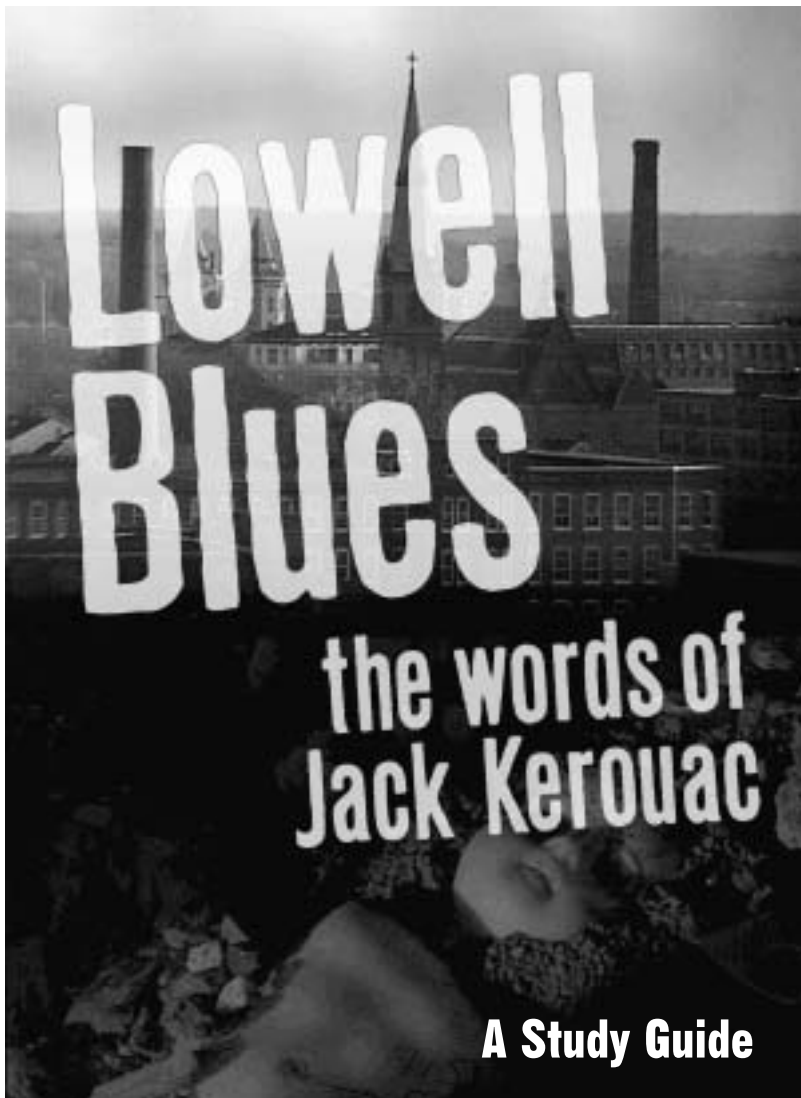


**“It was in Centralville I was born, in
Pawtucketville saw Doctor Sax. Across
the wide basin to the hill — on Lupine
Road, March 1922, at five**



**o'clock
in the
afternoon of
a red-all-over
supper time, as
drowsily beers
were tapped on
Moody and Lake-
view saloons
and the river
rushed with
her cargoes
of ice over
reddened
slick rocks,
and on the
shore the reeds
swayed among
mattresses and**

**cast-off boots of Time, and lazily pieces of
snow dropped plunk from bagging branches of
black thorny oily pine in their thaw, and beneath
the wet snows of the hillside receiving the sun's
lost rays the melts of winter mixed with roars of
Merrimac was born. Bloody rooftop. Strange deed.”**

— Jack Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*

About the Author



Born in the Centralville neighborhood of Lowell, Massachusetts on March 12, 1922, Jack Kerouac spent his early years deeply enmeshed in the

French-Canadian culture of lower Centralville. He spoke Quebecois French at home and was taught in French at the St. Louis School. His family moved to Lowell's Pawtucketville neighborhood in 1929, and Kerouac began attending Lowell public schools. He graduated from Lowell High School in 1939 and attended Columbia University in New York City on a football scholarship.

