

*I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*  
By Bill Morgan  
New York: Viking, 2006  
\$29.95

*A Life Lead Between the Lines*

“My mind is crazed by homosexuality,” wrote Allen Ginsberg in his journal in 1955. In the hands of a less adept biographer, Ginsberg’s characterization of himself might be misinterpreted as a statement of utter self-abnegation or, taken to the opposite extreme, as an ecstatic moment of self-revelation. But in Bill Morgan’s comprehensive *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*, the truth is somewhere in between: Morgan’s focus on the poet’s inner life explores how Ginsberg’s efforts to liberate sexual desire were inextricable from his earlier, often failed, efforts to liberate himself. Morgan’s biography usefully explores the collision between Ginsberg’s public life as bohemian icon and his private life as a poet assured of his renown, as he was made insecure by it.

Biographical criticism has produced uneven results in Beat Studies, with the romanticized details of Beat writers’ lives too easily interfering with discussions of textuality and craft in their work. Barry Miles’s and Michael Schumacher’s Ginsberg biographies (1989 and 1992, respectively) have served scholars well. However, recent accounts of Ginsberg’s life, in memoirs such as Trevor Carolan’s *Giving Up Poetry: With Allen Ginsberg at Hollyhock* (in 2001) and Sam Kashner’s *When I Was Cool: My Life at the Jack Kerouac School* (in 2004), offer little new

information or fresh perspectives. Both books repackage the poet's life into brush-with-frame narratives, a model for biography and memoir that serves few beyond the boundaries of fandom.

*I Celebrate Myself* is a comprehensive, definitive account of the poet's life that both casual readers and scholars will find a useful reference well into the future. Morgan is well known to scholars as the editor of the important collection, *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays of Allen Ginsberg, 1952-1995*, and for his unparalleled access to the poet in his two decades as Ginsberg's archivist. As Morgan notes in his foreword, his closeness to Ginsberg actually made the book more difficult to write. The temptation was great, he explains, to write a three-volume compendium. Thankfully, Morgan composes with a writer's eye for editing without sacrificing the archivist's eye for collection. He makes the correct decision to avoid writing a critical biography, which itself could have necessitated a three-volume set. Instead, when discussing events that provide the context for particular poems, he places the titles of the poems in the margins with references to page numbers from the recently published *Collected Poems, 1947-1997*. The result is a biography that can be read with almost seamless links back to Ginsberg's work itself. This unique approach deepens our understanding of the autobiographical nature of Ginsberg's work without disrupting the narrative momentum of the book.

For a poet such as Ginsberg who was driven by questions of politics, desire, and spirit, Morgan's narrowed emphasis on the poet's private life is valuable. For instance, *I Celebrate Myself* offers more detail than prior biographies on the role of the Ginsberg household in shaping the young poet, with extended discussion of how Ginsberg's early role as de facto caretaker of his mentally

ill mother, Naomi, affected him throughout his career. In its detailed discussions of the literary influence of his father, Louis Ginsberg (once known as “Paterson’s principal poet”), the book becomes a substantive companion volume to *Family Business: Selected Letters Between a Father and Son*, edited by Schumacher in 2001. Where *Family Business* established the depth and range of Louis and Allen’s influence on each other, Morgan’s book portrays the private conflicts that took place between the lines of the letters. Ginsberg eventually grew as a poet in a much different direction than his father had envisioned, as seen, too, in his introduction to Louis’s 1970 *Morning in Spring and Other Poems*, where Louis’s influence as a poet is characterized as outmoded in comparison to a more relevant, for Ginsberg, American and European avant-garde. Morgan’s narrative also reports in detail the extent to which William Carlos Williams himself became a rival, in Louis’s eyes, for the development of a new aesthetic that led eventually to “Howl.”

Ginsberg’s spiritual and poetic father-figure replacement for Louis and Williams was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher who was the primary force in the poet’s conversion to Buddhism and his creation of the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics and Naropa Institute (now Naropa University). Morgan’s treatment of Ginsberg’s Buddhism is of critical importance to readers interested in the final decades of Ginsberg’s life. One of the most important aspects of Ginsberg’s career is his Buddhist conversion in 1972, a significant influence on his work that often has been overlooked by critics who focus primarily on his two most influential poems, “Howl” and “Kaddish.” To be sure, the Miles and Schumacher biographers address Ginsberg’s Buddhism; however, Morgan’s biography extends this issue in

greater depth, with stellar discussion of Trungpa's complicated effects on Ginsberg's spiritual poetics, and of the stabilizing influence of his final teacher, Gehlek Rinpoche. Uniquely talented for speaking the language and customs of the 1960s and 1970s religious counterculture, Trungpa became one of the most important Buddhist teachers in the West. Still, his controversial and coercive extremes of "Crazy Wisdom" Buddhism were well documented, and Morgan does not shy away from these. Morgan's account explains how Trungpa's authoritarianism nearly brought down Naropa and created enormous obstacles for Ginsberg as a poet, and Buddhist, later in his career. Morgan's examination of the later influence of Gehlek Rinpoche after Trungpa's death demonstrates how Gehlek served as a corrective of sorts for the poet.

Morgan describes his book as a "love story"—more specifically, an account of Ginsberg's lifelong search for love. The conventional reception of Ginsberg's life story would suggest that this search ended in 1954, when he met Peter Orlovsky, with whom he would spend most of his adult life, Ginsberg often describing their relationship as one that resembled a marriage.

Although prior critics and biographers have noted that the relationship was far more complex than this public image of marriage would suggest—Orlovsky was primarily heterosexual, after all—Morgan provides important new detail on their often difficult partnership. The extent of their troubles, and its effect on Ginsberg's life and work, is dramatized by Morgan as part of a relationship that strained the limits of the homosocial ideal Ginsberg inherited from Whitman. As Ginsberg wrote in his journal during a particularly difficult period in 1985, his relationship with Orlovsky was "a mythic comradeship that had disappeared like a rainbow" (587).

Morgan's biography would be even stronger if it devoted as much time to Ginsberg's career from the 1970s through the 1990s as it does to his earlier career. As it stands, these three decades are only given as much space as the entire section on the 1950s. Such an approach reinforces the notion that Ginsberg's only important period was the one that produced "Howl" and "Kaddish," and works against Morgan's own statements that these latter decades are equally as important to Ginsberg's influence. Nevertheless, Morgan's book usefully disentangles the private life from the self-fashioned public persona, and goes to great lengths to correct prior misconceptions and apocrypha. His decision to emphasize Ginsberg's inner life is vital to understanding the motivations of a poet deeply concerned with his own reputation, and that of his fellow Beats, both inside and outside the literary establishment. As an important reference text for scholars, *I Celebrate Myself* can be read as both a compelling narrative and as a source for fresh perspectives on Ginsberg's life and work.