ago remain cult heroes to this day, much admired by many with an “alternative” lifestyle. Cassady had a huge influence on Kerouac’s literary style, as Kerouac tried to use the same forms as Cassady did when he spoke, without hesitation or self-consciousness, and this led to the free-flowing letter writing style that became Kerouac’s trademark.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1. **Guess:** Have students look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What do you think the book will be about? When and where does it take place? How would you describe the characters in the photograph?*

2. **Pair work:** Bring in photocopies of a map of the United States. Have students find some of the places that Sal Paradise and his friends travel to: New York, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Los Angeles, California; San Francisco, California; Des Moines, Iowa; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Denver, Colorado; New Orleans, Louisiana; Washington, D.C.; Houston, Texas; El Paso, Texas; and Tucson, Arizona. Have them refer to the map while they read the story so they can understand the distances traveled.

Introduction

After reading

3. **Read carefully:** With a partner make notes about Jack Kerouac, the author.

   - Name:
   - Date of birth:
   - Place of birth:
   - Education:
   - Friends and their overall beliefs:
   - Style of writing:
   - Army experience:
   - Books written (1950–1951):
   - Initial response to books:
   - Changes to books:
   - Fame with *On the Road*:
   - Other books:
   - Personal life:

Chapters 1–4

Before reading

4. **Guess:** Have students read the Introduction. This book is about the road trips that Sal Paradise takes across the United States in the late 1940s. In groups, have students guess what kind of feelings Sal will have before going on his first road trip. What will he probably see and do on this trip?

After reading

5. **Write:** After reading Chapter 1, have students imagine they are Sal and they are writing about their meeting with Dean in their journal. *Describe Dean. How do you feel about him?*

   - Example: *Today I met Dean Moriarty … Dean is … I think he … I think we …*

   - Share your writing in pairs.

6. **Discuss:** Have students imagine they are planning to travel around their country. *Where would you go and why? What would you need to do to get ready? What would you need to have?*

7. **Role play:** At the beginning of Chapter 2, Sal tells his aunt he is traveling to San Francisco and is possibly going around the world. Have students imagine what they would say to each other.

   - **Student A:** You are Sal. You are excited about your future travels. What do you want to see and do? Why?
   - **Student B:** You are Sal’s aunt. What advice do you have for Sal as he gets ready to go? How do you feel about his travels?
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8 Read carefully: Have students look at the map of the United States and trace Sal's travels from New York to Chicago, Illinois, to Davenport, Iowa, to Des Moines, Iowa, to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Denver, Colorado.

9 Pair work: At the beginning of Chapter 3 on page 6, Sal describes the trip from Gothenburg to Cheyenne as "the greatest ride of my life." Have students discuss why he might feel this way? What would they consider to be part of "a great ride?" Have them make a list and then share their ideas with the class.

10 Group work: Most of Sal's friends in Denver are not seeing or speaking to Dean Moriarty or Carlo Marx. Have students list the possible reasons. If they were Sal, would they try to see him? Why or why not?

**Chapters 5–8**

Before reading

11 Guess: The next four chapters take Sal from Denver to San Francisco to Los Angeles to New York. Have students guess what kind of adventures he might have. Will Sal be happy with his journey? Why or why not?

After reading

12 Read carefully: In Chapter 6, Sal writes about a trip to Central City with his friends: "Suddenly, everything seemed to be going wrong." Later in that chapter, before leaving Los Angeles, he writes: "Everything is going wrong." In groups, have students make a list of the problems Sal has with his friends in both places.

Problems in Central City:
Problems before leaving Los Angeles:
If they were Sal, how would they feel about these problems? What would they do?

13 Role play: Have students imagine how Sal and Remi might have felt after the dinner with Remi's father in Chapter 6. Have them imagine a phone call that Sal might have made to Remi the following day from Los Angeles.

_Student A_: You are Sal. How would you feel about your behavior the previous day? What would you say to Remi?

_Student B_: You are Remi. What would you say to Sal? How would you feel?

14 Pair work: Think about Sal's life with Terry in Sabinal. In pairs, have students make a list of the good and bad points about staying in Sabinal with Terry. Then have them decide whether they think Sal made the right decision to leave.

15 Group work: Imagine the scene at Rocco's home in Virginia at Christmas with the arrival of Dean, Marylou and Ed. In groups, write thought bubbles that show what each person might be thinking (but don't include the names on these). Write thought bubbles for: Dean, Sal, Rocco, Rocco's wife and Sal's aunt.

Have students exchange their writing with another group. Try to match a name with each thought bubble.

Example: "I can't believe Sal's friends showed up without calling first! We were going to have a quiet Christmas and now I have to get food ready for these strange people." (Rocco's wife)

**Chapters 9–12**

After reading

16 Role play: Sal's aunt travels with Sal and Dean from Virginia to New York with her furniture and sees Sal off on another journey to San Francisco. Imagine what Sal's aunt might say to a friend about her nephew and his friends.

