

## A Literary Bromance, Now in Its Sixth Decade

By ALEXANDRA ALTER *NYTimes* JUNE 25, 2016

Photo



The poet and artist Lawrence Ferlinghetti in his San Francisco studio. Credit Brian Flaherty for The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO — The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti was sitting at his kitchen table in his North Beach apartment on a drizzly morning, telling a story about Allen Ginsberg, when he hopped up suddenly and bounded out of the room to retrieve his hearing aid. “At my age, if it’s not one thing, it’s another,” he said cheerfully.

Tall and agile at 97, with a neatly trimmed gray beard and oval tortoise shell glasses that magnified his glassy blue eyes, Mr. Ferlinghetti could pass for a man in his 70s. He still writes almost every day — “When an idea springs airborne into my head.”

Mr. Ferlinghetti is one of the country’s most prominent poets, and arguably its most successful: His 1958 collection “A Coney Island of the Mind,” which was published by New Directions, has sold more than one million copies. Over the last 61 years, he’s published around 50 volumes of poetry. His latest work is unlike anything he’s ever written. After

retrieving his hearing aide, Mr. Ferlinghetti got up again and returned to the kitchen with a cardboard box stuffed with reporter's notebooks, numbered up to 78. He set it on the table, next to a bowl of fruit and a half-empty bottle of merlot. The box holds the first draft of a novel he's been working on, in fits and starts, for the last 20 years. "I think it's a new genre," he said. The book, titled, "To the Light House," blends autobiography, fiction and surrealist riffs on mortality, nature and consciousness. It's the closest thing to a memoir that he'll ever write, he said.

Mr. Ferlinghetti's project came as a happy surprise to his longtime literary agent, Sterling Lord, who has been badgering his client to write his autobiography for nearly two decades. Mr. Ferlinghetti has repeatedly spurned the idea. "I've stopped asking him," Mr. Lord said. Now Mr. Lord — Mr. Ferlinghetti's friend and occasional sparring partner — has finally prevailed, in a way.

"This new manuscript is his most personal," Mr. Lord said. "It's certainly different than anything I've ever read. I've never seen an autobiography that was constructed like this."

The partnership between Mr. Ferlinghetti and Mr. Lord, two towering legends in the publishing world, traces back to the heady, early days of the Beat movement, when a literary and cultural revolution was ignited by a band of iconoclastic writers.

#### Photo



The poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti, left, and Allen Ginsberg, with Stella Kerouac, who was signing one of her late husband's books in 1988. Credit: Jon Chase/Associated Press  
Though neither of them can recall precisely when they first met, their long association dates from the 1950s, when they became acquainted through Jack Kerouac, one of Mr. Lord's first clients. Over the years, as many of the writers they knew have died, they've formed even more of a kinship.

"Sterling really is my generation," said Mr. Ferlinghetti, who was born in Bronxville, N.Y., in 1919. "We're in the same boat, heading for the falls." Mr. Lord, who was born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1920, likes to point out their age difference. "Lawrence is the only client I have who is older than I am," said Mr. Lord, who will turn 96 in September.

Now, they stand as two of the last living links to the Beat Generation. From opposite coasts, they fueled a literary movement that defined the era and ushered in a new populist, countercultural strain of poetry and fiction.

At his New York agency, Sterling Lord Literistic, Mr. Lord helped initiate the careers of writers like Kerouac, John Clellon Holmes and Ken Kesey, who along with his band of Merry Pranksters elevated LSD use to something resembling performance art. When Kerouac, frustrated after a string of rejections, was ready to give up on publishing his groundbreaking, experimental "On the Road," Mr. Lord remained resolute. It took him more than four years, but he finally sold it to Viking, for \$1,000.

Through his small San Francisco publishing house, City Lights, Mr. Ferlinghetti championed the work of Beat Generation writers like Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder and Ginsberg, renegade poets who were too provocative for most mainstream publishers.

"It was a revolution in contemporary poetry," Mr. Ferlinghetti said. "My way of judging a manuscript was, if I had never read anything like it before, if it articulated a whole new view of reality, then I knew it was important."

His subversive taste sometimes got him in trouble. He occupied the front lines of a free-speech battle when he published Ginsberg's poem "Howl" in 1956, and faced obscenity charges as a result. His legal victory paved the way for the United States publication of boundary-pushing novels by D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller.