Kerouac spent a lifetime writing, and nearly 30 volumes of his work have been published to date. His series of autobiographical novels, known as the Legend of Duluoz, ranks as one of the major literary achievements of the past century. *Dr. Sax*, the novel that serves as the foundation for Henry Ferrini's "Lowell Blues," is part of the Duluoz legend. Kerouac's groundbreaking novel *On the Road* was recently named by a panel of scholars and writers as one of the 100 greatest novels in English, and Kerouac was named by Time magazine as one of the most influential figures of the 20th century. He died in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1969, and is buried in Edson Cemetery in Lowell.

About the City

Lowell, Massachusetts was founded in 1826 as a business venture by a collection of wealthy Boston industrialists who dreamed of a city full of factories on a river – factories large enough to rival the great mills of England. Workers were needed of course – first the "mill girls" who came from the farms of New England, then wave

after wave of immigrants like Kerouac's French Canadian parents, who settled in Lowell and built the city's neighborhoods. Today, in the 21st century, Lowell's textile mills along the river have either closed down or been converted to other uses, but the city continues to change and evolve. Recent arrivals from Southeast Asia have again strengthened the city's neighborhoods and begun to add a new chapter to Lowell's history.

About the River

The Merrimack River begins at the confluence of the Pemigewasset and Winnepesaukee Rivers and flows for approximately 116 miles from the White Mountains of New Hampshire to Newburyport, Massachusetts where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It was this very river that the Boston industrialists used to power their mills; the river, through an elaborate system of mills and canals, fueled their vision of industrial riches. Much, much further back, the river was an important source of life. Archaeological surveys have revealed at least four Native American sites dating from 8,000 years ago, and the point at Lowell, Massachusetts where the river turns sharply from the south to the east was considered a sacred site. It is at this very point (located where the current University Ave bridge spans the river) where Dr. Sax first appears. For Jack Kerouac, the Merrimack River was nothing



less than the great Amazon River that courses through the heart of the South American continent. "Map your putomayos to a Napo-further Amazonian junction," he writes, "origin of Dr. Sax." Throughout Ferrini's film, as it is in Kerouac's novel, the river is a persistent symbol – wholly open to interpretation by every viewer,

and yet a concrete presence that informs and often links the film to all other elements of activity in Lowell.

About the Book

Published in 1959, Jack Kerouac began working on *Dr. Sax* in New York City as early as 1949, though his most concentrated time spent on the book was in Mexico City in 1952. The book, as Kerouac described it in 1949, “is about children and glee; townspeople; a river flooding; and mysterious occurrences, in and about a ‘castle of life.’” Indeed, the novel is divided into six “Books,” with titles for each book that hint at the wild mix of everyday and mysterious occurrences: “Ghosts of the Pawtucketville Night”; “A Gloomy Bookmovie”; “More Ghosts”; “The Night the Man with the Watermelon Died”; “The Flood”; and “The Castle”.

If there is a central theme inherent in the wild imaginings of *Dr. Sax*, it is the interplay of imagination and reality. The book, then, becomes a mix of memory and dream, where real life-occurrences — such as the great flood of the Merrimack River — are mingled with scenes of the black-caped Dr. Sax battling an evil snake over the skies of Lowell. As Kerouac writes in *Dr. Sax*, “memory and dream are intermixed in this mad universe.”

Spontaneity and Improvisation

It was while he was writing *Dr. Sax* that Kerouac began practicing the art of “sketching,” a kind of spontaneous exploration in words that would soon lead to what Kerouac described as “Spontaneous Prose.” Kerouac’s central aesthetic, his guiding principal as a writer, was contained in his theory of spontaneous prose. For Kerouac, this meant that writing was something like a jazz musician’s solo. It had to be created on the spot, without any revisions, and it had to come from the heart.

But, like a jazz musician, this writing demanded great attention to practice and preparation.

About the Film’s Music

Henry Ferrini’s “Lowell Blues: the Words of Jack Kerouac” moves to a unique soundtrack of spoken word and improvisational, spontaneous jazz. Ferrini, Willie Alexander, and fellow musician Jim Doherty, began by laying down different passages that seemed to evoke or echo the Kerouac text being read during the film. Ferrini brought these tracks to Lee Konitz, along with the Kerouac text, and Konitz improvised on saxophone. As Ferrini comments, “the basic tracks helped lay down the atmosphere, and Konitz sax was the lightning in the atmosphere.”

