



The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac

Joyce Johnson

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A groundbreaking portrait of Kerouac as a young artist—from the award-winning author of *Minor Characters*

In *The Voice is All*, Joyce Johnson, author of the classic memoir *Minor Characters*, about her relationship with Jack Kerouac, brilliantly peels away layers of the Kerouac legend to show how, caught between two cultures and two languages, he forged a voice to contain his dualities. Looking more deeply than previous biographers into how Kerouac's French Canadian background enriched his prose and gave him a unique outsider's vision of America, she tracks his development from boyhood through the phenomenal breakthroughs of 1951 that resulted in the composition of *On the Road*, followed by *Visions of Cody*. By illuminating Kerouac's early choice to sacrifice everything to his work, *The Voice Is All* deals with him on his own terms and puts the tragic contradictions of his nature and his complex relationships into perspective.

The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac Details

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John Theofanis says

Fans of Jack Kerouac will enjoy this in-depth look at his life by Joyce Johnson. Johnson locates Kerouac's efforts to find his own literary voice. She captures the key factors to comprehending the writing style, a voice reminiscent of the improvisational performance of jazz. Kerouac called the voice "sense-thinking" and his style transcends mere thought or logic; Kerouac's sentences move with the rhythm, timing and the rushed, ecstatic outpouring of a John Coltrane saxophone solo.

Johnson's study moves like the work of a determined literary detective and she unearths Kerouac multiple sources: 1) a bilingual French Canadian childhood and the hurly burly family dynamics rooted in working class Lowell, Massachusetts, 2) the influence of writers William Saroyan and Thomas Wolfe, 3) his arrival in New York City as a prep school football star headed towards Columbia University, 4) his intellectual and personal encounters with a bohemian group of friends in NYC-- including Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, and 5) the birth of the Beat generation so inextricably intertwined with the birth of Kerouac's literary voice.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Herbert Huncke, a lowly street hustler, inspires Kerouac's full evocation of the term "beat." Huncke used the phrase "I'm beat," and his eyes contained for Kerouac an "exhaustion or defeat--as if a plunge to the bottom of existence... like martyrdom... and the opening up of consciousness into a kind of beatitude." (p.191)

Joyce Johnson breathes new life into Kerouac by affording him the poetic understanding he certainly deserves, a subtlety of treatment demanded by the quality of his work.

James Murphy says

It's been a long time since I read biographical material about Kerouac. Joyce Johnson's book, *The Voice Is All*, is an examination by a writer and editor of how Kerouac developed the spontaneous prose style that brought him success as a novelist and poet as well as the spokesman--if reluctant--for what became known as the Beat Generation. I don't agree with those who say of this biography that it adds nothing to the Kerouac we already know. I think it does. I think Johnson writes with a deep understanding of her subject other biographies couldn't, particularly fresh insights to facets of his character and the conflicts within the man. She has, after all, the advantage of having been his lover rather than other biographers who try to explain Kerouac relative to the literary movement. Her book obviously makes extensive use of Kerouac's available papers. This is evident from the careful track of how he found his voice and became the writer we know.

Johnson's study of Kerouac seems to have a few strengths which I think serve it well. I thought I detected attempts by her to write in the evocative language reflecting the different periods of his life. And her picture of Kerouac himself seems broader, more full than the man we encounter in other books about him. Also, her portrayal of those around him, those who mattered, are given more attention so that often the focus rightfully isn't on Kerouac but on those who influenced the directions he took. Every one of these legendary figures has a story which acts as a barb or fletch on the arrow of Jack Kerouac. Each was a factor, as Johnson relates, in his evolution as a writer. And all of it makes his story that much more interesting.

The book follows him into the mid-1950s as he was polishing *On the Road* and finding his way toward the prose style that fuels what's arguably his best novel, *Visions of Cody*. I'd be happy to read it if Johnson chose to continue with Kerouac's life through the final dozen or so years left to him.

Susan Ovans says

I'm kinda torn between two and three stars because I realize how well written and exhaustively researched this book is. I'd say you have to be a real Kerouac fan to want to know how he felt in all circumstances and how those feelings provided material for everything he wrote. Frankly, *Scarlet*, I just didn't give enough of a damn.

