

Kerouac's Crooked Road: The Development of a Fiction (revised)

by Tim Hunt

Foreword by Ann Charters and a New Preface.

Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

\$29.95; paperback

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I take the word “crooked” – which occupies a pivotal place in the book under review - to mean several different things: 1. A bend or curve; 2. A fraud or hoax and 3.) A deformity. In *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, which has just been reissued in paperback with a foreword by Ann Charters, Tim Hunt uses the word in all three ways, though mostly the first two. The process of creating *On the Road* didn't proceed in a linear fashion, but rather in twists and turns, Hunt explains. Moreover, Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, who was a kind of co-conspirator, made fraudulent claims and issued fictions about the composition of *On the Road*, leaving readers with the erroneous impression that it was wildly and spontaneously created once and forever in three weeks. Hunt makes it clear that that fiction was far from the truth. He also suggests that *On the Road* was deformed and “crooked” in a third sense of the word. This last “deformed” means that it veers from the artistic and literary *shape* that would have lifted it above ordinariness and made it into an extraordinary major work of innovative fiction.

Kerouac's Crooked Road was a book full of surprises and shocks in 1981 when it was first published and then again in 1996 when it was reissued. It has been around for a while, and it keeps coming back, which says a lot for its strengths as literary criticism. Indeed, it's clearly written, makes strong emphatic statements, and the author's intriguing views come across with vitality. Hunt uses biographical information when it makes sense to do so to illuminate texts. He isn't against biographical approaches to literature, but he wisely didn't allow himself to be mired in facts and minutia about Kerouac's life. He was wise enough to steer away from the anecdotal and to follow themes and ideas as befitting a scholar who was then immersed in the work of the seminal French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Probably the most surprising comment that Hunt makes is that despite the recognition it has received and its popularity, *On the Road* is “not a good indication of Kerouac's achievement” (77). Hunt believes that *The Subterraneans*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Visions of Cody* are “better books” than *On the Road* (252). Perhaps they are better. Perhaps also not better by any objective standards but in Hunt's view.

I admire the novels he touts. I like the stream of consciousness writing in *Visions of Cody*, *Visions of Gerard* and *Doctor Sax*. I like the way Kerouac makes use of the dash, one of his favorite punctuation marks, as when he writes in *Visions of Gerard*, “Lay me down in sweet India or old Tahiti, I don't want to be buried in their cemetery – in fact, cremate me and deliver me to *les Indes*.” (23 *Portable Jack Kerouac*). But in those books I feel as though I'm reading an author who studied James Joyce and Thomas Wolfe and was trying to imitate them, and so at times they feel too cute and self-conscious. So I am

persuaded by Hunt that *On the Road* is a “traditional novel,” not an experimental work and certainly not along the lines of Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and other modernists. In many ways – in terms of plot and the development of the main characters, Sal and Dean - it’s pre- and not postmodern.

But I’m not persuaded by Hunt that Kerouac is not at his best in *On the Road* and that *Visions of Cody* takes bigger aesthetic risks and is therefore a superior work. *On the Road*, in my estimation, is a good indication of Kerouac’s achievement. It shows that he was able to recreate the American road novel and the picaresque fiction, both of which had a long and honorable tradition by the time he got into the writing game. In *On the Road*, he places himself in a literary tradition that went back to Henry Fielding and his picaro hero, Tom Jones, and to Mark Twain and his good bad boy, Huckleberry Finn.

Kerouac paid homage to the road novel and at the same time he made something new for his own time and place – America after World War II. Let’s remember please, that in 1952 Ginsberg – then his literary agent – said that *On the Road* would and could never be published because it was about their own unknown small circles of friend, because it made use of their private mythology, and because there was a lot of sex talk. To fuse all those disparate elements in one poetic book, as Kerouac did, took real genius, and readers have responded to that genius for more than 50 years. Let me please quote from the last part of the last sentence of *On the Road*: “the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty; I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (309-310 Penguin edition). This is as fine as any writing Kerouac ever did.

Hunt goes over *On the Road* with a fine literary critical tooth and comb. He focuses his attention and his keen critical intelligence on that novel from half-a-dozen or so different directions: its relationship to other works of American literature such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*; its position in Kerouac’s overall body of work; and the way that the book reflects and illuminates Kerouac’s theories about writing. After reading Kerouac’s *Crooked Road* a lot of literary matters are straightened out. The word that appears repeatedly in this work is the word *complex*. Hunt uses it again and again when writing about Kerouac and his work, and he does make a reader appreciate the complexities of *On the Road* and its author. Kerouac himself was “crooked” in the sense that he wasn’t a simple or simplistic human being. His work was “crooked” in the sense that it was nuanced.

Hunt offers long quotations from Kerouac’s texts, which are helpful when he looks closely at texts and discusses contexts. The quotations Hunt offers are embedded in his text, and the reader does not have to search in Kerouac’s books for the relevant passages. Still, the quotations go on and on, sometimes taking up whole pages or half pages. Perhaps it’s a matter of taste, but I would suggest that Hunt would have had a tighter and more pointed book with shorter, pithier quotations.

In the new preface to the 2010 edition Hunt says that in 1981 when his book first came out Kerouac was “still a suspect figure” and that he “seemed fated to be remembered only for his connection to Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.” (xiii) Hunt does not say which writers and critics found Kerouac to be suspicious and one could argue that by 1981 Kerouac’s reputation was already well established as a writer and that he was widely appreciated by young readers who devoured *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*, and took them to be clarion calls that sent them out and about to explore the world and enjoy their own adventures. Truman Capote made stupid comments, but his were hardly the loudest or the most persuasive. *The New York Times* certainly praised Kerouac from the start and so did Ann Charters. If a handful of critics like Capote and Norman Podhoretz heaped scorn on him, many others lauded him and paid homage to his work.

Hunt certainly achieved a great deal in *Kerouac’s Crooked Road*, as Ann Charters observes in her Foreword, without access to all the papers in the Berg Collection. He deserves recognition and commendation for his attention to small details and for the bigness of his vision. After his groundbreaking work first appeared, other scholars have also looked at the genesis and the evolution of *On the Road*. Hunt is generous enough to tip his own scholarly hat to them in the preface to the new edition. In fact, he directs the attention of everyone who studies *On the Road* to Howard Cunnell’s introductory essay to *On the Road: The Original Scroll* and Matt Theado’s “Revisions of Kerouac: The Long Strange Trip of the *On the Road* Typescripts” in *What’s Your Road, Man?*

Now, someone – a young or an old scholar, male or female, American or Iranian – someone must go quickly please to the Berg and explore all the notes, manuscripts, and typescripts and provide readers with a full up-to-date report. I, for one, haven’t had enough. I want to know more about how, where, when, and why *On the Road* came to be born. Then, it seems to me, Kerouac’s road will look even crooker than it did to Tim Hunt when he embarked on his scholarly journey to learn the truth about spontaneous prose, sketching, and wild form that, alas, scholars and students alike today still take at face value and as the absolute gospel truth.

Works Cited

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