Saxophonist Lee Konitz stands high in the pantheon of improvising musicians. Born in Chicago in 1927, he was influenced by the cool style of Lester Young. After moving to New York he studied and played with pianist Lennie Tristano, and in 1948, aged 20, he was part of Miles Davis’s Birth Of The Cool ensemble. His approach and sound on alto sax is one of the most original in jazz. Kerouac, as a writer, was profoundly influenced by the spontaneity and improvisation of jazz in general and Lee Konitz in particular. In a letter to Neal Cassady in 1951, Kerouac recommended listening to Lee Konitz to learn how to write. “I’ve come up with even greater complicated sentences & visions,” he writes, “so from now on just call me Lee Konitz.” As Kerouac biographer Ann Charters has written, “with spontaneous prose, Kerouac felt he had found a way to write that gave him the spontaneity of a jazz musician.”



About the Film's Readers and order of appearance

In Ferrini's film, the words of Jack Kerouac are read by a collection of actors, artists, musicians, and writers who all acknowledge Kerouac as an inspiration for their own work.

Willie Alexander – Called the “godfather” of the Boston music scene, helped build the film's musical score. He also reads the opening section on birth as well as a onomatopoeic nonsense poem that demonstrates Kerouac's keen musical sense and experimentation with sounds.

Robert Creeley – A contemporary of Kerouac, Creeley is one of America's most honored poets. Creeley reads the “wrinkly tar” section where Kerouac not only talks about the writing process but describes the mystery of growing up in Lowell.

David Amram – As one of America's most gifted jazz musicians, Amram collaborated with Kerouac in the 1950's for a series of readings combining jazz and poetry. Amram read the



mill section. During his youth Kerouac's mother was a mill worker in several of the mills in Lowell.

Carolyn Cassady – Her memoir “Off the Road,” of her time with Kerouac and her husband Neal Cassady, was made into the Hollywood movie “Heartbeat”. Ms. Cassady reads a section about the Lowell neighborhoods where the writer describes “a thousand things up and down the street”. All these elements connect back to the river metaphor in the film.

Johnny Depp – Most famous for his work as a popular actor, Depp points to Kerouac and his

writing as one of the great inspirations of his creative life. Depp reads about the Merrimack River.

Roger Brunelle – One of the founders of the non-profit group “Lowell Celebrates Kerouac,” you can hear Kerouac's native French in Brunelle's readings. These French sections can be found translated by Kerouac in Dr. Sax. The first section deals with the flood of 1936.

Joyce Johnson – Her memoir “Minor Characters,” about her friendship with Kerouac in the 1950's, won a National Book Award. Johnson reads about Kerouac's early appreciation and love of books.

Willie Alexander – Nonsense poem reading.

Carolyn Cassady – High School, library reading.

Roger Brunelle – This section about a life of suffering is translated in the book. “Oh my poor Ti Jean if you know all the trouble and all the tears and all the sendings of the head to the breast, for sadness, big sadness, impossible this life where we find ourselves doomed for death— why why why, just to suffer like your father Emil like your aunt Marie, for nothing – my child poor Ti Jean, do you know my dear you are destined to be a man of big sadness and talent – it'll never help to live or die, you'll suffer like the others more”

Gregory Corso – A trailblazing poet and a contemporary of Kerouac, Corso can be heard reading the meditation on death and dying.

Jack Kerouac – The author's voice is used intermittently throughout the movie. At the beginning of the film he pipes in with his job as a writer is to describe heaven just a little bit. These snippets were recorded at radio station WCAP when Kerouac returned to Lowell in 1962. The interview was conducted by Charles Jarvis and James T. Curtis.

