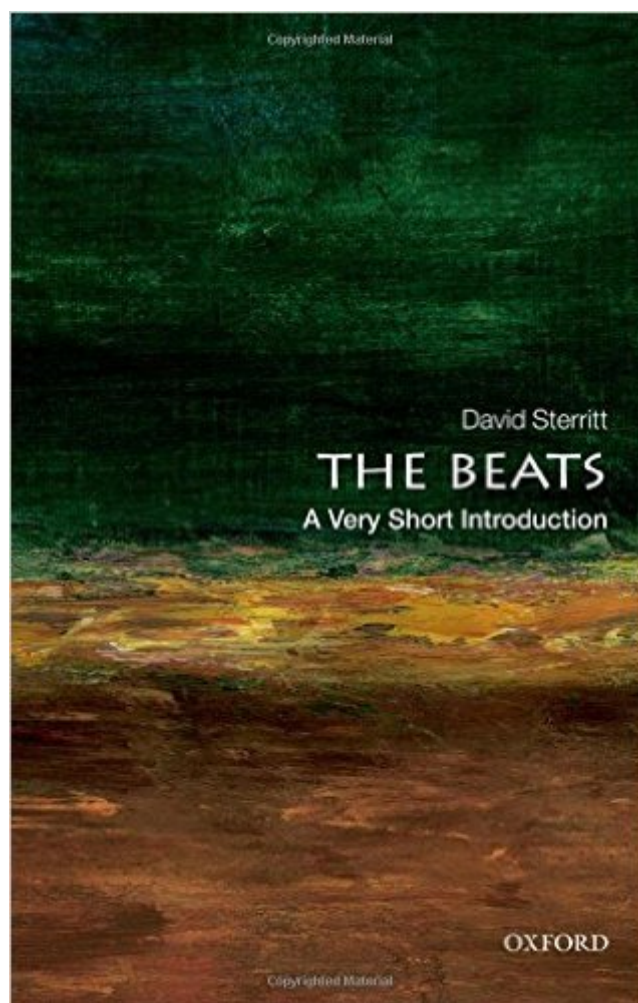


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The Beats: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



Synopsis

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the writers of the Beat Generation revolutionized American literature with their iconoclastic approach to language and their angry assault on the conformity and conservatism of postwar society. They and their followers took aim at the hypocrisy and taboos of their time--particularly those involving sex, race, and class--in such provocative works as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959). In this Very Short Introduction, David Sterritt offers a concise overview of the social, cultural, and aesthetic sensibilities of the Beats, bringing out the similarities that connected them and also the many differences that made them a loosely knit collective rather than an organized movement. Figures in the saga include Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Clellon Holmes, Carolyn Cassady, and Gary Snyder. As Sterritt ranges from Greenwich Village and San Francisco to Mexico, western Europe, and North Africa, he sheds much light on how the Beats approached literature, drugs, sexuality, art, music, and religion. Members of the Beat Generation hoped that their radical rejection of materialism, consumerism, and regimentation would inspire others to purify their lives and souls as well. Yet they urged the remaking of consciousness on a profoundly inward-looking basis, cultivating "the unspeakable visions of the individual," in Kerouac's phrase. The idea was to revolutionize society by revolutionizing thought, not the other way around. This book explains how the Beats used their antiauthoritarian visions and radical styles to challenge dominant values, fending off absorption into mainstream culture while preparing ground for the larger, more explosive social upheavals of the 1960s. More than half a century later, the Beats' impact can still be felt in literature, cinema, music, theater, and the visual arts. This compact introduction explains why. About the Series:Oxford's Very Short Introductions series offers concise and original introductions to a wide range of subjects--from Islam to Sociology, Politics to Classics, Literary Theory to History, and Archaeology to the Bible. Not simply a textbook of definitions, each volume in this series provides trenchant and provocative--yet always balanced and complete--discussions of the central issues in a given discipline or field. Every Very Short Introduction gives a readable evolution of the subject in question, demonstrating how the subject has developed and how it has influenced society. Eventually, the series will encompass every major academic discipline, offering all students an accessible and abundant reference library. Whatever the area of study that one deems important or appealing, whatever the topic that fascinates the general reader, the Very Short Introductions series has a handy and affordable guide that will likely prove indispensable.

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Customer Reviews

The Very Short Introductions series of Oxford University Press offers readers "stimulating ways into new subjects". This description applies to David Sterritt's recent "very short introduction" to the Beats (2013). Sterritt, film professor at Columbia University and the Maryland Institute of Art, has written extensively about film, including the role of the Beats in American film. In introducing his subject, Sterritt writes: "[i]n the late 1950s and early 1960s, a small group of writers challenged long-accepted tenets of American literature with their iconoclastic approach to language and their angry assault on the conformity and conservatism of postwar society." These writers became known as the Beats and centered around the figures of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. Somewhat later, Sterritt ties the Beats in to the long tradition of literary Bohemians, defined as "a gypsy of society, one who either cuts himself off, or is by his habits cut off, from society for which he is otherwise fitted, especially an artist, literary man, or actor, who leads a free, vagabond, or irregular life, not being particular as to the society he frequents, and despising conventionalities generally." This definition of "Bohemian" from the Oxford English Dictionary captures much about the Beats. Sterritt offers a broad portrayal of the Beats, juxtaposing them against the history and culture in which they arose. He finds the Beats rebelled in many ways against the society of the time. Sterritt ties the rebellion of the Beats to Eisenhower-era conservatism, but he overdoes it. The Beats did much of their work and established the characteristics of their movement in the late 1940's and pre-Eisenhower 1950's.

This book offers a starting place for those wishing to learn about the Beats, through an exploration of their lives, work, talents, and impact. Sterritt begins with a lengthy discussion of the Beat movement's origins, offering thoughtful insight into their context, explaining how the American post-war cultural climate fed their discontent with the status quo, desire for individualism and freedom of expression. The work and lives of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs are also topics covered in some depth; the author devotes multiple pages each to Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Clellon Holmes, Gary Snyder, and Kenneth Rexroth. The lion's share of the book is given over to the founding members of the group (the "East Coast Beats"), the history, characteristics and impact of the group. There's a brief discussion of the San Francisco Renaissance, a literary flowering which began in the 1950s and included many of the West Coast Beats, among other San Francisco literary figures. Sterritt also shines light on the Beats' literary, religious, musical and political views and influences, and their impact on various aspects of popular culture. Some of their dark sides - drug and alcohol use, and personal demons - are also discussed. At only 126 pages - including the notes, index and bibliography - this is indeed "a very short introduction." And there are some things which have been left out. Surprisingly, Michael McClure is only very briefly mentioned, with no discussion of his work or significance. Aside from Diane di Prima, to whom 4 paragraphs are devoted, the female Beat writers are also completely neglected.

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