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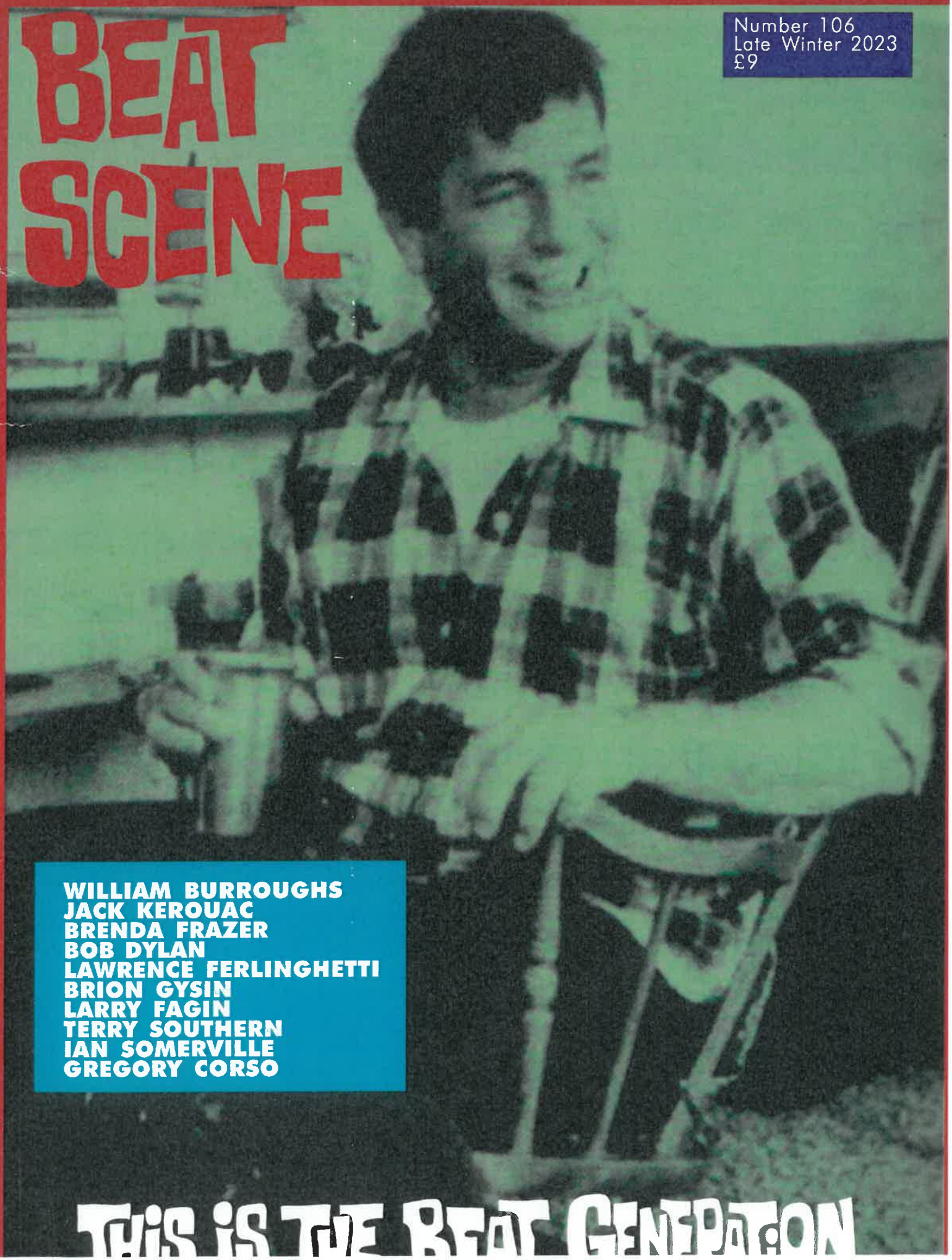

