

The Beat goes on: '50s generation of writers regenerated

Erin Moseley
Reporter

Decades have a tendency to take on identities in people's minds. Mention the '30s, '40s, '50s, or '60s and something rather specific immediately comes to mind. In the process of experiencing and writing, counter-culturalists of the '50s and '60s acquired a generational tag.

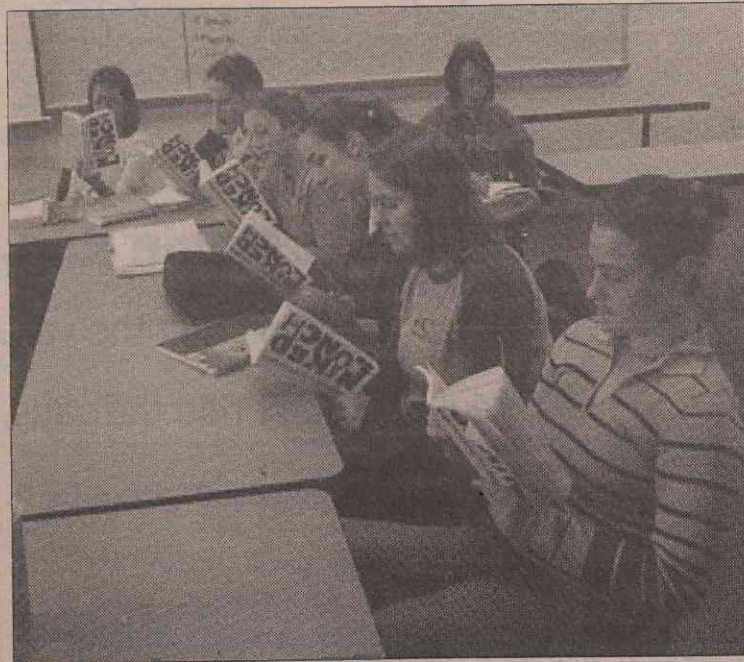
"They were the Beat Generation," said course instructor Michael Strickland, coordinator of the English Department's professional writing and rhetoric program.

"They were one of the longest-lasting influences on American literature, and they are back, without having ever really been gone."

This winter term, Elon students are learning about the Beat Generation and its influences in the '50s and '60s.

According to Strickland, the beliefs and concepts of the Beat Movement are still alive today.

"Through hippies and punks, and also throughout the '80s, the perceptions of the [Beat] generation have bubbled back up to the surface," he said.



Annette Randall / Photo Editor

Keeping the Beat

Students in "The Beat Generation" literature course read William S. Burroughs' "Naked Lunch," an abstract novel of imaginative sketches. Burroughs is regarded as one of the founding Beat writers.

“Their’s is a message of freedom and independent thought. The Beats pushed the limits of society and forever changed the way people think.”

“I am speculating wildly,” said Strickland, “however, one of the things that makes the Beat Generation appealing to the young people of today is that while we live in a freer, more progressive society, there is still an awful lot about our consumer culture that today’s generation feels a sense of rebellion against.

Followers today feel as though the Beat Movement rattled culture in a way it needs to be rattled again.”

Strickland said he is teaching a course on the Beat Generation this winter term to “encourage students to look deeper into the culture and ideas of the Beat Movement and to learn the authors’ lives.”

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and William Burroughs made up the core group. They met in a neighborhood surrounding Columbia University in uptown Manhattan. The movement later migrated to San Francisco. The Beat writers existed as a small group of

close friends that initiated a movement.

“They expressed objection and criticism against American materialism in a bitter, harsh and often abusive language,” Strickland said.

The Beats mocked America’s conformity, denounced its immorality and set out “on the road” to discover America’s true spirit.

“Their’s is a message of freedom and independent thought,” Mary Sessions said, student in the course. “The Beats pushed the limits of society and forever changed the way people think.”

As an attendee of the Jack Kerouac School For Disembodied Poetics, Strickland received “a real sense of the alternative lifestyle,” as he attended lectures by Ginsberg, Burroughs, and other prominent Beat thinkers.

“I’ve always been fascinated by a bunch of creative people, united under the same roof, executing a nexus of energy that collectively creates something much larger, much more influential,” Strickland said.

The Beat Movement was not just another literary genre, but a literary and social revolution.

