

An American Quest
Robert F. Barsky

A Review of Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

Other new books mentioned in this review:

Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Twenty Years with Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsberg*, NY, Penguin, 2005 (reissue edition).

Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, University of Mississippi Press, 2005.

Neil Heims and Leslie Newman, *Allen Ginsberg*, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publications, 2005.

William Lawlor, ed. *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons and Impact*, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2005.

This year has already been witness to an array of new books about the Beat Generation, a continuation of a resurgence of interest which has produced over the past five years alone roughly 80 new or newly-released books about the “holy barbarians,” this beat group so aptly described by Lawrence Lipton in his 1959 book by the same name. I like to think, pace Paul Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd*, that this trend reflects the rebellion of the many, sickened by the few, and that the spirit encompassed in the likes of Carolyn Cassady, Diane DePrima, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs or Anne Waldman, to name but a handful, speaks to that deeper sentiment of irreverence and holiness so profoundly repressed by the blue blazered, red-tied, grey-trousered, pentagon types who so dominate official airways and who are so (overtly at least) lacking in interest in what is really “holy,” rather than what sells to the terrorist, drug and abortion-crazed voting mass. Among the works that have appeared in the first few months of 2005, we find the reissue of Carolyn Cassady’s 1990 memoir that described the beat world as she experienced it in her fifteen year marriage to Neal Cassady, which was punctuated by his infidelities with, among others, Allen Ginsberg, as well as her own affair with Jack Kerouac. Kevin J. Hayes (ed.) compiles conversations recorded with Kerouac from 1958-1969, including the often reproduced texts of interviews recorded in the *Paris Review* and the *Village Voice*. And, in a significant new contribution to the corpus of works on the Beats, William Lawlor, the author of *The Beat Generation*, has edited an encyclopedic work on the Beats which includes 250 entries relating to the beat culture’s lifestyle, icons and impact.

Jonah Raskin’s work, which focuses upon Allen Ginsberg and, moreover, on the making of a poet through the writing and diffusion of “Howl,” is a very welcome addition to this beat corpus. His engaging writing is reminiscent of the older generation of beat commentators, such as Lawrence Lipton or even Paul Goodman; in that he defies current trends in literary scholarship that can sometimes render the “stuff of life” in obtuse theoretical categories. Here we have Allen Ginsberg portrayed in ways heretofore un- or partially-explored; this is Ginsberg as the son of the poet Louis Ginsberg, Ginsberg as patient undergoing analysis, Ginsberg as self-promoting advertising guru of his own -- in many ways self-fashioned and endlessly-promoted -- image. We realize in reading Raskin’s engaging prose that the Allen Ginsberg we saw portrayed in the seminal films “Pull My Daisy” or “Fried Shoes and Cooked Diamonds,” or as one of those interviewed in the wonderful collection of *Beat Writers at Work*, or as the author of well-diffused journals and letters, including the excellent *Indian Journals* is a kind of end-product, Ginsberg on Ginsberg (or Burroughs on Ginsberg, or Kerouac on Ginsberg, etc.). What emerges from Raskin’s

book is a far more comprehensive vision of a child, a son, a husband, a lover, a patient, an advertising executive, a poet, a human being.

Surprisingly and remarkably prominent in this story is the figure of Louis Ginsberg, whom we'd met through the heart-wrenching "Father Death Blues", performed with such a remarkable degree of poise and pain in "Fried Shoes and Cooked Diamonds" that even a more Jonah Raskin-inspired savvy reader, who had learned about Ginsberg's ability to self-promote, nevertheless recognizes this poet of profundity. And by the time we've finished *American Scream*, Louis is much more than the "high school teacher" Allen had introduced to Jack Kerouac and their mutual friends at college in the 1940s. We learn that Allen anxiously sought out Louis' approval, if not advice, and we find Louis' own amazingly astute letter to Allen describing "Howl as "a hot geyser of emotion suddenly released in wild abandon from subterranean depths of your being." Raskin is there to show that we shouldn't have been surprised, that "no one knew Allen's 'subterranean depths' better than Louis – not even William Burroughs, who became his surrogate father and self-appointed Reichian analyst, or any of his other surrogate fathers, from Lionel Trilling to William Carlos Williams" (27). Indeed, it may come as a surprise to those of us who imagine Allen inventing his voice against a backdrop of quite a different set of poetic conventions that "no one scrutinized Allen's poetry more thoroughly than Louis" and, moreover, that Allen's "Howl," like virtually everything else he wrote, was one part masturbation, sex and drug-induced passion, and at least nine parts reflection, research and revision. Allen really did need to "make a home for himself" in a family where poetry was the "family business" (39), and he did it by howling out a "call to arms" against the "American poetry establishment" defined at Vanderbilt and Yale by Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and the influence of the New Critics (44).