Robin Friedman says

This book received mixed reviews. I thought it good for the reasons given below.

Joyce Johnson's *"The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac"* (2012) offers a sympathetic internalized portrayal of Kerouac, the divisions in his personality, and his calling as a writer. Johnson has published three novels, and other works of nonfiction, including the memoir discussed below.

Johnson's life intertwined with Kerouac's. Joyce Glassman (b. 1935) had a relationship with Kerouac which began in 1957, months before the publication of *"On the Road"*, and ended abruptly in 1959. In 1983, nearly 25 after the relationship ended, Johnson wrote an eloquent reflective memoir, *"Minor Characters"* about her own early life as it interconnected with Kerouac's and other people in his circle. *Minor Characters* Written nearly thirty years later, in 2012, Johnson's biography covers Kerouac's (1922 -- 1969) early life through 1951. By 1951, Kerouac had published one novel, *"The Town and the City"* (1950). He had written *"On the Road"*, but the book would not be published until 1957, when Kerouac and Johnson were in their relationship. Thus, Johnson writes of Kerouac during over 40 years after her relationship with him ended, and her book covers her subject's life before she knew him. She writes about Kerouac with obvious affection and love but with the detachment and reflection that comes with time. In the Introduction, Johnson comments on the passage of time as it influenced her understanding of herself and of Kerouac.

"If I had written this biography in my fifties, when there was so much less reliable information available, mistaken assumptions would undoubtedly have led me down some wrong paths. If I had attempted to write about Jack in my twenties, when my memories of my own relationship with him between 1957 and 1958 were still fresh, I would not have had the objectivity I brought to my memoir, *Minor Characters*, when I began it in 1981."

As Johnson states, there are many approaches to writing about Kerouac, or any literary figure. Her book draws heavily of Kerouac's papers and on those of his friends and emphasizes what Johnson calls "his most important relationship -- the one he had with his work." Her book portrays a gifted, complex, highly troubled individual who found his calling as a writer early in life and pursued it with intensity. She portrays the private Kerouac, the person no one ever saw, "the man alone in a room writing".

Johnson is most interested in describing Kerouac's long, painstaking development as a writer. Thus she describes the three years of intense, isolated effort Kerouac spent writing his first published novel, *"The*

Town and the City." Then, legend has it that Kerouac's most famous book, his second novel "On the Road" was written on a typed scroll in a matter of weeks. But as Johnson shows, the writing of the book on the typescroll obscures the many failed starts and revisions over several years that proceeded and helped form the book in its final version. Johnson finds that Kerouac's writing finds "its fullest expression, in "Visions of Cody" the sequel to "On the Road" that he began shortly after its completion. She writes: "With 'Visions of Cody', Jack would make his own singular contribution to the great stream-of-consciousness experiments of twentieth-century literature."

Johnson focuses on Kerouac's ambivalences and divided nature which she calls "dualities". She pays great attention to the French-Canadian community in Quebec. Many French-Canadians moved to New England in search of better lives, including Kerouac's parents. His early life in Lowell, Massachusetts was embedded in French-Canadian culture, so much so that Johnson describes Kerouac as an American outsider, a status critical towards understanding his work. Johnson also describes a Kerouac split from childhood between his intellectual, reclusive nature on the one hand and his frenetic need for acceptance and companionship on the other hand. Some of this is shown by his prowess at football and sports as a young man. His relationship to his friends and to women also show Kerouac's need to be loved and accepted. Kerouac's French-Canadian background and the conflicting pulls in his character are emphasized throughout as Johnson explores his writing. Johnson also discusses insightfully the importance to Kerouac of the death of his older brother Gerard, nine, when Kerouac was four, and the domineering influence of Kerouac's mother throughout his life.

