



[Big Sur](#), by Jack Kerouac

In A Nutshell

Jack Kerouac was a pioneering member of the Beat Generation, a group of American writers, artists, and thinkers from the 1950s and 60s. The Beats were characterized by what was at the time a shockingly free spirited approach to alcohol, drugs, music, writing, and sex. Kerouac himself defined the word "beat" as a combination of many different connotations, including spiritually beatific, run down or tired, and musical.

The novel that made the generation, Kerouac, and the word "beat" famous was *On the Road*, published in 1957, which details the 1940s exploits of Jack Kerouac (known as alter-ego Sal Paradise) and friend Neal Cassady (known as Dean Moriarty). The novel is revolutionary in its prose style, which is characterized by free-form thinking, free-association, a lack of grammatical concern, and remarkable fluidity and rhythm, among other things. (Check out Shmoop's guide to *On the Road* for more on the famous novel.)

After *On the Road*, Kerouac was hit hard with the fame that comes with a groundbreaking novel. His lifestyle of hard drugs and drinking began to take its toll on his body and mind. By the 1960s, Kerouac found himself sick, breaking down, and dealing with the harsh reality of delirium tremens and episodic delirium caused by withdrawal from alcohol. His novel *Big Sur*, published in 1962, details events from this much darker period of his life. Focusing on August and September of 1960, Kerouac describes his time in San Francisco and in the woods of Big Sur, California in the cabin of good friend and fellow Beat writer Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

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Kerouac doesn't beat around the bush in this novel. Employing the same free-form style as *On the Road*, his descriptions of delirious episodes and alcohol-driven nightmares are visceral and intense. Much of the novel is devoted to recreating the experience for the reader. Though narrator and alter ego Jack Duluoz seems to end his story on a somewhat positive note, Kerouac was still consumed by alcoholism at the time of publication. He would die of cirrhosis – a chronic liver disease caused by excessive, long-term drinking – only seven years later, in 1969, at the age of 47.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Check out the poem, "Sea," appended to the novel. How do the verses reflect Kerouac's mood at the time of its composition (narrated in Chapter Seven)? How does the addition of this poem add to our understanding of the novel itself?
- 2 Look at the way *Big Sur* is divided into so many (38) brief chapters. What is the effect of this structuring? How does Kerouac encapsulate each episode within chapter divisions?
- 3 Now think about the structuring of *Big Sur* as marked by Jack's three visits to Monsanto's cabin. How do these visits divide the novel? What changes (in Jack, in the novel's mood or style) do you notice from one trip to the next?

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