"Without Lawrence Ferlinghetti, there wouldn't have been a Beat Generation at all," said Bill Morgan, a literary scholar and an expert on the Beats. "He published all of these people who would never have been heard of."

In some ways, Mr. Ferlinghetti and Mr. Lord make unlikely partners. Apart from their shared connection to the Beats, they never really ran in overlapping cultural circles.



The literary agent Sterling Lord, shown in 2013, who pushed his friend, the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, to write his coming-of-age story for nearly two decades. Credit Mary Altaffer/Associated Press

Mr. Lord, who favors tweed jackets, sweater vests and sharp ties, is a tenacious salesman whose star-studded client list included the former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the newspaper columnist Jimmy Breslin. He became famous for wringing fat advances from publishers, with an extremely diplomatic touch. (He titled his 2013 memoir “Lord of Publishing.”)

Mr. Ferlinghetti, a bohemian rebel who has a jeweled stud in his ear, has long occupied a place on the cultural and political fringes, even as he became one of the country’s most popular and influential poets. His fervent fan base includes Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, Francis Ford Coppola and the poet Billy Collins.

“Sterling is an old-fashioned gentleman, and Lawrence is really an anarchist,” Mr. Morgan said. “You could say that one of them is working within the establishment, and one is working against it.”

Sometimes, Mr. Ferlinghetti and Mr. Lord clashed when they found themselves on opposite ends of the negotiating table as publisher and agent. In a letter to Ginsberg in 1970, Mr. Ferlinghetti complained that Mr. Lord often snubbed him in favor of bigger publishers: “I’ve written Sterling Lord since Jack’s death, asking of ‘Visions of Neal’ and ‘Some of the Dharma’ but I never get the time of night from him – like we’re not worth his trouble for the big money, etc. Maybe you could tell him we complained and push him.”

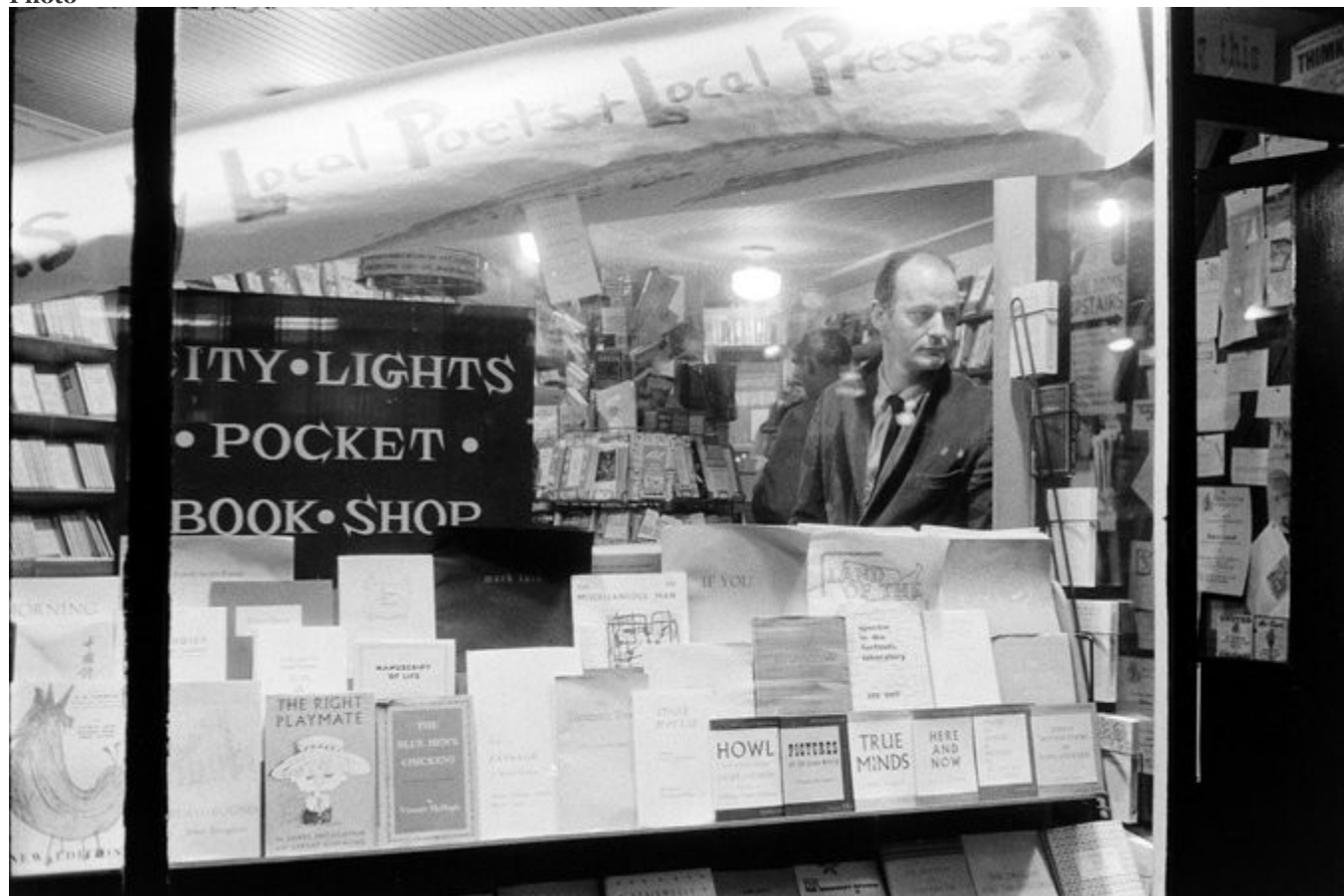
At other times, Mr. Ferlinghetti had the upper hand. He once turned down a manuscript that Mr. Lord sent him because it was too disjointed. (It was a messy early draft of William S. Burroughs’s “Naked Lunch.”) “I am extremely doubtful, from what I’ve read so far, that any bookseller would dare sell it in his store,” Mr. Ferlinghetti wrote to Ginsberg. For roughly three decades, Mr. Ferlinghetti managed his own career without help from a literary agent, which suited his rebellious streak. He did fine on his own. “Most agents can’t be bothered with poets because they never bring in any money,” he said. But in the 1980s, he struggled to find a publisher for his debut novel, “Love in the Days of Rage,” after it was rejected by New

