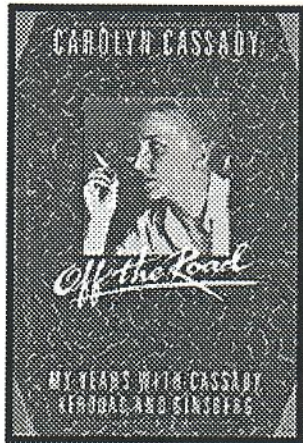


# AMERICAN MYTHS

## Carolyn Cassady - On Jack and Neal



Carolyn Robinson first met Neal Cassady in 1947 in Denver, Colorado, where she was getting her MA degree in Theater and Fine Arts at the University of Denver. Neal was then a self-taught intellectual and already a legendary ladies man who had grown up in Denver flophouses and pool halls. Early stages of his involvement with Carolyn were fictionalized in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* where Carolyn was called "Camille." She was called "Evelyn" in subsequent Kerouac novels and her actual name was used in *Some of the Dharma*. Neal, of course, was the irrepressible "Dean Moriarty" in *On the Road*--and "Cody Pomeroy" in later books. Neal and Carolyn had three children, but Carolyn finally divorced Neal shortly before his death; she had instituted the divorce "hoping to free him from family responsibilities." Carolyn realized her mistake when Neal died only five years later in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. No one knows the exact details of Neal's death; the death certificate states only that all systems were "congested." During Neal and Carolyn's twenty-year marriage Neal worked as a brakeman and conductor for the Southern Pacific Railroad--a job he loved and at which he excelled with his speed, coordination and love of freedom--and Neal also survived a two-year stretch in San Quentin for supposed marijuana dealings. After the divorce Neal joined Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters as driver of the bus "Further" until his death--becoming a permanent hero of the 1960s counterculture.

(The above introduction was written by a long time Cassady scholar; and here, in an exclusive interview with American Legends--conducted via e-mail over a two year period from her home in London--Carolyn Robinson Cassady recalls Neal and his buddy, Jack Kerouac.)

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**AL:** How did Neal feel about being the central figure in *On the Road*?

**CC:** Neal had mixed emotions about his role in *On the Road*. Of course, he got a little ego boost but mainly he was unhappy about it because Jack glorified all the aspects about his character he was trying so hard to overcome. Jack may have intuited Neal's feelings somewhat because he often wrote that he hoped no one felt badly about his writing about them. Neal certainly did not resent Jack's fame. There were never two more mutual admirers than those two.

- AL:** Neal was also a central character in Tom Wolfe's book (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*) about the Merry Pranksters--the group that drove around San Francisco with Ken Kesey in a bus painted in psychedelic colors.
- CC:** I can't speak for Tom Wolfe's accuracy about the Prankster years, other than I don't think he had any clue about Neal. Kesey told me he hated that book, so maybe that indicates something similar. It was so out of Wolfe's milieu.
- AL:** There are a number of stories about Jack's original draft of *On the Road*.
- CC:** The *On the Road* manuscript went through many changes and variations. At our house, Jack was writing what he called *Visions of Neal*. Parts of it became *On the Road*, parts *Visions of Cody*...Jack would read us bits of what he was writing, but I never saw the scroll or any of *On the Road* in manuscript or otherwise.
- AL:** Was there a dynamic that drew Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, and Jack Kerouac together?
- CC:** Both Allen and Jack admired Neal's brilliant mind and memory, as well as his energy. Allen, of course, was in love with Neal physically, but his descriptions of their coupling are Allen's fantasies. As for Jack and Neal, in some ways it was a case of opposites attracting. Jack was terribly self-conscious, shy and gauche. Neal was confident, polite. He could relate to anyone on their own level. Neal approached women easily--Jack had great difficulty, so he admired and envied all these things in Neal that he lacked himself. Neal admired Jack's writing ability and his way of describing sensory perceptions. Allen was sort of a little brother to both of them. They admired his talent, and felt compassion toward him, but didn't go along with his radical, activist behavior--not that they condemned him. It was what made Allen, Allen.
- AL:** In one Kerouac biography, *Jack's Book*, someone refers to Neal as a "sociopath" who had to act out every impulse.
- CC:** A lot of Jack's friends, like Allan Temko, the now famous University of California [architecture] professor [Roland Major in *On the Road*] put Neal down. It was kind of a left-right bias...or snobbery.. or maybe jealousy...
- AL:** Over the years, there has been criticism of the Beats' attitude toward women.



