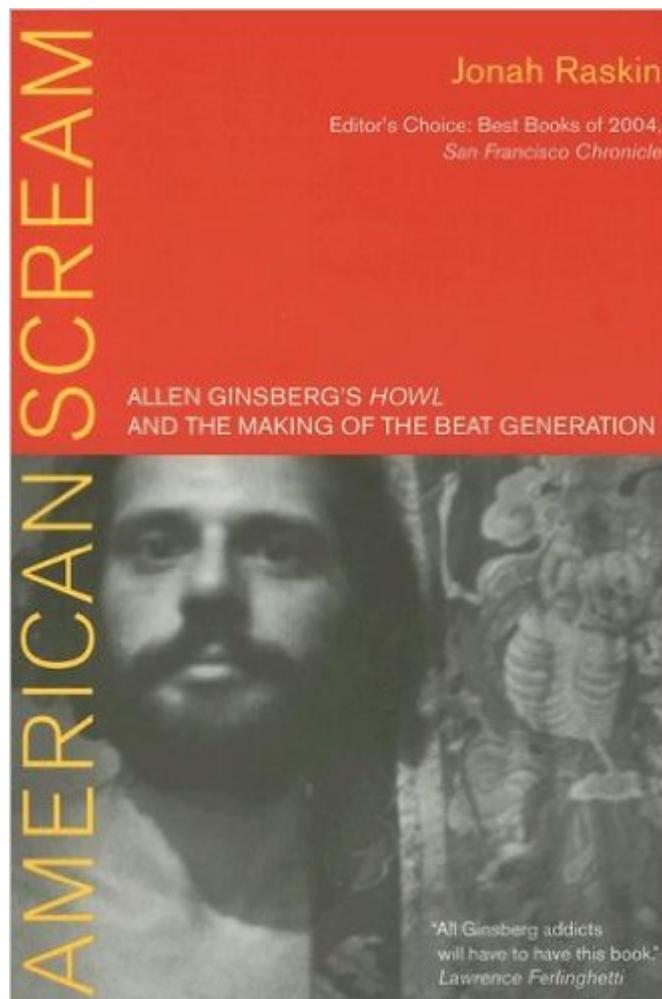


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American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl And The Making Of The Beat Generation



Synopsis

Written as a cultural weapon and a call to arms, *Howl* touched a raw nerve in Cold War America and has been controversial from the day it was first read aloud nearly fifty years ago. This first full critical and historical study of *Howl* brilliantly elucidates the nexus of politics and literature in which it was written and gives striking new portraits of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. Drawing from newly released psychiatric reports on Ginsberg, from interviews with his psychiatrist, Dr. Philip Hicks, and from the poet's journals, *American Scream* shows how *Howl* brought Ginsberg and the world out of the closet of a repressive society. It also gives the first full accounting of the literary figures—Eliot, Rimbaud, and Whitman—who influenced *Howl*, definitively placing it in the tradition of twentieth-century American poetry for the first time. As he follows the genesis and the evolution of *Howl*, Jonah Raskin constructs a vivid picture of a poet and an era. He illuminates the development of Beat poetry in New York and San Francisco in the 1950s—focusing on historic occasions such as the first reading of *Howl* at Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955 and the obscenity trial over the poem's publication. He looks closely at Ginsberg's life, including his relationships with his parents, friends, and mentors, while he was writing the poem and uses this material to illuminate the themes of madness, nakedness, and secrecy that pervade *Howl*. A captivating look at the cultural climate of the Cold War and at a great American poet, *American Scream* finally tells the full story of *Howl*—a rousing manifesto for a generation and a classic of twentieth-century literature.

