

## REVIEWS

*The Beats: A Graphic History*. Edited by Paul Buhle. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. 199pp. \$22

Some will say, “At last! A comic book about the Beats!” Popular knowledge of the Beat writers suggests their appropriateness for a graphic novel: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs are our nation’s pulp culture poets, beloved for turning adolescent explorations of the free and freaky nether regions of postwar American culture into the hip literature of the baby boomer generation. The Beats, this new graphic history reminds us, “revolutionized American culture and consciousness” and “democratized poetry...taking [it] out of the academy and into the streets,” in part by forging new circuits of affect and meaning between approved literary forms and lowbrow popular culture. When we consider Kerouac’s and Burroughs’s “real-life adventure” stories alongside the innovations in the comic book genre (which flourished in the American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s), *The Beats: A Graphic History* seems inevitable.

Harvey Pekar and Ed Piskor, the writer and artist who created the popular graphic novel *American Splendor*, tell the canonized Beat story in the volume’s first half, while lesser-known collaborators (many of whom directly participated in the Beat movement) depict the forgotten names and faces of this generation in the second. The contrast between the sections reveals two very different approaches to this period of American literature. It also raises a question: is the story of the Beats best told as separate biographies of a half-dozen or so whiz-kid drop-outs who influenced each other before pursuing diverse political and artistic agendas? Or is it better imagined as a collective biography about group efforts to create new ways of being together—a generation’s refashioning of the textures of citizenship and ordinary life?

Pekar and Piskor take a clear position in their version of the story: they depict the Beats as a small group of stoned kids who rejected the benefits of postwar prosperity in order to play at being criminals. Somehow, their story goes, these thuggish sex offenders ended up becoming best-selling countercultural icons and are now increasingly respected by the institutions they rejected. We are given all of the most well-known anecdotes of popular Beat history: the early gatherings of Kerouac, Edie Parker, Neal Cassady, Lucien Carr, Burroughs, Dave Kammerer, and Ginsberg in Joan Vollmer’s New York apartment; Carr’s murder of Kammerer and Kerouac’s day in court; Burroughs’s murder of Vollmer and no day in court; the reading at the Six

Gallery in San Francisco; various trips to Mexico City and Tangier; etc. The telling is drab and straightforward, following first Kerouac, then Ginsberg, then Burroughs through these well-known narratives with a remarkably high degree of overlap, and with almost no quotations from the poetry and prose (probably the result of steep royalties demanded for publication of Beat material). In terms of information, the first part contains nothing an interested reader wouldn't have found in the seminal Beat histories, James Campbell's *This Is the Beat Generation* (1999) and Ann Charters's *Beat Down to Your Soul* (2001).

The most striking visual feature of this section is the repetitive simplicity in panel framing, sequencing and figuration. Consider the following two panels from a page about the most well-known of Kerouac's accomplishments—the writing of *On the Road* on a long scroll:

HE INITIALLY TYPED "ON THE ROAD" ON A 120-FOOT-LONG PAPER ROLL, NOT WANTING TO STOP AND CHANGE PAPER WHILE HE WAS ON FIRE WITH IDEAS.



JACK GOT MARRIED AGAIN IN 1950 TO JOAN HAVERTY, WHO SUPPORTED HIM FOR A SHORT TIME BEFORE DUMPING HIM. SHE CLAIMED SHE HAD A BABY BY JACK, BUT COULDN'T PROVE IT IN COURT. SHE RELENTLESSLY LITIGATED FOR MONEY.



Pekor and Piskor maintain direct correspondence between the verbal and visual descriptions of events throughout. The words sit in little boxes above the images; the images almost always include one word bubble, but rarely more than one. Little dramatic interaction occurs between figures in these scenes, which often feature a scruffy-looking figure against the backdrop of a gritty environment: the run-down apartment, the New York City street. With tedious regularity, these scenes are interpolated with panels that depict emotional energy as a radiating halo behind a figure that appears to directly address the reader.

The artists make no distinction between acts of artistic production and personality-forming crises. Yet they also somehow never manage to evoke the Beats' attempted merger of art and life. Instead, Pekar and Piskor maintain a total distinction between the writer as creative genius and the world in which the writer moves—a distracting, hostile environment, frequently figured as groups of hysterical, whining lovers. The following panel, depicting Ginsberg with the Merry Pranksters upon his return to San Francisco in 1966 (after being crowned King of May in Prague), is typical:



The mature poet shows frustration with the anarchic environment around him—an environment of mostly anonymous, younger “followers” who, as indicated by the clichéd lampshade on Ken Kesey’s head, are “partying.” Radiant lines depict either the din of the party or Ginsberg’s emotional state—either way, they displace the possibility of interactions between foreground and background characters. In this version of history, attention fixates upon those singular individuals who are most easily acknowledged as Great Writers because of their relative popularity among middle-class readers today. All others—and all events not directly related to the story of this writer’s maturation—become bland backdrop, the toxic environment that provokes but also threatens to hinder the personal achievements of a few worthy individuals. The global counterculture that the Beats helped to foster and that propelled them onto the stage of world history becomes an inarticulate nuisance—background noise.

