

*Neal Cassady—The Fast Life of a Beat Hero*  
by David Sandison and Graham Vickers  
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### Oh Life, Who Is That?

If you are already familiar with the broad outlines of Neal Cassady's life, you probably will not learn anything startlingly new by reading *The Fast Life of a Beat Hero*. You will, however, get more of the details filled in or see more of the flesh on the skeleton. The authors seek to demythologize the Cassady legend, beginning in the opening chapter by pointing out that while Cassady was born in Salt Lake City on February 8, 1926, it was not while his parents were passing through in a truck. This is a motif that appears at various places throughout the book, with the authors taking what is generally regarded as the "received truth" about Cassady's life and then sorting out what is fact and what is legend.

The first half of the book is devoted to the first twenty years of Cassady's life. What emerges here is the dichotomy that Cassady lived with and struggled with his entire life: An outlaw/survivor mentality and way of living, on the one hand; coupled with a craving for respectability, wisdom, spiritual peace, and acceptance on the other hand. It was this latter set of needs and aspirations that drew him into his marriage to Carolyn Robinson. Indeed it is the Cassady dichotomies that are chronicled throughout the book: A sexual appetite and a spiritual hunger of similar magnitudes. We get both the self-assured con man and the self-doubting self-loather, although the authors could have probed more deeply into these splits.

Cassady's relationship with Jack Kerouac, in both its hot and cool times, is also given considerable play. While the bond between the two of them was real and unmistakable, and is well documented in this book, we also see how each used the other at various times.

Short shrift is given to the last eight years of Cassady's life. We get a very quick and cursory treatment of the Ken Kesey-Merry Pranksters-Jerry Garcia-Grateful Dead-Anne Murphy phase of his life. The information offered is good and reliable, but many readers may wish for a more thorough treatment of Cassady's tragic decline. The book is a little lopsided in this regard. This imbalance may be the result of the fact that the book was originally David Sandison's project, with Vickers playing a supportive role in gathering the data, as the introduction points out. When Sandison died unexpectedly in 2004, following what was supposed to have been non-life threatening surgery, Vickers took up the

project and saw it to completion.

The authors also become a little careless on occasion when they move outside the Cassady story itself. For example, they have Kerouac not speaking English until he is in his early teens, when most accounts have him bi-lingual by the age of six.

The authors acknowledge direct assistance from three Cassady off-spring—Cathy, Jami, and John Allen, as well as Carolyn Cassady—and interviews with Anne Marie (Murphy) Maxwell and Leon Tabory, who served as prison psychologist when Cassady was incarcerated in San Quentin; he was to become a friend of the Cassady family. They draw upon Al Hinkle's memory for a number of their accounts of Cassady's Denver days as well as the San Francisco, San Jose, and Los Gatos years. Absent from the acknowledgments is LuAnne Henderson, who now uses another last name. She is known to generally keep a low profile, but it is too bad that the authors apparently could not persuade her to participate in the project.

In both the acknowledgments and the epilogue, Graham Vickers is effusive in his thanks to Carolyn Cassady for her assistance and cooperation. There is no question that she is extremely important as a source of information about her husband, and his story cannot be told adequately or accurately apart from knowledge of her story about their years together. At the same time, it must be noted that Carolyn Cassady is heavily invested, emotionally and otherwise, in seeing that Neal's story is told "right," which in this case means the way she remembers it. Her version and interpretation of many events in Cassady's life must be accorded considerable respect. However, the challenge for any biographer, researcher, or commentator is to determine to what extent they should be taken as gospel. All in all, Sandison and Vickers manage to meet this challenge. And to both Vickers' and Carolyn Cassady's credit, her acknowledgment that "I find I am as guilty as anyone else of promoting myths about him (Neal)" is printed in the epilogue.

This review's title is the question Kerouac asks about Cassady in *Visions of Cody*: "Have you ever seen anyone like Cody Pomeray? . . . Oh life, who is that?" Of the many and varied attempts to answer the question over the years since Cassady's death, Vickers and Sandison have given it one of the best efforts yet. So, from Beat scholars to those having little more than a casual interest in the Beats, this book is a must read, given the few caveats mentioned in this review. My hope is that this book will encourage and inspire others to continue probing the life of one of the more enigmatic figures in late twentieth-century American Literature and culture. Cassady's son John Allen is writing his own memoir of his early life with, and reflections about, his father. With all the layers and levels of interpretation that can be taken, when it comes to the life of Neal Cassady, there

remains much to be explored.