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THIS IS THE BEAT GENERATION

DESOLATION PEAK

by Jack Kerouac

Ann Charters

Hats off in gratitude to Charles Shuttleworth, for his devotion and skill as the editor of this extraordinary new book by Jack Kerouac. *Desolation Peak* was created from notebooks at the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library purchased from the Kerouac Estate and recently made available to scholars. This book brought me closer to Kerouac's life and his writing than most of the twenty-five biographies and multiple critical works produced since his death in 1969. *Desolation Peak* also serves as an essential companion to Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*, as the chronicle of his experience as a firewatcher during July 5 to September 6, 1956 on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountain range in Washington state.

This past year marked the centenary of Kerouac's birth on March 12, 1922. The publication of *Desolation Peak* was the culmination of the celebration of his centennial. The book consists of the journal Kerouac kept from June 18, 1956, when he left Mill Valley, California, to September 26, 1956, a few days after he arrived in Mexico City. (He didn't start to write the spontaneous prose journal published as Part One of *Desolation Angels* until August 10th.) This is followed in *Desolation Peak* by the two novels written in conventional prose that Kerouac started and abandoned on the mountaintop, "Ozone Park" and "The Martin Family." *Desolation Peak* concludes with his translation of "The Diamondcutter of Perfect Knowing," a Buddhist text that was the only reading material he brought along with him to his two-month summer job, since he had hoped to devote himself entirely to his writing.

What makes *Desolation Peak* so special among the recent spate of books authorized by the Kerouac estate is Shuttleworth's introduction. When he focuses on Kerouac's life during the summer months of 1956, he doesn't flinch from taking on the tough questions about Jack's life and work. What was the psychological effect of his lack of publication after *The Town and the City* and his resulting poverty? Why was he so dependent on his mother? How committed was he to his experimental method of writing spontaneous prose? In *Desolation Peak*, Shuttleworth asks these and other essential questions, and he provides answers in his twenty-five page introduction that satisfy not only this reader, but also probably many others sympathetic to Kerouac's "shining performance" as a writer.

I must confess that I was not an impartial reader of *Desolation Peak*. I have a personal interest in the 1956 Kerouac notebooks in the Berg Collection. In 1966, when I worked on his bibliography with Kerouac at his home in Hyannis, he pulled out the drawers in a bureau beside his bed to show me piles of notebooks in various sizes that were the original manuscripts of many of his books, and he let me page through a few of them.

In 1979 I was invited to the Berg Collection to examine the research library's early purchase from a private source of five Kerouac notebooks from 1956-1959, including one dated April 1, 1956, three months before he began his summer job as a firewatcher, when he was living in Mill Valley with Gary Snyder. These notebooks contained, among many other things, Kerouac's *Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, as well as the list of the items he packed for his trip hitchhiking to Desolation Peak. Apparently

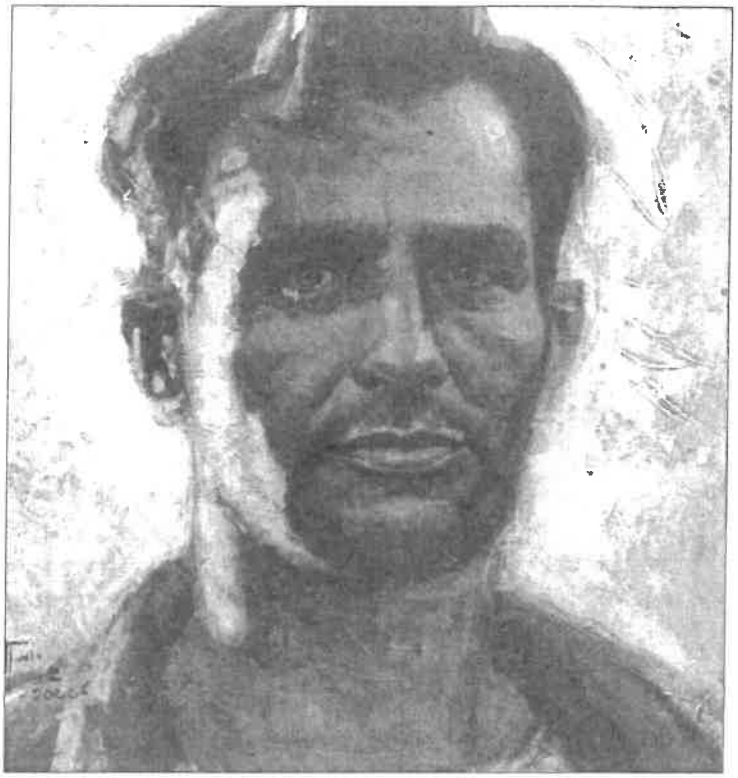
Shuttleworth wasn't aware of these related notebooks in the Berg's vast Kerouac archive, as he limited his discussion to the material obtained from the Kerouac Estate.

