

*Jan Kerouac: A Life in Memory.*

Gerald Nicosia, Editor.

Noodlebrain Press, Corete Madera, California, 2009

\$12.95 paperback

Reviewed by Marc Olmsted

This new collection of memories asks us to reinvestigate Jan Kerouac the writer. It also seems intended to perhaps engender new interest in the posthumous publication of her third novel, *Parrot Fever*. Editor Gerald Nicosia, who served as the literary executor of her estate for three years (13), includes a detailed history and analysis of the novel as one of his two contributions to *A Life*. But it's David Meltzer who sums the purpose most eloquently in his back cover endorsement: "Compiled by ...Gerry Nicosia, it gathers a diverse choir of voices, all...celebrating her presence in their lives."

The format of the volume is largely a collection of personal reflections on Jan that, title of the book aside, do not reach very far back in her life. There are no reminiscences from anyone who has not met Jan as an adult. Aram Saroyan discusses Jan with Allen Ginsberg at a book signing. Brenda Knight talks about their astrological chart connections, Jan's last phone calls to her, and Jan's writing style as "neopsychodelic" (108). John Allen Cassady, Neal Cassady's son, spontaneously asked her to marry him when they met for the first time – which she disdained. When they met again, she was sick and ravaged – without memory of the proposal but certain she would have taken him up on it. Her sheer determination to complete *Parrot Fever* is recounted by Phil Cousineau who was editing it for Thunder's Mouth Press before they canceled the project. Among the other contributors is Jacques Kirouac, founding president of L'Association des Familles Kerouac. Everyone recalls, as Joanna McClure mentions in her own back cover endorsement, "...a child with beauty, humor, a love of words and an unbelievable love for life."

The real jewel of the collection is Nicosia's interview with Jan herself conducted in June 1979. Here we get insights into her childhood, her thoughts about her father, and her reactions to news of his death—as well as a vision of what Jan might have become as a writer. Her oral accounts are lively and reminiscent of her father's energy and sweetness as we know it from his work, interviews, recordings and the slight film that exists on him. "Because you can be just as happy in povery – you know?"(sic, 182), she said. She calls her father "re-famous" (178) — "Now he's gone and DIED without even asking my permission" (171).

There is also a startling collection of unpublished photos, including a frighteningly mature 13-year-old Jan at the time of her *Baby Driver* self-reported hooking and heroin addiction. Jan towards the end of her life aged as rapidly as her father in photos. Both were no longer movie stars, to be sure. But

photographs of Jan as a child are incandescent, and there are several of her as a young woman that beg for a screen test.

The book seems at times to ask readers to engage in Jan Kerouac and Nicosia's legal perspective on the Kerouac estate, and a thread of accusations against what R.B. Morris calls "the Beat community" (128) can be discerned as well. For instance, Saroyan remembers Ginsberg telling him that he, Ginsberg, had researched the claims and found them unsubstantiated (103). Knight remembers Jan telling her that she "felt the most support" from William Burroughs and Gregory Corso, the only "'players' in the Beat scene" who had not "gone soft and bourgeois" (107). In her recollection, Mary Emmerick chides all of Jan's father's Beat friends for not telling her that she was entitled to royalties on her father's books (77). Who actually supported whom may always remain a vexed question, but Peter Hales of the Allen Ginsburg Trust and Bill Morgan, Ginsberg's biographer, staunchly maintain, as Morgan states in a 2009 e-mail, that "Allen actually did say he wanted to remain neutral on many occasions. . . . He did not want to take sides."

But Jan Kerouac and Gerald Nicosia's issues with the Kerouac estate have a historical precedent. In a final letter to his nephew Paul Blake, Jr., Kerouac said he was going to change his will and leave everything to Paul (*Selected Letters* 2, 480), but he died before he could. When Gabrielle Kerouac died in 1973, she left all of her son's assets to his third wife, Stella Sampas Kerouac. John Sampas has since controlled the estate, while Jan Kerouac and Nicosia continued to maintain that the will was fraudulent. The sad irony of all this is that only a few weeks ago, on July 24, a Florida judge ruled that Gabrielle Kerouac was physically unable to sign this contested will and that the signature appearing on the will dated February 13, 1973, is not hers. It will now probably never be certain who signed it instead (AP, 7/28/09).

*Jan Kerouac: A Life in Memory* is clearly not the critical biography still to be written about Jan Kerouac (and was not intended to be), but this account is worth reading because the little-known figure of Jan Kerouac is, in her own right, fascinating. However, readers who want to learn more about her will get a fuller portrait in her autobiographical novels. Her own reflections in *Baby Driver* and *Trainsong* are often darker and more disturbed than anyone can really celebrate. In particular, readers should check out *Trainsong*, which covers the second half of her life while she was healthy. It is now remaindered for one penny.

### **Works Cited**

Associated Press. 28 July 2009 "Fla. judge rules will on Kerouac's estate is fake."  
4 Aug. 2009. <<http://apnews1.iwon.com/article/20090728/D99NJB682.html>>.

Kerouac, Jack. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters: Volume 2: 1957-1969*. Anne Charters, Ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Morgan, Bill. E-mail to Marc Olmsted. 23 June 2009.