



The Portable Beat Reader

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Beginning in the late 1940s, American literature discovered a four-letter word, and the word was "beat." Beat as in poverty and beatitude, ecstasy and exile. Beat was Jack Kerouac touring the American road in prose as fast and reckless as a V-8 Chevy. It was the junk-sick surrealism of William Burroughs, the wild, Whitmanesque poetry of Allen Ginsberg, and the lumberjack Zen of Gary Snyder. "The Portable Beat Reader" collects the most significant writing of these and fellow members (and spiritual descendants) of the Beat Generation, including Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Diane DiPrima, Bob Dylan, Leroi Jones, and Michael McClure. In poetry, fiction, essays, song lyrics, letters, and memoirs, it captures the triumphant rudeness, energy, and exhilaration of a movement that swept through American letters with hurricane force.

The Portable Beat Reader Details

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Devin Proctor says

Boo fucking hoo.

Beth says

I read about 1/2 of this book in November, while I was on my trip to Rome, and I really enjoyed it, but found some of the featured authors a bit plodding. And yet, I picked it up to fill in some gaps in my historical knowledge of the movements of that period and some history of the city I live in (San Francisco), and influences to my social circles and lifestyle. I had no idea how much of an influence this small group of notable "Beats" had on society and later generations.

I remember watching cartoons that featured Beatniks, and seeing Audrey Hepburn in Funny Face, as a caricature of a Beatnik (or Beat's girlfriend, as they were a male-dominant group, with women mostly in the side-lines). My sister, only 6 years my junior, had no knowledge of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco; Couldn't even recall having heard of Beatniks, Beats, Beat Poetry, many/any of the major authors/poets, or Beat *anything* when she moved to San Francisco! Shocking! Although in retrospect, my knowledge was hardly rich with understanding, even though I'd read some Burroughs, knew of Kerouac and On the Road, Ginsberg and Howl.

I appreciate this anthology because Ann Charters does a great job of positioning the works, the sentiments and feelings in relation to history. Coming from only a rudimentary knowledge of the era and the motivation of the Beats, it's helpful to have the stories and poems skillfully placed alongside the back-stories of the people involved and the times they lived in.

This book reminds me of the best parts of evaluating writing in a college classroom - an adept, knowledgeable guide can make a huge difference to understand, or better, *liking* a piece. While I may have been predisposed to liking Beat writing because of its influence to my life and culture, I very much believe Ann Charter's book has given me much deeper appreciation and stronger liking for the works I've read in this anthology so far.

Jay says

Useful for historical purposes.

Julia says

Marking this as read because half is more than enough.

Amy says

I read this book when I was 16, and by 17, I was off on an adventure that lasted until I was 35. I still, to this day, long for freedom and for the open road. Of a childish life of multiple romances and endless celebration from town to town, countryside to countryside. Thank you Ginsberg. Thank you Kerouac. Thank you Thank you, William S. Burroughs. Xoxo

Lola says

As a huge Kerouac fan, I've always been fascinated with the Beat Generation. I picked this up at an used bookstore on a whim, hoping to learn more about the writers who seemed to shape a generation in the way the Lost Generation did. What I really learned from The Portable Beat Reader is that I hate excerpts.

Ann Charter's Portable Beat Reader is extremely inclusive. She guides you through all the sections of the Beats Generation: Kerouac's group in New York, the San Francisco Poets, and the other groups that were inspired by the work these groups produced. Some of these writers (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Snyder) I had heard of before, but there were several new names to me. I enjoyed the Portable Beat Reader more as a reference book than as a reader. I underlined titles of books that interested me and starred poems I enjoyed. I will definitely come back to this collection when I want to find something from the Beats to fit my mood.

Reading all the way through this book (like I did) is completely unnecessary. Skim around and read what you like. Read the writers that are new to you, and mark things to read later or in whole. Recommended for anyone deeply interested in the Beat generation.

Ann says

Poets, drug addicts, criminals, alcoholics, hedonists, ne'er-do-wells, agitators, college dropouts, social revolutionaries; the Beats were the voice of the Lost Generation born (mostly) between two world wars, looking for fresh artistic outlets and ideas away from those approved by contemporary academe. They found them.

Miguel Vega says

3.4 I liked most of the poets featured & added many great works to my TBR. The Beat Generation marked their presence with their difference into our great literary canon.

