

RICHARD FRANKLIN HUGO

(1923 – 1982)

“I am really addicted to places” was an admission made repeatedly by poet and essayist Richard Hugo. Critics labeled him a “regionalist” and he embraced the characterization. Fortunately, Hugo’s region was the Northwest and the places to which he was most addicted were Montana places. Although national recognition came late in his career, Hugo’s poetic vision remains a key to interpreting Montana in the middle of this century.

Born in Seattle, Washington, on December 21, 1923, Dick Hugo was raised by his grandparents and educated in White Center, a Seattle suburb. In 1943 he joined the Army Air Corps and he flew 35 missions as a bombardier in World War II. Following the war, he enrolled at the University of Washington, from which he received a B.A. in 1948 and an M.A. in 1952. Hugo studied at the university with poet Theodore Roethke, who he acknowledged had a strong influence on his writing. From 1951 to 1964, Hugo worked for the Boeing Corporation in Seattle, writing poetry in his spare time and gaining some recognition in creative writing circles in the Northwest.

In the autumn of 1964, Hugo came to the English Department at the University of Montana in Missoula to teach creative writing. Under his influence, that program became one of the most respected in the nation. It has produced scores of young poets, many of whom were indelibly touched by Dick Hugo. Hugo wrote, “It became the only job I ever took seriously. I was doing what I loved most, helping people write poems.” Hugo became a full professor in 1972.

As Hugo’s writings became more widely known in the 1970’s, official recognition followed. He received such prestigious awards as the Theodore Roethke Poetry Prize (1976), the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1977), the Melville Cane/Poetry Society of America Award (1980), the Academy of American Poets Fellowship (1981), and the University of Montana Distinguished Scholar Award (1982). In 1977 he became editor of the influential Yale University Younger Poet Series and, in 1979, President Jimmy Carter honored him as one of the country’s outstanding poets.

Richard Hugo’s poetic vision of Montana reveals the state’s bleakness, its desolation, and its loneliness; but it also includes Montana’s strengths, its people, environment, and promise. Hugo’s vision has benefited thousands of Montana in helping them recognize and understand a sense of place. In his twelve published volumes and in numerous periodical pieces, this Montana author has interpreted the state with perception and compassion. It was Dick Hugo, the “regionalist” who emphasized the Montana place, who could write: “Place gives you a stable base, that is, a base of operations. The imagination can then go out.”