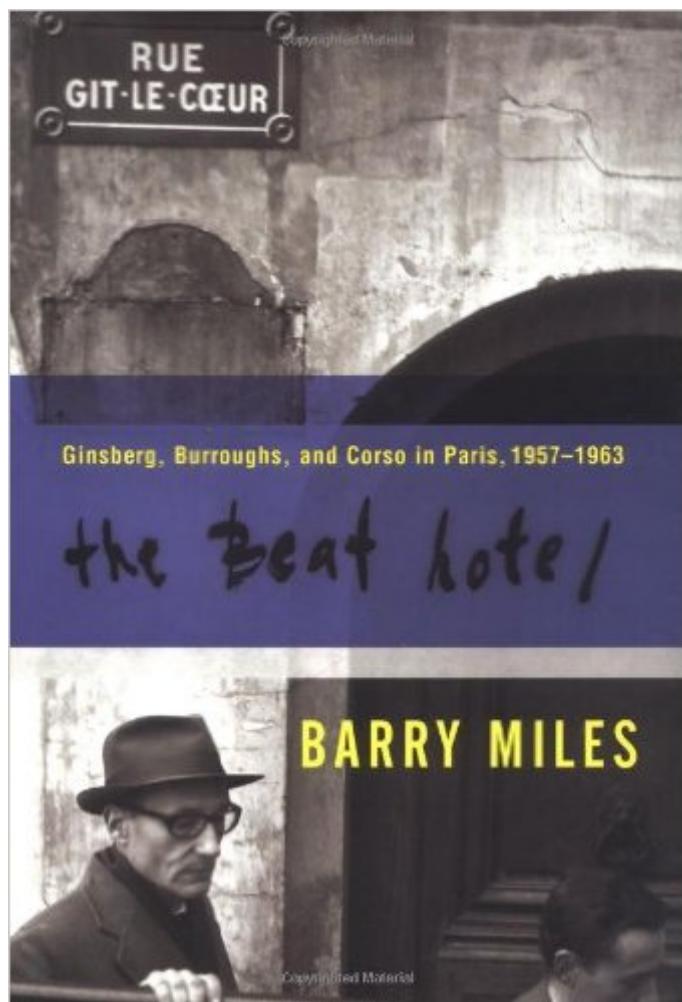


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The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs, And Corso In Paris, 1958-1963



Synopsis

Called "a vivid picture of literary life along the Left Bank in the late 1950s and early 1960s . . . [and] fun reading" by Library Journal, The Beat Hotel is a delightful chronicle of a remarkable moment in American literary history. From the Howl obscenity trial to the invention of the cut-up technique, Barry Miles's extraordinary narrative chronicles the feast of ideas that was Paris, where the Beats took awestruck audiences with Duchamp and Celine, and where some of their most important work came to fruition -- Ginsberg's "Kaddish" and "To Aunt Rose"; Corso's The Happy Birthday of Death; and Burroughs's Naked Lunch. Based on firsthand accounts from diaries, letters, and many original interviews, The Beat Hotel is an intimate look at a place that, the San Francisco Chronicle has written, "gave the spirit of Dean Moriarty and the genius of Genet and Duchamp a place to dream together of new worlds over a glass of vin ordinaire".

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Customer Reviews

I lived at number nine rue Git-le-Coeur from 1955 until 1958 and visited there often until 1960 and knew most of the people mentioned in the book. I was an ex-Korean War Vet studying on the G.I. Bill as were thousands of "Americans in Paris" in the 50.s. I can attest that most of the events related are accurate. The Hotel was special because of the freedom the owner granted us: cooking in our rooms, decorating them, allowing overnight guests, etc.) I believe it was the Hotel that helped form the "Beats" rather then the other way around since it was a creative beehive before they got there. My main argument with the book is the insistance of the hotel as being sordid, rat-ridden and

dirty. This was not true. I never saw a four-legged rat there and the only roaches were the cannabis kind. The rooms were swept and mopped daily. It was a great place to be even before the "Beats" arrived and should not be defamed by exaggeration at the expense of the wonderful blue haired Madame Rachou who owned it and took care of us, her Americains.

