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On the Road Again

Doug Nufer

GETTING INSIDE JACK KEROUAC'S HEAD

Simon Morris

Information as Material

<http://www.informationasmaterial.com>

310 pages; paper, £8.99

Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head by Simon Morris is an apparent replica of the 2000 UK Penguin Classics edition of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. From the cover photo, with Morris and editor Nick Thurston posing as Kerouac and Neal Cassady, to the fonts to the use of introductions, with Kenneth Goldsmith in place of Ann Charters, the elements of design of the Morris book take dead ringer aim on the Kerouac. So much for the paratext. The text of the Morris book follows Kerouac another way: backwards, page by page, via the "original scroll" version of *On the Road*. Originally, as it were, Morris retyped the entire novel, a page a day, on a blog, and this book re-publishes that effort, beginning with the last page first.

Welcome to uncreative writing. I can think of no more exemplary introduction to this genre, or to the broader field of conceptual writing, than *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head*, with the possible exception of the complete reproduction of one issue of *The New York Times* in the book *Day* (2003) by Goldsmith, who dared Morris to undertake this project.

Goldsmith's introduction succinctly lays out the rationale behind the work and relates some of the practical obstacles Morris faced. He likens the act of a writer typing a novel by someone else to the act of painter copying a masterpiece in a museum. Morris, a slow typist, struggled to do what Kerouac could

do at one hundred words per minute. At any rate, his process of simply typing what Kerouac composed (and revised again and again by typing in long, Benzedrine-fueled sessions) is put forth as not only a highly unusual way to read a novel, but also as a way for a reader to get a heightened understanding of the author and the work. As appealing as Goldsmith's alternative path to the study of literature is, and as admirable as Morris is for following through on an idea that usually gets filed away under "Let's Not and Say We Did," these claims may be more provocative than persuasive. If the provocations start fights, so much the better.

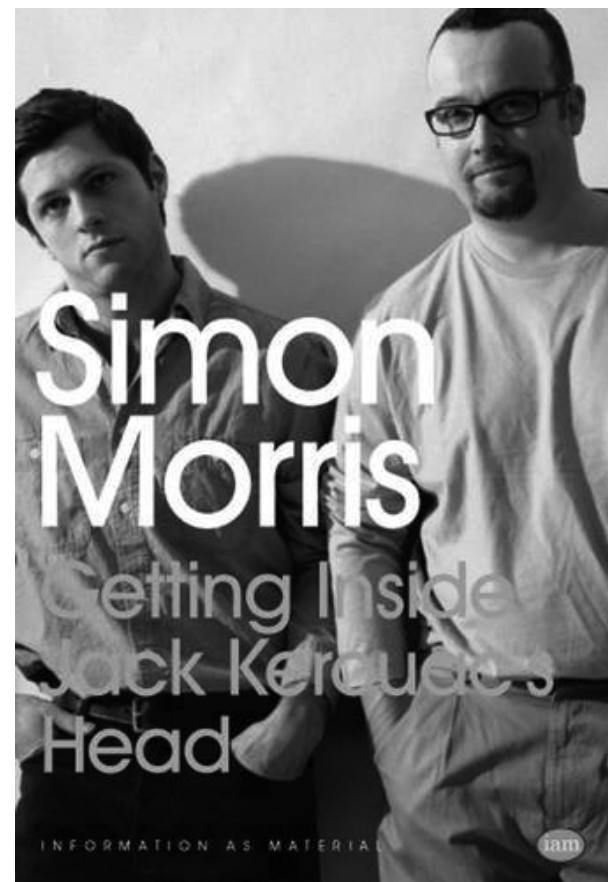
Goldsmith also raises an issue that is, for uncreative writing that appropriates what someone else created, the eight hundred-pound gorilla in the room: the law. Unlike Kerouac, who, Charters point out, changed the names of his characters to protect himself from libel, Morris tags the original suspects. And Morris, following the scroll, rolls out the prose in lines unbroken by paragraphs, while Kerouac's original mode of composition got edited into a more conventional form. By using the scroll to render the book the way he does, Morris may copy the original composition more directly, but he also veers away from making a true copy of the copyrighted classic. Goldsmith mentions how Kerouac's heirs didn't pester Morris for his blog work. Now that he has published his book, who knows? Morris may well be in the clear. It's absurd to claim that he stands to profit from or ruin the market for the original. If anything, his book might sell more copies of *On the Road*. Why shell out nine pounds plus shipping for *Getting Into Jack Kerouac's Head* if you can just read *On the Road* backwards?