The book is filled with detail about Kerouac's early life in Lowell, his year at Horace Mann, his attendance at Columbia, his service in the merchant marine, his wanderings, serious brushes with the law, and increasing dependence on alcohol and drugs. Johnson emphasizes his childhood friends, his many relationships with women, most of which were passing and sad, and his two wives. The book draws with a novelistic eye a portrayal of New York City in the post - WW II years and of the people that became part of Kerouac's circle, including Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, William Burroughs, and John Clellon Holmes. Johnson discounts the importance of the "Beat" movement or the role imputed to Kerouac as "King of the Beats." The movement such as it was has played out before Kerouac became notorious. In any event, Kerouac's writings remain alive and of importance while the Beat movement has long since faded.

Johnson's painstaking exposition of Kerouac's writing, including his letters, drafts, and manuscripts constitute the most insightful portion of her portrayal of Kerouac. She describes the many early versions of works such as "On the Road", "The Town and the City" and "Dr. Sax" together with manuscripts, some of which, such as "The Sea is my Brother" have been published. Other manuscripts, including a work Kerouac began in French, remain largely unknown. The discussion of the published books and of Kerouac's drafts and writing gave me a valuable perspective on his work. Johnson also describes well Kerouac's extensive reading, and the changes in the writers and the styles that came to influence him over time.

There may be small factual or chronological errors in this biography, but Johnson draws Kerouac from the inside. Her book increased my understanding of a writer I have thought about for many years. Johnson portrays a flawed individual's devotion to his art and the toll this devotion exacted.

René says

Well written. My only problem was with the very last couple chapters, in which she suddenly brings in a

fairly in-depth discussion of Visions of Cody. I know she had a hand in publishing the complete version of Cody, which probably explains her "favoring" of it a bit--but I don't think its discussion was fully justified here, as its writing was still off in the future of this book's chosen timeline. It made the ending drag a bit for me.

I also think some of the negative reviews here are rather bizarre and unnecessarily possessive and competitive. Discrediting Johnson because she wouldn't answer a question at a reading of what Kerouac was like in bed is especially weird. Why the hell should she answer a question like that? Get outta here. On the one hand she's blamed for turning her romantic relationship with the man into a cottage industry and banking on his ghost, exploiting him, etc. On the other she's blamed for not publicly divulging details of their sex life. Sorry guys, but your criticism of her reeks of sexism and pathetic jealousy that she hung out with and dated Kerouac while you didn't.

Joseph says

The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac by Joyce Johnson is a comprehensive biography of Jack Kerouac. Johnson's articles have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *New York*, *The Washington Post*, and *Vanity Fair*. Johnson for a time was Kerouac's girlfriend and a member of the inner circle of the beat movement.

I like Kerouac's work. I really do, but I didn't always. Many years ago I found myself at Big Sur and felt compelled to run to the closest bookstore and buy a copy of *Big Sur*. It didn't take long for me to put the book down. A few years ago a friend at work, knowing I read often, asked me if I read any Kerouac. I said I tried but couldn't get into it. He said he had the same problem until he heard Kerouac read. The secret, he said, is to read it in "beat." I gave it a try and it made a world of difference. Since then I have read all Kerouac's major works, and he has a spot on my bookshelf.

Once I was fully into Kerouac's work, I dabbled into Ginsberg and Burroughs. The same friend that told me to read in beat brought me a copy of *Minor Characters* to read. It was also written by Johnson. When I was asked how I liked it I replied honestly. I didn't like it it seemed too much like someone who felt cheated in history, despite her association. To be fair, I decided to give her another try with "The Voice is All."

To her credit, Johnson writes an extremely detailed biography. Having access to the Berg Collection in New York Public Library, Johnson had a wealth of knowledge not usually available to the public. Kerouac's childhood is covered in great detail especially his French-Canadian background. All the major players are covered as well as their histories. Even Ginsberg setting Kerouac and Johnson up on a blind date has its part. There is a tremendous amount of information in this book and all of it very detailed. That may be part of the problem I have with the book. Kerouac reveals a great detail about his life in his books. Johnson does not contradict Kerouac, but just goes much deeper into details. There is a point where a book begins to cross the line from being informative to becoming a scholarly dissertation or thesis. Biographies generally keep the reader interested with the subjects life, adventures, or accomplishments. Scholarly work presents detailed information that generally doesn't hold everyone's interest, most that I have read and written would only hold the interest of a few. Generally it has a much smaller audience, but much greater detail. Johnson seems to be on this path; rich in detail, but dry to the average reader. I found her style to be informative but not compelling to read though cover to cover.