- CC:** I was never bothered by their attitude. In those days, men were gentlemen, polite, and never swore in mixed company. Jack and Neal always treated me as an equal, listened to me, asked my opinion and advice, and I was happy being feminine and nurturing. I'm not a feminist, and I think they haven't the right take on what feminine power is. I chose a domestic life with free time for my own pursuits. It didn't turn out quite like my parents' but I made what choices I made. And I'm afraid I don't understand women who dress in a provocative manner and then blame men for treating them like sex objects.
- AL:** In his work, Jack Kerouac referred to Neal's "great sex" letter. Supposedly, this stream of consciousness letter influenced Jack to create the "spontaneous prose" method of composition he used to write *On the Road*.
- CC:** That letter was known as "The Joan Anderson Letter." It actually appears in the back of Neal's book *The First Third* [a posthumous collection of Cassady's autobiographical writings published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights]. It begins--"To have seen a specter..." Supposedly, some of the manuscript blew off Gerd Stern's houseboat, but what is left is a complete story. Neal may have written about other escapades, but I think this is the "lost" letter. A film was made of it last year entitled *The Last Time I Committed Suicide*. The material was turned into a superficial sitcom...
- AL:** Neal was also known for his monologues. Writer Pierre Delattre claimed that down in Mexico Neal would give his long raps backed up by a guitarist named Phil Santoro. He talked about everything from race car drivers to writers who had influenced him.
- CC:** Neal didn't do the long monologues until he was with Ken Kesey. Previously, he "discussed" subjects-- interested in the feedback from his listeners. When he'd given up trying and was waiting for death, he just babbled all the stored knowledge in his head. This was so vast, it impressed the groupies, even if they didn't understand it.
- AL:** Jim Morrison once told a friend, Linda Ashcroft, that he identified with Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. Was Neal aware of Morrison, or James Dean, whose offbeat images were like Neal's?
- CC:** Yes, he was aware of his comparison with James Dean. We saw the movies together, but I can't recall any specific conversation. I don't know about Morrison. But the trouble was that the side of Neal that was celebrated was the side that he was trying hard to overcome--and be respectable. Neal sometimes said that he wished no one would read *On the Road*.

**AL:** In *Grace Beats Karma*, Neal's prison letters, he writes of how his Roman Catholic faith helped him survive San Quentin.

**CC:** In *Grace Beats Karma*, Neal was only trying to occupy his mind, so as not to act with the fury he felt. He had long ago figured how irrational his Catholic training was. But they start so early. He and Jack had that sense of fear, guilt, worthlessness buried in their genes and couldn't overcome it.

**AL:** It seems that after San Quentin Neal never got it together.

**CC:** Those five years he did his best to get killed-- rolling buses, taking any offered drug, behaving as he has been depicted, and filled with self-loathing. Ken Kesey doesn't see him this way and had no idea of all this--Neal still had that saintly something even when a performing bear. His last words to me from the Mexican border before he died were: "I'm coming home. I'm coming home."

**AL:** What would Neal Cassady make of America in the 21st century?

**CC:** It's hard to say what Neal would make of today's world. He battled so hard against his abnormal lust in the days when sex was a dangerous and forbidden fruit. Now, it is so blatant and crude, I don't know if he would have been glad of that or appalled at the disrespectful and degrading attitude toward what he considered, in essence, holy.

(The following books were helpful in preparing this interview: Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road*, New York, Morrow, 1990; Arthur and Kit Knight, editors, *The Beat Vision*, New York, Paragon House, 1987; Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, New York, Quality Paperback Books ed., 1990; Neal Cassady, *Grace Beats Karma*, New York, Blast Books, 1993)

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