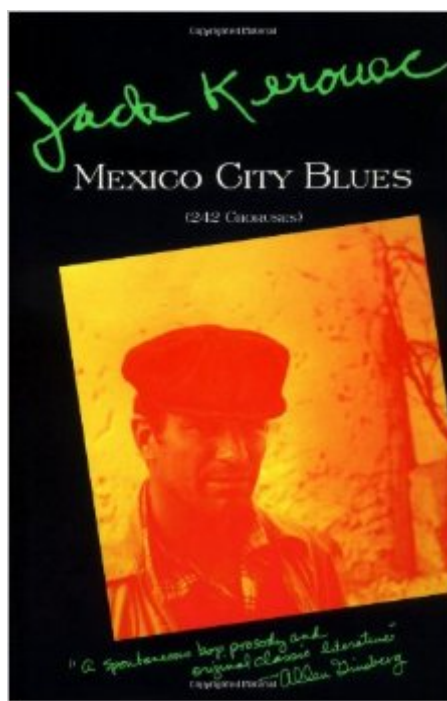


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# Mexico City Blues: 242 Choruses



## Synopsis

Kerouac's most important poem, *Mexico City Blues*, incorporates all the elements of his theory of spontaneous composition. Memories, fantasies, dreams, and surrealistic free association are all lyrically combined in the loose format of the blues to create an original and moving epic. "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses; my ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus or from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next." "A spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature." - Allen Ginsberg; "Kerouac calls himself a jazz poet. There is no doubt about his great sensitivity to language. His sentences frequently move into tempestuous sweeps and whorls and sometimes they have something of the rich music of Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas" - The New York Herald Tribune

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It took me a while to get beyond the Beat myth and see these poems for what they are--some of the most joyful, goofy and affecting writings of the last century. Jack wrote all 242 choruses--one per notebook page--over six weeks in 1955. His improvised word-jazz was at its peak; the poems are fresh and spontaneous but rarely sloppy (try it yourself if you don't believe me). The Buddhist leanings are a little simple-minded, but simplicity is part of the point. In layout and verbal inventiveness Jack's more experimental than most poets writing today. He combines a love for made-up words and language as pure sound with a lyrical directness that you find more often in pop

songs than modern poetry. Hearing Jack read some of these on the Steve Allen record made me realize how rare a thing his poems achieved: sentiment, experiment, tenderness, peace. A moving companion to *On the Road*.

Jack Kerouac wanted to be known as a jazz poet and with this poem he proves that he is. *Mexico City Blues* is one of my favorite Kerouac books and a lot of fun to read. The 242 Choruses are free-spirited and spontaneous, almost like they've been written just before you turn the page. If you've read and enjoyed "*On the Road*" or "*The Dharma Bums*" pick this one up and enjoy. A little Miles Davis, John Coltrane, or Charlie Parker playing in the background will add a whole new dimension. Sweet."..Fifty pesos 3 Cheers Forever It's beautiful to be comfortable Nirvana here I am.."

I remember when I first stumbled across this book in the early 90's- it was like Christmas came twice that year. You see, I had thought that I had read absolutely everything published by Kerouac, prose and poem. I didn't know this existed, Wow! It is like one long, magnificent blues or jazz riff of the written word. It is a true blues composition because it has genuine soul. The more I think about it, it just might be the best thing that he ever did. I know this is going to sound outrageous, but the only comparable book of American poetry I can even think of comparing this to would be Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman and Kerouac both sang of the same grass roots, mystical, America. And it's still out there, if you shake your mind free of the preconceptions and the [junk]....

*Mexico City Blues* shocked and moved me. The freedom with which Kerouac takes his writing, inventing words and splattering images, envys me as an aspiring poet. I have tried to imitate his style but finally realized that only Jack can write like Jack. The poems contained on these pages are some of the greatest I have ever read and reading them is like slowly devouring an entire banquet.

I have been a Kerouac fan for a long time, but it was a couple of years after reading most his novels that I was able to get into his poetry. "Pomes all sizes", for example, sat unread on my bookshelf for some time. "*Mexico City Blues*" is what really turned me on to his poetry and made me able to appreciate it. I was able to go back and read his other poetry with new eyes. This book is fantastic. Read it out loud to yourself, the man had a natural knack for rhythm. Great book.