I can think of no more exemplary introduction to uncreative writing, or to the broader field of conceptual writing, than this book.

Indeed, why read it at all? When it comes to *On the Road*, I am far from an innocent by-stander. I've read it every which way, for pleasure and for plunder. In order to write *On the Road* (2004), a novel in the form of a corporate history narrated by the CEO of a coffee company who's crazy about Kerouac, I began by taking passages from the Kerouac book and translating them via Oulipian procedures into business slang. The prospect of seeing what Morris did to it was irresistible, and the only way to see was to read the whole damn thing all over again.

Many writers have a rollercoaster history of assessments of *On the Road*. At one time or another, I've thought of it as an inspiring novel, a sloppy piece of fiction but an incisive memoir, a young-adult primer for boys, a formal departure from the dominant narrative patterns of mid-twentieth-century American prose but a far cry from the inventions of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Gertrud Stein, and William Faulkner, and a grotesquely overrated example of over-writing that, nevertheless, isn't so bad after all. For a book with a slapdash style, no plot, and a fatuous nincompoop for a protagonist to be considered canon fodder is pretty wonderful.

The qualities that make *On the Road* what it is also made it a perfect book for Morris to subject to his experiment in writing, reading, and literary criticism. Frontwards or backwards, the breakneck pace through similar scenes in interchangeable places has a resilience no typist could mangle, no matter what typos and grammatical lapses pop up (thanks



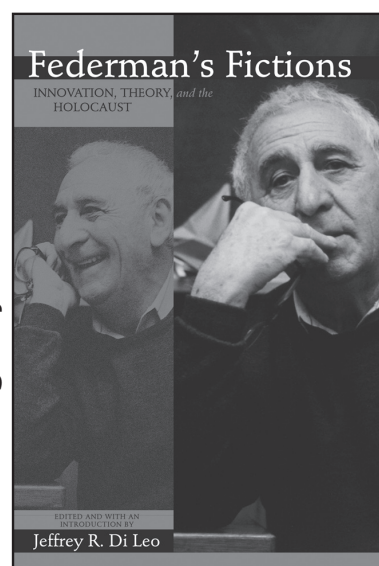
to Kerouac or Morris). And who needs paragraph breaks? Things just go, and the reader goes with them. Also, freed from any need to follow the story in a forward-driven coherence, I found it easy to stop and go anywhere, to read one page or dozens of pages at a sitting. The key to this thrill comes from Kerouac's sleek yet often compounded syntax, with a possible assist from William S. Burroughs: the cut-ups formed at the transition from the end of the page to the beginning of the next page that, in the original, preceded it. Many of these transitions form elegant splices, to enhance or confound meaning. Here are a few, in consecutive pages: "Be sure to bring your broom dear, the / 'Eh, Eh, What's that you say?'" "Henri was trying to put a story / gulls. Nobody noticed...." "I took out a gun and said / delighted." "...and shot at the / just a chance meeting a deer..." "She was / his pocket."

Given that Morris worked from a draft, I wasn't bothered by mistakes, even if the tendency to put a nominative pronoun after a preposition (between you and I) recurs so often as to suggest that the French Canadian-raised Kerouac had a chink in his command of American English vernacular. As reading upside down helps proofreaders spot what they might otherwise miss, reading pages out of the usual context can focus on syntax, dialogue, and vignettes. *On the Road* holds up well under this scrutiny, although the disembodied dialogue of these true-life characters, whether rattling off banalities ("Yass, yeass"), or worse, trying to sound profound ("and not only that, but it started a train of thoughts of my own, something real wild that I had to tell you..."), perhaps explains why Kerouac changed the names.

Perversely, the experience of revisiting the Kerouac Road via the Morris route led me to wonder whether more books shouldn't be revamped by freshly empowered readers in ways that disrupt the original context. Let's start with *Ulysses* (1918–1920), and not just page by page but word or word, backwards: "yes will I yes" all the way to "Mulligan Buck plump, stately." Anybody game?

Doug Nufer has been writing backwards for years, subjecting The Waste Land and many passages in his novel By Kelman Out of Pessoa to this mind of his twist.

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