No one seems more frustrated by this story of the Beats than Pekar himself. His commentary is mostly forgettable: “But listen, [Philip] Whalen is one of the funniest poets I’ve ever read”; “Like Rexroth, Ferlinghetti was a fine poet, but furthered the art in other ways as well”; and “Corso’s poetry has been called uneven, but at his best he is mighty good—witty, compassionate, and clever.” He occasionally lambasts his characters for bad behavior—“Kerouac had been somewhat of a bigot all his life”—but his disdain for his subject matter seems to generate disgust for the project itself, evident in the generally dreary tone of the entire piece. Wit is only brought into play in the worst way: the occasional

sneering insinuation of pedophilia, which is always directed at Burroughs and directly linked to his drug use. Halfway through Burroughs's tale, we get: "Burroughs found the dope plentiful and cheap, as were the young boy prostitutes"; and, exactly thirty pages later, the identical charge: "He left for Tangier, where dope was easily obtained, as were young male prostitutes." Many scenes are repeated almost verbatim in the same unenthusied, slightly disgusted tone.

Pekar's apparent distaste for the subjects of his prose can be seen as one line in a broader cultural divide between blue-collar populism and countercultural movements over the past half century. In an interview with Holly Seigel, Pekar answers the question, "Whose story do you identify with the most?" by saying, "None of these guys. My whole life, I've been a working stiff. I worked for thirty-seven years for the federal government as a file clerk. I had some flunky jobs, too; I used to write on the weekends. These guys attempted to be full-time artists." Pekar's attitude emerges from an identification with responsible masculinity secured by a lifetime of drudgery and in opposition to the queer romanticism of countercultural dropouts. Of course, this is a "bread-and-butter" perspective in several senses, for isn't Pekar and Piskor's evocation of the drab textures of cynical drudgery the source of their success? *American Splendor* capitalizes on a similarly dreary fatalism in its depiction of the miseries of daily life in the Reagan-era rust-belt. In so doing, it participates in a genre of the culture industry dedicated to promoting the world view of pissed off, white, working-class males in post-Fordist, downsized America. *The Beats* reveals how much this cynical populism is formed by pursuing "adult responsibilities," picking up the slack for a childish counterculture that is often trivialized in depictions of the free speech and antiwar movements.

This populist perspective often appears to contrast a working man's common sense with the opinions of an effete and pampered intellectual elite. In fact, the infatuated rejection of the Beats emerged in the academic culture of the 1950s, a phenomenon captured in Diana Trilling's 1959 article in *Partisan Review*, "The Other Night at Columbia: A Report from the Academy." Trilling was one of a handful of faculty wives who attended the reading by Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gregory Corso at the McMillan Theater despite the conspicuous absence of their husbands (Lionel Trilling had been Ginsberg's teacher at Columbia) and she provides a glimpse of how the generation looked from the perspective of respectable society. She describes "the shoddiness of an audience in which it was virtually impossible to distinguish between student and camp-follower; the always new shock of so many young girls, so few of them pretty, and so many dreadful stockings; so many young men, so few of them—despite the many black beards—with any promise of masculinity." The easy condescension Trilling marshals in her critique of Beat queerness repeats itself in Pekar and Piskor's pissed-off ennui.

In contrast to the tedium of the first one hundred pages, the short-form pieces of the second half contain ninety percent of the innovation, wit, and knowledge one finds in the whole. The stories in this section are without exception interesting and informative. Three that stand out are a biography of Kenneth Patchen, written by Nick Thorkelson and Harvey Pekar with drawings by Thorkelson; a biography of Philip Lamantia written by Nancy Joyce Peters and Penelope Rosemont with art by Summer McClinton; and “Jay DeFeo: The Rose,” written by Trina Robbins with art by Anne Timmons. Also, we find in-depth accounts by Tuli Kupferberg and Ed Sanders of the formation of the Peace Eye Bookstore and the antiwar D.I.Y. rock band, The Fugs, as well as profiles of figures on the margins of already marginal Beat culture, such as Philip Lamantia and Slim Brundage.

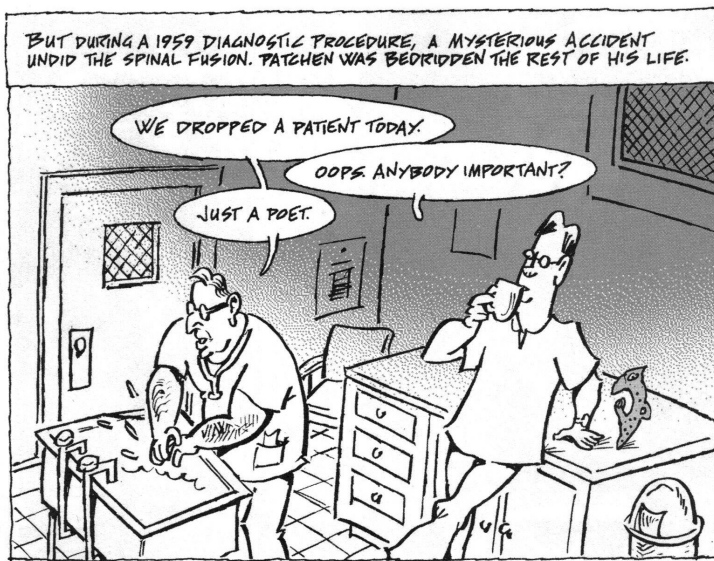
The images in the second half tend to be more detailed, with more mixing of figure and ground and more conversation. Here, for example, is a rap session between the founding members of the Fugs:



