

The Awakener: A Memoir of Jack Kerouac and the Fifties

by Helen Weaver

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Review by Leslie Nipkow

Helen Weaver is a distinguished translator of French literature, with over fifty books and a National Book Award nomination to her credit. Behind the academic, however, lies the twenty-four year old gamine who traded the pencil skirts and sweater sets of 1950's suburbia for the black tights and ballet flats of bohemian Greenwich Village. She fell in love with Jack Kerouac, and their relationship gave her a seat at the drink-laden table with the era's self-proclaimed hippest artists and thinkers. Weaver's new book, "The Awakener: A Memoir of Jack Kerouac and the Fifties," looks at the Beats from the other side of the bed.

When the doorbell rang early one morning in 1956, Weaver's roommate stuffed their key in a sock and tossed it out the window to Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and a roving band of poets winding down after a long night of "inspiration-seeking."

The boho life is not for everyone, however, and Weaver kept one foot in the straight world. Each morning while Kerouac slept it off, she headed to her publishing job. At night in writers' haunts like the White Horse and the Riviera, Weaver privately dreamt of settling down with Kerouac, living off his royalties, and finding a story of her own to tell. But she soon realized that her heart was not wild enough to sustain both the nightlife and the nine-to-five grind that paid for it. She needed her rest. And when a drunken Kerouac woke her up one too many times, she pummeled him in frustration, ripped out a handful of his hair, and soon kicked the Beat poet and "his cheap suitcase of manuscripts" to the curb. Kerouac immortalized the occasion in "Desolation Angels." Ruth Heaper, based on Helen, tells her boyfriend off: "You're irresponsible, do me no good, get drunk, bring drunk friends -- all hours of the night -- I can't rest." That was the end of Helen's dream of becoming Mrs. Kerouac.

Weaver's book doesn't end with the break-up. In the Sixties, her social conscience was stirred by Lenny Bruce's fight for free speech and the movement to legalize marijuana. In a pre-feminist gesture toward merging the personal and the political, Helen enlisted weed, Lenny and Freudian analysis in her quest for the elusive orgasm. But free-spirited Weaver couldn't completely let go of her Fifties upbringing; she skipped Woodstock for fear that bad weather might trigger her asthma.

She made it there a few years later, moving to post-Woodstock Woodstock from 1970s Manhattan, by then crime-ridden and on the brink of bankruptcy. Finally, she began writing her own story: rebel in search of a cause (literally) rubs up against some of the most memorable characters of the past half century.

But this is her memoir, not theirs, and Weaver herself remains a cipher. In fact, the book suffers from 20/20 hindsight. Weaver writes from a place of wisdom, rather than carrying us along on her journey from innocence to experience as sex, drugs and literature pry open her doors of perception (among other places). She tells us what happened rather than letting us see it, touch it, or hear her characters speak. In describing the hair-pulling incident, Weaver recounts, when she should relive: "[Kerouac] still smarted from my beating him. ... He claimed that when I tore out that chunk of his hair, it was the beginning of the end of his looks." She confuses by moving back and forth in time, often covering the same ground more than once, keeping us at arm's length, and cheating us out of the visceral experience essential to a truly great memoir.

And then there is Kerouac. In the memoir, "New York in the Fifties," Dan Wakefield quotes Weaver as saying, "Reading [Kerouac's *Dr. Sax*] made me feel ashamed for my multiple rejections of him as a man and as a writer." This regret permeates *The Awakener*, blunting Weaver's description of love with her "first wild man and [her] first drunk." In retrospect, Kerouac is the genius who got away, but the young woman so infuriated by his drinking that she ripped out his hair by the roots is the central character of the book, and Weaver shortchanges her former self and the reader.

Weaver translates her experience, rather than trusting us to take her trip and draw our own conclusions. Weaver's perspective is unique, but her book stops short of "man, like wow... off the wall, baby."

In an excerpt from her journal, twenty-five year old Helen writes: "I want to ... hell around with the greatest people going, make mad love with Jack Kerouac..." She did. And her memoir would go from good to great if she would open up and give us a little more hell.