JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Classic Book Notes #50

June 2025
Originally Published March 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Poet, Activist, Cultural Icon

Editor's note: Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. The Jefferson first published it in March 2021 as Book Notes #50.

This week in ***Book Notes*** I had originally intended to examine Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's ***The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again***, a brilliant recasting of the past 125 years of American history. Putnam and Garrett seek to answer the question, "After 60 to 70 years of increasing social cohesion and solidarity, how did Americans become so polarized?" Recognizing that social solidarity can be seen by some as a numbing conformity, they place the pivot point in the 1960s "do your own thing" rebellion against the social pressure to conform to established norms.

"The '60s" as cultural phenomenon, however, didn't come out of nowhere. It wasn't a spontaneous combustion of unknown origin. Frequently, it is asserted that the Baby Boomers created *"The '60s,"* which they didn't. They adopted its mores and styles, for a time, then morphed them into today's libertarian excess. But *"The '60s"* were created, if you will, by those members of "The Greatest Generation" who rejected what they saw as post-World War II America's smug self-assurance and stifling conformity.

One sees those *"'60s"* precursors in the 1940s and '50s in social science treatises such as William Whyte's ***The Organization Man*** (1956), which asserted Americans had eschewed individualism for a corporate, collectivist ethic, a theme echoed in 1950s popular fiction such as ***The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*** (1957) and ***Atlas Shrugged*** (1957). One also glimpses it in the newly emerging youth-oriented rock 'n' roll music and films such as ***Rebel Without a Cause*** (1955).

But of the 1940s and '50s cultural influences seeding *"The '60s"* rebellion and the following half-century's glorification of the individual, none was more important than that flock of poets, artists, novelists, singers, and musicians collectively known as ***The Beats***, short for beatnik – the iconic, beret wearing, goateed, be-bopping '50s image of the anti-establishment counter-culturalist. Ranging from ***On the Road*** novelist Jack Kerouac and his sidekick Neal Cassady to poet Allen Ginsburg and fellow poet and Zen guru Gary Snyder to jazz musicians like Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Dave Brubeck, "the Beats" changed America.

And none of them exerted more influence than Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who died Monday Feb. 22, 2021 at 101, a bit more than a month shy of his 102nd birthday. Ferlinghetti, who outlived all of his contemporaries, was, as Jesse McKinley noted in Ferlinghetti's **New York Times** obituary, "the spiritual godfather of the Beat movement." [1] Bill Savage, of Northwestern University, asserts, "it's no exaggeration to say that Ferlinghetti … changed the United States more than any single literary figure in our nation's history." [2]

That's a bit of a stretch, but not much. A future ***Book Notes*** might try to answer the question, "Which literary figures had the greatest sociocultural impact on

American society?" Mark Twain, like Walt Whitman, brought the vernacular into "high art"; Washington Irving invented Christmas, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as Abraham Lincoln said, "was the little lady who wrote the big book which brought us this great war" – ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***. While I am no fan of either their aesthetic or their ethic, Ayn Rand's ***The Fountainhead*** and ***Atlas Shrugged*** inspired today's libertarian, right-wing politics. It is an interesting thought exercise; Ferlinghetti would be on the list.

Who was Lawrence Ferlinghetti?

How did he change America?

Ferlinghetti was an acclaimed poet, painter, bookstore proprietor – that's an understatement – political activist, champion of the marginalized, and passionate advocate for freedom of speech. Born Lawrence Monsanto Ferling, the youngest of five sons, Ferlinghetti was the child of those whom the 19th century Immigration Restriction League called "the mongrel scum of southern and Eastern Europe"; that is, he was the son of an immigrant. [3] His father, Charles Ferling, who died six months before his son was born, was an Italian from Brescia who shortened his name upon arriving in America. His mother was Jewish of Sephardic heritage. Ferlinghetti's father's death caused his mother mental anguish ultimately leading to a breakdown.