Blake says

Peace's Red Riding quarter jumps forward three years, this time following the screwed up lives of half-decent police officer Bob Fraser, and burned out journalist Jack Whitehead. Both are dangerously obsessed with Chapeltown prostitutes, and are sucked into an investigation into the Yorkshire Ripper's slaughter of these women. Both men are dangerously on the edge, and the plot follows the hollow, desperate plummet of their lives as events overwhelm them, and the extent of the corruption of West Yorkshire police force becomes clearer. Like 1974, this is brutal, compelling stuff, but not for the faint of heart, nor those enamoured with happy endings

Kmkoppy says

It took me a long time to get through this but it was an excellent review of the many beat poets and how they were all connected. I enjoyed their later works more than their early works because they seemed more experienced and wise about life. Maybe it's because I'm old now too. I gave it only 3 stars because beat composition is not my favorite - not because the book itself wasn't well done. The author did an excellent job of reviewing each writer - their history, works, etc - before each section.

brass says

I brought it with me to New York in 1994 to The Beat Writers' Conference @ NYU. I was still leaking breast milk. I touched knees with Allen Ginsberg while he rambled on and signed his name next to 'America'.

Fuck the Government. I am a romantic like that.

Christopher says

A beautiful, wide swath of Beat goodness. C'mon y'all, they only changed the world.

David says

there is nothing wrong with this book. it is comprehensive and compiled well. i should just remember that compilations of authors aren't my cup of tea. in theory they are a great idea. but in practice it just isn't enough to hold my attention for very long. just as i start to read something i truly enjoy, it ends and then starts something i don't like. but, it did give me some leads into who of The Beats i would like to read next.

Stuart says

The sea darkens
the voices of the wild ducks
are faintly white

Anton says

A necessity. Not a book you need to plow through in its entirety, but reassuring to have on the shelf, to dip into now and again to check one's cynicism, recalibrate the moral compass. However naive the Beats' idealism sometimes seems, and however unfortunately susceptible to caricature they've become in the popular imagination, they remain an essential component of American literature and culture. Whether their ethos is really livable, possible, or even desirable is beside the point: they continue to present a challenge to the imagination and the status quo and offer a refreshingly popular model of poetics.

Again, no need to sit down and read the whole thing. Some of the writers are better than others. Page through and use this book to find the ones you like and get a sense of the movement as a whole.

(And I'm tired of the criticism Kerouac et al are best served adolescent readers - this view too shall pass, and On the Road be read without apology for the masterwork of naked, flawed, lived, absurdist lyricism it is.)

Charlie says

Question: i just read about a reading list that Ginsberg provided Cassady to further his writing. Has anyone ever seen such a thing?

Maya Day says

you can't have a Beat reader, have a "San Francisco Renaissance" section and not have Kenneth Patchen =]

Mazsuria Razif says

*4.37

Simon Robs says

Ann Charters' assemblage of Beat/Gen. personalities and the best of their poetry/bop prosody is fine fettle casting an era of divergence from post-war/Cold War ennui and set the stage for 60's/70's upheaval war protest that split the country leading eventually to our present day polarization and identity politics quagmire. We learn that Beat lit was a lot more than just "Howl" and "On The Road" and "Naked Lunch" even if those remain the pillars of the so-called movement. Beyond the obvious "beats" aspect of rap & hip hop culture there seems to me verisimilar root parallels to Beat culture (there are some rather marked dissimilarities too - Beats are universally pacifists while Rap often glorifies violence) - that street level make it personal freedom to create and "represent" the everyman/woman experience of authenticity - Punk too. It's predominately oral/in-yer-face realities laced w/beats blown or laid down electronic to accompany lyrical rhyme/assonance

of street slang cool. Things cycle, what's good gets repurposed/shoved around, then/when re-found. It's all hood!

Donald says

A really nice sampling of “beat” literature! Sort of like a greatest hits compilation! Parts 1-3 were full of writings that I love, and that were wonderful to revisit! I especially enjoyed reading the "Joan Anderson" piece! Part 4 fell pretty flat for me, as did part 6 and the appendix. But Part 5 was my joy! The writings in it gave me the feeling of the people on the periphery of the Beats - the children, lovers, spouses, etc.! I really glorify and romanticize many of the Beat authors and literature, and this section grounded me a bit, showing some of the real consequences of that lifestyle and movement. Strong stuff. And strong book!