Activities

- 1) Henry Ferrini, the filmmaker of “Lowell Blues,” deliberately uses images of contemporary Lowell to bring Kerouac’s words to life. As you’re watching the film, look for how Ferrini uses present-day Lowell to illustrate Kerouac’s novel of his boyhood in Lowell in the 1930’s. In what ways do you think Lowell has changed in the last 70 to 75 years? In what ways do you think it has stayed the same? Write a short paper that talks about one way in which your town has changed, and two ways in which it is similar, and for each point you make use examples from Ferrini’s film.
- 2) Jack Kerouac’s *Dr. Sax* largely consists of two interwoven stories: one fantastic tale set in Lowell where the good Dr. Sax battles the evil snake, and another story, also set in Lowell, where young Jack Duluoz records simple, everyday events such as walking to school with his older sister. Write a story in which you are the main character, and the simple plot of your story is that you are walking (or riding the bus) to school. Describe the things you see every day, including the places you pass every day and may not give much notice. If you want to make it an extended writing project you can add your own Dr. Sax-like character and imagine a battle of good and evil taking place on the streets and sidewalks that you pass everyday.
- 3) Language and music have many similarities, and the French language is considered one of the most “musical” of Western languages. Based on Kerouac’s tremendous output of over thirty books in English, it may be hard to believe that English was Kerouac’s second language. He spoke only French at home, and French was the language of instruction in his earliest schools, and so whole passages of *Dr. Sax* are written in Kerouac’s boyhood French. Most of the French in the movie is not translated. What sense do you get from listening to these sections. How is rhythm, phrasing, repetition and attack used by the writer and musician as well?
- 4) The places Kerouac describes in *Dr. Sax*, and the filmmaker photographs, are still very real places in Lowell: The Grotto behind the Franco American School on Pawtucket Street, the Merrimack River, Lowell High School and the Lowell Public Library. These places have particular importance to Kerouac. Describe a place that has special meaning and importance to you.



A Kerouac Chronology

- 1922 Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac was born on March 12 in Lowell, Massachusetts, the third child of Leo and Gabrielle Kerouac.
- 1939 Kerouac attends Columbia University in New York.
- 1942 Kerouac serves, during World War II, in the Merchant Marines.
- 1944 In New York City, Kerouac meets Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg.
- 1946 Kerouac meets Neal Cassady. He would later appear as Dean Moriarty, the hero of Kerouac's *On the Road*.
- 1947–50 Kerouac takes his first trips across the United States with Neal Cassady.
- 1948 Kerouac coins the term “the beat generation” to describe his contemporaries and their outlook on life.
- 1950 Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City*, is published.
- 1951 Kerouac discovers “sketching” and “spontaneous prose,” beginning a period of radical experimentation with language and form that would last the rest of his life.
- 1952 Kerouac writes *Visions of Cody* in San Francisco. He finishes writing *Dr. Sax* in Mexico City.
- 1953 Kerouac writes *Maggie Cassidy* and *The Subterraneans* in New York.
- 1954 Kerouac continues to study Buddhism and lives for a time in California. He writes *San Francisco Blues* and *Some of the Dharma*.
- 1955 He writes *Mexico City Blues* in Mexico City.
- 1956 He writes *Visions of Gerard* in North Carolina and the first part of *Desolation Angels* in Washington. Meets Robert Creeley in San Francisco.
- 1957 *On the Road* is published by Viking Press in New York City. The book becomes a national sensation and Kerouac must handle sudden fame and notoriety.
- 1958 Meets Joyce Glassman (Joyce Johnson)
- 1958–60 Writes *Lonesome Traveler* and *The Dharma Bums*.
- 1959 Participates in film *Pull my Daisy* with Gregory Corso and David Amram
- 1961 Kerouac writes the second half of *Desolation Angels* in Mexico City and writes *Big Sur* in Florida.
- 1965 He writes *Satori in Paris* in Florida.
- 1966 He marries his third wife, Stella Sampas, and moves back to Lowell.
- 1967 Kerouac writes *Vanity of Duluo* in Lowell.
- 1969 Kerouac dies in St. Petersburg, Florida on October 29. He is buried in Edson Cemetery in Lowell.

For Further Study

Selected Books:

- Kerouac, Jack.
On the Road.
New York: Viking Press, 1957.
- Charters, Ann.
Kerouac: A Biography.
San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1973.
- Kerouac, Jack.
Atop an Underwood: Early Writings.
Edited by Paul Marion.
New York: Viking Press, 1998.

Selected Websites:

- “Literary Kicks” – a website on Kerouac and other Beat writers.
<http://www.charm.net/~brooklyn/>
- “DharmaBeat” – a literary ’zine on Kerouac and his influence.
<http://members.aol.com/kerouaczin/dharmabeat.htm>
- “Lowell Celebrates Kerouac” – the Lowell-based non-profit organization that sponsors a yearly Kerouac festival in Lowell.
<http://ecommunity.uml.edu/lck/>



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