

The Letters of Allen Ginsberg.

Edited by Bill Morgan.

Cambridge, Massachusetts: DaCapo Press, 2008

\$30

What's surprising now after all these years is not that Allen Ginsberg asked friends and family to save the letters he wrote as a teenager in the 1940s but that they *actually* kept them for posterity. Long before he became famous, Ginsberg was convinced he was a genius and that he would be world-renowned. He said so, boldly, and lived up to his immodest claims for himself.

Some of his earliest letters are published in *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, edited by Bill Morgan, the workhorse of Beat studies, who has also edited Ginsberg's early journals and essays, and written a biography, too. No one has written more about Ginsberg than Morgan, and he seems to be the perfect editor for the letters. Unfortunately, many of Ginsberg's letters from the 1940s, when he was beginning to discover himself and his voice are not included. Those letters, many of them at the University of Texas at Austin, are beautiful written, and express Ginsberg's early angst. They show who he was before he wrote "Howl" and became famous, and how he forged his persona and discovered himself

Morgan has opted for a sampling of Ginsberg's letters from the 1940s to the 1990s, and although not every single year is represented, almost every year is, with special attention to particular years like 1956, when *Howl and Other Poems* was published, and 1962, when he lived in India. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg* shows the trajectory of the author's entire life, the evolution of his ideas, and his shifting relationships with friends and family members. Sometimes the letters are gossipy and caddy; it's remarkable how snide Ginsberg could be about his closest friends, when he wasn't writing directly to them.

Almost all of the letters are to men: Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neal Cassady, and, of course, Kerouac. What's striking is how male Ginsberg's universe was, how few women correspondents he had, and how little thought he gave to women and women's work.

There are, however, a few significant letters to women, including one to Carolyn Kizer, who was about to write about the San Francisco poetry scene for *The Nation*, much to Ginsberg's annoyance. "This is absolutely absurd," he wrote. "How can you know all the essential details?" But when he learned that Richard Eberhart was going to write about the San Francisco poetry scene he did everything in his power to help him, providing details about the composition of "Howl," and even serving as his guide. As a poet, teacher, and critic, Kizer was as eminently qualified to write about poetry in San Francisco as Eberhart, though as a woman she was unqualified in Ginsberg's eyes.

These letters show Ginsberg as peevish, opinionated, and bossy, as well as loyal to friends, and eager to promote their careers. In several of the letters, he writes as Kerouac's literary agent, though in the most significant of these letters he writes to Kerouac about why he can't find a publisher for *On the Road*. "I don't see how it will ever be published," he explained. "It's so personal, it's so full of sex language, so full of our local mythological references." Ironically, of course, he could have faulted "Howl" for precisely the same reasons. It, too, was intensely personal, marked by obscenities, and infused with references to local places.

Morgan provides a short prologue to the *Letters of Allen Ginsberg* in which he explains his strategy as editor. Of the more than 3,700 letters by Ginsberg that he gathered, he selected 165 that he calls "the very best." Unfortunately, he omitted Ginsberg's letters from the early

1940s to Kerouac, which are masterpieces in their own right. "I am alien to your natural grace," Ginsberg told Kerouac in a 1945 letter not in this collection. "You are an American more completely than I, more fully a child of nature and all that is of the grace of the earth. I am ugly and imperfect." [See Raskin's *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 63.]

Morgan says that Ginsberg's "letters are largely responses" to other people, but he seems to be misreading them. More than a dozen letters are addressed to newspapers and to political figures like President Dwight Eisenhower, and for the most part they are not responses. For instance, in 1953, on the eve of the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, convicted as Russian spies who stole the secret of the atom bomb, Ginsberg took it upon himself to write the White House to plea for clemency. "Rosenbergs are pathetic, government will sordid, execution obscene, America caught in crucifixion machine, only barbarians want them burned," he wrote. No one had solicited his opinion.

Ginsberg's letters to Kerouac and Burroughs aren't responses either. It was Ginsberg who pursued them more than they pursued him, though at times there was a degree of reciprocity. Moreover, for all his admiration for Kerouac, Ginsberg also resented him and felt unduly neglected by him. "He hasn't seen me through my eyes," he complained to Ferlinghetti. "He didn't treat me right."

More early letters, and fewer letters from the 1980s and 1990s, would have made for a more eloquent collection, though the book would not have been truly representative. Morgan seems to have done the best he could under the circumstances. Without a publisher willing to commit to an edition of all of Ginsberg's letters, he had no choice but to edit severely. Then, too, in order to market a collection of Ginsberg's letters, he had to have a sampling of letters.

The Letters of Allen Ginsberg is a wonderful resource for students and scholars. Here, he appears uncensored and unwrapped. Near the pinnacle of his fame, shortly after the publication of *Howl*, he and Peter Orlovsky took off their clothes in public. "I disrobed finally," Ginsberg wrote Ferlinghetti from Los Angeles, where he had undressed before an audience that included Anais Nin. In these candid letters, he's naked in print for all the world to see.