

After Re-reading *On the Road*

“But then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”

From *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac

Part of the wonderful run-on sentence quoted above was read in a Volvo television commercial a few years ago; however, the commercial doesn’t seem to be available anywhere at this time. Maybe it’s locked away in Gothenburg. When *On the Road* was first published in 1957, Truman Capote quipped that it was typing not writing. That “typing” still sells over fifty thousand copies a year.

I first read OTR in 1959. I was thirteen years old, and for a few months after reading it, I was a pretend Beatnik, a wannabe, a poseur. I slouched around with a paperback copy of *On the Road*, or Ferlingetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind*, or Allen Ginsburg’s *Howl and Other Poems* in the hip pocket of my jeans thinking I was way to cool to respond to my fellow students who delighted in calling me Maynard. There was a popular television program at that time titled *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. Dobie’s friend on the program was a beatnik character called Maynard G. Krebs. Maynard was played by Bob Denver who was later the lead, and similar, character in television’s *Gilligan’s Island*.

When Michelle and I moved to Denver a few months ago, I re-read *On the Road* and was amazed to discover that I remembered certain passages. Since being in Denver, we have gone to Larimer Street and other locations mentioned in the book, “This is the very sidewalk that Neal Cassidy and Jack Kerouac walked down.” There are still a couple of blocks of Larimer Street that have not been re-developed and look like they did when the Beats were hanging out there; like skid row.

Although not mentioned in OTR, My Brothers Bar is an establishment that Neal and Jack frequented in Denver, it was called Paul’s Place at that time, and it is now the oldest bar in Denver. Michelle and I went there this afternoon, it was kind of hard to find since it doesn’t have a sign! While looking for it we passed some Occupy Denver street corner demonstrators waving signs. As Michelle slowed the Jeep to turn the corner, I threw a handful of change at their feet to let them know that I thought they were just homeless people.

We eventually found the bar, went in and had a couple of brews. Physically the place has character; red brick walls, high ceilings, and hard wood floors. Take into consideration that people come from all over the world to go to the bar where Jack Kerouac and Neil Cassidy use to hang out. Neil's brother was the bartender there at one time. The place is historic, so I was expecting a shrine to the Beats like The Beat Museum in San Francisco. I expected jazz, I thought the walls would be covered with posters of Jack, Neil and other Beat luminaries with framed news articles about them and copies of their books, and beret-wearing, silver-haired hipsters, reciting poetry through a cloud of suspicious smelling smoke, and... Instead, classical music could barely be heard, and the walls were conservatively adorned with framed posters from the Denver Symphony.

Before we left, I visited the Men's Room and was glad to discover that it probably smells as bad today as it did when Jack last took a whiz there.

Reading OTR today it is surprising what a huge impact it once had. After reading it when first published, thousands of young men from across America left their homes and headed out for Denver, San Francisco, or New York City to become part of the Beat movement to be where the action was.

This book let America know there was an alternative to the boring, *Leave It to Beaver*, bologna and white bread, buttoned down life that dominated American culture. And that alternative was on the road.

OTR was a beacon lighting the way for kindred spirits who were searching for more; more life, more love, more experiences, more, more, more. Like Hemmingway's *The Sun Also Rises* for the generation before them, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe for the generation after them *On The Road* was a searchlight beaming across a sea of conformity. The Beats didn't change the world (for better or for worse) the way the Hippies did, but they did offer an alternative.

Next door to My Brother's Place is the REI flagship store with a climbing wall, bike path, snowshoe lessons, and... I bought a pullover that had a little tag saying the color of the pullover was "Baked Clay". I like that, "Baked Clay".