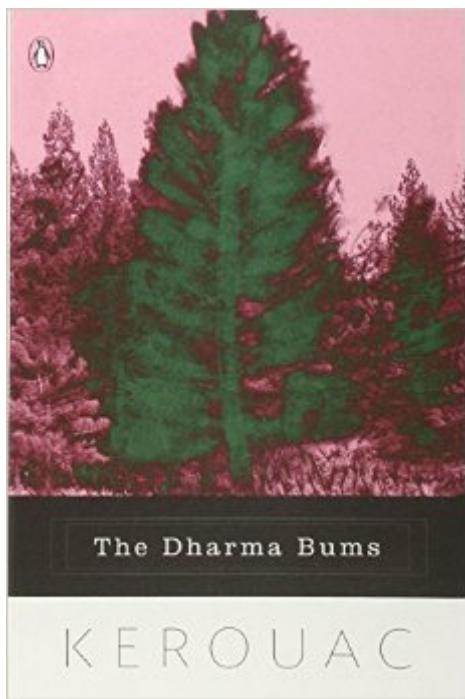


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The Dharma Bums



Synopsis

One of the best and most popular of Kerouac's autobiographical novels, *The Dharma Bums* is based on experiences the writer had during the mid-1950s while living in California, after he'd become interested in Buddhism's spiritual mode of understanding. One of the book's main characters, Japhy Ryder, is based on the real poet Gary Snyder, who was a close friend and whose interest in Buddhism influenced Kerouac.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (335 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

As Kerouac notes in the introductory chapter, he met Gary Snyder, a.k.a. Japhy Ryder in 1955, just before Snyder went off to Japan to immerse himself in Zen Buddhism. What follows is a free-wheeling account of their time together in perhaps Kerouac's most appealing and certainly most positive book. *Dharma Bums* is a celebration of American Buddhism, which was budding in San Francisco at the time, with a number of Beat poets reading their haikus and free-verse poems at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Once again, Kerouac revels in changing names, but among the many prominent faces presented in this autobiographical novel are Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Snyder was the rising star, a Buddhist scholar and translator of books of Japanese and Chinese poetry while studying at Berkley. Snyder, like Kerouac, had working class roots and the two hit it off from the start, exulting in each other's state of being. Kerouac devotes *Dharma Bums* to Snyder in the same way he did *On the Road* to Neal Cassady. It was one of Kerouac's more happy times, as he was heavy into Buddhism, and sought out Snyder as a soulmate and mentor. Kerouac sets the stage wonderfully, coming across a hobo

reading from St. Theresa on a train bound for LA, coming back from Mexico. He then hops the "Zipper" up to San Francisco, which whirled along at 80 miles an hour on the California coastline. Kerouac hangs out at Ginsberg's cabin in the Berkley hills, but it is Snyder's spartan cabin that draws his attention. Snyder had already chosen to live the life of an aesthete, giving up most of his worldly possessions, except for his famous rucksack and orange crates of books, mostly of poetry.

DHARMA BUMS came out a year after ON THE ROAD. While the latter is the beat manifesto celebrating the peripatetic lifestyle, BUMS focuses on the beat romance with Buddhist enlightenment and the building of an inner life. ON THE ROAD was an instant, memorable success, and while BUMS no doubt fed a desire for more of the same, it stands apart, its own satisfying work of art, its own way of sending telegraphs from the heart of the beat movement. Many of the episodes are based on actual events and experiences that were still fresh memories as the book was written. Ray Smith is the first person narrator of DHARMA BUMS, a look alike for Jack Kerouac. For most of the book, he slyly puts Japhy Ryder at the center of attention. Ryder is a stand-in for poet Gary Snyder who survives, who as a young man in his twenties was already a natural leader. Surrounding them are other familiar figures from the era, including Alvah Goldbook (translates to Allen Ginsberg). They all write poetry and love jazz, women, and a casual lifestyle. They seek spiritual enlightenment. They delight in trolling for clothes in the Good Will and Army and Navy stores, they savor the simplest meal over a campfire. They are the Dharma Bums, rejecting the paralyzed emptiness they ascribe to middle class life. I really like this book. The prose is clear and concrete, even when sorting through abstract notions. It is often funny. Kerouac had extraordinary insight into individual nuances and desires, and plays them into the tension of the journey and the sorting out. He had a gift for seeing how outsiders might perceive him and his crowd and how history might come to interpret the present he was portraying.

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