One way to define oneself against a stuffy establishment is to move over to some borderline, in Ginsberg's case criminal and insane, which is a story that's often told, even from the horse's own mouth. Raskin brings in some expert advice on the matter, with reference to a letter to Wilhelm Reich (about which much more detail would have been welcome) and, moreover, to Ginsberg's one dollar psychiatric sessions with Dr. Philip Hicks, at Langley Porter in San Francisco. Ginsberg had acknowledged the role that Hicks played for Ginsberg, but until *American Scream* we have not had Hicks's own sense of this help, or details about where the influence played out. Raskin writes: "Ginsberg had always insisted that he never received help from anyone while writing the first draft of *Howl*," a long-held idea that is in fact contradicted by Hicks (xix). Further confirmation of several insights about Ginsberg's performative and self-promotional sides is summarized in a single statement by Hicks in which he described a "prickly and snotty" Allen Ginsberg who at the beginning of the treatments was "clean shaven" and wore a Brooks Brothers suit. "Over the next year or so I saw his transformation to the wild poet of North Beach," recalls Hicks, suggesting to Raskin that the psychiatrist "played a pivotal role in Ginsberg's own metamorphosis and also in the evolution and development of *Howl* (153).

Raskin, who clearly appreciates his subject and the works he produced, nevertheless manages to remind the faithful that Ginsberg could really be an asshole, as in his effort to "play the role of the average American male" by "dressing the part" (61) and by "becoming sexist and racist". The examples of Ginsberg's denigrating talk is painful to read, given his work and his legacy, but it is explained by Raskin's sense that despite Ginsberg's denunciation of segregation and racism, he was of several minds about, for example, blacks, whom he variously described as "romantic savages, downtrodden workers, and the coolest of Americans" (169). Ginsberg was also calculating his own assent from early on; indeed,

“by the time he was fifteen, Allen Ginsberg believed that he was a literary genius and that one day he would become a famous writer” (40); indeed, by Raskin’s reading of “crowned with thorns in Galveston, nailed hand and foot in Los / Angeles, raised up to die in Denver,” and “resurrected in 1958” (from “Howl”), Ginsberg eventually sees himself as an “American Christ” (100).

Other areas touched described in *American Scream* which are likely to raise eyebrows even amongst those of us who have tried to find each word by and about Ginsberg include the depth of his resentment of the *Partisan Review* crowd, especially Lionel Trilling, Norman Podhoretz, and Mary McCarthy, whom he describes as “CIA-sponsored intellectuals” (xiii). We learn as well that Ginsberg’s incredible genius as a performer was carefully honed, and that he consciously developed that incredible tone, those dramatic and sometimes humorous pauses, and that remarkable cadence (172-3). And we discover that his lust for success led him to ask for reviews of his work, rearrange his books in bookstores, and generally work, for himself and also for his friends, as a kind of one-man marketing dynamo. Some thought that this was inappropriate behavior for a poet, but as we look back to this amazing *American Scream*, it’s hard not to be grateful to that overzealous customs agent who saw fit to seize “Howl,” to those who created firestorms of resistance and fear around the writings of Ginsberg and fellow travelers, and to a reading public who found, and still finds, remarkable resonance in these words, at once holy, at once carefully-crafted, which seem to open up whole new vistas for poetic experience in against an increasingly bland and militaristic group of talking and ruling heads.