

PAGE-TURNER

NEAL CASSADY: AMERICAN MUSE, HOLY FOOL

By **Scott Staton** December 12, 2012

The critic Morris Dickstein once said that Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road” is more important as a myth or a cultural marker than as a novel. Its story of exhilaration and adventure resonates with young readers in the abstract, but few will deny its stretches of tedium, or fail to note the misogyny and narcissism expressed by the misbehaving male characters. Nevertheless, when “On the Road” appeared, in 1957, it unexpectedly helped lay the literary bedrock for an emergent youth culture that was consumed with the lure of authenticity and an aversion to social norms. Because this attitude was in due course thoroughly assimilated by the mainstream, the novel has secured a place in the canon as a profound, if somewhat clunky, articulation of the postwar American experience—“the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being,” as Kerouac’s alter ego, Sal Paradise, puts it.

Walter Salles’s film adaptation of “On the Road,” which arrives in theatres

on December 21st, struggles to do justice to both the myth and the novel. Having directed three prior road movies (including “The Motorcycle Diaries”), Salles is no stranger to the genre’s conventions of open space and intermittent lassitude, but his treatment of the book borders on precious. I found Garrett Hedlund’s teen-idol depiction of Dean Moriarty particularly unsatisfying. A portrait of Kerouac’s close friend Neal Cassady, Moriarty is supposed to be irrepressibly talkative and dynamic, a model of hyperactivity. Aside from occasional eruptions of energy, Garrett’s Moriarty has a cooler disposition, and is at times almost laconic. “On the Road” is Kerouac’s long meditation on his friendship with Cassady; if the book is more myth than novel, Cassady is both muse and demigod. Hedlund’s performance neuters the book’s animating Mephistophelian spirit.

Cassady was a complicated soul whose creative energies found release through an immoderate enthusiasm for sex, automobiles, and drugs. His enduring aesthetic legacy was an incorrigibly hedonistic life that his friend Kerouac and sometime lover Allen Ginsberg transmuted into art. To them, Cassady was a revelation, the consummate hipster-savant. In his poem “Howl,” Ginsberg rhapsodized Cassady “whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver—joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses’ rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too.” Appearing two years later in “On the Road,” he was celebrated by Kerouac as having “the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint,” and then, toward the end of the book, diminished (with emphasis) as

“the HOLY GOOF,” a wanderer incapable of fulfilling his obligations as a father and husband.

Years later, Cassady had a brief second act in American literature, depicted as the helmsman of Ken Kesey’s epic 1964 cross-country journey in Tom Wolfe’s “The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.” He served as a kind of totem for Kesey’s Pranksters, who drew inspiration from Kerouac’s novel. Wolfe’s introduction of Cassady is appropriately brisk:

Off to one side is a guy about 40 with a lot of muscles, as you can see because he has no shirt on—just a pair of khakis and some red leather boots on and his hell of a build—and he seems to be in a kinetic trance, flipping a small sledge hammer up in the air over and over, always managing to catch the handle on the way down with his arms and legs kicking the whole time and his shoulders rolling and his head bobbing.

Wolfe’s book, published in 1968, just months after Cassady’s mysterious death in Mexico, at the age of forty-one, certified Kesey’s frolic as an American folk tale. Cassady materializes as a ready-made icon, conveniently tracing the bloodline from Beat to flower generation. Last year, the documentary “Magic Trip,” comprised of footage shot by Kesey and his cohorts during their trek, offered a rare glimpse of Cassady: restless and motormouthed, a man whose life had led him, it seemed, beyond the brink of lucidity.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

The American Opioid Crisis

Cassady's own attempts at writing were rough, but his effusive prose—which can be found in hundreds of letters and an unfinished manuscript—had an impulsive quality, anticipating the vigorous style of gonzo journalists such as Hunter S. Thompson. The first line of a 1953 letter to Kerouac captures this breathlessness:

Well it's about time you wrote, I was fearing you farted out on top that mean mountain or slid under while pissing in Pismo, beach of flowers, food and foolishness, but I knew the fear was ill-founded for balancing it in my thoughts of you, much stronger and valid if you weren't dead, was a realization of the experiences you would be having down there, rail, home, and the most important, climate, by a remembrance of my own feelings and thoughts (former low, or more exactly, nostalgic and unreal; latter hi) as, for example, I too seemed to spend time looking out upper floor windows at sparse, especially nighttime, traffic in females—old or young.

While Kerouac struggled to envision his novelistic account of road-tripping with Cassady, he perceived the value of his friend's correspondence and seized its influence. As he explained in a 1968 interview with the *Paris Review*, given a year before his death from cirrhosis, "I got the idea for the spontaneous style of *On the Road* from seeing how good old Neal Cassady wrote his letters to me, all first person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed." Referring to a particular letter, a forty-thousand-word composition that was forever misplaced, Kerouac remarked, "It was the greatest piece of writing I ever saw, better'n anybody in America, or at least enough to make Melville, Twain, Dreiser, [Thomas] Wolfe, I dunno who, spin in their graves." During the famous three-week-long burst of memory-typing that produced the book, Kerouac wrote of his friends using their real names, and he indiscriminately incorporated portions of Cassady's letters into his manuscript.

Cassady's compositional strengths were exuberance and a lack of discipline—elements that Kerouac decisively embraced—but he had difficulty exploiting this talent in the service of his own fledgling literary effort. "My prose has no individual style as such," he confessed in a 1948 missive to Kerouac, "but is rather an unspoken and still unexpressed groping toward the personal. There is something there that wants to come out; something of my own that must be said. Yet, perhaps, words are not the way for me." He spent years endeavoring to write his own autobiographical novel, laboring over the sentences until the exertion seemed hopeless. "At best I write only from sentence to sentence and can't construct beyond this," he lamented to Ginsberg in 1951. "I get hopelessly involved in words to contain the increasing number of ideas.... I am soon so overextended—

stretched grammatically and logically to the point where any semblance of clarity is lost.”

He never completed the book, a picaresque account of his childhood, titled “The First Third,” but the manuscript was published after his death.

Stylistically uneven and factually unreliable, it is nevertheless a fascinating look at his peripatetic origins, dealing principally with his experiences on Denver’s skid row with his wino father. The elder Neal Cassady introduced his son to a world of dissolute excess, freight-car hopping, and hitchhiking. “Among the hundreds of isolated creatures who haunted the streets of lower downtown Denver there was not one so young as myself,” Cassady recalled. “Of these dreary men who had committed themselves, each for his own good reason, to the task of finishing their days as penniless drunkards, I alone, as the sharer of their way of life, presented a replica of childhood to which their vision could daily turn, and in being thus grafted onto them, I became the unnatural son of a few score beaten men.” The book’s more inspired passages suggest a tramp’s approximation of Proust, an oft-cited hero of his.

Of course, Neal Cassady was no Proust—he was a loquacious fool with a madness for living. Yet his exploits continue to fascinate, and words are the reason. He presented an extreme embodiment of American freedom to close friends who were determined to become writers, and in being thus grafted onto their work, he became an unlikely literary legend.

Photograph by Ted Streshinsky/Corbis.

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