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The Cambridge Companion to The Beats

Edited by Steven Belletto

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The inclusion of the Beats in the *Cambridge Companions* series signals an assimilation of the Beats' anti-establishment seriousness into another variety of seriousness to be found in the academy. Indeed, such is the jarring of the juxtaposition of the Beats and the *Cambridge Companion* series that the editor of this volume, Steven Belletto, opens his Introduction, "Fans of irony will appreciate that *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* now exists". He goes on to sketch a picture of the Beats; "they wrote against conformity, consumerism, and the values of mainstream culture. From a literary perspective, they often positioned their writing against that of the so-called 'academic' or 'university' poets" (p. 1).

As is customary for an Introduction in the *Cambridge Companion* series, Belletto discusses the nuances and difficulties underpinning the core definitions and terms which shape the book and in doing so expands our understanding of the literatures encompassed by this label. Most readers are likely to be familiar with the names of Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, authors usually recognised as Beat writers. This *Companion* locates an understanding of the Beats beyond the familiar, identifying a wide range of writers and approaches to writing which are associated with the term Beat. This factor alone makes the volume worthwhile for any reader looking to read beyond the "canonical" Beat authors.

There are 18 chapters, presented without groupings into the thematic subheadings often

encountered in *Cambridge Companions*. Chapters 1 to 9 focus mainly around individual writers, and assess and review the achievements of their work. The first chapter, *Were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs a Generation?* tackles the familiar names. Establishing this question early on in the volume clears the path for Chapters 2 to 9: *Beatniks, Hippies, Yippies, Feminists, and the Ongoing American Counterculture*; *Locating a Beat Aesthetic*; *The Beats and Literary History: Myths and Realities*; *Allen Ginsberg and Beat Poetry*; *Five Ways of Being a Beat, circa 1958-1959*; *Jack Kerouac and the Beat Novel*; *William S. Burroughs: Beating Postmodernism*; *Memory Babes: Joyce Johnson and Beat Memoir*; and *Beat Writers and Criticism*. Chapters 11 to 18 adopt a thematic approach. The eight thematic chapters are presented as: *The Beats and Gender*; *The Beats and Sexuality*; *The Beats and Race*; *Ethnographies and Networks: On Beat Transnationalism*; *Buddhism and the Beats*; *Beat as Beatific: Gregory Corso's Christian Poetics*; *Jazz and the Beat Generation*; and *The Beats and Visual Culture*. It is interesting to read in the Introduction that "We deliberately avoided having chapters organized around particular identities such as "women Beat writers" or "African American Beat writers", not only because so doing would ironically reinscribe a white male centre but also because issues of gender or race are of course relevant to white men as well as women or people of color" (p. 19). Having reviewed very many titles over the years in which such identities have indeed informed approaches to organizing the content of *Companions* and other reference works it is refreshing to encounter an attempt to rethink what are by now standardised ways of presenting critical academic readings of texts.

As one would expect from a series as authoritative as the *Cambridge Companions*, every chapter is informed by up-to-date scholarship, written in an approachable style and is fully referenced. The Contributors are all academic scholars, predominantly from the USA. Front matter includes Contents, Notes on Contributors, a Chronology and the Introduction, whilst the book finishes with five pages of Further Reading and a good 14-page Index.

This title is recommended for university and college libraries supporting American literature or culture programmes.

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