This was enough for Shuttleworth to take on major issues in his introduction. *Desolation Peak* contains thirty-two beautiful color plates of "Images and Figures," beginning with a photograph of the light blue cover of the spiral notebook Kerouac titled "DHARMA 11 (1956) Desolation Peak." It is similar to his ten other 1953-1956 notebooks transcribed in *Some of the Dharma*. The second image is the "Backside of the cover of the Desolation journal [that] contains Jack's running total of money earned while employed as a lookout." These meticulously penciled columns of figures enabled Shuttleworth to illuminate Kerouac's precarious financial situation, and his stoical acceptance of his poverty, as no biographer has ever done before in such crushing detail.

After Jack's commitment to writing spontaneous prose in 1951, his books had been too experimental to interest publishers. Six years after its composition, his agent still hadn't sold the manuscript of *On the Road*. Kerouac was literally down to a few cents in his pocket when he started his summer job. Over the firewatcher's shortwave radio, he learned that Martha Foley chose his story "The Mexican Girl" for inclusion in her volume of the *Best Short Stories of 1956*. Instead of feeling elated at the honor, Kerouac only allowed himself to dream – to feel a faint hope — that he might have made a hundred dollars from the sale of that story.

Money matters. Shuttleworth includes letters Kerouac received in 1956 from his mother Gabrielle that clarify perhaps the most troubling aspect of Jack's life, his complete dependence upon her. Most Kerouac readers know that he promised his dying father to take care of his mother, but it seems that later Gabrielle gave all her savings from her years of factory work to her son-in-law for his business, and he soon lost all of it. Penniless, she was forced to live with her daughter's family in their crowded home in North Carolina. On the evidence of Gabrielle's letters, where she dwells on her miserable feelings of being lonely and lost without Jack, what could be called his mother's emotional blackmail was an essential part of Kerouac's story. Writing in his journal on his solitary mountaintop, he vowed to "protect her." (p. 29)

Desolation Peak shows that Kerouac's commitment to his writing was the most important thing in his life. Shuttleworth discusses what Jack planned to write during his two months of isolation on the mountain, and his judgment of the 100,000 words he produced. He was obsessed by what he called his "writing problem," the question of whether he should write conventionally or stay with spontaneous prose. He wrote constantly regardless of his troubling mood swings – in fact, only his immersion in his writing gave him a reason to live, the "ecstasy of mind" that he also sought in alcohol and other drugs after leaving Desolation. "I'd rather have drugs and liquor and



divine visions than this empty barren fatalism on a mountaintop." (p. 29)

Kerouac's best work is visionary, as he wrote on the mountaintop in early August 1956: "The Duluoz Legend is made up of Visions, not Novels — Visions are something that you see, not something you made up – The form of Visions is a deep form, a visionary form, and has nothing to do with the Novel form IT IS NOT SO MUCH A STORY AS THE VISION OF A STORY." (P. 88) As his biographer Joyce Johnson understood, his literary ambition in his Duluoz Legend was to capture "a life completely digested in spirit." (*The Voice Is All*, p, 370) Kerouac's readers should never assume that the facts he gave about his life are accurate. Instead, as he wrote on Desolation, the books in his Legend are "Beautiful lies – (which I'm good at)." (p. 117)