Originally raised by an aunt, Emily Monsanto, in Strasbourg, France, Ferlinghetti learned to speak French before he spoke English. Economic misfortune forced Emily to return to America, where she became a governess for the affluent Bisland family in Bronxville, New York. After Emily disappeared, the Bislands adopted Ferlinghetti as a foster child. His foster father, Presley Bisland, encouraged his study of literature and the classics. Ferlinghetti attended the elite Mt. Hermon preparatory school. Having developed an interest in Thomas Wolfe, he then attended the University of North Carolina from which he graduated in 1941.

During World War II, he served in the U.S. Navy skippering a submarine chaser during the 1944 Allied invasion at Normandy. After the war, using the benefits from the G.I. Bill – the Servicemen's Readjustment Act – Ferlinghetti earned a master's degree in literature from Columbia University. He then moved to Paris, where he attained a doctoral degree in comparative literature from the Sorbonne – the University of Paris. In 1954, upon discovering his family name, he changed his name from "Ferling" to its original form of "Ferlinghetti." In 1951, he moved to San Francisco, where he lived for the next 70 years championing new artistic talent, defending freedom of speech, and writing poetry. [4]

These brief biographical notes scarcely do justice to the man who once said he was "just an American kid." Though an Eagle Scout, he once was arrested for shoplifting. [5]

So, what did this "American kid" do that changed American society? Three things: 1) his City Lights Bookstore championed new talent, mainstream publishers at first shunned; 2) he championed freedom of speech and opposed censorship, most famously in publishing Allen Ginsberg's *"Howl";* and 3) his own poetry. It is his own poetry that I find most satisfying, but first a word or two about City Lights and *"Howl."*

His City Lights Bookstore and its *Pocket Poets Series* revolutionized American literature. As Bill Savage writes, "In the popular imagination, writers are lone geniuses filling notebooks in cold-water flats. But to have any impact, a writer's words have to get to readers." [6] Although realistic about the literary marketplace – he once said "Publishing a book of poetry is still like dropping it off a bridge somewhere and waiting for a splash. Usually you don't hear anything" [7] – Ferlinghetti got them readers. Among those he published were Ferlinghetti himself, but also Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, William Carlos Williams, Gregory Corso, Malcolm Lowry, Frank O'Hara, Pablo Picasso, Robert Bly, and Julio Cortazar. As Emma Brown notes, his "San Francisco bookstore and avant-garde publishing house … catapulted the Beat Generation to fame and helped establish the city as a center of literary and cultural revolution. … City Lights became one of San Francisco's most enduring institutions." [8]

In publishing Allen Ginsberg's *"Howl,"* Ferlinghetti not only found readers, he heard the "splash." In the process, he changed America's obscenity laws. In a long poem originally written as a performance piece, Ferlinghetti published *"Howl"* in 1956. Containing references to both gay and straight sexual practices, the use of illicit drugs, and written in the street vernacular of the time, the book was declared obscene. Both Ferlinghetti and his bookstore manager, Shig Murao, were arrested for publishing and selling obscene material. Defended by the American Civil Liberties Union, the case was decided in Ferlinghetti's favor. Judge Clayton Horn of the California State Superior Court determined that a book with "the 'slightest redeeming social importance' merits First Amendment protection." [9] [10]

"Howl's" literary merits notwithstanding, the California decision and the U.S. Supreme Court's 1957 decision in *Roth v. United States* became landmarks in deciding what constitutes obscene material unprotected by the First Amendment. [11] In the process, it enabled American artists to use the language of the people – how the people actually spoke – in their work. It also, by permitting the publication of *"Howl"* "helped to ignite a movement" enabling "Beat" writers, like Kerouac and Burroughs, to finally find an audience. [12]

So, from the vantage point of social science and cultural criticism, Ferlinghetti indirectly created *"The '60s"* by publishing *"Howl,"* which empowered the Beats, with whom he never claimed membership, and sowed the seeds that led to the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. As Bill Savage writes:

> "The Beats didn't set out to create a counterculture; they wanted to write their Great American Novels and epic poems. But in so doing, they voiced dissent, rejecting consumerism and materialism, as well as political and artistic conformity. Audiences responded with enthusiasm because the Beats expressed a current of dissatisfaction already roiling beneath the placid surface of Eisenhower's United States. The Beats let their fellow Americans know that. … You didn't have to put on a suit and tie and hold down a job in advertising – though Ginsberg himself did just that.
>
> Despite being dismissed by conservatives as mere "Beatniks," Ferlinghetti and the Beat Generation and the breadth of their influence cannot be overstated. The Beats inspired the Beatles (note that spelling) … The Beats influenced young songwriters such as Bob Dylan. The Beats asserted the importance of gay rights when "homosexuality," the term of the day, was still criminalized or considered a mental illness. When Ginsberg concluded his poem "America" with "I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel," he cracked open minds and hearts, planting seeds that would later make the United States more free and equal. [13]

All of which is true, but if he had done none of that, Ferlinghetti would still be important as one of the most original and important poetic voices of the second half of the 20th century. His ***A Coney Island of the Mind*** (1958), with more than a million copies in print in over a dozen languages, "remains one of the best-selling and most popular books of poetry ever published." [14]

Speaking in the language of the everyday, many written for jazz accompaniment, all of Ferlinghetti's poems exalt common folk in genuine populist songs of freedom. They come in two definite strains or strands of thought and temperament. First, political protest – Ferlinghetti called it "poetry of insurgence" – and, second, a wistful, romantic joy celebrating life and freedom. Stylistically, Ferlinghetti's poems experimented with form and line structure. As Kory Grow writes in **Rolling Stone**, he "was known for stacking small fractured lines on top of each other in unique geometric shapes like Jenga towers, with each thought supporting the one's above it." [15]

Combining both political protest and a romantic joy, one of my favorites is *"Dog."* Almost 60 years ago, a friend created an etching based on it as a Christmas gift. I still have it. It celebrates a dog trotting freely along his town's city streets taking note of what there is to take note of, enjoying his day and the things to be enjoyed and scorning those worthy of scorn, like Congressman Doyle and other hypocrites.

from Dog

The dog trots freely in the street
and sees reality
and the things he sees
are bigger than himself
and the things he sees
are his reality
Drunks in doorways
Moons on trees ...
The dog trots freely in the street
and the things he smells
smell something like himself
The dog trots freely in the street
past puddles and babies
cats and cigars
poolrooms and policemen ...
And he goes past the Romeo Ravioli Factory
and past Coit's Tower
and past Congressman Doyle
He's afraid of Coit's Tower
but he's not afraid of Congressman Doyle
although what he hears is very discouraging
very depressing
very absurd
to a sad young dog like himself
to a serious dog like himself
But he has his own free world to live in
His own fleas to eat
He will not be muzzled
Congressman Doyle is just another
fire hydrant
to him ...
a real realist
with a real tale to tell
and a real tail to tell it with
a real live
barking
democratic dog
engaged in real
free enterprise
with something to say
about ontology
something to say
about reality

and how to see it
and how to hear it
with his head cocked sideways
at streetcorners
as if he is just about to have
his picture taken
for Victor Records
listening for
His Master's Voice
and looking
like a living questionmark
into the
great gramophone
of puzzling existence
with its wondrous hollow horn
which always seems
just about to spout forth
some Victorious answer
to everything [16]

His poetry of political protest, which he called "Poetry as an Insurgent Art" could take a sharper, more aggressive tone, as in *"I Am Waiting":*

from I Am Waiting

I am waiting for my case to come up
and I am waiting
for a rebirth of wonder
and I am waiting for someone
to really discover America
and wail
and I am waiting
for the discovery
of a new symbolic western frontier
and I am waiting
for the American Eagle
to really spread its wings
and straighten up and fly right
and I am waiting
for the Age of Anxiety
to drop dead
and I am waiting
for the war to be fought
which will make the world safe

for anarchy
and I am waiting
for the final withering away
of all governments
and I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder [17]

Written much later, 2007's *"Poetry as Insurgent Art (I am signaling you through the flames)"* speaks in a still sharper, more urgent voice:

Poetry as Insurgent Art [I am signaling you through the flames]

I am signaling you through the flames.