Directions. He called Mr. Lord, who quickly sold the book to Dutton. They've worked together ever since.

“He admired what he knew about me, and I admired what I knew about him,” Mr. Lord said. “He’s absolutely unique in the world of publishing.” Any perceived slights or old rivalries from decades ago seem to be forgotten. (Mr. Lord seemed full of affection even when he noted casually that one of his ex-wives was “kind of in love” with Mr. Ferlinghetti, adding, “I can understand any intelligent

Both men attribute the longevity of their lives and careers partly to the fact that they weren’t as wild as the Beat writers they championed. Mr. Lord, who cycled through four marriages, hung around with many of the rebellious, semi-feral writers he represented, but he was always the straight man. He never even smoked cigarettes, at least not in the last half-century. “I did smoke a little, in my 30s,” he said. “But I didn’t inhale.”

Photo



Lawrence Ferlinghetti at his City Lights book store in San Francisco, which he co-founded in 1953. Credit Nat Farbman/Time Life Pictures, via Getty Images

Mr. Lord often found himself in the role of babysitter. Once, when he visited Kerouac in St. Petersburg, Fla., he gamely joined him on a bar crawl, but only drank a few beers, while Kerouac downed rounds of double scotches and chased them with beers.

During a visit to Kesey’s farm in Eugene, Ore., Mr. Lord rode in Further, the infamous bus that ferried Kesey and his band of tripping Merry Pranksters back and forth across the country. But Mr. Lord’s joy ride was a relatively uneventful, acid-free trip: Kesey just drove him to the airport.

Mr. Ferlinghetti was also pretty tame, by the hedonistic standards of the era. He smoked the occasional joint and experimented with LSD, but never got too crazy. He remembers peeling Kerouac off the ground in front of his cabin in Big Sur early one morning, after Kerouac went on one of his benders while visiting him there. (The visit wasn’t entirely fruitless: Kerouac wrote his novel, “Big Sur,” which features a character

based on Mr. Ferlinghetti, at the cabin).