_Student A_: You are Sal's aunt. Tell your friend about your nephew and his friends. Keep in mind that Sal stays at your home when he is in New York.

_Student B_: You are a friend of Sal's aunt. Ask questions about her nephew and give your opinion.

17 Group work: Sal, Dean and Marylou drive very long distances in a short time and see little of the places they pass through. In groups, have students think about why they do this. Have them consider the following things and decide which are most important for the travelers: changes in the countryside and scenery; the sense of freedom; the excitement; beautiful sunrises and sunsets; the sense of living life to the full; meeting different people.

Can they think of other reasons that Sal and his friends enjoy this type of travel?

18 Write: Have students imagine they are Sal and they are riding out of San Francisco on the bus at the end of Chapter 12. _Write in your journal your feelings about Dean, Marylou, and Camille. Are you happy to leave them? Do you want to come back to see them again? Why or why not?_

Example: _I am on the bus and I am leaving San Francisco …_

**Chapters 13–15**

After reading

19 Discuss: Have students think about Dean's problems with Marylou and Camille in Chapter 13. Sal says "Poor, poor Dean ..." and suggests to Dean that they go to New York and then Italy together. However, Galatea yells at Dean and says he has "no sense of responsibility." Have students discuss the reactions of Sal and Galatea. How would they react if they knew Dean? What would they say to him?

20 Role play: In pairs, have students think about the ride in the Cadillac from Denver to Chicago. Imagine a conversation between one of the college boys and Sal about Dean and his driving.

_Student A_: You are one of the college students. How do you feel about riding with Dean in the car.

_Student B_: You are Sal. What do you say to the boy about Sal.
Chapters 16–19

After reading

21 Write: On page 67, Sal describes Dean as a “rat” when he leaves him in Mexico with a fever. Sal says nothing to Dean about this. Have students imagine they were Sal in this situation. What would they say to Dean when they saw him later in New York? Have them write down their ideas in a short speech to Dean. Have them share their answers in groups.

22 Discuss: What do Sal, Dean, and Stan see, hear, and do in Mexico that makes the trip interesting to them? In groups, have students share their ideas. Then have students share the things that are most interesting to them when they take trips somewhere.

23 Pair work: Think about the friendship between Sal and Dean. Is their friendship different at the beginning of the story than it is at the end? If so, how? Discuss with your partner. (Have students review their response to activity 6.)

Extra activities

24 Check: Have students recall their thoughts before reading the book (in activity 1). Were they correct with their guesses about the characters in the photograph and what might happen in the book? What (if anything) surprised or interested them about the story itself? How would they describe the style of writing?

25 Role play: Have students imagine that Sal and Dean meet again in 1967. Discuss what they say about: their lives now (about twenty years after On the Road); their lives on the road; young people today and what they do compared with what Sal and Dean did when they were young. Choose one aspect of the discussion. Write a conversation between Sal and Dean. Student A is Sal and Student B is Dean.

26 Write: Kerouac writes about a certain group of young people in the late 1940s. Write your feelings about young people today. Why might they act the way they do? Consider the changes in society and the responses of young people to these changes.

27 Artwork: Have students imagine that they are Sal and they are putting together a poster or collage that will help describe the road trips they have taken and the adventures they have had along the way. In pairs or groups, have them cut out pictures and words from newspapers and magazines (or write and draw their own). Put these together on a large piece of paper to make a poster.

28 Discuss: In small groups, have students discuss why the characters in this book spend so much time on the road. Are they trying to gain experience of life? Are they running away from reality? Are they unsure what to do with their time? Are there other reasons? Have groups share their ideas with the class.

29 Group work: There are many references throughout the story to the fact that Dean is crazy. In groups, have students decide whether he is crazy. Have them find examples to support their views.

30 Research: Look for further information about Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation. In groups, have students also look at other groups of young people that have been labeled through the years (largely in North America), such as Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. What are the main characteristics of these different groups? What might be the characteristics of future groups of young people?

31 Role play: Have students imagine a TV interview about the book between a reporter and Jack Kerouac. Have students reread page viii in the Introduction for a brief summary of Kerouac’s life. Student A: You are a TV reporter. What kind of questions would you like to ask Jack Kerouac about his life and the book? Student B: You are Jack Kerouac. Imagine how you might respond to the questions.

32 Write: A lot of Kerouac’s writing involves observation of the people around him. Give students a weekend assignment that requires them to take a ride on a bus or to sit on a bench in a park, shopping mall or playground. In a descriptive paragraph, have them write about some of the interesting people they see. Have them share their paragraphs in groups.

33 Group work: The story of Sal Paradise and his friends takes place in the United States in the late 1940s. Discuss how their experiences would be different if they traveled across the United States sixty years later. Think about cars, public transport, hitchhiking, money, casual labor, popular music and attitudes of society. Complete a chart and make comparisons.

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Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.