This book is an important, often funny, illuminating look at an extraordinary period in the history of popular culture. It will be enjoyed by anyone with even the slimmest interest in the history of western literature, art and the moral evolution of western man in the waning years of the second millennium. The squalid Paris rooming house at rue-Git-Le-Coeur didn't have a name. It was just an address to which, because of its arts friendly management and cheap rent, luminaries of the "beat movement" lived and labored between 1957 and 1963. In this book, which takes as its title the colloquial name for Madame Rachou's establishment, Barry Miles continues his informal history of the Beats which, in addition to this offering includes biographies of Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac. Burroughs and Ginsberg, along with Gregory Corso and Brion Gysin form the fulcrum on which this history turns. If there are any doubts as to the absolute madness of these people, their exuberant embrace of drugs, their extravagant pursuit of sex in all of its variety, their tireless devotion to literature and to each other, this book should lay them to rest. The matter-of-fact description of life at The Beat Hotel is perhaps the greatest strength of this book. There is no question that the sensational and lurid descriptions of the Beats that were fodder for the popular press in the late 50's and early 60's were in no way exaggerations. The depiction of "beatniks" as decadent, impoverished, culturally alienated, drug maniacs seems, after reading this book to be a rather tepid underestimate of just how extreme these cultural icons actually were. But Mr. Miles, in his at once familiar yet detached tone, manages to affirm the facts of "beat" existence while in no way diminishing the people he is describing. The productivity of the principals during this period would be astonishing under any circumstances; under the particular circumstances it seems simply not possible. And yet it was during these years that Naked Lunch found its final form; that Kaddish and The Lion for Real were written; that cut-ups were discovered and explored, and the Dream Machine invented; that The Soft Machine, Nova Express, and The Ticket That Exploded were composed, cut-up, compiled, and first presented to the public. This book, filling as it does a neglected portion of Beat history is an honest, accessible, amusing, and ultimately inspiring chronicle that no one should neglect adding to their collection.

This book is an exploration of the American beat movement during a time period in which most of its

major representatives, (with the exception of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder) were in Paris at a cheap, nameless hotel located at Rue Git-Le-Coeur, and managed by one Madame Rachon. The hotel was cheap and unsanitary. As long as the guests paid their bills, Madame Rachon allowed them a broad range of freedom in their eccentric lifestyles. The beat hotel was home to the beats as well as to various artists, models, and other bohemians before it closed in 1963. The book includes wonderful biographical pictures of Allen Ginsberg, his lover Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin (whose name was unfamiliar to me), and others who stayed at the beat hotel. There is detailed documentation on the activities of each during their stay in the beat hotel with some thought given to why each of these people are important and worth knowing something about. I found the discussion of the day to day life in the hotel the most rewarding part of the book together with a discussion of the relationships of the beats, and other guests, to Olympia Press, which published many of them together with many forgettable works of pornography at that time available only with difficulty in the United States. The book invites reflection on the nature of the beat movement and of the broader movement of bohemianism as it developed in the 19th Century. What were the beats looking for? They were full of unconventional, shocking behavior, particularly in the abuse of drugs and sex as these are documented graphically in the book. They were also serious, had a dedication to literature, a willingness to explore and to come to terms with themselves, a desire for change. The beats were perhaps the most cohesive literary movement 20th Century America has produced and in some cases produced works of merit. Miles's discussion of the work and achievement of these writers encourages one to want to know more. Miles ties the beats in to later developments in pop culture in the 1960s: rock and roll, psychedelics, open sexuality. This to me is claiming too little and too much. It trivializes this movement, I think, to watch the commercialization that took place during the 1960s. The beats were isolated, troubled, and searching individuals who, in their productive days, neither had nor wanted the glare of the media. What they did was for themselves and what we make of them is a matter for reflection and not for subsequent 1960s hype. I read Miles biography of Kerouac and was moved by it to read this book. I wasn't disappointed. He is a thoughtful writer on a significant American literary movement.

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