

*You'll Be Okay: My Life with Jack Kerouac* by Edie Kerouac-Parker. City Lights Books, 2007. Reviewed by Nancy Grace, The College of Wooster.

Many features of City Lights' posthumously released memoir of Edie Kerouac-Parker sadden me. However, the fact that Tim Moran took it upon himself to craft a readable narrative from the voluminous fragments left him is not one of them. Nancy K. Miller, in a recent PMLA essay, wisely noted that all life writing is ultimately about relationships, a thesis supported by Moran's e-mail answer to my interview question about what inspired him to take over 2,200 pages, highlight and order significant passages, retype them, and blend them as a seamless narrative. "Working on Edie's book was, in way, a continuation of our friendship," he said. "Perhaps more accurately, another phase. Such relationships never end. When you are close to someone, the closeness doesn't end with their death: It continues always in your thoughts and memories and influences you as a person to no less a degree – probably a greater degree because often it is death and the loss of someone that brings you to realize just how much they meant. My loyalty to Edie grew from her unconditional love for me and her devotion to extracting from me the person I never saw."

Moran's sensitive and finely constructed introduction to *You'll Be Okay*, as well as the epilogue that illuminates Kerouac-Parker in the last sixties, establishes Moran as a legitimate co-author and underscores the reality that any portrait of self is ultimately a portrait of human connections. Jack Kerouac gets major billing, but it is Moran's gift to the woman who gave him shelter – the process of writing the book as a gesture of human faith and kindness – that may be the greatest contribution the memoir makes to Beat and American studies.

What does sadden me is the fact that editors to whom the manuscript was submitted couldn't envision as worthy the full story of Edie Kerouac-Parker. Even with Moran's assistance, she was clearly not a trained or talented writer, but the published version strongly suggests that her life, even just the Beat period, carried its own integrity. Kerouac-Parker maintained faith in the value of her story despite multiple rejections from publishers, according to Moran, but even he gave in to the publishing world's obsession with Kerouac to fulfill his promise to Edie.

Granted, the period that Moran has focused on has real historical value, particularly the narrative of the Lucien Carr killing of David Kammerer and Kerouac's involvement in it, as well as the descriptions of Jack and Edie's jail-house wedding and Moran's story of taking Edie and Henri Cru to Kerouac's funeral. But the text hints at so much more about the life of a young woman coming of age during World War II and the Beat fifties. For instance, Parker Kerouac's experiences working as a longshoreman beg elaboration and reflection, as do the back stories of her relationship with Joan Volmer Adams Burroughs, living with a mother who was a successful business woman, and her efforts to make a life for herself separate from Kerouac's. Kerouac-Parker's papers at UNC-Chapel Hill provide material with which to flesh out these stories, as Moran notes in my interview with him, so why couldn't a savvy editor see the value in a more complex female narrative?

Moran suggests that Kerouac-Parker was not a melancholy person – and she never seems down in *You'll Be Okay*, even when her fiancé is in jail, a characterization that fits her portrait in Kerouac's autobiographical fiction and later letters. But the absence of a

substantive narrative beyond Edie and Jack's divorce leaves the impression that Kerouac Parker's post-Beat years constituted a life misplaced. Moran acknowledges that this: "To an extent, Edie was living in the past. However, this did not comprise her sense of self worth. Edie was a caregiver whose gratification came from doing for others."

Despite Kerouac-Parker's mission to help others, the reality of living in a past strikes me as sad, especially when it seems to match the narrative that Moran and Parker Kerouac give us. From a well-to-do Michigan family, Edie Kerouac-Parker seems to have lots of fun living in Beat New York, but her ties to family money are omnipresent: Her grandmother who lives in the City frequently provides room and board for her, while Edie and her friends often use the grandmother's account to eat expensive meals at a local upscale restaurant. She play-acts finding an apartment since her grandmother's is always available, and even her longshoreman job coupled with WWII rationing emerge as metaphoric footnotes to footnotes.

So too does sexuality, which is left unexplored, either by Moran or Kerouac-Parker, as opposed to Beat women memoirists Joyce Johnson's, Hettie Jones, and Diane di Prima, who tackle the double standards of fifties sexuality head-on. By contrast, Kerouac-Parker is revealed as a young woman having a post-secondary fling and loving every minute of it. Such a life situates her as more of a Marjorie Morningstar from Mamaronek, than an authentic Beat libertine spirit. Consequently, the youthful Jack Kerouac's return to New York from their Grosse Point honeymoon without his bride, while albeit callous, emerges as logical, since Edie appears to be a happy-go-lucky young woman with the character to take some risks but without the gravitas to risk it all.

Perhaps we can credit much of this portraiture to Moran's operational definition of memoir as fundamentally historical narrative and his understanding of the duty of a memoirist to adhere as closely to the facts as possible. In *You'll Be Okay*, this approach produces a somewhat one-dimensional who-did-what-and-when-and-with-whom narrative, although that is not altogether bad. Granted, I would have preferred to read the story of Edie Parker, the woman, written in the style of Johnson's *Minor Characters* or even di Prima's modernist *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, rather than that of Edie Parker, Jack Kerouac's first wife, written in the traditional action-oriented style of a woman who achieves notoriety by marrying a famous man.

But what Moran has given us is, again, a gift of sorts, although this time not so much for Edie but to the readers of her story. As Nancy Miller reminds scholars, all those who write memoirs "need readers – particularly to share their loss. That invitation is what makes the reader want to take the autobiographer up on the pact." The pact with the reader is the unstated but deeply engrained belief that what a memoirist writes is true. Moran's *You'll Be Okay* wholeheartedly attempts to maintain that pact, giving us a sturdy account of several key years in the life of an important figure in the Beat Generation. After all, Edie Parker is responsible for bringing the major male players into close proximity. That story alone, coupled with a set of great vintage photographs, is worth our attention.