A casual fan of Kerouac's work may find *The Voice is All* intimidating or a bit more than they expected. To

the person needing or wanting to know every detail of the man's life, this book may be for you. I will keep it as a reference. There is some really great information contained in the pages of *The Voice is All*, but I doubt I will read it cover to cover again. A great deal of credit is given to Johnson for compiling such a tome. What it lacks in captivating reading it makes up for in information

Dale Neal says

Fascinating look at how Kerouac fumbled around, looking for his trademark "bop prosody" style that made him famous with "On the Road." Kerouac, of course, had a mess for a life, as a full-blown alcoholic by his 20s. It's a tribute to his talent and determination that he was able to write despite his addiction. He's a much underrated writer is Joyce's argument, but unfortunately he was in Yeats' words "a man helpless before the contents of his own mind."

Tami says

the first 75 pages or so were like "blah blah blah" with joyce putting her own spin on jack's childhood. i mean, yes, she read his papers, but much of what she wrote in this section, to me, seemed completely fabricated. the woman color coded his memories at one point, for God's sake.

but i'm beyond the "blah" now and getting into it...

ok so perhaps he did attach colors to certain memories. ok. but this book was mostly about what the author felt keroac was trying to achieve - based on the man's own diaries and letters so it's legit - and i suppose i am lame and just wanted to know stuff the man did. that's in there, too, but the book ends prior to the publication of the 1957 version of "on the road." so much is left out.

worth reading. just not aMAzing, imo

Kevin Kizer says

The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac
By Joyce Johnson

In the category of most biographed (trademarked!) author, Jack Kerouac seems to still reign supreme as evidenced by this the 12,653th biography to be published since his death in 1969. One would think that the territory would be well worn. However, this biography is written by Joyce Johnson, who was a steady part of Kerouac's unsteady life from 1957, when she met Kerouac on a blind date, to his death twelve years later. Johnson was already a writer by the time the two met. She had enrolled in Barnard College at the age of 16 and sold her first novel in 1957 at the age of 21, which was when she went on that date with Kerouac. And she was with Kerouac nine months later when the New York Times review of *On The Road* was published, turning the unknown Kerouac into a literary and cultural sensation over night. After Kerouac's death, Johnson kept his legacy alive by getting Kerouac's experimental novel *Visions of Cody* published. Many Kerouac devotees consider the book to be his masterpiece.

In *The Voice is All*, Johnson brings to light lesser known (and some unknown) facets of Kerouac's life, in

particular his French-Canadian upbringing. As a youth Kerouac spoke a Canadian dialect of French and struggled with English through high school. It was this constant translation and re-translation of words and phrases that informed Kerouac's development as a writer, in particular his experiments with prose. This combined with an early love for improvisational jazz that was nurtured by friends in college who were involved in the music business, resulted stream-of-consciousness writing in league with James Joyce and William Faulkner.

Johnson's book illuminates much of Kerouac's development and digs deep into his heritage, from his youth in Lowell, Mass., during the Depression to his collegiate and post-war years in New York and beyond. And along the way, we meet a good portion of the Beat Generation: Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke and John Clellon Holmes.

This is an excellent book for Kerouac fans and neophytes as it faithfully records Kerouac life (well-known) and punctuates it with new information that deepens our understanding of this complex and talented writer.

Michelle Curie says

"With a sweep of bewilderment I began to live - a man on the earth, his relation to all things, to his fellow man, to his society, and to the universe."

Since reading *On the Road* for the first time a couple of years ago, I have felt something like natural sympathy towards Jack Kerouac and his peers. The way they seemed to have lived, that *free American lifestyle* away from today's structures and requirements seemed intriguing and inspiring. When visiting a bookshop the other day and recognising his thoughtful and sensitive face on the cover of this book, I gave in to the spontaneous urge to take it home with me.

