



Venice West

By John Arthur Maynard

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"A most remarkable book . . . a wonderful account of an odd and unlikely place where for a brief time a small number of people pursued a romantic vision of what a life dedicated to art should be like . . . a superb story."—William O'Neill, author of *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960*

The beatnik was born in Venice, California, in the 1950s. An imaginary figure in many respects—the invention of both the media and the people who played the beatnik role—the character quickly assumed nearly mythic proportions for the American public. Coffeehouses, beards, poetry, drugs, and free-wheeling sexuality were all associated with the beatnik, the quintessential rebel who, by rejecting material values, represented both a threat and an alluring alternative to the dominant middle-class culture.

In this fascinating book, John Arthur Maynard tells the story of the poets and promoters who invented the Beat Generation and who, in many cases, destroyed themselves in the process. In this look at the least remembered (but in its time, most publicized) beat enclave, Maynard focuses on two of Venice's most newsworthy residents—Lawrence Lipton and Stuart Z. Perkoff. Lipton began as a writer of popular detective stories and screenplays, but was determined to be recognized as a poet and social critic. He eventually published *The Holy Barbarians*, which helped to create the enduring public image of the beatnik. Stuart Perkoff was a more gifted poet; with fascination and horror, we follow his failed attempts to support his family, his heroin addiction, his first wife's courage and mental fragility, his sexual entanglements, his imprisonment, and the development of his own writing. Other characters who move in and out of the story are Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg, as well as lesser-known poets, artists, hangers-on, and the many women who were rarely treated as full members of the community.

For most of the 1950s, the Venice beatniks were able to live and work in isolation. Once the media decided that beats made good copy, however, their peace was shattered. Reporters, drug dealers, violent criminals, and would-be beatniks invaded Venice in such force that many "square" residents began an unrelenting campaign to purge their community of bohemianism. This campaign persisted long after the beats, who tended to ignore politics, had yielded the stage

to a new generation of political activists. In this collective biography, based largely on unpublished sources, Maynard tells us how these events affected public perceptions and the beats' own perceptions of themselves.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

In the late 1950s, Venice was southern California's answer to Greenwich Village and North Beach. Maynard interweaves the bohemian colony's history with the lives of its two most prominent literary denizens: Stuart Perkoff and Lawrence Lipton. Perkoff, the quintessential beat poet, lived simply, took drugs, and was dedicated to his muse. Lipton, despite his rabid rejection of materialism, seemed doomed to become its victim. His book, *The Holy Barbarians*, brought a wave of publicity that all but drowned the real concerns of the beat movement, shifting the focus of attention from beats to beatniks. Maynard's book, begun as a dissertation, is meticulously researched and a pleasure to read. A major work on bohemianism, this is highly recommended.

- William Gargan, *Brooklyn Coll. Lib., CUNY*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Ponderously serious book about a California cult upheaval that prefigured the better-known rage of hippie bohemianism. Applying the full academic treatment, self-described historian Maynard, a Californian, delivers a defeating book that seems always to be promising a breakthrough for its beatnik subjects--and yet releases them only in death. There are some fast pages midway where the beatniks of Venice West attain a single season in the sun, but the public appetite for fads moves on, and the town goes into a long, lingering death rattle that cannot lift Maynard's literary sociology into brilliance and great humor. Venice was founded in 1905 ``as a genteel retreat for esthetically-minded Los Angeles businessmen" and quickly became ``the Coney Island of the West." The ocean-front town was built in imitation of Venice, Italy, with a Grand Canal, Bridge of Sighs, miles of canals, and imported Venetian gondolas. It was much in decay by the late 1950's (Orson Welles used it as the vile bordertown in 1958's *Touch of Evil*), when Lawrence Lipton was readying his research on his fellow Venice bohemians, to be called *The Holy Barbarians*. Lipton--who seems to have been an oddly repulsive fellow--surrounded himself with callow, unformed poets, wanted to make a big statement of his opinions, and chose to ride his friends as a hobbyhorse for his breast-beating and tub-thumping. Alas for Lipton, the Kerouac/Ginsberg axis stole much of his thunder, and Venice West never achieved quite the recognition of Haight Ashbury. Despite some early ink in *Life* magazine and time on TV, which suddenly threw a hot spotlight on Venice, the town soon closed up as a beat enclave and its greatest literary lights (dim bulbs all) could not survive drugs, cancer, madness, or old age. What should have been a lively, eccentric book wilts under a pall of dreary sociology. -- Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

About the Author

John Arthur Maynard is a historian who lives in Simi Valley in southern California.

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Christopher Rangel:

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