

Neal Cassady Collected Letters, 1944-1967

Introduction by Carolyn Cassady

Edited by Dave Moore.

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Reviewed by Jonah Raskin

He had as many different sides to him as his friends, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg, who transformed him from the flesh-and-blood Neal Cassady into “Dean Moriarity” in *On the Road* and “N.C. secret hero of these poems” in “Howl.” A hipster, hustler, husband, father, blue-collar worker, criminal and writer, too, Neal Cassady, the man, has always been hard to separate from Neal Cassady, the myth. William Burroughs, the third member of the Beat trinity, and probably the least sympathetic of all the Beats to Cassady, described him as “The Mover, compulsive, dedicated, ready to sacrifice family, friends, even his car to the necessity of moving from one place to another.” Ginsberg called him “the Adonis of Denver” and a kind of sex machine “who sweetened the snatches of a million girls.” Kerouac characterized him as “the holy con-man with the shining mind.” Are all those views true and accurate? Do they all evoke a side of the man who would also show up, after the peak of the Beat Generation, in yet another guise, in the company of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters of the 1960s? Who was Neal Cassady, really, and why should we care about him? These questions are prompted by *The Collected Letters of Neal Cassady*, edited by Dave Moore, that begin in 1944, when Neal was just 18 years old, and that end in 1967, the year before his death, in Mexico.

The letters provide an indelible self-portrait of Cassady. They reveal him in all his many, sometimes conflicting, identities and his shifting moods, and they shed valuable light on his complex relationships with Kerouac and Ginsberg. Cassady doggedly aimed to define himself, for himself, and not to give his friends free reign to define him. So, again and again in these pages, he fends off their advancements and encroachments, both personal and literary. In a

letter to Ginsberg on April 10, 1947, he insists, “I’m a simple, straight guy,” though the letters themselves show that Cassady was anything but simple and straight (36). He proclaims his love for Allen, and for men, as well as women, and he describes his abundant sexual experiences. Indeed, as one might expect, sex comes up often in the letters. “I love all – sex – yes all,” he writes exuberantly in a letter from September 1948 (104). Cassady usually uses slang and he’s often lewd, if not obscene, at least by the legal definitions of the times. He goes to houses of prostitution, has sex with prostitutes, and he provides graphic description of his sexual habits, and the sexual fantasies and habits of his sexual partners. Alfred Kinsey, the pioneering student of sexuality, and the author of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), would have found Cassady’s letters eye opening, since Cassady lived the life that Kinsey studied and wrote about.

The earliest letters in the book are from 1944, when Cassady was a teenager and a prisoner in the Colorado State Reformatory. The four-page chronology that precedes the letters provides useful information about Cassady’s career as a criminal, beginning in 1940, when he stole his first car, through his arrest in 1958 for possession of marijuana, when he was sentenced to five years in state prison. Some of the letters were written while he was under the influence of drugs, mostly marijuana; they are sometimes in a stream of consciousness style – Cassady aimed to write like James Joyce – and sometimes they are merely disjointed. In a letter to his third wife, Diana Hansen (she followed LuAnne Henderson and Carolyn Robinson), he describes his writing as “all a jumble of words” (220). But one can understand why Kerouac was impressed with his writing and wanted to write like him.

At his best, Cassady composed in a simple, straightforward prose that conveyed a sense of urgency and vitality, especially when he described women and cars, perhaps the two loves of his life. He also had remarkable moments of brilliant self-awareness and the ability to capture himself in words. In an October 1944 letter to Justin Brierly, a wealthy, influential Denver lawyer who took an avid interest in him

and his case, Cassady writes, “I must speak dogmatically, which, of course, means a certain degree of exaggeration & distortion of the true facts” (3). With that comment in mind, one reads the letters with an appreciation for Cassady’s penchant for aggrandizing and distorting – and for telling vivid tales, too.

The bulk of the letters - and the best of the letters - are from the years 1944-1954. From 1954 to the end of his life, Cassady wrote less and less frequently. Indeed, as Kerouac and Ginsberg published their work and became famous, he lost self-confidence and stopped writing for long periods of time. So, there are no letters at all from 1957, the all-important year of the “Howl” trial and the publication of *On the Road*, and no letters from 1962. There’s only one letter from 1964, and only one while he was incarcerated at San Quentin. “I’ve tried to write and I can’t,” he complained in April 1951 (288). Soon afterwards, he noted to Kerouac, “can’t write at all,” and in June 1953, he told Ginsberg, “You really are a poet” (377). What seems to have been left unsaid was that he felt he wasn’t really a poet or a novelist.

Dave Moore, the editor of the volume, provides useful notes at the bottom of the pages, as well as introductions to each section that offer helpful background information. The brief (2?--page) introduction to the volume itself by Carolyn Cassady raises more questions than it answers. “Who was Neal Cassady?” she asks at the start, and, though she offers some suggestions and hints – “many considered him a saint,” she writes – she never gets beyond clichés, as when she observes that he was a “sparkling diamond in the rough” (xv). What’s more troublesome is her observation that he “hit women,” that “they asked for it and that it was a sexual turn-on.” A whole essay might be written on that subject; it’s too big and complex to tackle in his brief review, but worth mentioning here.

The last letter, from November 15, 1967, less than three months before his death, to his last girlfriend, Janice Brown, who was nearly half his age, is quintessential Cassady. As always, he’s

eager to go. As always, he wants to be on the road, and as always he's seductive. "You're late," he writes. "Hurry up I can't wait much longer." And he adds, "You better ditch those gigolos & get home to daddy Neal."

In an endorsement for this book, Ann Charters, writes, "Here is the authentic 'hero' of the Beat generation." Indeed, the word "hero" must be put in quotation marks when it refers to Cassady. As a hero, he was as flawed as any, as these rich, memorable letters make abundantly clear.