The Voice is All is a portrait written by somebody who knew Kerouac on a very personal level: In the 1950s, Joyce Johnson had been his girlfriend for two years. In this book, however, she focusses on the time before the novelist had reached critical acclaim, tracking his development from boyhood through the breakthroughs of 1951 which resulted in the composition of *On the Road*.

The first couple of pages worried me a bit, as I felt somehow thrown into a portrait of Kerouac's living situation and the details of his Franco Canadian childhood. However, the further I read, the more I felt drawn into this very details portrayal of Kerouac's world. Full credit has to be given to Johnson for doing her research properly: her descriptions are backed up by files from the Kerouac Archive and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, both of which are not easily accessible to the public.

What we get is a very detailed, but alluring insight into what kind of person Kerouac was and what kind of friendship connected him to people like Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady. It definitely gave me a new perception of his work and writing, which to an uninformed eye might feel natural and effortless, but Johnson explains it plausibly:

"The idea of spontaneous writing suggested the process was easy, leaving out the immense discipline that went into it, the extraordinary verbal sensitivity Jack had acquired by existing between two languages, the

instinctive and learned aesthetic judgements that shaped the writing, and all the rehearsals that preceded Jack's seemingly effortless high-wire act, enabling him to finally leap 'out of the window' into the vastness of the American landscape and uncharted territory in fiction."

What this book made me understand was that **Kerouac lived and breathed his writing. It's what he lived for.** He was a flawed human being, but a devoted one. For people with an interest in the Beat generation and particularly Kerouac's work, this will most likely be an enthralling read. I am excited to re-read his stories now, as I feel like I will see them in a different light!

Chrissie says

I saw Joyce Johnson speak about this book recently. I'm not sure she's adding anything essential to the understanding of Jack Kerouac. Most of the anecdotes she mentions are in many of the other biographies written by other people about Kerouac and the passages she chose to read that night were not very interesting. During the Q&A, Johnson did not seem to want to address anything other than superficial issues and when she was asked a question about whether or not Jack was a good lover, she recoiled defensively, spat a passive-aggressive comment at the questioner (who was gracefully there to see Joyce, of course, actually interested) and Johnson turned the room very uncomfortable and very tense. Then Johnson tried to contextualize her response, proceeding to insult "most Americans" who, she claims, are all addicted to sordid details and celebrity tell-alls. That may be true on some very surface level, but it wasn't true about the room that night and the people who were there to hear her view of Kerouac and any insight she might have had for the audience there for her.

I think, at this point, that Johnson has made her career out of the few months of a romance that she had with Kerouac - and her relevance to Kerouac was mostly over after that. Johnson is not much of an authority on Kerouac and does not like to reveal anything real about him, showing demonstrable tension when people get close, because I don't think there is much there. Kerouac, truth be told, was not much of a lover. He loved his writing and his inner circle and his mother most of all. Johnson was not part of that inner circle, although she has certainly portrayed herself as that. Johnson told us something very telling that night also, the one moment of revelation that night about her real relationship with Jack - Johnson mentioned when asked what kind of contact she had with Kerouac after they broke up after a few months of dating: Johnson said she only had one short, uncomfortable, sad phone call with Jack after they broke up and before he died prematurely in 1969.

For someone who has been published based mostly on her having slept with Kerouac and dated him - and although she can write, albeit clinically and dispassionately - Johnson should not be so restrained with her view of Kerouac and dispensing of new information. I see this book as more of a revenue stream for her and a repackaging of already known anecdotes from her view, rather than a passionate portrait of Kerouac that might reflect the magic and breathless passion for life itself that Kerouac had. There is not much feeling of humanity in Johnson. You're better off reading Ann Charters's book on Jack or "Memory Babe" by Gerald Nicosia. Johnson's book is just someone else who knew Jack mostly peripherally - and having Kerouac's association and name on their books sells.

Jodi says

"The Voice is All" is Joyce Johnson's third biography/memoir of Jack Kerouac. Her two previous works are "Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir" and "Door Wide Open: A Beat Love Affair in Letters, 1957-1958" which was co-written by Kerouac.

