

YOTS, YOYS AND SILLY BOYS

Heu mihi, quod sterilam vitam duxi! As a certified YOY (youth of yesterday), I sit here in my slippers, angrily clicking my dentures at the antics of the youth of today (hereinafter known as YOTs). My own youth came and went in a blur of fun and games I can barely remember. As a gleeful teen, The Who quickly convinced me I ought to die before I got old, so for many years I behaved as if I was liable to die at any moment.

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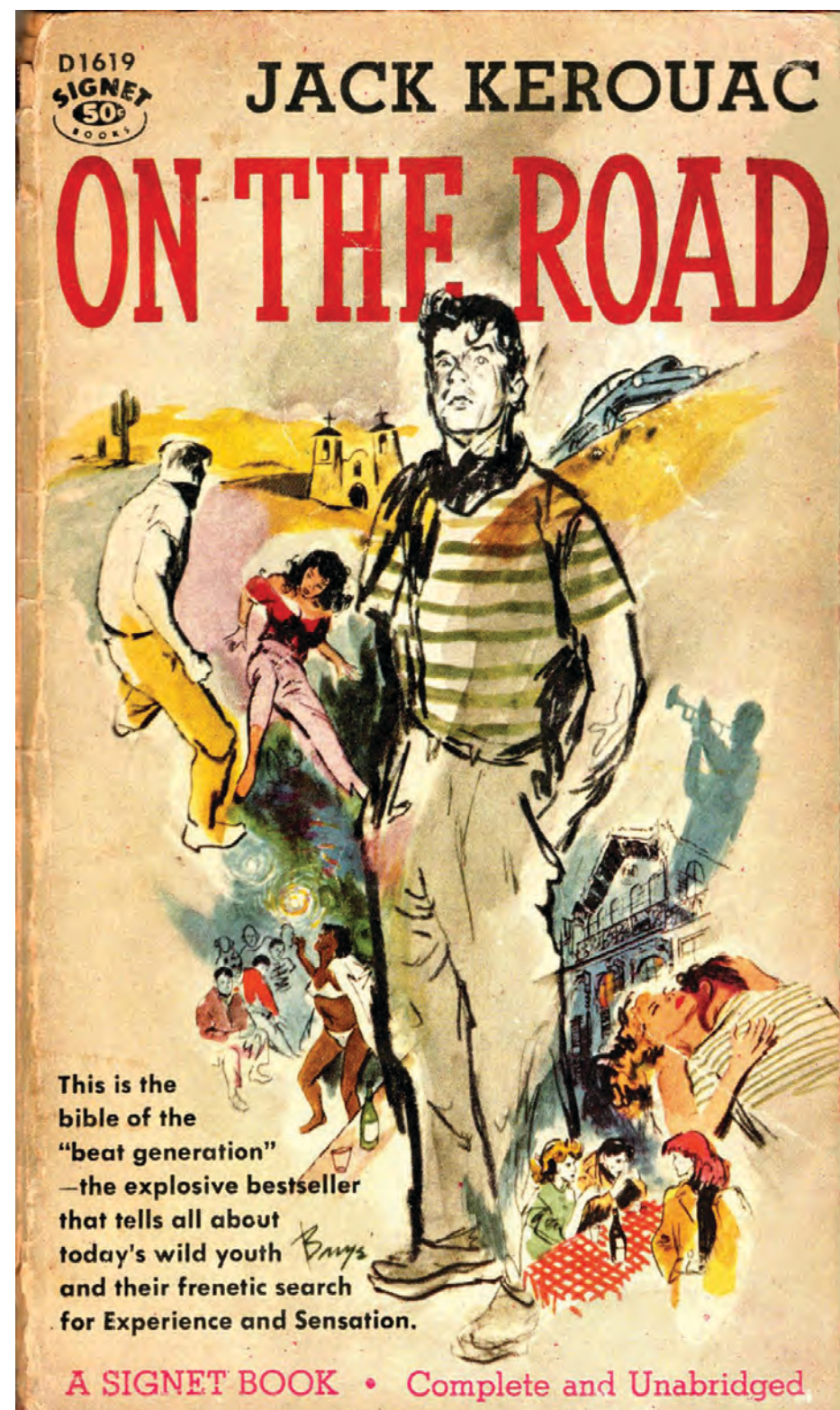


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Indeed, on a couple of occasions, I believed that moment had arrived. A gormless youth surrounded by many other teenagers also utterly lacking in gorm, wandering the Midlands like a herd of deranged wildebeests.

My older brothers were an inspiration. I avidly followed their trail of heartbreak, the procession of beautiful birds conquered on a car seat or nailed on the family couch. There was an endless stream of girl power seated demurely in front of the glowing grate while Mum broke dishes in the kitchen, and I happily carried in fuel for the fire, angling for a glimpse of their feminine glory – Valerie, her rosy cheeks flushed scarlet as she raised her head from my brother's lap when I burst in with a shovel full of coal; Lorraine's black bra strap that had slipped down onto her arm; Sylvia, ah Sylvia, her garter visible to the naked eye and surely the hint of a smile playing about her magnanimous lips... I couldn't wait to reach that age, but in the meantime I freely dispensed copious amounts of baby batter on Mummy's bed sheets while conjuring the legendary scrubbers of Mansfield.

