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Environmental Poet Gary Snyder to Visit IWU

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Gary Snyder, one of the most well-known American poets of the second half of the twentieth century, will be on the Illinois Wesleyan University campus March 13.

A commentary will follow Snyder's poetry reading in a presentation entitled, "Poetry and the Practice of the Wild: A Reading with Commentary." The presentation will begin at 7 p.m. in the Main Lounge of the Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University St., Bloomington. It is free and open to the public.

Snyder is a professor at the University of California, Davis where he teaches literature and creative writing and founded the university's Nature and Culture program.

"I'm excited about Gary Snyder's visit because he's one of the great poets of recent times," IWU Associate Professor of English, Dan Terkla said. "The deep yet synthesized catalog of themes that run through his essays and poetry have enabled him to transcend the narrow labels his readers and critics have assigned him over the years. He's not just a Beat poet, an environmental poet, a Buddhist poet, an epic poet, a translator, an essayist, he is all of those things and more."

Snyder's work spans a variety of areas including the literature and spirit of Asia, and the environment.

His publications include: "Riprap" (1959), "Myths & Texts" (1960) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Turtle Island" (1974), among others.

In 1950, while pursuing a double major in literature and anthropology at Reed College, Snyder wrote a senior thesis analyzing the myth of the Haida, native people living on the coast of British Columbia. The thesis, published in 1979 as "He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth," has been noted as one of Snyder's works that reveals his intellectual integrity.

Snyder met poets Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac at Berkeley in 1955, where he had recently taken up residency. Over the next few years, the three became good friends. Their relationship inaccurately earned Snyder the title of "Beat poet," "a designation he has robustly rejected," according to the Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century American Western Writers. Snyder agreed with the opinions of the poets in cases of politics and social conditions, but his writings "provid[ed] a sharp contrast to the political and urban Beat aesthetic," according to this same collection. However, it also notes, "What was called a renaissance in San Francisco in the 1950s became the 'counterculture' of the 1960s, and it was all imagined first by these poets."

Born in San Francisco at the beginning of the Great Depression, Snyder has spent much of his life on the West Coast. As the the Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century

American Western Writers notes, "Snyder was deeply imbued with his parents' working-class, West-Coast, left-wing ideas, and in the rain forests and mountain landscapes of the Puget Sound region, he came to the realization that the environment serves more complex human needs than that for natural resources."

"Unfortunately, the warnings in his early environmental poetry are still relevant, and his newest long poem, 'Mountains and Rivers without End,' is important in that regard and in other ways," Terkla said.

"Snyder was one of the first environmentalists," said Matt Glavin, a senior political science major and former president of IWU's student senate. "He spoke of conservation before it was popular. It is important to bring him to campus, because the world is finally starting to understand what he has been talking about for the past 50 years."

Snyder's "Mountains and Rivers without End," published in 1996, was a long poem forty-years in the making.

Snyder has said of the poem, "In a sense, what I've done there is globalized the West ... it is a Western poem that starts and ends in the West, and never is far from it, but it uses the West, the Western landscape, almost as a metaphor for the whole planet--it becomes the whole planet."

In 1997 Snyder was awarded the Bollingen Prize, a distinguished honor for a poet. He also received the John Hay Award for Nature Writing.

"I think there will be a fairly large pull from the community," said Glavin. "Anyone who likes poetry or has an interest in the environment will gain from his presentation."