

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Jack Kerouac was born on March in 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts, to French-Canadian parents. While studying at Columbia University in New York City, he met future friends William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. He left university and after briefly serving as a merchant marine in World War II, he travelled through the US, Mexico, and Europe. He took odd jobs and, at the same time, wrote about his experiences. His first novel, *The Town and the City*, was written when he was 28-years-old. Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957,) the first beat novel, became the defining text of the beat culture. It was written over a short period of 20 days on a single roll of telegraph paper.

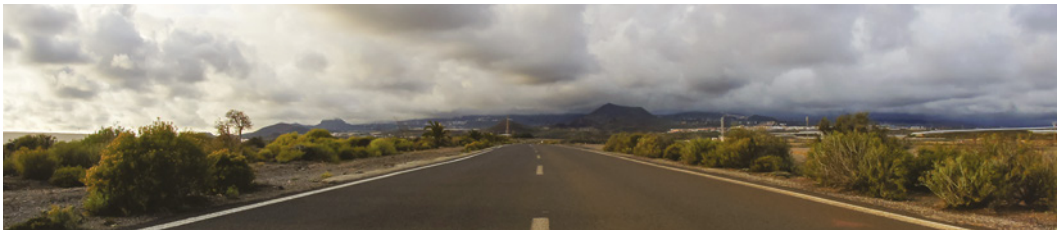
In his search for spiritual liberation, Jack Kerouac experimented with drugs and sex. Jazz inspired his writings and he also studied Zen Buddhism. He died in 1969.

The following is an excerpt from *On the Road*, the story of Sal Paradise and his renegade friend Dean Moriarty. Much of the plot is based on events taken from Kerouac's life.

In the winter of 1947, Dean and Sal start three years of restless journeys back and forth across the country. With a combination of bus rides and adventurous hitchhiking, Sal reaches his much-dreamed-of west to join Dean and more friends in Denver, and then continues west by himself, working as a fieldworker in California for a while, among other things.

The following year, Dean comes east to Sal again, and they drive west together, with more crazy adventures on the way. Later, Sal goes to Denver alone, but Dean soon joins him and they go south all the way to Mexico City this time. Through all of this constant movement, there is a great number of colourful characters, shifting landscapes, dramas, and personal growth.

Sal not only tells us of his journeys across America but also depicts a perfect picture of the post-war times he lived in.



I'd been poring over¹ maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the road-map was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started. To get to 6 I had to go up to Bear Mountain. Filled with dreams of what I'd do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran, I took the Seventh Avenue Subway to the

end of the line at 242nd Street, and there took a trolley² into Yonkers; in downtown Yonkers I transferred to an outgoing trolley and went to the city limits on the east bank of the Hudson River. If you drop a rose in the Hudson River at its mysterious source in the Adirondacks, think of all the places it journeys as it goes to sea forever – think of that wonderful Hudson Valley. I started hitching up the thing. Five scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Bridge, where Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous.

Glossary

¹ examining very carefully – ² tram (American English)

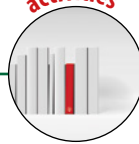
Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness. Not only was there no traffic but the rain came down in buckets³ and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover; this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool. I was forty miles north of New York; all the way up I'd been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north instead of the so-longed-for west. Now I was stuck on my northernmost hangup⁴. I ran a quarter-mile to an abandoned cute English-style filling station⁵ and stood under the dripping eaves⁶. High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps⁷ that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. "What the hell am I doing up here?" I cursed, I cried for Chicago. "Even now they're all having a big time, they're doing this, I'm not there, when will I get there!" – and so on. Finally a car stopped at the empty filling station; the man and the two women in it wanted to study a map. I stepped right up and gestured in the rain; they consulted; I looked like a maniac, of course, with my hair all wet, my shoes sopping⁸. My shoes, damn fool that I am, were Mexican huaraches⁹, plantlike sieves not fit for the rainy night of America and the raw road night. But the people let me in and rode me back to Newburgh, which I accepted as a better alternative than being trapped in the Bear Mountain wilderness all night. "Besides," said the man, "there's no traffic passes through 6. If you want to go to Chicago you'd be better going across the Holland Tunnel in New York and head for Pittsburgh," and I knew he was right. It was my dream that screwed up¹⁰ the stupid hearth-side idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes.

In Newburgh it had stopped raining. I walked down to the river and I had to ride back to New York in a bus with a delegation of schoolteachers coming back from a weekend in the mountains – chatter chatter blah-blah, and me swearing for all the time and money I'd wasted, and telling myself, I wanted to go west and here I'd been all day and into the night going up and down, north and south, like something that can't get started.

Glossary

3 it rained very hard – **4** a problem that causes a delay or difficulty – **5** gasoline station – **6** bottom edge of a roof that continues out over the walls – **7** single loud sounds of thunder – **8** dripping water – **9** flat-heeled sandals with an upper of woven leather strips – **10** spoiled

activities



↓ TEXT COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 How did the narrator prepare his journey? 2 What was the starting point of his journey? 3 How did he travel? 4 Which places especially attracted him? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5 What happened when he reached Bear Mountain Bridge? 6 What was his mood like? 7 Where did he run to? 8 Who helped him? |
|--|---|

↓ CLOZE EXERCISE

Complete the following summary of the passage you have just read with the given words: city – road – books – north – west – fool – red – bus.

Dreaming of Route 6

After consulting many maps and **1**, Sal, the main character of the novel, plans to take Route 6 – a winding **2** line from Cape Cod through to Los Angeles. To do this, he has to go to Bear Mountain, forty miles **3**. He hitchhikes there and ends up on a winding mountain **4** in pouring rain, with few cars passing, cursing

himself for being a **5**. Finally a couple picks him up, and the man suggests a more sensible route; Sal knows he is right. He has to go back to the **6** – where he started from 24 hours ago. Anxious to get **7** as fast as possible now, he spends most of his money and takes a **8** to Chicago the next day.