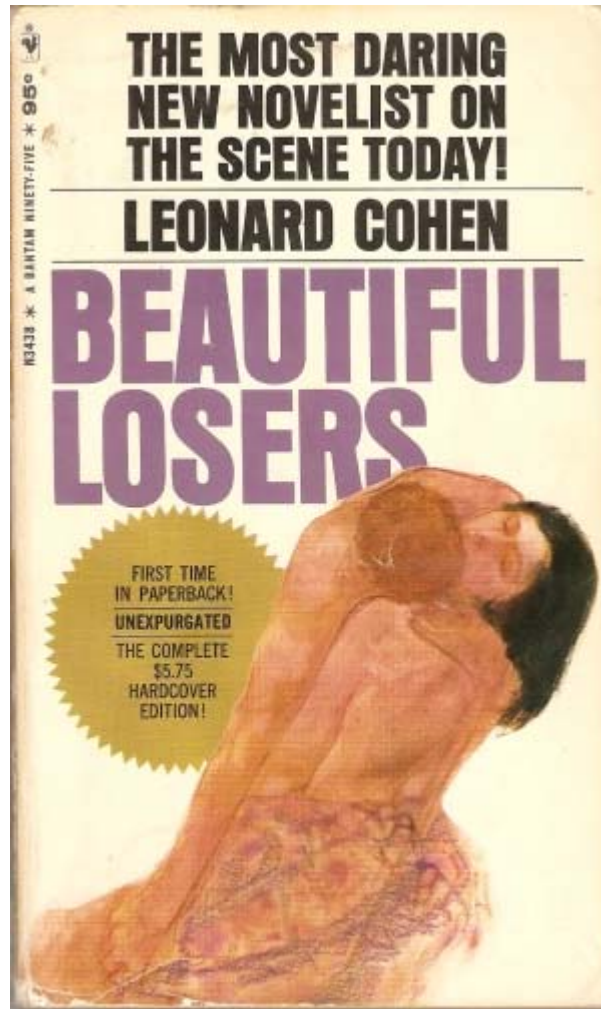


ReadReidRead

OCTOBER 20, 2012 · 8:05 PM

Kateri Tekakwitha Already Canonized!



Reid Dickie

On Sunday, October 21, 2012, the Catholic Church will canonize to sainthood Kateri Tekakwitha, a 17th century Mohawk converted to Christianity by the Black Robes. She will be the first North American aboriginal to attain such eminence.



Clueless as ever, our mainstream media is making claims that she was “Canadian” while US media claim her “Americanism.” Both wrong! Neither Canada nor the United States existed in 1680, the year of her death. Her nation was and is Mohawk. Besides, she has already been canonized!

Huh? Yes, canonized in Canadian literature by no less a figure than Leonard Cohen. Kateri Tekakwitha is one of four central characters in Leonard Cohen’s second novel, *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966. In addition to Cohen himself, the book’s characters include Cohen’s wife Edith, a native of the same tribe as Tekakwitha, his radical friend F and our martyr, Kateri. Revolving around a statue of her Cohen sees in Montreal, Kateri’s life and martyrdom are described in graphic terms.



Cohen retreated to Hydra, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, for two eight-month periods in 1964 and 1965 to write the novel, largely inspired by fasting, amphetamines and hashish. This is a shot of Leonard at his Olivetti writing *Beautiful Losers*.

In retrospect *Beautiful Losers* is the first truly postmodern Canadian novel. History, culture, sex and politics commingle in an uneasy relationship topped with large dollops of absurdity. I read this as a teen and have lived with its images ever since. Particularly memorable are the indoor fireworks scene and the scene where Cohen and F masturbate in the car while driving to Ottawa after F gets elected to Parliament. The novel hasn’t, as yet, been made into a movie but its time is right!

Full of grace and humility, this is the preface Cohen wrote for the Chinese translation of *Beautiful Losers* in 2000. He describes how the book feels to him forty years after its conception.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for coming to this book. It is an honor, and a surprise, to have the frenzied thoughts of my youth expressed in Chinese characters. I sincerely appreciate the efforts of the translator and the publishers in bringing this curious work to your attention. I hope you will find it useful or amusing.

When I was young, my friends and I read and admired the old Chinese poets. Our ideas of love and friendship, of wine and distance, of poetry itself, were much affected by those ancient songs. Much later, during the years when I practiced as a Zen monk under the guidance of my teacher Kyozan Joshu Roshi, the thrilling sermons of Lin Chi (Rinzai) were studied every day. So you can understand, Dear Reader, how privileged I feel to be able to graze, even for a moment, and with such meager credentials, on the outskirts of your tradition.

This is a difficult book, even in English, if it is taken too seriously. May I suggest that you skip over the parts you don't like? Dip into it here and there. Perhaps there will be a passage, or even a page, that resonates with your curiosity. After a while, if you are sufficiently bored or unemployed, you may want to read it from cover to cover. In any case, I thank you for your interest in this odd collection of jazz riffs, pop-art jokes, religious kitsch and muffled prayer æ an interest which indicates, to my thinking, a rather reckless, though very touching, generosity on your part.

Beautiful Losers was written outside, on a table set among the rocks, weeds and daisies, behind my house on Hydra, an island in the Aegean Sea. I lived there many years ago. It was a blazing hot summer. I never covered my head. What you have in your hands is more of a sunstroke than a book.

Dear Reader, please forgive me if I have wasted your time.

Los Angeles, February 27, 2000

Leonard Cohen

Hear [Leonard read](#) from *Beautiful Losers*