

ADVENTURES IN SECOND PERSON

by Ken McGoogan

The first time I encountered an entire novel written in the Second Person, in a novel-writing workshop at the University of British Columbia, I was intrigued enough to investigate. Maybe some great second-person works have since appeared. But I turned up just a single literary triumph, a novel called *La Modification* by Michel Butor, which appeared in English as *A Change of Heart*.

That work contrasted sharply with the multitudinous failures I found, many of them detective novels. Where Butor had the imagination and linguistic resources to spin off complex sentences that reduced the need for personal pronouns, all the other books proved repetitive and irritating: nothing but you, you, you, you, you. This happens, I realized, because in English a change of case, subjective to objective, does not change the second-person pronoun. In first person, we shift between I and me. In third, we move between he and him, she and her, we and us – always two different pronouns. In Second Person, however, we have but that single word: you.

That is the main reason, I believe, we see so few works in second person. Who wants to work with reduced resources? Only experimentalists. Inevitably, a quick run through my *Calgary Herald* bylines from the 1990s turns up a second-person experiment under the headline *Kerouac: His spirit is alive and well in San Francisco*.

You arrive in San Francisco knowing that, here, Jack Kerouac lives. Never mind that the legendary King of the Beats, best-known as the author of *On the Road*, died in 1969. In spirit, Kerouac lives forever in the City by the Bay. You're not here to prove it, but simply to revel in it, and to meet some of the people who are keeping his legacy alive.

Front and centre is biographer Gerald Nicosia, who's embroiled in a legal battle to keep Kerouac's archive intact and accessible. Nicosia, author of *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* -- demonstrably the best of a raft of biographies -- lives with his wife and baby daughter just north of San Francisco in a comfortable old house that's loaded with character. He's finishing up a massive book about Vietnam veterans -- the manuscript stands at 1,600 pages -- but he's more emotionally engaged in trying to save Kerouac's books and papers from being sold off in profitable pieces by John Sampas, the brother of Kerouac's late wife.

Nicosia's opponents are seeking to have him dismissed as literary executor for the late Jan Kerouac, Jack's daughter. The wrangling is complex and ugly, but don't be surprised if, no matter how things shake down, Nicosia turns the whole nasty mess into a counter-culture best-seller called *The Kerouac Legacy*.

Back in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, the heart of Beat country, you join Neeli Chernovski in the Cafe Greco. He's best-known as the biographer of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the

legendary American poet who founded -- and still owns -- the nearby City Lights bookstore. Chernovski is going through page proofs -- a revised version of his biography of the late Charles Bukowski called *Bukowski: A Life*. He's also anticipating the eminent publication of *Elegy to Bob Kaufman*, a poetry collection honoring yet another San Francisco Beat.

You're enjoying your second double cafe latte when who should wander into the cafe but Ferlinghetti himself, easily the most respected living writer who knew Kerouac personally. Ferlinghetti joins the table and reminisces briefly about visiting Calgary during the 1988 Olympic Writers' Festival: "They took us out to a lovely little town in the mountains -- Banff! . . .

Ferlinghetti also brings tidings that the on-again, off-again movie version of *On the Road*, which Francis Ford Coppola is bent on making, is most recently off-again: "He hasn't been able to get a good script." If and when he does, the betting is on Sean Penn to play the madman Dean Moriarty, and either Keanu Reeves or Johnny Depp to play the Kerouac figure, Sal Paradise. How can it miss?

You head out to Golden Gate Park, where the De Young Museum is holding an exhibition called *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. It runs through Dec. 29 and features more than 200 objects in a variety of media, among them art works and videos and manuscripts of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and, yes, Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Closer to downtown, at the newly opened Centre for the Book, you find another relevant exhibition: *The Pages of Sin: Beat Era Book Arts*, which runs through Jan. 15. Curator Susan Landauer describes it as "a kind of salon des refuses" for the De Young show, one that explores "the accomplishments of Beat artists working in the book form, and their reactions or affinities to the seven deadly sins." This summer, she says, she'll mount a related show celebrating the 30th anniversary of the notorious Summer of Love.

Somewhere along the line, you deke out to Oakland and spend a crazy afternoon with yet another Beat figure -- the poet Jack Foley who, with his wife Adelle, is building on the performance side of the Kerouac tradition. Foley's books include a new poetry collection called *Exiles and O Her Blackness Sparkles!*, and a non-fiction book about the Batman Art Gallery, a centre of Beat art that flourished in San Francisco in the early '60s. . . .

So The Beat (movement) goes on and on, yes, but what about youth? The next generation? One evening you fall in with Ken Kaplan, late 20s, who leads you from Vesuvio, Kerouac's old favorite watering hole, to one down-and-dirty blues club and

then another. Kerouac would have loved it. Another night, Jim Camp, an early-30s ex-teacher, ex-stockbroker, describes a novel-in-progress and trots out several chapbooks he's published as Synaesthesia Press. One glance and you recognize all the signs: they're Beat.

Back in North Beach, you again leave City Lights bookstore, cross Jack Kerouac Alley -- so-named after a long campaign, led by Ferlinghetti, involving many streets -- and return to Vesuvio, that crowded and colorful bar. Nicosia has described the corner where, habitually, Kerouac sat. When it comes vacant, you get Jim Camp to take your picture there. Look out the window: Kerouac lives!

This is choppy but the second person works as well as can be expected, I think, because it suits the "hip" subject matter. The piece disguises the main limitation of second person, the reduction of linguistic resources, by remaining outer-focused. Even so, it has the look and feel of a one-off, and is unlikely to inspire imitators.