The North Pole is not where it used to be.

Manifest Destiny is no longer manifest.

Civilization self-destructs.

Nemesis is knocking at the door.

What are poets for, in such an age?
What is the use of poetry?

The state of the world calls out for poetry to save it.

If you would be a poet, create works capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this meaning sounds apocalyptic.

You are Whitman, you are Poe, you are Mark Twain, you are Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, you are Neruda and Mayakovsky and Pasolini, you are an American or a non-American, you can conquer the conquerors with words ... [18]

Artists, like teachers (or, at least, those teachers who really care), always put themselves on the line risking rejection and humiliation. Parker Palmer talks about that in ***The Courage to Teach***. [19] Although I am not sure Ferlinghetti ever thought of himself as a teacher, I am sure he'd get the analogy, for aren't all artists teachers wanting us to see what they see, feel what they feel, know what they know? No one, I think, said it better than Ferlinghetti.

Constantly Risking Absurdity

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
above a sea of faces
paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats
and sleight-of-foot tricks
and other high theatrics
and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
who must perforce perceive
taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits
with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

And he
a little charleychaplin man
who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence [20]

I can't tell you how many times I've sat in meetings listening to this or that pundit or staff member drone on obsessing over every detail and missing the obvious when the obvious stares them in the face saying, "I'm the answer"! Some of them have even heard of Ockham's Razor, but they'd all benefit from listening to Ferlinghetti.

Kafka's Castle

Kafka's Castle stands above the world
like the last bastille
of the Mystery of Existence
Its blind approaches baffle us
Steep paths
plunge nowhere from it
Roads radiate into air
like the labyrinth wires
of a telephone central
thru which all calls are
infinitely untraceable
Up there
it is heavenly weather
Souls dance undressed
together
and like loiterers
on the fringes of a fair
we ogle the unobtainable
imagined mystery
Yet away around on the far side
like the stage door of a circus tent
is a wide wide vent in the battlements
where even elephants
waltz thru [21]

A version of Ferlinghetti reading "*Kafka's Castle"* can be found here.

We'll conclude this brief survey of Ferlinghetti's work with two – I was going to say "romantic," but that is not quite the right word. We'll conclude with two of his gentler poems. One a wistful holding onto youth and desire as one feels oneself aging, the other a meditation on one's imagination opening up to living and life's possibilities. First, *#26* from **A Coney Island of the Mind**:

#26

That 'sensual phosphorescence
my youth delighted in'

now lies almost behind me
like a land of dreams
wherein an angel
of hot sleep
dances like a diva
in strange veils

thru which desire
looks and cries

And still she dances
dances still
and still she comes
at me
with breathing breasts
and secret lips
and (ah)
bright eyes [22]

from #20

The pennycandystore beyond the El
is where I first
fell in love
with unreality
Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom
of that September afternoon
A cat upon the counter moved among
the licorice sticks
and tootsie rolls
and Oh Boy Gum … [23]

Next week we'll leave imaginative "unreality" behind for a return to post-1960s America as we explore the double-edged reality of individualism and freedom: on the one hand, the selfless grace of a Lawrence Ferlinghetti; on the other, the graceless selfishness of a "greed is good," "I've got mine – bugger the rest of you" individualism run amok. We'll ask how we got here and what might be done about it as we look into Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's ***The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again.***

Ferlinghetti's works can be purchased at all the usual places, but for a taste of the authentic experience try ***City Lights Book Sellers & Publishers***, which can be found **here.**

