

Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters
Edited by Bill Morgan and David Stanford
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\$35

Reviewed by Jonah Raskin

Their correspondence lasted two decades, carried across continents, and endured deaths and divorces, wars and revolutions. But it got off to a shaky start. In his fourth letter to Allen Ginsberg, on September 6, 1945, Jack Kerouac took his new friend to task for not revealing more of himself. "I honestly wish that you had more essential character," he wrote. "But then, perhaps you have that and are afraid to show it" (25). Kerouac was right on target; he read Ginsberg's character and personality immediately. Ginsberg wrote back soon afterward, but it took him a long time before he addressed the issues that Kerouac raised. Throughout most of the letter, he talked about their mutual friends, such as William S. Burroughs, and his own reading in Rimbaud. Only at the very end did he stand up for himself and accuse Kerouac of being "condescending to him." (27) He added in a P.S. that "I'd like to save your letters."

Of course, he did save them, much as Kerouac saved Ginsberg's letters to him. Without their instinct to archive their correspondence this book of nearly 200 letters from 1944 to 1963 would not exist. In many of the letters, Kerouac tries to draw out Ginsberg and to persuade him to be more authentic and more candid than he was. Indeed, Kerouac is more consistently open about himself than Ginsberg is open about himself. Again and again, Kerouac reveals the deepest parts of himself, as in an April 1948 letter in which he writes, "It's terrible never to find a father in a world chock full of fathers of all sorts. Finally you find yourself as father, but then you never find a son to father." (33) Reading letters such as this one helps one to understand why Kerouac wanted to make *On the Road* a novel about the main character's search for his father. In addition to the archetypal theme of the son's search for the father, there was an intensely personal element.

Bill Morgan and David Stanford, the two editors of this hefty volume, sorted through about 300 letters before fixing on the published subset. They have written a very short introduction and the briefest of notes to some of the letters. That seems to be wise. A reader does not have to wade through a long critical essay about Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the Beats, and can instead go almost directly to the letters themselves. About a third have already been published in the two-volume, masterful collection of Kerouac's letters that Ann Charters edited. Scholars have had access to these letters in libraries for decades, and students and teachers who are familiar with the biographies of both Kerouac and Ginsberg will recognize many passages from them. So, *The Letters* isn't as startling as it might have been, but it is an essential book for

anyone and everyone who wants to understand the relationship between these two men who were at the heart of the Beat Generation.

Almost everyone who played a part in Ginsberg's and Kerouac's lives shows up in the letters, and so they provide a kind of group portrait. David Kammerer, Lucien Carr, Joan Adams, Hal Chase, and, of course, William Burroughs make appearances in the earliest letters. Before long, they're also comparing notes about Neal Cassady. In fact, Kerouac explains in a letter to Ginsberg on May 18, 1948, that he has written a letter of recommendation for Cassady who has applied for a job as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific railroad.

Reading these letters makes one appreciate how little time they actually spent together in the same places, and how long they stayed connected by writing to one another across great distances. Sometimes their letters are emotionally raw, as when Kerouac writes to Ginsberg on January 21, 1958, to say, "Don't forget I love you, but I'm afraid of you now, and for you." (390) One feels the depth of their emotional ties, and especially Ginsberg's neediness. In the last letter in this book from October 6, 1963, he asks Kerouac, "Will you love me ever?" (475).

For my money, this is the best single resource book about the Kerouac-Ginsberg connection. It takes one inside the tangled knot of their relationship, and it shows the people who gathered around them, their family members, friends and lovers. *The Letters* will aid any scholar of the Beats. It will also touch the hearts of everyone who has ever read *On the Road*, and "Howl" and who has been moved by those two classics. *The Letters* is a big book – more than 500 pages – and after reading it, one might well feel as though one has lived side-by-side with Kerouac and Ginsberg, coming to know them as authors and as friends.