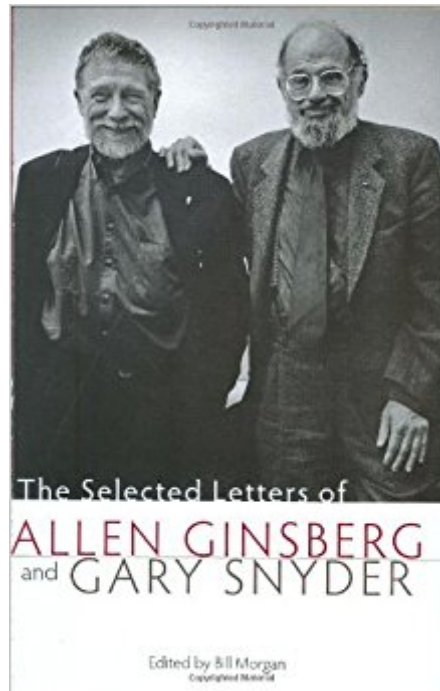




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The Selected Letters Of Allen Ginsberg And Gary Snyder, 1956-1991



Synopsis

One of the central relationships in the Beat scene was the long-lasting friendship of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. Ginsberg introduced Snyder to the East Coast Beat writers, including Jack Kerouac, while Snyder himself became the model for the serious poet that Ginsberg so wanted to become. Snyder encouraged Ginsberg to explore the beauty of the West Coast and, even more lastingly, introduced Ginsberg to Buddhism, the subject of so many long letter exchanges between them. Beginning in 1956 and continuing through 1991, the two men exchanged more than 850 letters. Bill Morgan, Ginsberg's biographer and an important editor of his papers, has selected the most significant correspondence from this long friendship. The letters themselves paint the biographical and poetic portraits of two of America's most important and most fascinating poets.

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Customer Reviews

Allen Ginsberg was, of course, the Great Beat(nik) Poet who achieved early fame/infamy with "Howl" and thereafter maintained a very public profile. Gary Snyder was the model for Jack Kerouac's Japhy Ryder in "The Dharma Bums" and is an excellent, if lesser known, poet (Snyder won a Pulitzer Prize for "Turtle Island" in the 1970s) and environmental activist. The two met shortly before their participation in the legendary San Francisco 6 Gallery reading in 1955 and maintained a correspondence until near the time of Ginsberg's death in 1997. The selected letters offer insight into the personalities and lives of two key figures in the 1950s beat literary movement which would form a foundation for the 1960s counter-culture as well as the ecological movement of the present day.

Ginsberg roamed the world and made his way into the inner sanctums of pop culture. When you run across references to Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger, and even Uma Thurman in the book's index, rest assured their mention comes in a Ginsberg letter. Meanwhile, Snyder spent the last half of the 1950s and much of the 1960s in Japan studying Zen Buddhism. The two, along with their companions, traveled around India in the early 1960s and later organized the San Francisco Be-In. In the 1980s and 1990s academia slowly came around to recognizing the literary accomplishment of the beat movement and both writers found themselves re-cast as honored elder statesmen. Snyder served as a member of the California Arts Council under Governor Jerry Brown and accepted a teaching post at UC Davis.

Having reviewed "The Gary Snyder Reader" last month, I wondered how this collection might illuminate some of the contexts as Snyder's wanderings across Beat San Francisco, early-'60s Japan, and back to settle in first Marin County and then the Sierras connect with Ginsberg's New York (city and then upstate) and West Coast residences. Both, furthermore, roam far as they become countercultural spokesmen. Early on, both found success, Ginsberg in the spotlight of course, and then, after his Asian travels, Snyder's poetry finding more recognition. While Ginsberg's reputation earned him the headline role, Snyder's influence as this series 1956-1991 documents reveals him as the guide. Ginsberg's attraction to Buddhism appears more gradual, as Snyder had preceded him and nearly every other young (non-Asian or a few academics excepted) American. I looked for a pivotal shift to acceptance of Buddhism by Ginsberg in the letters, but it's occluded. Perhaps an early-'60s trip to Asia and extended visit with Snyder in Japan can be credited. Yet the pull of the possibilities that expanded consciousness exerted on these eager seekers tugs early. 8/10/60, Snyder expresses disgust with American politics and foreign policy. "Bread and Circuses. No longer a problem of helping out American workers, but of giving up for the whole world welfare...will America ever choose to be a bodhisattva? and wear blue jeans and sandals before the world and give up her property? The 'orgy' has political and metaphysical significance." (31) I guess he got the fashion trend right, at least.

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