

*Book of Sketches* by Jack Kerouac  
Introduction by George Condo  
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Reviewed by Dave Moore

After completing his scroll version of *On the Road* in April 1951, Kerouac was still unsatisfied and wanted to break away from its "conventional narrative survey of road trips etc." In October, his architect student friend Ed White suggested to him: "Why don't you just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words?" Kerouac tried it, and was gripped by the power of the new technique that lent a new form of spontaneity to his writing. He began straight away, enthusiastically rewriting his Road book in this new fashion. The first 36 pages of *Visions of Cody* are pure sketches, recorded in the streets, subways and diners of New York in the fall of 1951. This new publication, *Book of Sketches*, contains over 400 more pages of sketches, typed by Kerouac in 1959 from the original small breast-pocket notebooks in which they were recorded. They begin with sketches of life at his sister's home in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in August 1952, just after Kerouac had returned there from Mexico City where he had completed work on *Doctor Sax*. Kerouac describes his work on the North Carolina railroad just before taking off on the road once more on a mammoth hitch-hike to California, via Denver, and the new Cassady home in San Jose. Then follow sketches of Mexico from December 1952, and one on an airplane flying from St Louis to New York, a previously unknown trip taking Kerouac back home in time for Christmas.

In the following year, Kerouac sketched while on a visit to Montreal in March 1953, and during his railroad work at San Luis Obispo, California that April, before taking off by sea for New York and a meeting with "Mardou" (Alene Lee) during the summer of *The Subterraneans*. Sketches of Kerouac's work on the Long Island railroad in October are also included, as well as more descriptions of the streets of Manhattan and Long Island that fall. The book comes to a close with a glimpse of life in San Francisco in early 1954, and tagged onto the end are a few sketches recorded during his overseas trip of Spring 1957, to Tangiers, France, and England.

The writing is superb throughout, particularly the description of what must have been Kerouac's longest ever hitch-hike, 3000 miles from North Carolina to

California in late August 1952, via Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada, a trip not previously mentioned in his other writings. Kerouac lists each town he passed through and describes practically every lift he obtained on the way. Reaching Denver, he spent a whole day sketching Cassady's old haunts, including Zaza's barbershop, the Glenarm poolhall, and Pederson's. But as well as sketching the scenes before him, Kerouac also explored philosophical topics, such as his Spengler-inspired sympathy with the Fellaheen, in his "Notes on the Millennium of the Hip Fellaheen, Oct. 1952, California" and planned his future with them: "Go among the People, the Fellaheen not the American Bourgeois Middle-class World of neurosis nor the Catholic French Canadian European World -- the People -- Indians, Arabs, the Fellaheen in country, village, of City slums -- an essential World Dostoevsky."

This has to be one of the most important pieces of Kerouac's writing to have been released in several decades. As well as providing further examples of Kerouac's innovative sketch-writing, it also fills some gaps in the Duluoz Legend. It will become an essential part of the Kerouac canon. The marketing of the book raises some queries, however, since it is described on the back cover as a collection of "poems" and is published in the Penguin Poets series. Kerouac always seemed quite clear that his sketches were not poems but prose. In his definition of a sketch (in *Some of the Dharma*) he notes that "A sketch is a prose description of a scene before the eyes," and on the title page of his typescript wrote: "Book of Sketches -- Proving that sketches ain't verse." It is unmistakable, though, that sketching led to Kerouac's development of the spontaneous poems he called Blues, which he began in 1954 with "San Francisco Blues," continuing with his classic *Mexico City Blues* the following year. Nonetheless, it is the content of the book that matters, and this is quite simply outstanding, and essential for any Kerouac scholar and enthusiast.