

Kerouac Ascending: Memorabilia of the Decade of On the Road
By Elbert Lenrow. Ed. Katherine H. Burkman.
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The Kerouac mystique—yearning soul, fast car, and apple pie with a toke on the side—still partly shapes our understanding of Kerouac as a writer. The publication of selections from his work journals and selections of his correspondence have offered important evidence for the need to move beyond the mystique, documenting the range of his literary engagements and his insightful, if at times idiosyncratic, critical reflections. Elbert Lenrow's *Kerouac Ascending: Memorabilia of the Decade of On the Road* offers additional evidence and should be read by anyone interested in understanding Kerouac's initial turn—as he was completing *The Town and the City* and seeking a publisher for it—toward what would become *On the Road*.

In *Kerouac Ascending*, Lenrow collects materials from his friendships with Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, then stitches them together with passages of memoir and commentary. Lenrow's own commentary details his friendship with Kerouac (primarily) and Ginsberg (secondarily), and it suggests he was a thoughtful, sympathetic onlooker to the Beat scene. The documents include several academic essays Kerouac wrote while he was a student in Lenrow's class on the 20th century American novel at the New School for Social Research while collecting G.I. Bill benefits, snippets of poetry, and letters from both Kerouac and Ginsberg in which they reflect on their work and their contemporaries. The letters also show that both Kerouac and Ginsberg appreciated Lenrow for his interest in them, valued his encouragement, and respected his knowledge of literature and music.

The heart of this slender book is the 32 pages that comprise Part I, covering the period 1948-1951, and the heart of the heart are the two essays, “Dreiser and Lewis: Two Visions of American Life” and “The Minimization of Thomas Wolfe in His Own Time,” which Kerouac wrote for Lenrow’s class.¹ In them, Kerouac is not simply offering an analysis of the writers but using them as an occasion to probe his sense of the American tradition and its implications for the direction he was trying to find for his own writing. If that, perhaps, compromises their success as conventional student papers, it also deepens their richness as documents for understanding his development as he sought to assess *The Town and the City* and to imagine his way forward into what would become *On the Road*. That Lenrow, who had known Wolfe, believed in Wolfe’s importance as a writer may have been a factor in Kerouac choosing to write about Wolfe in the course. At the very least, the essays show Kerouac seeking both to historicize and to theorize his commitment to an alternate canon of American fiction to the one he’d been offered at Columbia University, in which Henry James, not Dreiser, initiated the modern era and in which Wolfe was at best a marginal figure.

Kerouac Ascending is not a scholarly study in the usual sense. It might best be described as a brief memoir with embedded documents. However, Lenrow’s biographical reflections offer a glimpse of Kerouac and Ginsberg in the years before their major work and fame, and he shows them as not simply exuberant disrupters of the stale and staid but as serious (if unconventional) students of their cultural heritage. Kerouac and Ginsberg may have had little other than disdain for *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, but they cared—deeply and intelligently—about great

¹ This section of Lenrow’s memoir has been previously published as “Memoir: The Young Kerouac” in *Narrative* 2:1 (Jan. 1994): 65-86.—Ed.

literature, and Lenrow clearly recognized this and encouraged them in their independence. One senses that Kerouac especially valued Lenrow, who was able from the beginning of their relationship to see beneath Kerouac's pose as working class lout to his genuine literary talent and perceptiveness.

In addition to Lenrow's commentary and the Kerouac and Ginsberg documents, *Kerouac Ascending* includes an Introduction by Howard Cunnell, in which he provides background on the New School, offers a narrative of Kerouac's time as a student there, and places Kerouac's work with Lenrow in the context of the fictional projects he was trying to develop at the time.

Kerouac Ascending also includes a Preface by Katherine H. Burkman, Lenrow's cousin, who prepared the materials for publication, and "Remembering Elbert and 'The Beats,'" by Barbara Philips, Lenrow's niece, and these pieces offer an overview of Lenrow's own career, including his many years teaching at the Fieldstone School in New York, an elite private school where he headed the English Department.

Kerouac Ascending will not radically change our understanding of Kerouac's development as a writer, but it does fill in gaps that we did not, by and large, recognize were there, and in doing so, it helps document that Kerouac's achievements as a writer were only partly a matter of fast typing and faster cars. And while Elbert Lenrow has been only a minor footnote in some studies of Kerouac and a complete absence in others, *Kerouac Ascending* shows that this lack of attention has been our loss. Lenrow was not a novelist or poet fighting to pry academe's fingers from literature's throat and free it from Eisenhowerian containment. He was not a charismatic misfit blazing new modes of behavior. But he was a sympathetic, insightful witness. And he

was a generous spirit, whose recognition and support mattered, especially, to Kerouac at a crucial juncture in his development.