



# Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen & Jack Kerouac in the Cascades

*John Suiter*

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## **Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen & Jack Kerouac in the Cascades** John Suiter

A beautifully illustrated portrait of Beat icons Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen and the years in the Cascades high country that shaped their lives and work. . This is John Suiter's first book, and it evolved from a magazine assignment that took him to Jack Kerouac's remote fire lookout on Desolation Peak on the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *The Dharma Bums*. For two weeks in the summer of 1995, Suiter-an East Coast city-dweller all his life-lived in Kerouac's still-standing fire lookout, making photographs for his magazine project. Meanwhile, the awesome beauty and profound solitude of the surrounding North Cascades worked their magic-as it had for Kerouac and countless others since. In 1996, Suiter met the poets Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, who had also worked as fire lookouts on peaks in the North Cascades in the 1950s. It had been Snyder-the real-life model for Kerouac's fictive "Japhy Ryder"-who had first come into the Upper Skagit country as a fire lookout in 1952 and blazed the way for Whalen and Kerouac to follow. Suiter returned to the North Cascades during the next few summers for further shooting-hikes on Crater, Sourdough, and Sauk mountains. Illustrated with thirty-five beautiful photographs, *Poets on the Peaks* tells how the solitary mountain adventures of three young men helped to form the literary, spiritual, and environmental values of a generation. Based on scores of previously unpublished letters and journals, plus recent interviews with Snyder and Whalen and several others, *Poets on the Peaks* creates a group portrait of Kerouac, Snyder, and Whalen that transcends the tired urban clichés of the "Beat" life. *Poets on the Peaks* is about the development of a community of poets, including the famous Six Gallery reading of October 1955, and contains unexpected cameos by fellow poets and mountain-climbers Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Philip Lamantia, and Michael McClure. *Poets on the Peaks* is also a book about Dharma and the years of *Dharma Bums*-from the 1951 roadside revelation in the Nevada desert that led Gary Snyder to drop out of academia and head for Japan, to Kerouac's lonely vigil with *The Diamond Sutra* on Desolation Peak, to Philip Whalen's ordination as a Zen priest. Finally, *Poets on the Peaks* is the story of the birth of a wilderness ethic, as well as a photographic homage to the Cascades landscape, a landscape virtually unchanged since these men journeyed there thanks to the environmental protections they helped inspire.

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