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Customer Reviews

AMERICAN SCREAM is a well-done precis of everything that was happening in American culture at the time Ginsberg wrote HOWL and in the months that succeeded his breakthrough. Better yet, Raskin has had quite a coup and he has persuaded Ginsberg's psychoanalyst (Dr Hicks) to talk about the mental and emotional torments Ginsberg had first to overcome before he could begin the writing proper, and he has ventured into the dusty file bins and uncovered for us the actual records of Ginsberg's stays in mental hospitals and psychiatry facilities. Heretofore such records were only vaguely guessed at. Raskin uses the new information wisely, much as Diane Wood Middlebrook was able to use the testimony of Anne Sexton's analyst when writing her biography some years ago of Sexton. There are a few places where I disagree with Raskin's implications. Regarding the now-notorious "6 Gallery" reading in San Francisco where AG premiered HOWL, Raskin states, "Many of the notable local poets--Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser--were not included in the program, and so the gala event at the Six Gallery was a cultural snub of sorts to the poets who thought they embodied the best of Bay Area poetry." This is disingenuous, as Raskin knows: neither Duncan, Spicer nor Blaser was living in the Bay Area at the time. Duncan was at Black Mountain College, Spicer living in NYC, and Blaser in Boston. How is this a "cultural snub"? It's also a shame that such a classy book should be spoiled by the numerous typos. On one page alone the names of two poets who spoke at Ginsberg's funeral are mis-spelled, so we have Andrew "Shilling" instead of Schelling, and Robert "Haas" instead of Hass. They show up in the index thus abused as well.

A worthwhile treatment of the history of the writing of an important American poem. However, this book is not a history of the Beat Generation. It covers Cassady, Kerouac, and Burroughs, but only insofar as they intersected with Ginsberg. This is mostly a literary biography of Ginsberg. That doesn't diminish its value, but it does point to the book's main focus. The book is best in its focus on Ginsberg's formative years and the themes of alienation and fear that went into the creation of "Howl." The book has less to say about the poem's aftermath: the infamous reading in San Francisco, the seizure of the book by customs officials, and the subsequent obscenity trial are dispensed with in a chapter, and Ginsberg's subsequent life is summarized in a few pages. The book is also written in what is frequently a bloodless, dry style that fails to do justice to the feverishness of the times and the people involved. You never get away from the fact that you are reading a book written by an academic, albeit a thoughtful and sympathetic one. There are other books out there that capture the times more passionately. However, if you are intrigued by the era

and are looking for a jumping-off point to explore other work about the Beats, you could do a lot worse than using this book as an introduction.

Excellent. The very best in book on the beat movement that I have read and, regarding Ginsberg with the main, but not only, focus on his pivotal mid-twentieth century poem 'Howl' there has never been and most probably never will be a more detailed understanding and appreciation of that great poem. This book is absolutely essential for anyone interested in poetry and in the major movements in the written arts during America's critical mid-century political and artistic upheavals.

Jonah Raskin indirectly makes the case that Ginsberg's "Howl" was the epicenter of the Beatquake. He never comes out and says that but it's clear he believes that Ginsberg's work and the Six Gallery reading in 1955, connected many strands in the Beat movement. Ginsberg was close friends with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, the other titans of Beat literature. He had a sexual relationship with Neal Cassidy who was the inspiration for Dean Moriarty, the leading character in "On the Road." He used heroin and other drugs in the 1940s and lived with Herbert Huncke who was a Beat prototypical character; junkie, thief, hustler, poet and rebel. Ginsberg bridged the coastal divide of the Beat movement. He lived in New York City during forties when it was the breeding ground for the movement, helping to hone the movement's sensibility and giving people the urban anonymity where they could live on the fringes of society. But the Beat movement only became visible when it flowered in San Francisco, a city that celebrated eccentricity and rebellion and the place where he chose to first read "Howl." "American Scream" is not a critique of "Howl." While it does reference sections of the poem and talk about many iterations and traces the origins of specific images and allusions, it in no way purports to be a thorough analysis of the work. Instead the book gives us a fresh look at the young and struggling Allen Ginsberg who wanted to deny his sexuality and fit in with the intelligentsia. His precarious mental state and quirky genius made that pose impossible for him to maintain. The reading of Howl came at a time when Ginsberg had embraced both his homosexuality and his mental illness and that gives the poem a sense of giddy rage. Raskin always makes sure that all roads lead back to Howl, both in the moment it was sprung on the world at the Six Gallery Reading and the text that Ginsberg kept re-working for many years after. "American Scream" covers a lot of ground from post-war American political, cultural and intellectual history, literary criticism, a courtroom drama over censorship and the emergence of a poetic genius. All of it is written in very engaging, readable prose and easily makes the case that Howl was a watershed moment and text in nineteen fifties' America.

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