I have an ancient photo of me with friends at the Nottingham Goose Fair. It portrays young men in their prime, some now dead, from car wrecks, cancer, hard living, heart attacks, all the joys that age affords. On the October night it was taken we were young and easy in the evening mist, the pints of bitter filling us with optimism. Legend said that the stone lions outside Nottingham's town hall roared every time a virgin walked by, and we later found this to be true. Our transport was an old shooting brake and my pal's dad's furniture van. A floating boudoir, a seraglio on wheels, something the Notty girls who clustered in defensive postures outside the pubs had never seen. They climbed aboard most willingly, a couch or mattress preferable to scraping your best coat against a brick wall. We partied on the furniture due for delivery the next day. There were no mobile phones to track us, no hidden cameras, only the occasional copper dozing in a lay-by as the Albion Claymore sailed through, loaded with Albion's daughters.

This YOY sheds a tear for that misspent youth. I want to do it all again. I want to taste that physical beauty, smooth skin, blood filled with billions of endorphins ready to stampee at the slightest hormonal signal. It doesn't last, so get it while you can, you beaver hunters and carpet munchers, liver ticklers and lager louts, belt snappers and fudge packers – worship in the house of youth while youth is still in the house. "Your body is a temple," to paraphrase John Cazale in *Dog Day Afternoon*, right before he got blown away by some trigger-happy Fed.

My own YOY bod was enhanced by serious soccer in school and college, I didn't even smoke until I was 20, and yes, I went to college, that's how I know the meaning of that Latin tag. Accompanied by my great school pal Mick W, who now test-drives Lamborghinis, I was turned loose in London at the tender age of 18. Real life had grabbed us by the scruffs of our necks, commanded us to get it while we could. So we did. We learned nothing in college, except how to run up an overdraft and move in the middle of the night from one vile bedsit to the next. I had more folding money than my dad, who was making about a tanner a week as a skilled plumber. My brother Rusty was making a bit more as a long-distance lorry driver. He occasionally visited the hovels we inhabited in Kentish Town and Highgate and along the borders of Hampstead, complaining

bitterly of my good fortune and poor work habits as we sat stupefied in clouds of hash smoke, surrounded by Mandrax-ed, banjaxed, guitar-strumming runaways, laughing at his green-eyed envy, never dreaming that my mortal case would withstand the abuse long enough to become creaky and wrinkled, that my once-proud tats might get smudged up and runny like eye make-up at 2am.

As if to remind me of the fleeting nature of physical beauty, the Rolling Stones recently toured again. Their music propelled us at warp speed through so many fabulous, unreal nights long ago, but now they have reached a certain age, the pre-dotage period best spent on the porch playing the blues for real, reiterating that gutbucket music they knocked off as absolute beginners. Press reports focused on how much money the Stones would earn on this Viagra-sponsored OAP tour as they churned out old chestnuts for their middle-aged fans, a vintage dose of the rump-pumping music that compelled us to shag anything that moved back in the day.

But YOTs don't want to hear about how it was "back in the day", how you could find a walk-up flat for \$100, a 1,000ft loft for \$200. How the rent didn't count as a major factor in your life. It only makes them sad and resentful that their own lives will never be so free and easy. And that their culture produced Justin Bieber not the Stones, but that's what the kulcha is throwing up these days. Likewise, the once-arcanic mysteries of sex are now at anyone's fingertips, even those who are far too young to need the information.

The tidal wave of internet porn has exposed us to too many fleshy combinations, neutered the dirty beauty of small details, the magic gap between stocking top and underwear – was there ever a more-forbidden territory for a pimply youth to explore? The twang of garter belts snapping, the feel of that impossible strap between one's fingers, the latch, the hatch, the gate of heaven. According to the late poet Philip Larkin, sexual intercourse began sometime between the "Chatterley ban" and the Beatles' first LP. Shagging emerged from the back seat and sat up front; mod girls, rocker tarts, it didn't matter – the slags were outnumbered by pretty girls peeling off their panties, popping pills after they had popped the pill, come inside please!

The YOTs are much better looking and well turned out than we were. Indeed, the streets of Lower Manhattan and London and Paris are crammed with beauties of both sexes, strolling around as if the economy was not in the tank. But the YOTs don't have that wild streak that the first years of sexual freedom triggered in every YOY's heart – YOTs are licentious, but they have a licence for it, everything is permitted, but nothing much matters. Why bother talking when you can text, or sext? Why bother going out when you get everything delivered on the screen in front of you? Food, sex, clothes, shop online until you drop. No worries. When I was young I read *On the Road* and then felt compelled to hitchhike across America. I was as clueless as *Candide*, never realised how perilous this country might be once you left the confines of New York City. When I drove back from San Francisco to New York in a fast car with a beautiful black girl, I never realised how dangerous that might be either, that the hostile diners in one particular diner in Utah might have wanted to lynch us both. I just thought they were jealous. My ignorance saved me from their ignorance. That's the beauty of youth, dumber than a bag of hammers, lovelier than spring rain. ■