I enjoyed reading Shuttleworth's insight about how Jack organized what he called the "lies" of his visionary spontaneous prose in his final typescript version. (p.21) *Desolation Peak* made me want to re-read the published description of his summer in Part One of *Desolation Angels*, "Desolation in Solitude." I turned to the opening section of this novel, and with a fresh awareness of Kerouac's writing process, I found that his words seemed new again. I am grateful to Charles Shuttleworth at the Harker School in San Jose, California. His students are extremely fortunate to have him as an instructor. I hope he continues to share his thoughts with us in other books about the writing of Jack Kerouac.

Beginning to read the passage in *Desolation Angels* in Part One, Section 62, about the first day after Jack left Desolation Peak in early September, I discovered why I keep reading Kerouac books. When he came down from his two months in solitude, he was writing spontaneous prose at the peak of his form.

On the mountaintop he'd learned that "the D Legend must only be writ in happy wild spontaneous prose & there's a lot to do." (p. 31) As I continued to read, I admired his open-hearted, personal narrative voice and the musicality of his associative prose style. On the page, his words evoked visual images that felt as familiar as my own stream of personal memories.

In Section 62 Jack described his first ride back on the road in rural Washington state. It is classic Kerouac, a brilliant blend of fact, memory, dream, and reflection. At this point he's thirty-four years old and doesn't know that this will be his last long trip as a hitchhiker. Heading south four thousand miles to Seattle, San Francisco, and Mexico City, he thumbs his first ride on a narrow blacktop road with three old men who initially listen to him while he talks enthusiastically "to beat the band" about his experience of solitude. As Shuttleworth understood, Jack's isolation had "intensified his emotion." (p. 23)

Inside the small, two-door car, instead of squeezing into the back seat, he's crowded himself as the third person on the front seat to get next to an open window. Thanks to Shuttleworth's introduction, I can visualize Jack's shoes in tatters after climbing down the mountain trail, and I know that his bruised feet, cushioned with strips of paper, are killing him. It's suffocatingly hot. After a short while he notices that the others in the car have grown silent. They have lost interest in what he's saying. He realizes that he has drifted into banality. "There's a nice breeze blowing up there on the mountain."

In the car Kerouac does what any hitchhiker would do: he sizes up the three strangers who stopped to pick him up on the road. He decides they must be friends who "abide by God" since the driver did a good deed by offering a ride. Still immersed in his study of Buddhism, Jack envisions them as "Three Old Immortal Buddhas Who Know Silence," and he imagines that they will ferry him "to the other shore." Deciding to ignore his three silent companions, he turns to the landscape outside the windows. Its placid domesticity is a comforting sight after the savage beauty of his mountain top. Then, barreling down the highway, he becomes uneasily aware of what he senses as a "long, dead" silence growing between him and the "three old geezers" in the car. His thoughts grow darker. His mind turns to making what Shuttleworth called "grandiose statements equating himself with history's greatest artists." (p.23)

This time Kerouac pulls it off. I encounter something that keeps me reading him – intertextuality, or a reference to the words of another author. The words can be brought into the text as a quotation, but often they appear without attribution. This practice lends a subtle emotional layering to the author's meaning, as the words and ideas of two writers reflect upon each other and often illuminate what is being expressed. Intertextuality can also suggest a deeper continuity within a literary tradition, when the contemporary writer has been impressed enough by the words of an earlier author to echo them in a new text.

