

The Awakener: A Memoir of Kerouac and the Fifties
By Helen Weaver
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Reviewed by Jonah Raskin, Sonoma State University

Beat Generation women have been writing about the Beat Generation for nearly 40 years. But the pivotal place of the women did not dawn on many readers in a major way until 1996 when Brenda Knight published *Women of the Beat Generation* (Canari). Knight arranged the work in four sections: The Precursors, which included women like Jane Bowles; The Muses, among them Carolyn Cassady; The Writers, such as Joanne Kyger; and The Artists, including Jay DeFeo. The most recent book to join the body of literature by women who lived with and among the famous Beat writers is Helen Weaver's *The Awakener: A Memoir of Kerouac and the Fifties*.

The title (*The Awakener*) and the subtitle (*A Memoir of Kerouac and the Fifties*) are misleading. While Kerouac and the 1950s are a part of this book, they are not the entire book, or even its most riveting sections. "The awakener" is Kerouac, the person who literally rouses her from her sleepy life. He is also, in her view, the person who woke up all of America in the 1950s. Parts of the book are indeed about Kerouac's power and influence. However, there are significant, insightful portraits of other men, including Richard Howard, one of the most important translators of the past 60 or so years, who has brought Stendhal, Baudelaire, de Beauvoir, and Camus into English. Weaver also writes evocatively about Lenny Bruce, the comedian and social critic who was tried for obscenity—and convicted of obscenity, unlike Ginsberg and Burroughs.

Much of the book is about Weaver's life in the 1960s, when she moved on from the Beats to the hippies, smoking marijuana and listening more intensely than ever before to rock 'n' roll. She turned to spiritualists, settled in Woodstock, New York, and began the practice of yoga. Weaver also worked in publishing for decades. She was an accomplished translator, taking Antonin Artaud's work from French into English and working with Susan Sontag. She was a social activist and rallied to the defense of Lenny Bruce. Her descriptions of Bruce and her intimate relationship with him are powerful and shocking. In her view, Bruce had a "strange aura, almost repellent; very sexual, but like both sexes at once, like half man half woman" (128).

Her style in *The Awakener* is distinctly her own, as for example when she borrows from both Yiddish and the Beat argot and describes herself as "a little shiksa chick" (131). She has a wry, deadpan sense of humor and sometimes sounds tongue-in-cheek. Candidly, she describes her physical ailments, her love affairs in New York and in Europe—including her orgasms—and her therapy in Freudian analysis. Her strength is in psychology: understanding her own motives and the motivations and the motives of Kerouac and Ginsberg.

Probably the most valuable parts of the book are about her relationships with her doctors and the role of analysis in helping her to see herself and to accept herself. She plays therapist to the men, too. Of Ginsberg she writes, “As long as I had known Allen there had always been someone like Harry Smith, someone who was Not Quite Right, as my mother would say, whom Allen was giving shelter to, lurking about the place. It was almost as if Allen, whose mother died in an insane asylum, had to have someone a little marginal around to feel at home” (162-163). That is a possible interpretation and provides food for thought. On the other hand, Ginsberg’s adoption of people like Smith might have been a reflection of his (Ginsberg’s) kindness and altruism.

The last quarter of *The Awakener* feels disappointing. The flesh-and-blood Kerouac—though not his work—is gone, and so is Ginsberg. Minor characters, such as Jan Kerouac and Gerald Nicosia, take over, and while it is useful to know more about them, they are less compelling than the major characters. Weaver also tries too hard to turn herself into a kind of representative figure. “I am like many of the so-called literate members of my generation,” she writes near the end of the memoir. “In a way, my journey is a microcosm of America’s” (209).

Maybe so, but her book does not support that claim or make a convincing argument to persuade a reader that it is true. *The Awakener* feels like writing by the numbers: predictable, and not spontaneous. Perhaps that is because she worked on the book for 19 years. A book that takes that long to write will probably not feel fresh and new – no matter how hard one tries.

In an email, I asked Weaver to comment on the length of time it took her to write *The Awakener*. In response, she explained that she originally conceptualized the idea of a book about Kerouac when she first met him in 1956—that is 53 years ago. But she did not begin to write seriously about Kerouac until the 1990s. “The Kerouac file sat on my computer for years pending the courage to complete,” Weaver explained. She went on to provide a long list of reasons why her writing dragged on for decades: “Residual anger at Jack, perfectionism, fear of hurting people’s feelings, fear of failure, fear of success, innumerable false starts, genre confusion (is this an autobiography or a memoir?), and just plain laziness: all these have exerted the necessary pressure to keep this story from being told. I had to lose my innocence of death. I had to discover Jack as a writer. I had to read all of his books. I had to read him aloud! And maybe I had to become a Buddhist, maybe I had to develop a little more patience and compassion before I could find my way to the final structure with something approaching clarity.”

All of the memoirs by the women of the Beat Generation—including Weaver’s— add a vital piece to the portrait of the era, and to the people who helped to create it. Other women, such as Joanna McClure, might write their accounts, adding to what Nancy Grace has insightfully described as “a taxonomy of female memoirs from and about the Beat period.” But the women who could have, or might have told us volumes about the Beats never did and never will write their stories. The mothers—Naomi Ginsberg, who inspired *Kaddish*, and Gabrielle Kerouac, known as “*Memere*”—surely had wonderful tales they might have told. It is too bad they never had the opportunity to tell them, and it

is too bad that their sons didn't encourage them to write.

(I want to thank Nancy Grace for her illuminating comment to me in an email about the "taxonomy of female memoir.")

Works Cited

Weaver, Helen. E-mail to Jonah Raskin. "My question." 31 July 2009.