My favorite biography is that of Kenneth Patchen. Though the book's first section contained remarkably little quotation from the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, Patchen's story narrates biography directly through his creative work, pairing snippets of verse with descriptions of biographical events. Patchen's verse and Thorkelson's accompanying art romanticize what Pekar and Piskor's narrative dulls—and I use the term “romantic” because of the interplay of fantasy, playfulness, and verbal and visual wit. Against the harsh spotlight of Piskor's forward-facing, singular figures, we get subtler, more complex panels. In one, young Kenneth lies in a rickety bed beside his grandfather, whose boldly recited quotations from Robert Burns hang in the darkness above them, and a little creature, reminiscent of Patchen's pen-and-

ink drawings of fantastical animals, stares from the lower left corner, apparently delighted by the poetry, or perhaps just the intensity, of its own bizarre existence. We have shifted worldly and worlding textures—from a poetics of cynical, bland harshness to one of optimistic, unexpected happiness.

There is nothing Pollyanna-ish about this style—in fact, because of its imaginative humor, the Patchen section proves all the more capable of treating grim subjects. Consider this panel, in which doctors discuss the accident that left the strapping and energetic Patchen bedridden for life:



It's a joke about professions—about the difference in cultural and financial capital between doctors and poets. But it's also about how the systems of modern medicine produce a distance between doctors and patients. The doctors are depicted as mere workers, whose anxieties are the ordinary ones of the job. This portrait makes their displacement from the poet all the more powerful—for a moment Patchen's centrality to the narrative is almost entirely dislodged: he becomes a minor figure in the story of his own life.

Perhaps the most interesting approach to this question about the relation of art to artist is "Jay DeFeo: The Rose," which is not the biography of an artist but of a painting. DeFeo's paintings were hanging in the Six Gallery on the night of the famous Beat reading there in October, 1955; three years later, she began to paint "The Rose," a masterwork that took her eight years to finish. DeFeo worked and reworked the painting, embedding materials and objects—strands of copper wire, beads, and a barrette—until "The Rose" weighed so much that part of the wall of her second-story studio was removed

and a crane employed in order to move the artwork, which currently resides in the Whitney. The story of this painting—which, we are told, “was the death of” Defeo (ingesting the lead of the paint, it’s suggested, gave her cancer)—reminds us vividly how art might intrude upon life. The artist’s obsession, the passionate, often hysterical pleasures of trying again and again to make the impossible thing, figures a dangerous pleasure that is the superficial core of the Beat phenomenon: in this world view, dedication does not take the form of cynical optimism but instead becomes vehicle to new pleasures—by doing what one should not, one ushers into the world new forms.

From this perspective, *The Beats* reveals a different kind of history. The three or four most prominent Beat figures recede, and an entire century of anarchist art practices emerges. These lesser-known figures represent a long tradition of radical organizing and theorizing—a populist counterculture that connects Wobblies to Beats to hippies to Black nationalists to punks and so on, in an endlessly transforming, multigenerational culture of D.I.Y. aesthetics. Their dedication to impossible projects might be called “practical romanticism”; see, for example, Philip Lamantia’s call to end “the supreme disalienation of humanity and its language.” These are Utopian objectives, to be sure—but pursuing such fantastic notions brings an irresistible springtime to the soul following the dolorous cynicism that precedes it.

Matthias Regan

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Walter Mosley, *The Long Fall*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009. 305pp. \$25.95

Considering that it included a half-serious call for “the end of the novel,” Walter Benn Michaels’s recent *Bookforum* essay, “Going Boom” (February/March 2009), met with surprisingly little resistance from the larger literary community. According to Michaels, the kind of fiction in which “what people really want is respect for their otherness rather than money for their mortgages” can hardly do justice to our moment of economic crisis. Toward the end of his essay, he even starts naming names: “For sure, no more books like *The Corrections*, or any of Oprah’s other choices. And no more stories about the children of immigrants, trying to figure out whether and where they fit into American culture.” Critics and novelists from across the spectrum accorded Michaels plaudits for speaking a courageous truth; “Going Boom” was feted with a special panel at the New York Public Library.

“Going Boom” met with enthusiasm in part because Michaels is right: contemporary literary fiction has an allergy to money problems. His prescription for this allergy is a combination of Brett Easton Ellis, whose *American*