

Kevin Starr

S.F. EXAMINER—Page 27

★ Thurs., Aug. 16, 1979

Walking the beat

A new San Franciscan, Dennis McNally, has just published a blockbuster of a biography of Jack Kerouac. It's called "Desolate Angel — Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation and America" (Random House, \$15).

Dennis McNally, who is around 30 and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts, is currently at work on a novel. If it is half as good as "Desolate Angel," it ought to be sensational.

He has written an action-and-anecdote-packed chronicle of the Beat Generation — Kerouac himself, but also such larger-than-life figures as poet Allen Ginsberg; novelist William Burroughs; reporter Lucien Carr; novelist John Clellon Holmes (his novel "Go" first announced the Beat scene); playwright Michael McClure, poet Gregory Corso; poet Gary Snyder; and, of course, the near-mythic Neal Cassady, whom Kerouac immortalized as Dean Moriarty in, "On the Road," the most lasting literary legacy — along with Ginsberg's poem "Howl" — of the Beat Generation.

I had no idea until reading McNally's book that the entire circle revolving around Kerouac and Ginsberg and Cassady was gay, or at least bisexual. Kerouac himself was bisexual. We already understand the Beat movement as a forerunner of the counter-culture of the 1960s. McNally's book, I believe, will go a long way towards establishing this movement as some sort of overture to the gay rights movement of the 1970s. As McNally develops it, so many of the protagonists of this earthshaking literary/social movement sustained at one time or another sexual connections with each other. Only Ginsberg came out of the closet; Kerouac never did. To the end of his life, moreover, (he died of complications following alcoholism in 1969), Kerouac maintained an Archie Bunker-like contempt for what he termed "the queers and the faggots." At the height of his railing, however, he solicited sex from Ginsberg. He also had a rather unsatisfactory one-night stand with Gore Vidal.

Sex, drugs and booze pervade this book like recurrent leitmotifs because these preoccupations pervaded the lives of the beats. Kerouac had to be hospitalized just after World War II because of his use of Benzadrine. He wrote most of his books on one drug or another, or after filling his stomach with booze — Jack Daniel's, white port and brandy being among his favorites. William Burroughs was on junk for a number of years and wrote about heroin addiction in his novel "Naked Lunch."

Neal Cassady had an affair with Allen Ginsberg. Jack Kerouac moved in with Neal and Carolyn Cassady, Carolyn playing wife to both of them. Burroughs, a homosexual, had erotic ambitions towards a number of the group.

I emphasize all of this, not to give a false impression of McNally's book. It is not a work of prurience or scandal-mongering. It is a serious, scholarly study, absolutely magnificent in its literary and socio-political judgments. McNally has a large theme in hand, one larger even than the life of Jack Kerouac.

It is this. The bohemianism of New York in the 1940s became the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the protest generation of the 1960s. Attitudes that began as revolutionary and disruptive are now mainstream Marin County. It took 30 years for this process of assimilation to occur. At each stage of development, mainstream America — in the form of the media — reached into the protest movement, decided what was usable, then proceeded to appropriate it. Attitudes towards drugs and sexuality, for instance, that were avant garde among Kerouac and his circle in the 1940s in New York are commonplace.

In this process of representative pilgrimage, Jack Kerouac used himself up. The establishment might in the long run have assimilated many of his attitudes and values; in the interim, however, he was excoriated by establishment critics as a literary freak. In this, he resembled another American writer who burnt himself out on booze, Edgar Allen Poe. In his effort to stay two decades ahead of his times, Jack Kerouac stoked his body with drugs and alcohol. Ironically, these abuses cost him exactly two decades of life. He died in his late 40s, after having lived a lifetime and a half.

He died bitter because his times had passed him by. America always gets the best of everyone. This process is ruthless, even brutal. But it goes on. Having taken from Kerouac what it wanted, America tucked him away into a lower-middle-class bungalow in St. Petersburg, Fla., parking him in front of a television set with a half-quart can of beer in his hand. Born to the working class, Kerouac raged against the long night of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie got hip — just a little bit, mind you — said, "Thanks, Jack," then proceeded to mock Kerouac for his working-class manners, his tenderly ardent Roman Catholicism, his belief in the essential goodness of ordinary people and, most of all, his belief that literature was something earned through experience and suffering and pain.