

# The Arts

## Poetic Justice

A new biography of writer/activist  
Allen Ginsberg

By Matthew Budman

**DHARMA LION** by Michael Schumacher. St. Martin's. 769 pages.

For four decades Allen Ginsberg has been an inextricable part of America's cultural landscape. Brashly bearded, gay and Jewish, Ginsberg led the Beat

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movement of the 1950's and 60's, becoming along the way one of the century's most influential poets.

Michael Schumacher's *Dharma Lion* draws a complete, complex portrait of Ginsberg and his work in a definitive, beautifully written and researched biography.

A great deal has already been written about the Beats; *Dharma Lion* contains a sizable bibliography, including Barry Miles's 1989 *Ginsberg*, a slightly smaller, less critical and less Jewish biography that shares many anecdotes and photographs with Schumacher's book.

Ginsberg became a center of the "Beat Generation," and *Dharma Lion* tells the parallel stories of his notorious contemporaries — Neal Cassady, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, the overrated Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, and several other poets and novelists associated with the sometime-Bay Area movement.

For years at a stretch their lives seem to dissolve in a melee of hallucinogens, illicit sex, free-speech court trials, anti-war activism, Eastern spiritual epiphanies, and — oh yeah — writing.

Many conversations and events are recorded in Ginsberg's own words, from journal entries and poems; others' memoirs and letters are plundered for material as well. While certainly adding to authenticity, the writer's-own-voice tactic creates readability problems — apparently none of the Beats ever wrote a simple declarative sentence, and sometimes it's difficult to extract meaning from the free-association jottings. Even the most private thoughts appear, self-consciously, to have been written with future publication in mind.

The book's most harrowing passages are those dealing with Ginsberg's mother Naomi, who slowly went insane, becoming a paranoid schizophrenic. She lived in and out of institutions; eventually her traumatized teenage son agreed to authorize a lobotomy.

Only seven mourners, too few for a *minyan*, attended Naomi's funeral, and the "Kaddish" was never said for her. After years of contemplating her life and death,



Allen Ginsberg

Ginsberg wrote his masterwork, *Kaddish*, his version of the Hebrew prayer for the dead.

Ginsberg's grandparents fled Russia, largely to escape anti-Semitism, and transferred a mixed religious and cultural legacy to Allen's parents and to him. Eventually the poet turned to Buddhism but never for a moment forgot his heritage, making his Jewishness nearly as integral to his identity as his homosexuality.

When finally granted an audience with noted poet Ezra Pound, a virulent Jew-baiter during World War II, "Buddhist Jew" Ginsberg got Pound to admit, "the worst mistake I made was the stupid suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism."

Ginsberg's anti-nationalist tendencies — "This place is not so exciting," he wrote upon visiting Israel — continually brought him into conflict with his Zionist father. "You are both a Jew and a poet," Louis Ginsberg wrote his son. "You cannot escape your own self: your own biological inheritance flowing from untold generations of race."

After Kerouac's physical and mental collapse and eventual death in 1969, Ginsberg began joining creative forces with the likes of John Lennon and Bob Dylan, on whom he had a tremendous influence. Though musically limited, Ginsberg recorded a couple of albums of songs, with encouragement from Dylan. He continues to publish and stay politically active.

Rising to prominence 36 years ago, Ginsberg has managed to remain relevant and visible, "a long way from being a passive gray-beard," Schumacher writes.

"For all his weaknesses and foibles — and he is far from perfect — Ginsberg has evolved into a sort of living symbol of kindness and generosity, an artist who has dared to make his own life a form of literature, open to judgment and interpretation but never failing in its basic human honesty." ■

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