

'THE BEATS' GO ON

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a milestone that will be marked in a number of ways. Viking, which had heavily censored Kerouac's original manuscript, will publish an unexpurgated edition of *On the Road*. Meanwhile, that manuscript—a 120-foot-long scroll on which Kerouac composed his novel during a three-week period in 1951—is now on tour, and will be on view this summer in Kerouac's hometown of Lowell, MA.



Filmmaker Walter Salles (left, in blue sweatshirt) talks with English instructor George Mangan (center). Salles, who is making a documentary about Jack Kerouac, came to Exeter last spring to film Mangan's course on "The Beats."

Finally, filmmaker Walter Salles—whose Oscar-nominated film *The Motorcycle Diaries* chronicled the on-the-road adventures of another iconic figure, Che Guevara—is making a documentary about Kerouac, produced by Francis Ford Coppola's company American Zoetrope. Last

spring, after filming in Lowell, Salles and his crew swung by Exeter to film a Harkness class discussion of *On the Road*—an unlikely sounding detour that begins to make sense as you talk with the course's instructor, George Mangan. Mangan first read the novel in the early 1960s when he was studying for the priesthood, and it literally changed his life. "I responded to everything in *On the Road*," says Mangan, who dropped out of seminary and went on his own quest for experience, a journey that eventually led him back to college and grad school and into teaching. Mangan joined the Exeter English department in 1976, and the following year proposed a course on Kerouac and other Beat Generation writers—an idea, he says, that was met with little enthusiasm at the time.

It wasn't until the 1990s that Jack Kerouac gained a firm foothold in the Academy curriculum when Fred Tremallo began teaching a course on "The Beats," and Mangan, as the instructor of the course "Novels into Film," assigned students to write a group screenplay of *On the Road*. Following Tremallo's death in 1997, Mangan took over "The Beats," which now ranks among the most popular courses at Exeter.

Mangan says it's easy to understand *On the Road's* ongoing appeal. Students, after all, are traveling the same road as Kerouac's characters, "searching for identity, for meaning, for spirituality," he says, "while also wanting to sample all the pleasures of the flesh." They're also, he adds, intoxicated by Kerouac's language, which "really touches the adolescent soul."

"For me," says Alex Fankuchen '06, "the book's prevailing theme is that we all have an innate 'hunger' that can only be satisfied by experience." Fankuchen was struck by the "dichotomy of studying *that* book with *that* teacher at *that* point in my life. There was nothing I wanted more than to follow Mr. Mangan's example and just drop everything one day and go out and see the world." Exeter, he adds, can seem like "the exact opposite of that ideal, where the world is brought to you in a comfortable classroom for 50 minutes at a time."

Mangan says he has to remind his students that the author of *On the Road* "never had a driver's license," and that later in life Kerouac had trouble living up to his own ideal. The beauty of *On the Road*, Mangan stresses, is how vividly Kerouac evokes this timeless wish for freedom.

Walter Salles found his way to Mangan's classroom through a series of plot twists. In 2005, American Zoetrope announced that Salles would direct a feature adaptation of *On the Road*. Coppola has owned the screen rights to the novel since 1979, which he has described as "inherently difficult to adapt to the screen."

To overcome some of those difficulties, Salles decided he would first film a documentary about Kerouac. His plan, explains Brendan Kenney, manager of creative affairs at American Zoetrope, was to revisit many of *On the Road's* locales, seek out some of "the primary sources from that generation and ask, 'What would you like to see in this film?'" Salles, who is Brazilian, also wanted to "talk with the youth of America," Kenney says, "because this is a novel that speaks so powerfully to young people."

Kenney was describing the project to a friend one day, "and she began telling me about this great class she'd taken in which they'd written a screenplay for *On the Road*." That friend was Corie Pierce '92, and she put Kenney in touch with Mangan.

Mangan says he was expecting Salles to "come on like Erich von Stroheim, dressed in jodhpurs and carrying a riding crop." But the director turned out to be "completely unobtrusive, warm and charming. He put everyone at ease." When students began discussing a particular character in the novel, Salles reached into a box he'd been given by Kerouac's Lowell relatives and pulled out a photo of the young woman who had inspired the character. What had been planned as a brief, 20-minute stopover stretched into an extended two-hour conversation among Kerouac lovers.

Salles is now home in Brazil, editing his documentary. Whether any of the Exeter footage will find a place in the finished film is uncertain, but Kenney reports that "the kids were very articulate, and Walter was happy with the visit."