

Kerouac's Nashua Connection by Stephen Edington. Nashua, NH: Transition Publishing, 2000.

\$12.95

The Beat Face of God: the Beat Generation Writers as Spirit Guides by Stephen Edington. Victoria BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2005.

\$18

Steve Edington is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua, New Hampshire. His vocation and his location position him advantageously for authoring this fine pair of books. In the first, he explores the roots of Jack Kerouac's forebears to discover their effects on Kerouac and his writing. In the second, Edington surveys the ongoing spiritual benefits the Beats share with today's readers.

Kerouac's Nashua Connection (2000) at first glance seems to be a sideshow, a bit of a tag-along that merely fills a niche in Kerouac studies. And why wouldn't a Nashua resident and Kerouac fan aim to develop his own town's stature in the Kerouac legend? I remember a long afternoon when I pored over books and maps trying to figure out whether Kerouac had ever passed through my own hometown in Virginia. But now that I have read Edington's study—and it is in every sense of the word a *study*—I marvel at the importance of his book and the ways that it will change how readers engage the world Kerouac creates (and recreates) in his books.

Edington faced a closed door when he first turned to the past. Even though Kerouac's father, brother, mother, and daughter were all buried in Nashua, Edington knew very little of his town's importance in the history of Kerouac's people. He began to remedy this lack in a simple manner: he went to the library and began leafing through the century-old city directories. This was his first step on a journey of several years' duration that led him to newspaper archives; vital records; birth, marriage, and burial records; and individual interviews. The task might prove daunting even to a seeker with Kerouac's vitality since the *Geneologies des Descendants de Maurice-Louis-Alexandre LeBrice de Keroack* (the first Kerouac to arrive in North America, Jack's great-times-five grandfather) contains over 600 pages with thousands of names of relatives. Even though Edington cast his reconnaissance only so far as to include first cousins, his mission was overwhelming. Yet what emerges in the pages of *Kerouac's Nashua Connection* is nothing less than a cogent, intelligent, fully fleshed report of Kerouac's more immediate forebears that helps explain Kerouac's books, his world view, and his life.

In so doing, Edington emends the work of previous biographers and even of Kerouac himself in this “prequel to the Legend of Duluoz,” as Edington dubs his cause. Edington traces the steps of Jean Baptiste Kerouac, who moved to from Canada to Nashua in 1890 with his wife, Clementine, and their nine children (three had already died, and three more would be born only to die in the next five years). The youngest child to survive was Leo, Jack’s father. Edington develops the concept of *La Survivance*, “a survival spirit mixed with a strong pride the French Canadians took, and continue to take, in their heritage, ancestry, and language” (27). Edington illustrates issues regarding immigration (particularly the situation of insular immigrants), the economy, language, the role of the church, and genealogy, revealing an appreciation for not only the themes of loss in Kerouac’s books but also the theme of redemption. Edington likewise maps out Jack’s mother’s genealogy. Not only does he convey numerous new facts about both Kerouac’s father’s and mother’s sides of the family, he places them in a useful context that will reward readers for their enhanced knowledge of Kerouac’s—and America’s—sources.

A few caveats: Edington does not explain the discrepancies in the spelling of the “Kerouac” name (for example, sisters born two years apart are “Kerouak” and “Kueroauc”); there is no development of citizenship issues (Leo was born in Canada, for example); there is no acknowledgment that on his father’s side Jack’s grandmother was a Bernier, as was his great-great-great-great grandmother; and while there are some fine photographs of significant buildings, there are none of people. On the other hand, Edington includes several essential lists, including the extended family at the time of Jack’s birth. This is immensely helpful in the second half of the book as Edington painstakingly notes the appearances—or lack thereof—in Kerouac’s books of the various family members and speculates on their fictionalized representations.

Edington continues his personal exploration on a broader canvass in his second book, *The Beat Face of God: The Beat Generation Writers as Spirit Guides*. This time Edington looks less to the people and dates of the past and more into his own soul. He casts himself as a fairly easy-going guy who simply is not cut out to take the risks that the Beat writers took with their own lives. Edington (like most of his readers, I presume) favors a decent home, steady employment, and regular hours. Nonetheless, throughout the book he emphasizes an undercurrent of tension that he feels between keeping stability and reasonableness in his life, and on the other hand chucking it all for a headlong dash on the road toward . . . something momentous and maybe enlightening. He knows by now who he is and who he’s not, yet he’s learned to value the “spiritual restlessness that gave birth to the Beats” and wonders “what good news might these blessed and holy spiritual misfits of their day have to offer us in our day” (9, 11). He humbly offers his particular viewpoint as a Unitarian minister whose growing-up years featured “duck and cover” drills, Bob Dylan songs as sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary, the advent of church folk music services, and his ongoing discovery of Kerouac’s restless frenetic traveling while he himself sat stationary reading *On the Road* (albeit at one point in a houseboat).

Taking his title from Kerouac's response to a television interviewer's question ("I'm waiting for God to show me his face"), Edington teases out the Beat messages that reached him as he came of age and that he hopes to share with today's readers. He moves comfortably and knowledgeably through a wealth of Beat literature. After a general overview in which he establishes the cultural atmosphere in which the Beats were born, he touchingly and convincingly reveals how the Beats came to be his "spirit guides." Each of thirteen chapters works as an independent exploration of topics ranging from Kerouac's religious quest, the role of madness, Burroughs and the "ugly muse," Buddhism, Beat women, and more. And in each chapter Edington delivers a comforting, entertaining sermon of sorts that pointedly connects his readers with the Beat ethos, illustrating his lessons with specific Beat works. He provides the strongest analysis of Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" that I have ever read, full of poignancy and insight. In *The Beat Face of God*, Edington compellingly makes the case that the Beat Generation was a spiritual movement, and he has written this message in a way that makes it just as accessible, appealing, and inspiring for newcomers to Beat literature as for long-time readers.