

681 Lexington Avenue: A Beat Education in New York City 1947-1954 by Elizabeth Von Vogt
Wooster, Ohio: Ten O’Clock Press/Greater Midwest Publishing, 2008
\$16.9

This thoughtful memoir revisits the excitement of an impressionable youth in the New York City of John Clellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac, and Neal Cassady, and it is a welcome addition to literature of close observation of the early Beat Generation. And author Elizabeth Von Vogt wasn’t merely an opportunistic tourist, but the younger sister of John Clellon Holmes, who authored the Beat scene novel, *Go*, published in 1952. In 1947 she was living with her divorced, Communist-inclined mother in a small apartment at 681 Lexington Avenue between 56th and 57th streets, upstairs from the flat where John sweated over drafts of novels and hosted Beat impromptus—in this jazz-drenched and heady intellectual environment, young Liz Holmes absorbed the cadences and attitudes of the writers who significantly shaped her ideas about art and the world. Von Vogt’s book offers snapshots from the memory of a sensitive, imaginative young woman making her way to adulthood.

Most of the narrative takes place prior to the significant publication dates which mark the growing public awareness of a “Beat” generation, so Von Vogt is filling in the scenes and inspirations which contributed to her elder brother’s early work, as well as chronicling some of the initial urban comings-and-goings of Beat writers on the East Coast. In these remembered episodes, New York City itself emerges as a vivid major character: “New York was big, dark, motley, and cheap enough to furnish the messy subsoil of hipsters, cafeteria criminals, hangers-on, bop fanatics, and petty bohemians that it takes to seed the geniuses of art” (20). In some ways, her text is a both an homage to and a lament for a specific lost urban era, before any whiff of shiny gentrification obscured the “gross, feral, naked, mechanical heart of the city” (134) and the dreams of those without means who were nonetheless drawn to this gritty, busy place.

Von Vogt is a compelling wordsmith and storyteller, and her memoir of arriving at early adulthood displays the giddy strengths but also some of the “angsty” weaknesses of adolescent experience itself. Her inspired language forcefully recreates the vibrant emotional rollercoaster of actual coming of age, as when Jack and Neal roll into town and captivate her brother, while she “broods” into her beer with a hopeless crush on the “handsome” and “dark, shy ” Kerouac (31): “I could never catch up to Jack and John and that gang who were always up ahead teaching me and then shedding me like a useless coat at the change of season” (51). That raw teen uncertainty over how to proceed also curbs the shape of some of the chapters, as the author falls back on litanies of description which recur throughout the text; we return repeatedly to the apartment and its

“threadbare” cots, “lipsticked” cigarette butts piled in the glass ashtray, the dresser criss-crossed by racing roaches. We’re in the realm of the recurring jazz motif, but not quite. But this is a minor complaint, and overall Vogt essays some bold insights into a society reshaped by returning WWII vets, changing racial relations, and dissonant and challenging art forms.

Because of her youth and the tentativeness of some of her forays into the wild side, Von Vogt is also often the sole sober observer at some of the spontaneous eruptions of Beat activity in the post-WWII milieu, and for this scholars should be indebted to her recall. Neal is a “magician” at a party where everyone listens to Dizzy Gillespie records, and Allen Ginsberg hangs out a window in his underpants and screeches like an owl (37). She conveys the excitement of hearing a cutting-edge jazz 45 for the first time with John and Jack, the thrilling impact of returning vets on classroom dynamics in high school and college classrooms for a young woman, and an era when tenure was arguably more of a provident sinecure for even the most licentious and dipsomaniac professor. Education in her era is just as heady an experience as it is now, but she confronts the period’s resistances to the education of women and reminds us that “we few girls in the group” were often tough pioneers into fields of higher study (121).

As Nancy Grace’s artful introduction conveys, Von Vogt has written a memoir that is a unique blend of the literary and the historical. The book contains a useful author’s introduction, editor’s notes which clarify some of the more obscure historical contexts, and a glossary of individuals which reminds us of an age when thinkers and artists could be household names—if your house was located at 681 Lexington Avenue and your door was always open to Beat Generation writers you knew as friends.