

New biography says Jack Kerouac was 'haunted' by his French-Canadian heritage

BY RANDY BOSWELL, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 18, 2012



Jack Kerouac, author of *On the Road*, was so deeply shaped by his family's French-Canadian roots that he never became an American in his own mind, a new biography written by the writer's former girlfriend suggests.

A new biography of the famed 1950s' *On the Road* author Jack Kerouac claims the Massachusetts-born "King of the Beats" was so deeply shaped by his family's French-Canadian roots that he never really became an American in his own mind.

In her just-released *The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac*, the hipster novelist's former girlfriend Joyce Johnson — now a Columbia University professor and an award-winning writer herself — describes Kerouac, who died in 1969 at age 47 from the effects of alcoholism, as "precariously balanced between conflicting selves, between two cultures and two different languages, between ambition and self-immolation."

The biography appears just ahead of a much-anticipated film adaptation of *On the Road* that was screened last week at the Toronto International Film Festival and opens in theatres in December. Big

Sur, a film version of Kerouac's 1962, semi-autobiographical novel about battling the bottle during a retreat to a California cabin, is also slated for release this year.

Meanwhile, the British Library opens a three-month exhibition in October that displays Kerouac's typewritten manuscript for *On the Road* — sold at a U.S. auction in 2002 for \$2.4 million — and explores the author's life, prose and poetry.

"For Jack, whose attachment to his heritage was as strong as it was anguished," Johnson writes in *The Voice is All*, "the process of becoming American would never be completed, and it would prove to be particularly wrenching."

Kerouac was born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1922. He shot to fame in the 1950s after the publication of *On the Road* — his highly unconventional, spontaneously crafted narrative about a road trip across a rapidly changing postwar America — made him a leading voice of the Beat Generation literary movement.

Several of Kerouac's 16 books are peopled by characters, settings and experiences drawn from his French-Canadian background. He was the grandchild of a potato farmer from Riviere-du-Loup, Que., who, along with hundreds of thousands of other French-Canadians, moved to New England in the late 1800s in search of a better life.

In 2003, a U.S. auction house sold a 1951 letter Kerouac had written as part of a literary funding application that laid out his never-realized dream of writing an epic novel, tentatively titled *The Vanity of St. Louis*. The planned novel, described by Kerouac as his "life work," would have captured the saga of a French-Canadian immigrant community in the U.S.

Kerouac was seeking the funds for a research trip to Quebec.

"Canada was always in the forefront of his mind," historian Douglas Brinkley said at the time, adding that he would "go so far as to describe Kerouac as a North American writer" rather than purely an American one because of his fixation on Canada and, in later years, Mexico.

In her new book, Johnson recasts Kerouac's well-known interest in his family's Canadian background as something bordering on obsession.

"Despite their bitter memories of conditions in Quebec, many French Canadian emigrants kept in the back of their minds the hope that someday they would return to their ancestral lands with the riches they had accumulated in America," Johnson observes, quoting Kerouac writings in which he said Canada "brooded in the air and haunted me... Canada was my bosom of God."

The Quebec author Victor-Levy Beaulieu has also argued that Kerouac's identity was "profoundly Québécois" and that his works should be on library shelves alongside those of French Canada's greatest writers.

