I've been on a full time road trip through the Americas since 2006, but I've never read Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," until now.

My Amtrak train was heading north out of Burbank, California as I started Part One of Jack Kerouac's classic *On the Road*. The scenery out my window was all low rent suburbia until just south of Carpenteria when the ocean appeared not 200 feet from the tracks. Surfers bobbed. A few homeless people camped on the beach. Kids waved at the passing train for their own dreamy reasons and Sal Paradise, a thinly veiled in-print version of Kerouac, “began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off.” It was the winter of 1947 and Kerouac/Paradise had finally succeeded in hitting the road for real.

In 2006 I hit the road for real as well and I've been driving around the Americas with my husband full time ever since as our ongoing *Trans-Americas Journey* continues. During those years we've driven most of the roads in North America, Central America and northern South America, some of them twice. There's been a paperback copy of *On the Road* in the back of our truck since day one of our road trip, part of a mini-library of must-reads that we took with us from our bookcases in Manhattan in the days before Kindles. I've never opened the book.
The first draft of *On the Road* was written by Kerouac, a college dropout, over the course of three weeks in April of 1951 as one continuous paragraph on a 120-foot long scroll of paper in a feat of what Kerouac called “spontaneous prose”. *The New York Times* called it “a breathless blurt of language”. *Truman Capote* snarked that it wasn’t writing, it was typewriting. The book, inspired by multiple cross country road trips in the late 1940s, was published on September 5, 1957. It was Kerouac’s second novel and it rocketed to #1 and has sold strongly ever since.

In 1979 Francis Ford Coppola had an option on the film rights to the book. In 2012 a movie version of the book, directed by Walter Salles and starring *Kristen Stewart, Elisabeth Moss, Kirsten Dunst* and *Viggo Mortensen*, was released to generally tepid reviews. And the draw of the 178-page tome remains strong.

**Not really a road trip book**

The story takes place primarily while the main characters are traveling US highways and byways from east to west and vice versa, but *On the Road* is not really a road trip book. Book covers through the years have featured road trip iconography like a close up of a car bumper and front tire or an abstract of the open road, but Kerouac’s classic is really about “gunning” for girls, “digging” the streets in each new city or town and trying to catch up with elusive friends in the emerging Beat culture.

Kerouac is certainly not on vacation and probably wouldn’t even consider himself a traveler. His journeys in *On the Road* are frantic findings, driven by a nagging fear that he might be missing out on something, somewhere and he probably was. The road was simply the thing that connected the girls, the towns and the elusive friends.

However, in a review of *On the Road* published in the *New York Times* in 1957, Kerouac was praised for crafting some of the most evocative road trip descriptions yet published. There are many passages in the book that bring the road to gritty, blissed out life whether Kerouac’s traveling by bus, thumb or in his own wheels and many of his depictions still ring true.

**Kerouac on road trip planning...**

“I’d been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the road map was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I’ll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started.”

“I looked over the map: a total of over a thousand miles, mostly Texas, to the border at Laredo, and then another 767 miles through all Mexico to the great city near the cracked Isthmus and Oaxacan heights. I couldn’t imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west, but magic south. We saw a vision of the entire Western Hemisphere rockribbing clear down to Tierra del Fuego and us flying down the curve of the world into other tropics and other worlds.”

**Kerouac on road trip milestones...**

“And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up.”

“Now I could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promised Land, way out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and the plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night.”

“I went outside. And there in the blue air I saw for the first time, far off, the great snowy tops of the Rocky Mountains. I took a deep breath.

**Kerouac on road trip addiction...**

“We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved! We flashed past the mysterious white signs in the night somewhere in New Jersey that say SOUTH (with an arrow) and WEST (with an arrow) and took the south one. New Orleans! It burned in our brains.”

“Beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West. I had to go.”

“What is that feeling when you’re driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It’s the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.”

**Kerouac on crossing road trip borders...**

“Just beyond, you could feel the enormous presence of whole great Mexico and almost smell the billion tortillas frying and smoking in the night....We felt awful and sad. But everything changed when we crossed the mysterious bridge over the river and our wheels rolled on official Mexican soil, though it wasn’t anything but car way for border inspection. Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico.”

**Kerouac on road trip scenery...**

“The dark and mysterious Ohio, and Cincinnati at dawn. Then Indiana fields again, and St. Louis as ever in its great valley clouds of afternoon. The muddy cobbles and the Montana logs, the broken steamboats, the ancient signs, the grass and the ropes by the river. The endless poem.”

“In the afternoon we crossed drowsy old Davenport again and the low-lying Mississippi in her sawdust bed; then Rock Island, a few minutes of traffic, the sun reddening, and sudden sights of lovely little tributary rivers flowing softly among the magic trees and greeneries of mid-American Illinois. It was beginning to look like the soft sweet East again; the great dry West was accomplished and done.”

“It seemed like a matter of minutes when we began rolling in the foothills before Oakland and suddenly reached a height and saw stretched out ahead of us the fabulous white city of San Francisco on her eleven mystic hills with the blue Pacific and its advancing wall of potato-patch fog beyond, and smoke and goldenness in the late afternoon of time.”

“All the magic names of the valley unrolled - Manteca, Madera, all the rest. Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries. I stuck my head out the window and took deep breaths of the fragrant air. It was the most beautiful of all moments.”

**Kerouac on road trip math...**

“I got on that hot road and off I went in a brand new car driven by a Denver businessman of about 35. He went seventy. I tingled all over; I counted the minutes and subtracted the miles.”

**Kerouac on road trip revelations...**
“As we crossed the Colorado-Utah border I saw God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say ‘Pass here and go on, you’re on the road to heaven.’”

“And before me was the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent; somewhere far across, gloomy, crazy New York was throwing up its cloud of dust and brown steam. There is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like wash lines and emptyheaded - at least that’s what I thought then.”

“The purity of the road. The white line in the middle of the highway unrolled and hugged our left front tire as if glued to our groove.”

“Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”

“A tall, lanky fellow in a gallon hat stopped his car on the wrong side of the road and came over to us; he looked like a sheriff. We prepared our stories secretly. He took his time coming over. ‘You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?’ We didn’t understand his question, and it was a damned good question.”

**Recreating Kerouac’s road trip**

If you aren’t craving a road trip at this point, well then I can’t help you. But is it still possible to have a Kerouac style road trip? Yes and no.

Modern dangers (or at least our modern awareness of them) make many of Kerouac’s adventures ill-advised, including thousands of miles of hitchhiking (which is illegal in many states), shacking up with a woman he met on a bus (despite initial suspicions) and hopping into the back of a truck full of hobos. *On the Road* style road trips also belong to the tech-free 1940s and ‘50s, uncluttered (and unaided) by inventions like GPS devices, Wi-Fi at every highway rest stop, AAA, Google maps and radar detectors.

So the nuts and bolts of road trips have changed since Kerouac’s day, but the intangibles of a road trip—beauty, wonder, freedom, chance, longing—remain. As Kerouac himself wrote, “Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road.”

For help recreating Kerouac’s road trip, check out a book called *On the Road for 17, 575 Miles* which provides 55 pages that guide you through various cross country routes taken in the book, with help from Google.

Dennis Mansker has put together interactive maps which chart the journeys in *On the Road segment by segment*, placing pins in the map to mark significant locations and link to relevant text from the book.

And don’t hit the road without this audio book of *On the Road* narrated by Matt Dillon.

*(Travel photos by Eric Mohl)*