I have to be honest, I hadn't heard of Jack Kerouac prior to being contacted by Penguin Group with a review opportunity. I love a good biography so decided to give The Voice is All a read. Joyce Johnson has obviously done her homework as displayed in the daunting list of research sources. But with so many previous biographies on Jack Kerouac it is unlikely Johnson revealed any further insight however I truly cannot be sure. Having said that, I did enjoy the read.

The book chronicles Kerouac's struggles to make his mark in the literary world, covering his formative years, through to age thirty, when he published his most notable book "On the Road". The epitome of a starving artist Kerouac spent most of his life homeless and moneyless. Keeping company with a lifelong group of friends, some of which spurred on questions of Kerouac's sexual preferences, but ultimately he was a womanizer, alcoholic and opportunist.

Born in Massachusetts the third child to a French Canadian family, Jack struggled with the death of his brother Gerard and experienced the toll it took upon his doting mother and his ne'er-do-well father. Always trying to live up to his father's expectations Kerouac pursued his love for football garnering a scholarship and recruiters for major teams. After a sports injury that sidelined Kerouac he left university and over the years that followed he would be in and out of university several times.

During the course of his lifetime until his timely death, (a time period not included in this biography), he wrote some 28 books including fiction, poetry and other works, but he is best known for "On the Road" and "Visions of Cody."

If you are a student or a fan of Jack Kerouac's writing, you can't go wrong with "The Voice is all: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac." The book is informative but definitely not a light read but one that is definitely worth the read.

Disclaimer: This book was given to me by Penguin Group in exchange for an honest and unbiased review.

Liza Wiemer says

Revealing, highly researched (but never boring) biography of one of America's most fascinating, iconic novelists.

When Penguin offered me the opportunity to review this biography, I was reluctant. I don't read many biographies, but as a writer, I couldn't resist learning more about Jack Kerouac. And does Joyce Johnson deliver. There are times I was deeply sympathetic toward Jack - the loss of his younger brother Gerard had a huge impact on his life. The death left his mother overprotective toward her remaining son. The apron strings were tied tightly and Jack never seemed to be able to cut them. Jack also grew up in extreme poverty with a father who barely provided for his family. His dad was often drunk and at the very least demanding. Jack's mother was the nurturer, often stepping in to protect Jack's love for writing when his father pushed for Jack to become a football star.

Jack was given many opportunities in life to succeed. With the promise of a football scholarship to Columbia

University, Jack was to finish high school in New York City at the prestigious Horace Mann High School. There, he played football, met some highly influential and supportive people, and had lots of opportunities to excel in his writing. After Horace Mann, he did indeed attend Columbia University on a full football scholarship. But he and the coach didn't seem to get along, especially after an injury Jack sustained, and Jack bailed, throwing his scholarship away. There were times he regretted this choice and at other times he seemed to be deeply relieved to be rid of the burden of classes he hated and a football game he wasn't the star of.

There were times when I despised Jack. The binge drinking and drug use destroyed his life. He was arrogant and insecure. He was a womanizer and he abandoned his wife and child with barely a blink of the eye. He had no qualms about sleeping with his friends' girlfriends. Actually, it was encouraged.

His writing was everything and his friends and acquaintances filled his pages. He hung around with the hottest writers of his generation and the movers and shakers in the publishing world. Sometimes with great respect and love and sometimes with disdain. Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and John Clellon Holmes were the friends who influenced him the most. They fueled his experimentation with drugs, sex, alcohol, and deep philosophical discussions. They traveled the road together, listened to the hottest jazz in Harlem together, partied together. All of this led to the creation of novels, poems, short stories, and letters, especially for Jack. *ON THE ROAD* was penned during and after many trips from New York to Denver, San Francisco, and his home town of Lowell, to name just a few.

There were several sections I loved. The descriptions of Jack's life at sea were amazing. I found the jazz scenes particularly fascinating as well as his life in Lowell, MA, at the Horace Mann school in NYC, and at Columbia. I found myself completely drawn in and transported to that time and space.

