

# American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 1919–2021

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American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose writing career extended back to the mid-1950s, died on February 24 at his home in San Francisco. He was 101.

Ferlinghetti's poetry provided a glimpse of the restlessness and rebelliousness of generations that emerged from and after the Second World War, who felt strongly the possibilities of global modern life and, at the same time, the terrible constrictedness of the dominant politics and culture in the Cold War era. His work often gave voice to the existing, but suppressed opposition to the established order of those years and sought to unmask, in poetic form, a portion of the actual social and political conditions.

Ferlinghetti was, so to speak, a “conscientious objector” in regard to the conformist and anticommunist American culture of the 1950s, and his early poetry collections such as *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955) and particularly *A Coney Island of The Mind* (1958), which has been translated into many languages and read widely around the world, remain his freshest.

The opening lines of the first poem in *A Coney Island of the Mind* generally evoke the years of destruction from 1939 to 1945, and doubtlessly also refer to the violence Ferlinghetti himself experienced or witnessed personally as a naval officer in the world war. He begins by calling to mind the works of the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746–1828), perhaps above all the artist's series of prints known as the *Disasters of War*:

In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see  
the people of the world  
exactly at the moment when  
they first attained the title of  
'suffering humanity.'  
They writhe upon the page  
in a veritable rage  
of adversity  
Heaped up  
groaning with babies and bayonets  
under cement skies  
in an abstract landscape of blasted trees  
bent statues bats wings and beaks  
slippery gibbets  
cadavers and carnivorous cocks  
and all the final hollering monsters  
of the  
'imagination of disaster'  
they are so bloody real  
it is as if they really still existed  
And they do  
Only the landscape is changed  
They still are ranged along the roads  
plagued by legionnaires

false windmills and demented roosters

They are the same people  
only further from home  
on freeways fifty lanes wide  
on a concrete continent  
spaced with bland billboards  
illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness  
The scene shows fewer tumbrils  
but more maimed citizens  
in painted cars  
And they have strange license plates  
and engines  
that devour America

The flow of images and the assonance of words carry the reader along from the violence so recently inflicted on humanity in the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Japanese cities to the prosperity and “illusions of happiness” of the postwar economic boom.

The work intends to awaken feelings produced by the recent and intensely traumatic historical period—as little as official society wants the population to be reminded of or examine it critically—and the suffering inflicted on millions. *A Coney Island of the Mind* is a real and enduring accomplishment.

Ferlinghetti was born in 1919, itself a tumultuous year in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, in Bronxville, New York, just north of New York City. His father, an Italian immigrant, was an auctioneer in Little Italy and died before his birth. His mother, of mixed French and Portuguese-Sephardic heritage, was institutionalized in a mental hospital when he was two. He was taken to Strasbourg in France by a relative and later returned to the US and raised in a wealthy household. There he was encouraged to memorize epic poems and began to read voraciously.

Ferlinghetti attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in 1941 enlisted in the Navy. He participated in the Allies' bloody D-Day invasion of Normandy and was an eyewitness in Nagasaki six weeks after the Japanese city's destruction by US nuclear weapons, an indelible experience that made him a pacifist for life. After the war, Ferlinghetti studied literature at Columbia University in New York and at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he met and was influenced poetically and politically by Kenneth Rexroth, the anarchist writer, translator and critic.

Ferlinghetti founded City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco in 1953, the first all-paperback store in the US (which still exists), and soon a publishing house with the same name. Ferlinghetti was known for his association with postwar writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and others known as the Beats. The Beat Generation in literature was synonymous with opposition to academicism and formalism, favoring more improvisational, spontaneous and jazz-influenced methods. Drugs, sexual license, anti-militarism and “Eastern” spirituality tended to be part of the mix.

Both perhaps because he did not lead an especially Bohemian lifestyle

and because he adopted a more structured, “classical” approach to writing verse, Ferlinghetti never considered himself a Beat poet, although he was the first to publish many of their works.

Along these lines, a 2016 *New York Times* portrait suggested that while Ferlinghetti’s “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,” he told the *Times* reporter. “I was more interested in developing my own painting and writing.”

There are numerous evocative poems of his from this period, including “Fortune” (“Fortune / has its cookies to give out / which is a good thing / since it’s been a long time since / that summer in Brooklyn / when they closed off the street / one hot day / and the / FIREMEN / turned on their hoses / and the kids ran out in it / in the middle of the street / and there were / maybe a couple dozen of us / out there”) and “The world is a beautiful place” (“The world is a beautiful place / to be born into / if you don’t mind some people dying / all the time / or maybe only starving / some of the time / which isn’t half so bad / if it isn’t you”).