In *Desolation Angels*, when Kerouac writes that "Chekhov's angel of silence and sadness flies over our car," my first thought is, "Where did that come from?" I love Chekhov's writing, but I can't remember reading these particular words. I put down the book, pick up my cell phone, Google "Chekhov's angel of silence," and find a reference to his play *The Seagull*. Reading Act One, I discover that these words are given to the doctor in the play [Yevgeny Sergeyevich Dorn]. He speaks them after a heavy silence has followed the usual miscommunication between the self-absorbed characters on stage.

The quotation from Chekhov adds another dimension to Kerouac's description of himself. It's a sign that he's a very literate hitchhiker, because it's an appropriate quotation in the context of a book titled *Desolation Angels*, in which he describes the inner circle of his close friends, such as Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso, as "angels." Most important, "Chekhov's angel of silence and sadness flies over our car" introduces something new

that expands the meaning of Jack's personality as the narrator of his "true-story."

It suggests his volatility, his quick changes of mood, his impatience with the ups-and-downs of ordinary life, just as Shuttleworth described in his Introduction to *Desolation Peak.* The Chekhov citation shows Kerouac's mind in a moment of reflection, exposing his emotional recoil and his quick humorous rebound as he finds words for his feelings of boredom with the mundane quality of everyday reality, trapped inside the stifling car with three uncommunicative strangers after his challenging adventure that summer in the Cascades. The citation adds a visionary quality to his own mundane experience.

Not only was Kerouac familiar with a wide range of world literature, but he also internalized the writing of classical writers such as Chekhov, Joyce, Proust, and Balzac. If relevant, he could use their words to express his visual memories as he recorded his stream of consciousness. Quoting Chekhov was one of Kerouac's multiple linguistic resources as he captured his vision of the past. What else will I discover in Kerouac's "true-story" narratives? That's why I continue to read him.

Jack Kerouac's DESOLATION ANGELS was first published by Coward McCann in 1965. In the concluding chapter of the book - *Passing Through America Again* Kerouac says "A peaceful sorrow at home is the best I'll ever be able to offer the world, in the end, and so I told my Desolation Angels goodbye. A new life for me."

JACK KEROUAC'S NOT SO SECRET AGENT

Tom Swift

A few significant figures stand tall in the life of writer Jack Kerouac, his mother Gabrielle, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, to name a few obvious characters. There is another, slightly removed from the hurly burly of Kerouac's quivering meat conception - Sterling Lord, his longtime literary agent. Lord has died in recent times, a highly regarded figure in the competitive New York City scene. He was the grand old age of one hundred and two years old. A real survivor, he worked almost right to the end. Married four times, his commitment to his work, his authors, cost him all those wives.

Ten years ago Tim Scheaffer, writing of a meeting with the then 92 year old Lord in a restaurant close to his offices on Bleecker Street, for *Vanity Fair* magazine, said of him, "He is 92, dapper in his tailored jacket, a charming and decent man with shrewd eyes who still goes to work every day at the agency he founded." Lord, ever the workaholic.

Scheaffer, on a mission to speak of Lord's then newly published autobiography *Lord of Publishing* (Open Road Books), can't resist falling into the trap of focusing his talk on Sterling Lord and Jack Kerouac. This is both wonderful and wholly misleading. Scheaffer's interview appeared in the same year that the Walter Salles directed film of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* appeared on the silver screen and Lord was promoting his own autobiography. Perhaps it was felt timely to coincide both releases. Lord and Kerouac being so deeply connected over the years.

Of *On the Road*, Lord said back then, "I had no idea it was going to be a big success or not. But I thought Kerouac's voice was different and should be heard. That's all I was thinking."

Lord recalls for Scheaffer the episode of Kerouac with the 'scroll' version of his novel, taking it to editor Robert Giroux at Farrar, Straus publishers and Giroux being speechless, dumbfounded at being handed a manuscript in such a fashion. He and Kerouac might have been friends but it seems, according to Sterling Lord looking back, that Giroux stuck to convention and Kerouac was equally dumbfounded and a little hurt that something he had laboured over in a near frenzy for weeks was being rejected.