Drawing from the extensive research done from the Kerouac Archives, Johnson maps out Jack's life in a comprehensive manner. While reading, I experienced the highs and lows of Jack's life, the successes and the failures. Even when I felt disgusted by him, I still felt drawn to his story and the need to know what made him tick.

I'm not sure anyone could ever say that they knew Jack Kerouac, but this biography gives us a solid look into his world and philosophy of life. As a writer, I definitely know about the ups and the downs. His seemed to be quite manic fueled by alcohol, drugs, and sex.

A side note:

One observation that struck me while reading this biography was that not much in society has changed in the last 70 plus years. There is still war, debauchery, drug and alcohol abuse, mayhem, promiscuity, anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia. I am beginning to wonder if we "human beings" will ever learn. We like to believe that we've made progress. Perhaps on a few things we have. But overall, not much. But one thing is for certain: We can't stop doing whatever we can to make a difference, to leave a positive mark,, and do our best to not only learn from the past, but to utilize it to make life now and in the future better.

I definitely recommend this biography to anyone interested in Jack Kerouac, literature, writing, history. I will also be reading Joyce Johnson's memoirs.

Michelle says

Impressive, enthralling – and probably Kerouac’s last wish.

Just the compilation of this book is astounding. Hunting through all his letters, ceaseless journals, half written manuscripts, and the personal accounts and books of his friends and lovers – is a monumental task. The author Joyce Johnson related in a book reading in Brooklyn that this book took her 4 years to write. Each bit of information was cataloged with copious notes. The painstaking research is so dedicated it seems to be a testament of love.

Johnson succeeds in describing Kerouac’s life. She shows both, how he is seen by others and how he sees himself. Combining these with his published books and history, a picture of Kerouac comes together in a book which he would never have been able to write himself. It’s absolutely gripping to watch the intensity in which Kerouac lives in his journals. The dark raging inner struggles and his need to live every second of his life to the fullest, sheds light on what it means to be in the beat generation.

I can only help feel like what Kerouac had been trying to describe his whole life in his books can only accurately and fully be described by Johnson in his biography. Johnson shows Kerouac’s life and the way he lived, dedicated to dreams and passion, was his real accomplishment.

Jim Cherry says

In her introduction to “The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac” Joyce Johnson warns against considering her biography of Jack Kerouac a definitive version, but after reading the book I guess I’ll do it for her. If there is such a thing as a definitive biography Johnson’s “The Voice is All” is as close as you can get.

Besides being a writer in her own right, Johnson had an affair with Kerouac just as his breakthrough and now classic “On The Road” brought him national acclaim and fame. She also remained friends with him the rest of his life. Biographies or memoirs by ex-girlfriends or lovers can be a scary proposition. They can turn out to be a love letter that borders on hagiography, a defense of their love, a kiss and tell book, or even a volume that settles a score with the former loved one. However, Johnson gets it right with an unbiased biography.

In the “Voice is All” Johnson visits all the usual landmarks of Kerouac’s life, his relationship and the death of his brother Gerard, his early interest in and exploring of his imagination and the creation that resulted from it, the travails of his youth, the athletic prowess that got him out of the factory town of Lowell, MA, and to Columbia University in New York, falling in with group of friends that would inspire him and would later become known as The Beats, including Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and John Clellon Holmes. What is new is the information Johnson brings out with the aid of her being able to access Kerouac’s archives, and she delves more deeply than other writers have into the relationships that formed Kerouac both early on and in his budding literary career, including his brother Gerard, and more surprising Holmes who most biographers brush past in favor of Kerouac’s more incendiary relationship with Neal Cassady.

Another point Johnson pulls into tighter focus is Kerouac’s devotion to writing and the WORK he put into it, going over the diaries Kerouac kept, and the visions and revisions he went through to insure his work was the best writing he could do until he elevated it to the level of the writers he admired Thomas Wolfe, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville.

Johnson also brings her considerable skill and insight as a writer to the volume. I never once found the writing hum-drum, boring, or average. It was engaging all the way through.

Johnson is now around 78 years old, and “The Voice is All” ends right before Kerouac meets her and fame. I hope there’s plans and time enough for her to finish a companion volume.