In “Christ climbed down,” Ferlinghetti has the Son of God descend from “His bare Tree” and run away “to where / no intrepid Bible salesmen / covered the territory / in two-tone Cadillacs / and where no Sears Roebuck creches / complete with plastic babe in manger / arrived by parcel post / the babe by special delivery / and where no televised Wise Men / praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey.”

Ferlinghetti’s publication of Ginsberg’s *Howl*, in 1956, led to his arrest on charges of printing “indecent” writings, which sparked a major First Amendment trial that Ferlinghetti eventually won. “His legal victory,” commented the 2016 *Times* piece, “paved the way for the United States publication of boundary-pushing novels by D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller.” Ferlinghetti also translated poetry of a number of important authors, including Jacques Prévert and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The 1950s were difficult, contradictory times for serious artists. Left-wing thought had been practically illegalized by the McCarthyite witch-hunters, with whom American liberals had made a devil’s pact. Globally, the domination of Stalinism, masquerading as “communism,” and American imperialist “democracy” made access by artists to the working class as an independent force and to genuine Marxism difficult. The official cultural scene was dominated by various forms of anti-Communist liberalism, and there was little to nourish more than a sincere but often ephemeral revolt in a number of arts.

Nonetheless, Ferlinghetti, a philosophical anarchist, believed in the power and obligation of poetry to oppose the status quo, and he effectively communicated this. The radical 1960s no doubt revived his spirits, but as was the case with most American artists, questions as to the nature of the Soviet Union and Stalinism, the fate of the 1917 October Revolution, went unanswered. Ferlinghetti traveled to Cuba, identified himself with the antiwar and other protest movements, but his social views did not fundamentally develop.

His novel, *Love in the Days of Rage*, only published in 1988, provides some indications of his views. The book is set during the May-June events in France. A love affair between a young American woman, a painter, and a middle-aged Portuguese anarchist-banker, occurs in the foreground. Ferlinghetti writes:

Down in the streets a little revolution was giving birth to much hope and euphoria, not just in France but around the world, in the U.S., in Germany and Italy and Mexico City, in Prague, in Portugal, everywhere there was a stirring, more than a stirring, a new spirit, a seething spirit.

The French students, asserts a character, “woke up the workers everywhere, they inspired the hunger strikers, and every other brand of forgotten humanity came pouring out of the side streets—the anarchists and the Trotskyists, and the communists who hated everyone else, especially the anarchists, they all began to unite, because they were all hungry and fed up with the flat flabby ancien régime.”

Indicating that the poet had some inkling of the political forces at work, Ferlinghetti writes about the eventual betrayal of the mass French general strike by the Communist Party, which played “its opportunist and reactionary role, preventing any real revolution by supporting existing organizations and law-and-order, as it did in every incipient revolution around the world in the sixties.”

In the final analysis, however, Ferlinghetti takes the line of least resistance and contends that the revolt of 1968 was “the first articulation, the first bursting forth of a new vision of earth, of man and woman. It was a new consciousness, or an ancient consciousness rediscovered. And it was a new feminist consciousness, the Gaia hypothesis, based on what was being called the New Physics, the earth seen as Mother Earth again, ancient source of all ... The spirit of ’sixty-eight was the first halting cry of what twenty years later would burst forth in a great new political movement, a new green movement, Green Power.”

As noted above, his earliest work remains his sharpest and most striking. The past four decades or more of cultural and political stagnation took their toll on Ferlinghetti as they did on so many. A certain formulaic quality entered into his work. Even the more agitational, “incendiary” poems feel a bit forced, such as “Populist Manifesto” (1976): “Poets, come out of your closets, / Open your windows, open your doors, / You have been holed-up too long / in your closed worlds.”

Still, one comes upon such lovely, biting works as “Two scavengers in a truck, two beautiful people in a Mercedes” (1980), which describes “two gargamens in red plastic blazers” looking down into “an elegant open Mercedes / with an elegant couple in it.” The “two scavengers up since Four A.M.” continue to gaze down “as from a very great distance / at the cool couple,” and the red light for an instant holds “all four close together / as if anything at all were possible / between them / across the small gulf / in the high seas / of this democracy.”

We learn something about the artist in the conditions that emerged in the 21st century from Ferlinghetti, for example, in this poem from his 2006 book, *Poetry as an Insurgent Art*.

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....

One reads the poem with a mix of feelings. The period—now almost seventy years past—in which Ferlinghetti developed as a poet, due to the dominance of Stalinism and other bureaucracies, tended to cut the artists off from the social force, the working class, that could change the world, and poetry itself could do no more than object, often morally, to the state of things. There is a pessimistic and even panicky coloration to this poem. But there is also an admirable relentlessness. To one extent or another, this runs through Ferlinghetti’s work from his earliest days as a poet.

The flag of semi-anarchistic, semi-Bohemian artistic revolt is

insufficient for our times, but Ferlinghetti's work will help to inculcate critical thoughts and feelings about the world in the people who need to transform it.



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