

By: Iván Brave

From Susan Bell's "The Artful Edit"

1. *Name one or two of your favorite books and explain why you love them.*

One of my favorite books is "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac. What I love about it is its historical context, its lyricism, and the story I read between the lines.

So much has been said about the author and this little travel book since its publication some 60 years ago that today the myth still inspires me. How could the child of migrants, chasing dreams, chasing kicks and women, ever settle down to write novel after novel after novel? The mystique surrounding his first major publication is itself intoxicating. And yet I was not underwhelmed in fanning its haze when it came down to reading the pages. The prose speaks. And sings. Whether gripping the handrail of a bus on my way to work, and reading the book; or sitting down at a desk, and reading the book; or whatever, and reading the book; my imagination spins dizzy with the best kind of motion sickness. His sentences are alive! I tore a bit of a page once, and almost reached for a Band-Aid thinking blood would ooze out of a paragraph. Alive it is. And well-wrought. I see wet tear drops on the passages about Sal leaving his Mexican girlfriend. I smell belches of beer at the end of witty one liners.

Jacques has been called, not a writer, but a typist. Well, if he's a typist, then his machine must have had keys for quarter-notes, because I almost don't read letters. I hear music.

Of course, it goes without saying, the book is so much more than a book about two friends who travel west. It is the kind of book that tells you a story in the back of a pick-up truck, of which you are left to figure out on your own its meaning—and yet whether or not you care enough to think about it, either way you'll admit the book caught you while you were looking for something else, and left you still looking, still restlessly without an answer, yet with a few good kicks to look back on and smile.

2. *Reflect: Do you read with standards of quality or an agenda of taste?*

Before Susan Bell's class, I most certainly read with an agenda. "On the Road" had affected me to such a degree that all else came second. If a book didn't scream for my attention, if a book didn't offer to buy me the first beer, if a book didn't juggle humor/sadness/lively-profound-nothingness, then I simply would mark it up with a pen, put it down, and move on. For me, back then, a book had to be lyrical, whimsical, breezy, and drugged. Many years I wrote in one or all four of those states, late at night, and to no one. It took many more books, and many more romances with various genres—of note, non-

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fiction, especially Strunk and White, with their resounding argument for concentrated prose (style approach number 9)—before I came to take my own work seriously, and write for others, and read as much as I can with an open mind.

Today, I follow Bell's advice to read with standard of quality above all else, asking: how does this passage ask to be read? rather than how does this passage compare to everything else I've read before?