

## The Kerouac Myth Goes Viral

With three up-coming movies and a new biography, the author of *On The Road* is poised to become the all-time iconic American writer

By Jonah Raskin

What is it about Jack Kerouac? Why have generations flocked repeatedly to his novel, *On the Road*, for inspiration ever since it was first published? Why do biographers continue to write books about him? And why have moviemakers always sought to turn his novels into films? There isn't a better time than right now to answer those questions about the author who was born in 1922 and who died in 1969 at the age of 47 from internal bleeding in the house he shared with his third wife Stella and his mother Gabrielle who taught him how to tell a good story.

Fifty-five years after it became a best seller, *On The Road* comes to movie screens later this year. A cinematic version of Kerouac's *Big Sur* is on its way, too, and there's a forthcoming feature film entitled *Kill Your Darlings* about Kerouac and his buddies that stars Jack Huston as Jack Kerouac and Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg. Moreover, there's a new biography out by Kerouac's ex-lover Joyce Johnson that's entitled *The Voice Is All* (Viking; \$32.95) that recounts his evolution as a writer but doesn't tell all about his personal life.

Johnson did that already in her memoir, *Minor Characters*, and in a collection of her correspondence with Kerouac entitled *The Door Is Open*. In one of her letters to him, Johnson wrote, "I'm your girl, your mistress, or whatever." She added, "The door is still open always." Johnson was not the only woman to feel that intense way about him. Even when he was living with Johnson in her New York apartment, he pursued other women. Married three times, with

dozens of girl friends, mistresses and whatever, Kerouac appealed to women and to men, too, because he seemed like the older brother they always wanted to have, the little boy who needed to be rescued from his own worst habits including his alcoholism, and the handsome lover who appeared to promise the wildest nights of uninhibited sex and existential adventures.

In *On the Road*, he advertised himself and his friends as saintly outlaws who wouldn't and couldn't stop doing whatever they did. "The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, made to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time," he wrote. "The ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars." Kerouac was a roman candle who exploded from too much sex, too much travel, too many illicit drugs, especially speed, and too much writing. Like Jack London whom he revered and wanted to emulate, he burned himself up and burned himself out. "I would rather be ashes than dust," London said. Jack Kerouac felt exactly the same way. London died at 40. Kerouac lived seven more years than London and wrote books until the end, most of which are in print, and most of them unread including masterpieces like *Visions of Cody* in which he experimented with the English language and wrote long sentences like the one that begins, "But the latest and perhaps really, next to Mexico and the jazz tea high I'll tell in a minute, best, vision, along on high, but under entirely different circumstances, was the vision I had of Cody."

In a phone interview with *The Bohemian*, Johnson said that she wished that Americans would turn to *Visions of Cody*, *Dr. Sax*, and *The Subterraneans*. "They're all really wonderful novels," she said. "Perhaps the movies about Jack, and my biography will encourage readers to discover the vast library of books that he wrote." Kerouac fans have usually read his novels as fictionalized autobiographies, a habit he encouraged when he described his work as "true-story novels." Biographers have on the whole added to the myths about the man, and, though Johnson tries very hard in her biography to separate fact from fiction, it's too late in the game for that. The forthcoming movies seem guaranteed to magnify the myths

and turn Kerouac even more than ever before into an American icon.

Maybe that's a good thing. After all, Jack Kerouac is our Dostoevsky and Marcel Proust. He was also a major con artist who may even have coned himself into believing that he wrote his novels spontaneously and never changed a word. If you want proof that he revised you have only to compare the "scroll edition" of *On the Road* with the standard edition first published in 1957. There's a world of difference.

William Burroughs once said that Kerouac sold "a million pairs of Levis." Indeed, his life style was contagious. He also knew how to write a bestseller. *On The Road* keeps on selling and with no end in sight.