The novel that launched the Beats, the hippies and designer jeans turns 50. But this legendary 'joyride' is actually the saddest book you'll ever read—even with God on every page. Time for another look.

On the Rules

BY DAVID GATES

JACK KEROUAC'S "ON THE ROAD" GETS THE FULL 50TH anniversary treatment next month, and both cheerleaders and hand-wringers acknowledge that it radically changed American culture—somehow or other. True, the National Quiet Desperation Index has only risen since 1957, and if the book's exaltation of junker cars and diner food had really taken hold, we'd have fewer SUVs and fast-food franchises. But "On the Road" showed, and continues to show, generations of young readers a more intense, more passionate—and more closely examined—life. Some who've busted out to live it themselves died on the streets. Others have refreshed the American sensibility, in music, art, fashion, or in simply learning to kick back and take pleasure in pleasure. This book has stayed, as one of its early readers would say, forever young.

Yet when the novel—which might now be called "creative nonfiction"—appeared, its events were already 10 years in the past. And in 1947, when Kerouac (Sal Paradise in the book) hit the road, the America that obsessed him was already dwindling. Even bebop—apparently the only worthwhile product of modernity—was in decline, from Charlie Parker hot to West Coast cool. Kerouac mostly loved the vestiges of the Great Depression of the '30s: the hobos, hitchhikers, migrant workers and good plain folks just trying to get by. "In those days," a cowboy tells Sal, "you'd see hundreds of men riding a flatcar ... all kinds of men out of work and going from one place to another and some of them just wandering ... Brakemen never used to bother you in those days. I don't know about today." Paradise lost, in both senses.

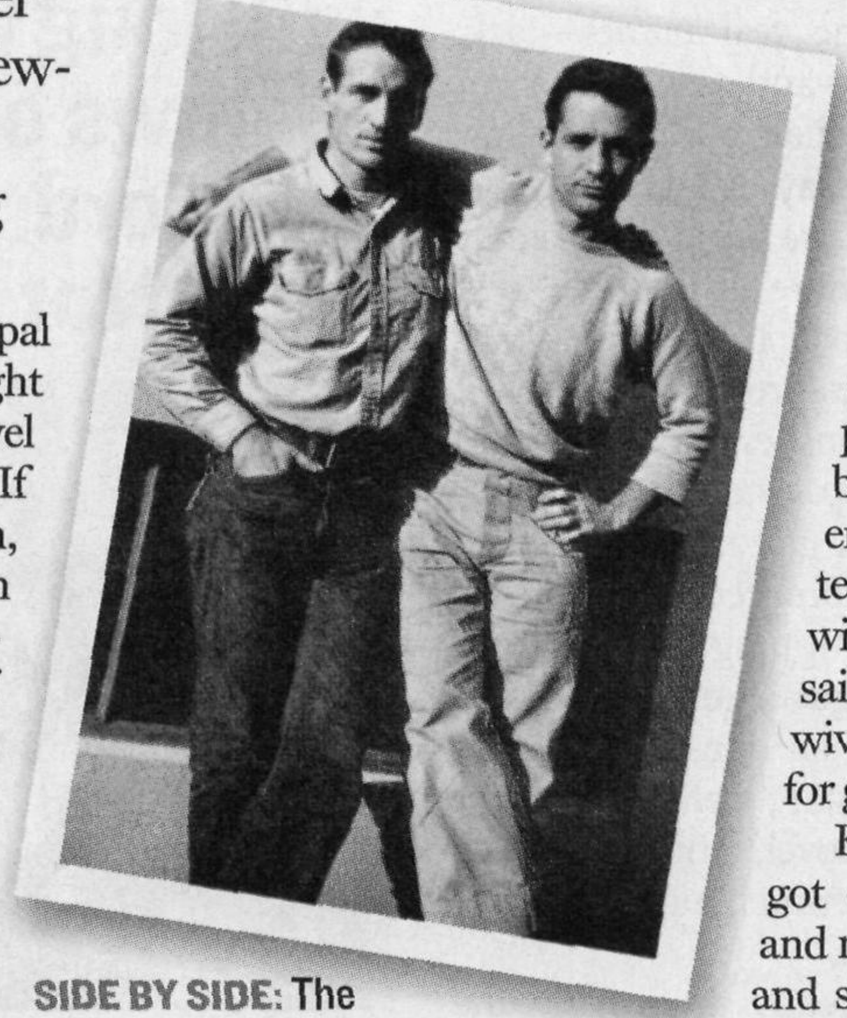
America's archetypal literary joyride might be the saddest novel you'll ever read. If you're young enough, "On the Road" can be a liberating, life-changing blast of energy. But its brief yawps of pure joy and pleasure simply add piquancy to the general lamentation. Near the end of the novel, an apparition with long white hair (maybe a vision, maybe a crazed wanderer) gives Sal the Word: "Go moan for man." He didn't say *Go man go*.

I've been moaning, too, about this 50th anniversary nonsense. What next, the 50th anniversary of the 50th anniversary marketing ploy? But I have to admit that, thanks entirely to the publishing industry, "On the Road" once again has my total attention. Viking, the book's original publisher, has issued a "50th Anniversary Edition," which reads just like the edition you could've bought on the 49th anniversary, except for its reproduction of Gilbert Millstein's prescient review in The New York Times of Sept. 5, 1957. Millstein called the novel's publication "an historic occasion"—back then, such an assertion in the Paper of Record guaranteed it *would* be prescient—and saw that the book was a search for "affirmation" and "belief." On the other hand, neocon-to-be Norman Podhoretz wrote in Partisan Review that the implicit message of "On the Road" was "Kill the intellectuals who can talk coherently, kill the people who can sit still for five minutes at a time, kill those incomprehensible characters who are capable of getting seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause." (Was he smoking "tea"?) Over the years, Podhoretz has probably done more for Kerouac's career than Millstein.

The Library of America will observe the anniversary with a volume of five "road novels": "On the Road," "The Dharma Bums," "The Subterraneans," "Tristessa" and "Lonesome Traveler," as well as a selection of journal entries. (But not the powerful, terrifyingly depressing "Big Sur," compared with which "On the Road" *is* a joyride.) City Lights Books, the original publisher of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"—which had *its* 50th anniversary last year—is putting out "You'll Be Okay," a posthumous memoir by Edie Kerouac-Parker, who served a brief term as Kerouac's first wife—his "life's wife," he said. As usual with his wives, she got time off for good behavior.

Kerouac-Parker never got over "the fulfillment and nemesis of my youth," and she kept memories of the young man who liked to make love in the morning and carried a comb for his cowlick—"it was the scourge of his vanity." She also had a front-row seat for the previews of the Sal-and-Dean show, which became the heart of "On the Road." Neal Cassady, Dean Moriarty in the novel, was the con man, sociopath and holy fool who urged Kerouac to take to the road, and became Kerouac's own fulfillment and nemesis: the doppelgänger who finally abandoned him and had to be abandoned.

But Viking has the real goods—not just "On the Road" itself but the hitherto-



SIDE BY SIDE: The author (above, right) once described himself and Cassady as 'Catholic buddies'

FROM LEFT: ELLIOT ERWITT—MAGNUM, CAROLYN CASSADY