A Highwayscribery Book Report

The legendary 1951 scroll draft of On the Road, published word for word as Kerouac originally composed it. Though Jack Kerouac began thinking about the novel that was to become On the Road as early as 1947, it was not until three weeks in April 1951, in an apartment on West Twentieth Street in Manhattan, that he wrote the first full draft that was satisfactory to him. Typed out as one long, single-spaced paragraph on eight long sheets of tracing paper that he later taped together to form a 120-foot scroll, this document is among the most significant, celebrated, and provocative artifacts in contemporary American literary history. It represents the first full expression of Kerouac's revolutionary aesthetic, the identifiable point at which his thematic vision and narrative voice came together in a sustained burst of creative energy. It was also part of a wider vital experimentation in the American literary, musical, and visual arts in the post-World War II period. It was not until more than six years later, and several new drafts, that Viking published, in 1957, the novel known to us today. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of On the Road, Viking will publish the 1951 scroll in a standard book format. The differences between the two versions are principally ones of significant detail and altered emphasis. The scroll is slightly longer and has a heightened linguistic virtuosity and a more sexually frenetic tone. It also uses the real names of Kerouac's friends instead of the fictional names he later invented for them. The transcription of the scroll was done by Howard Cunnell who, along with Joshua Kupetz, George Mouratidis, and Penny Vlagopoulos, provides a critical introduction that explains the fascinating compositional and publication history of On the Road and anchors the text in its historical, political, and social context. Celebrating 50 Years of On the Road: A 50th anniversary hardcover edition of Kerouac's classic novel that defined a generation. On the Road is the quintessential American vision of freedom and hope, a book that changed American literature and changed anyone who has ever picked it up. Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (Theyre Not What You Think): John Leland,
author of Hip: A History argues that On the Road still matters not for its youthful rebellion but because it is full of lessons about how to grow up.

From the back cover of On the Road: The Original Scroll: Jack Kerouac displaying one of his later scroll manuscripts, most likely The Dharma Bums

Kerouacs map of his first hitchhiking trip, July-October 1947 (click image to see the full map)

Original New York Times review of On the Road (click image to see the full review)

he continent groans again and again.

The night is too often sad, the cities are mad or wild and sad some more. New York is the edge of the continent, and San Francisco, too and sometimes theyre the rim of the world, or some similar allusion.

Jack Kerouac and his friends, hanging outside New York Citys Harmony Bar, would be considered drunks and losers by the standards of most. The authors muse and messiah, Neal Cassady, is a fellow too easily distracted, undisciplined and, by todays measurements, a candidate for depression medication.

In the recently released scroll version of On the Road, Cassadys criminal bent and complete disregard for his friends concerns or the safety of strangers are drawn in much starker contrast than they are in the (we now know for sure) much toned-down Viking Press version of the 1950s.

But it works and wonderfully so.

Whatever the personal flaws of the roadgoers, and they are multiple, whatever the prosodic sins of their faithful secretary Jack, equally numerous, The Scroll is blessed with energy and truth and dynamism, a beatific rhythm and sound that hold up, even though 50 years on weve read it all before.

But where what was once novel becomes cliché with the passing of time, The Scroll takes on enhanced value as snapshot of a country long-disappeared.

The Scroll contains a hundred pages more than the edited On the Road, and thats a lot of adventure and resulting ruminations, as Kerouac takes us to Denver and San Francisco, and back out to New York and down to North Carolina, back up again, and then down through Louisiana back up to San Francisco, New York again and finally through Texas to damp and sexy San Antonio before shooting through biblical Mexico, now gone, too.
Even the normal people in this frantic tome, those with wives and jobs they stick with are not like us anymore, working on ships and in factories as they do, abiding in company towns and city centers.

The Scroll is a sweeping panorama of America and of thought beaten out on teletype paper by a guy on speed; maybe drug speed, maybe coffee, but probably something else that burned out of Kerouac like heavy kerosene and which caused his death when the last vapors rose from his being and poofed out into the dusty firmament.

It has politics without the jeremiads and program points, just whole manifestoes in a masterful word-stroke such as sullen unions, a flavor and entire reality nailed to the minds wall.

The American police are involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who dont frighten them with imposing papers and threats. Theres no defense. Poor people have their lives interfered with ad infinitum by these neurotic busybodies. Its a Victorian police force; it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes dont exist to their satisfaction.

It is loving landscape portraiture as in this passage laid down about Neal, his whore wife Luanne (meant here as flattery), and Jacks departure from New Orleans:

Port Allen -- Poor Allen -- where the rivers all rain and roses in a misty pinpoint darkness and where we swung around a circular drive in yellow foglight and suddenly saw the great black body below a bridge and crossed eternity again. What is the Mississippi River -- a washed clod in the rainy night, a soft plopping from drooping Missouri banks, a dissolving, a riding of the tide down the eternal waterbed, a contribution to brown foams, a voyaging past endless vales and trees and levees down, down along, down along, by Memphis, Greenville, Eudora, Vicksburg, Natchez, Port Allen, and Port Orleans and Point of the Deltas, by Venice and the Nights Great Gulf out. So the stars shine warm in the Gulf of Mexico at night. From the soft and thunderous Carib comes electricity, and from the continental Divide where rain and rivers are decided come swirls, and the little raindrop that in Dakota fell and gathered mud and roses rises resurrected from the sea and flies on back to go and bloom again in waving mells of the Mississippi bed, and lives again.

The passage lies almost exactly at the books midpoint; stands as strong backbone to all the word swirling before and after, a fine spine, like the Mississippi in its marriage with the landscape.

Everywhere lively applications, symbols, poetry pulled from the very map that is America, multiple magic in Missouri and Mississippi, no invention with Port Orleans and Point of the Deltas, by Potash, and Venice, just the natural ordering of an evident and obvious song about the land itself.
Early on in this passage the prose become unnecessary, the point made, ripe for a Madison Avenue editors pen. But gripped by the authors sweaty hand, we are yanked along, pointed here and there on the keyboard toward ecstatic sites he has taken the time to see for us.

Can the Carib be both soft and thunderous? Does the oscillation between them make electricity? On paper it does. Is there such a thing as a mell or does his easy resort to something that sings make it go down so much easier, and isnt that part of the job?

Mell is a swell on the Mississippi and we know that, even if we didnt before.

It is not easy to sift through all the postmodern swill that has come after and still be awed at the pure audacity of Kerouac; the audacity to make up words, to appear at his New York editors office sweating and stinking of chemical ooze with a manuscript written on 120 feet of rolled paper demanding respect of The Scroll as if it were plumbed from Dead Sea depths.

So goes it with the aspiring philosopher whom, even if he is a bum, still philosophizes for all of us and not just for those of high brow and intentions:

deat will overtake us before heaven. The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced -- tho we hate to admit it -- in death. But who wants to die. More of this later.

Beyond bum philosophy or travel writing The Scroll renders social commentary still relevant today:

On the sidewalk characters swarmed. Everybody was looking at everybody else. It was the end of the continent no more land. Somebody had tipped America like a pinball machine and all the goofballs had come rolling to LA in the southwest corner. I cried for all of us. There was no end to the American sadness and the American madness. Someday well all start laughing and roll on the ground when we realize how funny its been. Until then there is a lugubrious s