Kerouac wrote his volume of poetry "*Mexico City Blues*" during the summer of 1955 while living in

Mexico City. During this time, he also wrote his sad and still underappreciated short novel, "Tristessa" — Tristessa [TRISTESSA] [Paperback]. "Mexico City Blues" had a difficult history. Kerouac's friend, Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Press, rejected the book for publication in 1956. In 1959, Grove Press published the work. Then, in November, 1959, the poet Kenneth Rexroth published a devastatingly critical review titled "Discordant and Cool" in the New York Times. Rexroth wrote: "Mr. Kerouac's Buddha is a dime-store incense burner, glowing and glowering sinisterly in the dark corner of a Beatnik pad and just thrilling the wits out of bad little girls." Rexroth concluded his review with mocking irony: It's all there, the terrifyingly skillful use of verse, the broad knowledge of life, the profound judgments, the almost unbearable sense of reality. I've always wondered whatever happened to those wax-work figures in the old rubberneck dives in Chinatown. Now we know; at least one of them writes books. "For all its weaknesses, "Mexico City Blues" has survived its publication history and Rexroth's criticism. The book continues to be read, discussed, argued about, and taught. "Mexico City Blues" is a collection of 242 short poems, each of which is titled simply as a numbered "Chorus". Kerouac wanted to write poetry in the style of the jazz and bop music he loved; and in this he for the most part succeeded. He wrote at the outset of the book: "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses; my ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus or from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next." The work is written free-style and spontaneously with Kerouac, as he says, frequently taking an idea from one chorus and following through into the next. (The dividing lines between some of the choruses thus frequently seem artificial and mask a continuity in the text.) As with all poetry, the choruses in "Mexico City Blues" work best when declaimed and read aloud. Remember the Beats of Kerouac's day, as these poems were recited in coffee-houses to bongos. In reading the book, I was able to recapture some of this by "surfing" and by finding examples of choruses either read skillfully or accompanied by piano, drum, or small combo. Reading aloud, alone or with music and rhythm, brings to life these choruses. The choruses have many themes, of which Kerouac's interest at the time in Buddhism is one. Rexroth devalues severely Kerouac's insight into Buddhism, among other things. The poems include sequences about Kerouac's early life and his relationship to his parents and to his older brother Gerard who died at the age of 9 when Kerouac was 4. This death haunted Kerouac throughout his life. The choruses include meditations on death. There are poems about substance abuse which haunted Kerouac throughout his life and which undoubtedly played a role in the poems. There are choruses about Kerouac's life in Mexico, on the railroads, travelling around, and about much else. "Mexico City Blues" is a long, erratic collection. Given the spontaneous method of

writing and the circumstances under which it was written, much of the collection is indeed poor, ranting, almost unreadable, and deserving of Ferlinghetti's declination of the book and of Rexroth's criticism. At its best, there are some good poems here and a distinctive beat creative voice. I found that as I reread and thought about the book more of the choruses began to make sense. With many frustrating things in the collection, overall the book works. Some of the individual choruses has become relatively well-known and anthologized. Here are a few passages from the work, among several, that seem to me characteristic and that I enjoy. In the conclusion of the 33d Chorus, Kerouac writes about himself: "I'm an idealist who has outgrown my idealism I have nothing to do the rest of my life but do it and the rest of my life to do it" The 234th Chorus is among the shortest in the collection and captures something of Kerouac's spiritual outlook. It reads in full. "Holy poetry. 'All thinks are empty of self-marks' 'If it is space that is perception of sight You ought to know, and if we were to substitute One for the other, who'd win?" Santiveda, St. Francis, A Kempis Hara A sinner may go to Heaven by serving God as a sinner." The last few choruses include Kerouac's tribute to jazz musician Charley Parker who had recently died and whose bop inspired Kerouac. In the 239th chorus, Kerouac said of Parker ""The expression that says 'All is Well"-- This was what Charley Parker Said when he played, All is Well. You had the feeling of early-in-the morning Like a hermit's joy, or like the perfect cry Of some wild gang at a jam session 'Wail Wop' -- Charly burst His lungs to reach the speed Of what the speedsters wanted And what they wanted Was his Eternal Slowdown. A great musician and a great creator of forms That ultimately find expression In mores and what have you." "Mexico City Blues" is a mixed collection that captures its author and an important American literary movement. Some of it will inspire. The book has been published several times since its initial printing. It is also included in a new Library of America volume <sup>^</sup> Jack Kerouac: Collected Poems: Library of America Series Jacket <sup>^</sup> devoted to the "Collected Poems" of Kerouac. Robin Friedman

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