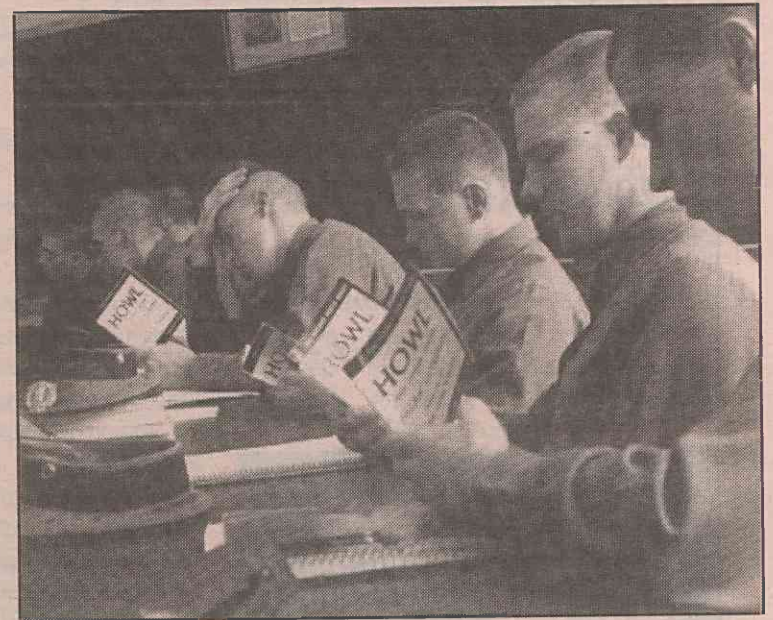
Strickland said the term is associated with literature and poetry; however, within the same era, the United States also hosted artistic movements in jazz and abstract expressionism.

“The writers were living in a very restrictive and repressive time,” junior Kara Falck said.

“They did not follow all of the rules in form and subject matter. They delved into their own souls and came up with dynamic realizations about life and the world.”

Strickland continues to teach the stories and ideas of the Beat Generation because students are drawn to it, and he wants to guarantee that they grasp the true story.

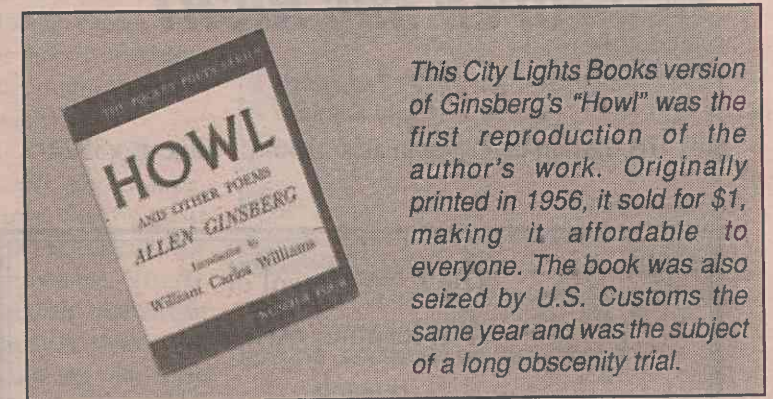
“I enjoy getting involved in the literature with students who are



Gordon Ball / copyright Gordon Ball

Feeling the Beat

Cadets at Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va., read Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem “Howl” in professor Gordon Ball’s Literature of the Beat Generation class.



This City Lights Books version of Ginsberg’s “Howl” was the first reproduction of the author’s work. Originally printed in 1956, it sold for \$1, making it affordable to everyone. The book was also seized by U.S. Customs the same year and was the subject of a long obscenity trial.

genuinely interested,” said Strickland.

What began as a movement espousing mysticism and spontaneity is reemerging in conversation, books, museums, movies and CD-ROMs, as well as on Elon’s

campus. “All too often people are content in accepting the rules and roles that society dishes out,” said Falck. “I’ve gained a new understanding of literature and society.”

BEAT

def: (bēt) adj. tired, broken-down, sympathetic; relating to the Beats

usual suspects: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Kenneth Rexroth

sugg. books: “On the Road,” “The Subterraneans,” “Big Sur” (Kerouac), “Junky,” “Naked Lunch” (Burroughs), “The Portable Beat Reader” (ed. Charters)

sugg. poems: “Howl,” “America,” “Kaddish” (Ginsberg)