

Missing a Beat: The Rants and Regrets of Seymour Krim

Edited with an introduction by Mark Cohen

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When asked to write a book review of *Missing a Beat: The Rants and Regrets of Seymour Krim*, I resisted the temptation to say, “OK, but first can you tell me who’s this Krim?” Now, as I out my former ignorance, I must thank the editor for thinking of me. I’m a Seymour Krim convert, viewing him as an essential writer for rethinking the Beat Jewishness of Ginsberg specifically and 1950s Jewish American literary culture more generally. I also frankly love Krim for stating what I often have felt about being Jewish in America. In “On Being an Anglo,” for example, Krim speaks to my own experience of Jewish whiteness, a complex, changing, unwilling but inevitable form of Anglo-identity. Like Krim, I resist and attempt to deny, but cannot entirely escape whiteness, a phenomenon that Karen Brodtkin historicizes in *How Jews Became White Folks*, but that Krim explains more vividly, personally, and briefly. Krim wooed me when writing with humor, insight, and honesty about his “Anglo” categorization when in Taos, New Mexico, a categorization that “would have furrowed the brow of [his] innocent, trusting mother, whose maiden name was Ida Goldberg,” but won me when admitting that “it amuses [him] to be stuffed into the identity of the ruling American archetype that helped to make [his] life miserable as a kid” (91). As “On Being an Anglo” and the seventeen other at times brilliant, aggravating, funny, and beautiful essays included in *Missing a Beat* demonstrate, and as editor Mark Cohen points out, Krim had the rare ability to write with heat and humor, complexity and contradiction, about Jewishness, identity, the Beats, and America. Cohen has provided us with a collection that will hopefully encourage and enable scholars of the Beats and of Jewish American writers to begin the work of reexamining Seymour Krim in order to rethink his place among his fellow Beats and Jewish American writers.

Given his early attempt to be a New York Jewish intellectual, writing critical pieces on Dreiser, Hemingway, Whitman, and Wolfe in journals such as *Commentary*, *The Hudson Review*, and *Commonweal*, and his post-*On the Road* radical rejection of that earlier persona, Krim could be viewed as something of an anti-Lionel Trilling. In “What’s *This Cat’s* Story?” his 1961 essay tracing his transformation from mainstream literary intellectual to something new—a Beat New Journalist/Memoirist—Krim writes about his need to slough off his formal, affected, intellectual prose style, a style that required “put[ting] on Englishy airs, affect[ing] all sorts of impressive scholarship and social-register unnaturalness and in general contort[ing] ourselves into literary pretzels” (11). In the essay, Krim “mark[s] the end of a long shipwrecked journey” and “the beginning of a new one,” one where he would attempt to write in a manner “more open and explicitly creative,” to write “grapplings with life, desperate bids for beauty and truth and the slaking of personal need, hot mortal telegrams from writer to reader” (4). Even though Krim broke from his earlier authorial persona after reading Kerouac, becoming, as Cohen persuasively argues, a proto-New Journalist and a Beat essayist, he has unfortunately been largely ignored by Beat literary historians and scholars.

Missing a Beat editor Mark Cohen persuasively argues that it was Krim's turn to Jewish themes and topics and his writing non-fiction rather than the poetry or fiction most Beat scholars preferred that has caused Krim to be ignored or forgotten. While Cohen's theory is persuasive, I believe that other factors may have also played a role in Krim's disappearance from the Beat canon. As Cohen points out, Krim had a provocative, critical style that placed him both inside and outside the Beat movement. For example, in "Anti-Jazz" Krim offered an important critique of the Beat appropriation of black identities and black aesthetic practices. In doing so, Krim may have gained the praise of James Baldwin but alienated many Beats at the same time. In "The Insanity Bit," an important essay unfortunately not included in this collection, Krim offered a minor critique of Ginsberg's treatment of insanity in "Howl." It is just this sort of critical stance that might have made critics think of Krim as an outsider to the Beat movement. Krim's critical, provocative style may have also seemed at odds with a certain positivism or even optimism found in a great deal of Beat writing. And, as Cohen implies, Krim's urban New York, Jewish aesthetic may have made the fit with the Beats seem a tenuous one, given "the nature-oriented, Buddhist-flavored strain" of much of Beat writing (xxvi). However, it is Krim's very precarious fit with the other Beat writers, or as Cohen puts it the fact that Krim "won't be comfortable anywhere" (xxxix), that makes him such an interesting writer to reconsider alongside the more canonical Beats.

Cohen's introduction to the collection is brief, intelligent, and evocative, as are his useful introductions to the various Krim essays. The introduction's brevity seems a thoughtful choice, with Cohen apparently attempting to keep the focus on Krim's own writing. Despite the brevity of his introduction, Cohen introduces many ideas that could prove useful to scholars who might wish to mine Krim's work. For example, Cohen credits both the sweeping, messy, lively first person style of Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) for Krim's dramatic shift in style from traditional literary criticism to a Beat-inflected, memoir-journalism. Connecting Krim's writing simultaneously to the Beats and Jewish American novelists like Bellow and Roth seems both appropriate and promising for further study. Cohen also points to Krim's seeming contradictions (how he could reject the White Negro as an inauthentic appropriator in "Anti-Jazz" but later on explore identity as more fluid and performative in "On Being an Anglo," for example) as issues that bear further investigation. And Cohen does a fabulous job of choosing essays and writing an introduction that would help a scholar of Jewish American authors of the mid-century to consider Seymour Krim as an important forgotten writer of the era.

My criticisms of Cohen's introduction are minor indeed. I disagree, for example, with his argument concerning the nature of the differences between Krim's and Ginsberg's Jewish writing. Cohen contends that Krim viewed Jewish issues as living issues, whereas Ginsberg "wrote immigrant literature when he wrote on Jewish themes," writing on "a dead Jewish world" that was of limited interest to him: "For Ginsberg, Jewish concerns were not contemporary concerns. They were historical matters" (xxxiii-xxxiv). I would argue that Ginsberg poems such as "*Yiddische Kopf*," "Death & Fame," "Jaweh and Allah Battle," "Visiting Father and Friends," "After Whitman & Reznikoff," and "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgias)" demonstrate that Ginsberg in fact had a sometimes conflicted but living relationship to his own Jewishness. Nonetheless, Cohen's attempt to compare Krim and Ginsberg is worthy of further research and thought.

This leads me to a final minor complaint, but a good one to have: a number of important Krim essays and any example of his fiction are missing from the collection. This is undoubtedly an unavoidable problem, but I still wish Cohen could have found a way to include such essays as “The Insanity Bit,” “Ubiquitous Mailer vs. Monolithic Me,” “Should I Assume America Is Already Dead?” and “The Kerouac Legacy,” and perhaps one example of his old-style, formal, literary criticism essays such as “Walt Whitman at Home.” And given the fact that Krim worked on it for eight years and it is so difficult to access, I believe it would have been helpful to have included even an excerpt from Krim’s enormous unpublished novel, *Chaos*. Nonetheless, these are minor complaints compared to the major praise that Mark Cohen deserves for returning Seymour Krim to a wider reading audience, and for introducing and contextualizing Krim’s work in such a thoughtful, helpful manner.