

## CIRCUMNAVIGATORS CLUB FOUNDATION

### 2008 GRANTEE HARRIS SOCKEL NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

#### **American Literature's Global Circulation – How is originally American literature translated, republished, marketed and interpreted across the world? What do these processes reveal about America's image today abroad?**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper examines American literature's global circulation through tracking Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and similar novels of the "Beat" generation as they are published internationally. As Penguin Books largely dominates the worldwide circulation of *On the Road*, I draw heavily on my interviews with Penguin executives and associates in depicting the state of American literary translation and reception. I draw the correlation between the availability of Penguin publications (especially new editions of *On the Road* in the wake of the novel's 50th anniversary) and the popularity of those publications (and the ideas contained within those publications) in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Morocco, Tunisia, India, and China.

The paper opens with a discussion of the nature of American literature, and the problems surrounding its definition. Any national literature is an illusory construct. Any definition of "American literature," "Indian literature," "Moroccan literature," or any literary heritage is necessarily exclusive. American literature, however, is especially artificial and illusory. In contrast to European literatures, American literature is a nascent ideal. With the break from England in the eighteenth century, one way for the new nation to set itself apart was through its stories. Cornelius Mathews' 1876 essay, for example, "Nationality in Literature," embodies literary anxieties running throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. While America was moving forward in economy and industry, it was anxious to make sure it established its own literature as well. Eventually, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville (among others) were "chosen" by late-nineteenth century American literati. In this way, American literature itself is a complex and artificial category.

This discussion is followed by a statement of my ultimate claim, that the popularity of certain writers implicitly affiliated with Kerouac and his cohort (along with Kerouac himself) overshadows America's enduring conservatism and the persistent influences of its Puritan roots. After an outline of my methodology, hypotheses, and itinerary, I reveal my research results for each country.

The opening section, on my research in Paris, details translation and translators as the most important force in American literature's French circulation. Céline Zins' translation of

Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* is popular in France for its attention to linguistic nuance and aesthetics. I encountered Zins, a poet, at the French Festival Franco-Anglais de Poésie. The following section presents my interview with Adam Freudenheim of Penguin Books in London. Mr. Freudenheim's thoughts on Britain's fascination with American literature, and on his management of the Penguin Modern Classics series (which comprises a large amount of American literature) support the argument for Penguin Books' international influence on popularity, specifically regarding Kerouac and other twentieth-century American writers. Sections on Germany and the Maghreb support this same claim while incorporating information on the history of German higher education post-World War II, and English language acquisition in Morocco and Tunisia. In India, the presence of Penguin's publications in street side bookstalls bolsters this argument. The final section, on American literature in China, presents an interview with Emily Wang of Penguin's new offices in Beijing and offers insights on the future of literary circulation and electronic novels.

The report concludes with an appeal to readers and literary consumers, asking them to think critically about which books are placed on the front table of Borders or Barnes & Noble, and to broaden their reading beyond the bestsellers marketed aggressively by Penguin and other major publishers.