While his vagabond Beat cohorts were taking mescaline and Benzedrine-fueled road trips across the country, Mr. Ferlinghetti was married and running two businesses: his bookstore, which he co-founded in 1953, and his publishing house, which he created in 1955. On top of that, he had his own creative pursuits. "I had too much to do," Mr. Ferlinghetti said. "I was more interested in developing my own painting and writing." And though he's often lumped with the Beats, Mr. Ferlinghetti rejected the label. "I got associated with the Beats by publishing them, but my own poetry has never been Beat," he said.

As they approach 100, neither of them has slowed down all that much. Most days, Mr. Lord, who gets around nimbly with a walker, still works at Sterling Lord Literistic, the literary agency he founded in 1952 after being fired from his job as a *Cosmopolitan* editor. He often works six or seven days a week. He reads submissions and drafts with the help of a magnifying machine, and conducts most of his business face to face or by phone.

"It's a little bit like having Maxwell Perkins call you," Barbara Epler, president of New Directions, said, comparing Mr. Lord to the legendary editor of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.

Mr. Ferlinghetti, who suffers from glaucoma, still paints in his art studio at Hunters Point once or twice a week, though because of his deteriorating eyesight he's limited himself to black-and-white abstracts. In July, his paintings will be featured in a solo exhibition at the Rena Bransten gallery in San Francisco.

He stopped riding his bicycle around North Beach after taking a spill a few years ago, but remains an intrepid traveler. He spent two weeks in Paris last year, and visited the Pacific Coast of Mexico this January, where he spent a week on the beach, writing in his notebooks by day and drinking margaritas at night.

"He's still very much engaged with the world," said Elaine Katzenberger, the executive director of City Lights Booksellers & Publishers. "It's just who he is."

Mr. Ferlinghetti's presence is still palpable at City Lights, one of the last countercultural outposts in a rapidly gentrifying city. His deep, raspy voice is on the bookstore's answering machine. His handpainted signs adorn the store's walls and windows, with slogans he coined like, "Stash Your Sell Phone and Be Here Now!" and "Books Are Trees Made Immortal." Upstairs, in the small three-room headquarters of the publishing house, Mr. Ferlinghetti keeps a small, tidy office with an old roll-top wooden desk.

Though he retired from running the press many years ago, he still makes suggestions about potential acquisitions and poetry translation projects. Last year, Mr. Ferlinghetti released a flurry of books. He published a compilation of his travel journals titled "Writing Across the Landscape," a collection of his correspondence with Ginsberg, a 60th anniversary edition of the City Lights Pocket Poets Anthology, with a new introduction he wrote.

And in a sly prank that no one seems to have been up on, he also published a new volume of his poetry, titled "Shards," with New Directions, which he passed off as a translation of verses by a 14th-century Roman poet named Lorenzo Chiera (English translation: Who Was Lawrence).

Most days, he works in his home office, a ramshackle room teeming with books and notebooks full of his sketches and writing, in a second floor rent-controlled apartment where he's lived for more than 30 years. He has a computer that he mostly uses to send emails, and a magnifying machine that helps him read the newspaper. His desk is surrounded by dictionaries in English, Spanish, French and Italian, and bookshelves with volumes of poetry by E. E. Cummings, Milton, Ezra Pound, Ted Hughes, T. S. Eliot and Frank O'Hara. A wicker chair held a thick stack of unpublished poems, typed up with hand-scrawled edits.

"At my age, I might not publish another book of poetry," he said. "But there's lots to be published." For now, Mr. Ferlinghetti is focused on his new novel, which Mr. Lord is shopping around to publishers. Part of the narrative draws on his coming-of-age as a young man in Europe and his tumultuous childhood: His father died before he was born, and he lived in an orphanage for a while after his mother was institutionalized.

Mr. Ferlinghetti and Mr. Lord have been talking on the phone over the past few months, discussing ways to shape the story. Mr. Ferlinghetti has pushed back on some of his agent's suggestions. But Mr. Lord is, as ever, optimistic. "The book is not a conventional autobiography in any sense of the word, but you get to know Lawrence quite a bit by reading this material," Mr. Lord said. "We're describing it as 'scenes from his autobiography.'"