

The Selected Letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder

Edited by Bill Morgan.

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Allen Ginsberg wrote to Gary Snyder from Paris, Athens, Delhi, Shanghai, and New York. Snyder wrote to Ginsberg from Kyoto, Calcutta, Mill Valley, and Nevada City. They were peripatetic poets and their correspondence records their inner as well as their outer journeys from early manhood to middle age.

Beginning in 1955, when he first read “Howl” at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco, Ginsberg presented himself to the world as a paragon of candor, and “nakedness,” as he put it. But in this volume Snyder emerges surprisingly as the more candid of the two men, and especially as he aged. In the brief but illuminated one-page note at the start of the book, he explains that when he and Ginsberg first met “they argued a lot and were not easy on each other” (viii). He adds, “I made him walk more and he made me talk more. It was good for both of us.” Indeed, it was, as this book demonstrates abundantly.

The Selected Letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder reveals the 40-year long dialogue between these two poets who “came from the far ends of the nation” and who were opposite in many ways (vii). At the launch for the book in San Francisco, Snyder told the audience that he’d never had sex with Ginsberg, though Ginsberg had tried to seduce him. Since Ginsberg had sex with many of his Beat Generation friends including, of course, Neal Cassady, it was not an unreasonable clarification for Snyder to make, and especially for a San Francisco audience.

Snyder’s letters tend to be logical and to the point. His sentences are grammatically correct, and he often makes detailed lists about his plans, places to visit, and choices to be made. Ginsberg’s sentences can go on and on, as he jumps from subject to subject in a seemingly haphazard way. Proper punctuation is often missing.

They both write about Buddhism and meditation, drugs and consciousness, poetry and politics, but they also write about practical matters, from taxes and toilets to money and the weather. Their daily lives and quotidian realities are made transparent.

Ginsberg often drops the names of famous people he has met: Robert Kennedy, the Beatles, T. D. Suzuki, and the billionaire George Soros. Having named them, he rarely goes on to describe them, or to illuminate them. He tells Snyder what he admires and doesn’t admire in his poetry. “I like best the poems when you have a definite narrative structure,” he says. When Snyder becomes annoyed that Tricycle magazine won’t publish an article about the contributions of Asian Americans to Buddhism in America and resigns from the board in protest, Ginsberg urges moderation not confrontation. He’s the conciliator.

There are ample comments about politics, and this volume will make it more difficult for Beat scholars to say that that the Beats were apolitical and unconcerned about social issues. “I think that time, history, disarmament and peace lead inevitably toward an international mixed-race-culture of socialism,” Snyder wrote in 1962. He also writes about Fidel Castro, Cuba, communism and guerrilla warfare.

By the late 1980s and then throughout the 1990s the letters become shorter, and less expansive, though Snyder writes with remarkable candor about the end of his marriage to Maza in a long letter of March 5, 1988.

Oddly enough, neither Ginsberg nor Snyder say anything at all about *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's 1958 novel in which Ginsberg appears as Alvah Goldbook and Snyder as Japhy Rider. Perhaps they never did discuss it, but their apparent silence on the subject suggests the topic might have been too sensitive to bring into the open. Some explanation from Snyder would be helpful.

Morgan, the editor, provides a short, useful preface, but the index to the book unfortunately only contains the names of people, not the names of books or themes. Moreover, many of the significant people in the books, like Jack Shoemaker, Snyder's longtime editor, don't make it into the index. The poet known as "Antler" doesn't either. Morgan's footnotes are erratic and unpredictable. Bernardine Dohrn merits a footnote, but not Zach Stewart, Snyder's friend and architect, or Sterling Bunnell the Berkeley therapist who worked with many Bay Area writers and artists.

Snyder, of course, has outlived Ginsberg by nearly a decade-and-a-half, and he has continued to write letters. Hopefully his correspondence with other friends and family members will also see the light of day, and we will see him, as we see Kerouac, in the round.