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

Classic Book Notes End Notes

1. McKinley, Jesse. *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Poet Who Nurtured the Beats, Dies at 101,"* in **The New York Times** (February 23, 2021) available at https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/23/obituaries/lawrence-ferlinghetti-dead.html accessed February 27, 2021.
2. Savage, Bill. *"Opinion: How a San Francisco bookstore owner made America freer, braver and more interesting,"* in **The Washington Post** (February 25, 2021) available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/02/25/how-san-francisco-bookstore-owner-made-america-freer-braver-more-interesting/ accessed February 27, 2021.
3. See Roth, Andrew. *"The Immigrant's Tale & the Fusion Thread,"* Episode #6 in **The American Tapestry Project** at Listen/Podcasts/The American Tapestry Project available at https://www.wqln.org/Listen/Podcasts/The-American-Tapestry-Project accessed February 27, 2021.
4. These brief biographical notes are based on information in *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti Biography"* in the **Encyclopedia of World Biography** available at https://www.notablebiographies.com/supp/Supplement-Ca-Fi/Ferlinghetti-Lawrence.html accessed February 27, 2021 and from *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Ferlinghetti accessed February 27, 2021.
5. Brown, Emma. *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti, literary citadel of San Francisco, dies at 101,"* in **The Washington Post** (February 23, 2021) available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/lawrence-ferlinghetti-dead/2021/02/23/37b2a134-edd5-11df-abf5-a1622994c5f5_story.html accessed February 27, 2021.
6. See Savage, cited above.
7. See Brown, cited above.
8. Ibid.
9. *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti" in* ***Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*** *available at* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Ferlinghetti *accessed February 27, 2021.*
10. *"Howl," in* ***Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*** *available at* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howl#1957_obscenity_trial *accessed February 27, 2021.*
11. *"Roth v. United States," in* ***Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*** *available at* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roth_v._United_States *accessed February 27, 2021.*
12. See Savage, cited above.
13. Ibid.
14. *"A Coney Island of the Mind", in* ***Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*** *available at* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Coney_Island_of_the_Mind *accessed February 27, 2021.*
15. Grow, Kory. *"Lawrence Ferlinghetti Dead at 101,"* in **Rolling Stone** (February 23, 2021) available at https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/lawrence-ferlinghetti-beat-poet-dead-obituary-1132247/ accessed February 28, 2021.
16. *"Dog,"* **A Coney Island of the Mind**. (New York: New Directions, 1958), *p. 67-68.*

17. *"I Am Waiting,"* ***A Coney Island of the Mind****. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 49.*
18. *"Poetry as Insurgent Art," from* ***Poetry as Insurgent Art****. (New York: New Directions, 2007) at Poets.org available at* https://poets.org/poem/poetry-insurgent-art-i-am-signaling-you-through-flames *accessed February 28, 2021.*
19. Cf. Palmer, Parker. **The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
20. *"Constantly Risking Absurdity,"* ***A Coney Island of the Mind****. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 30.*
21. "Kafka's Castle," **A Coney Island of the Mind**. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 31.
22. "#26," **A Coney Island of the Mind**. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 41.
23. "#20," **A Coney Island of the Mind**. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 35.

In Case You Missed It

Tribute | Raimy: Businessman and Civic Leader written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Be Well | Surprising Reasons Why Your Back Hurts written by **Debbie DeAngelo**

Book Notes #202 | Reminding Americans Who We Are written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Building Community and Social Infrastructure written by **Lavea Brachman, JC, MCP,** and **Meriem Hamioui**

In the News | Past Air Disasters May Help Prevent Future Ones written by **Mark Steg**

JCLA Report | 'It's Broken, so Let's Fix It' written by **2024 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort**

Men in Crisis | Chivalry is Dead: Long Live Medieval Masculinity written by **Jeff Bloodworth**

On the Waterfront | Neighborhood Theology Lessons: Those Pesky Lutherans written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Russia-Ukraine War Series | 5 Recommendations for Trump Regarding War in Ukraine written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

The Wider World | Power – Hard, Soft, Smart? written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker**

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.