PITTSBURGH—This year marks the one hundredth birthday of William Stafford, one of the United States’ foremost poets and teachers. Observances are planned nationwide, and the University of Pittsburgh Press is celebrating with the publication of a unique collection of his work: Sound of the Ax: Aphorisms and Poems by William Stafford, edited by Vincent Wixon and Paul Merchant.

"Sound of the Ax brings together for the first time over 400 aphorisms and 26 aphoristic poems by one of America’s most essential twentieth century poets,” said Wixon. “It is unlike anything Stafford published himself.”

According to Wixon, many readers are familiar with the trenchant nature of Stafford’s poems, with lines such as “Justice will take us millions of intricate moves.” But readers have never had the opportunity, until now, to read a sustained selection from the thousands of wise, witty, and penetrating statements Stafford created in over 40 years of writing daily in his journal.

In keeping with Stafford’s varied interests, the aphorisms in Sound of the Ax explore the themes of war and peace, involvement, aging, fear, egotism, writing, nature, suffering, and living an ethical life, to name just a few. “Readers will find much to enjoy and think about, and will return to this collection often—for inspiration, pleasure, and wisdom from an author noted for his integrity and mindful living,” said Wixon.

Stafford was born on January 17, 1914 in Hutchinson, Kansas. Author of over 60 volumes of poetry and recipient of the National Book Award, he served as U.S. Poet Laureate and Oregon’s Poet Laureate. Among his many honors, Stafford was the recipient of a Shelley Memorial Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Western States Lifetime Achievement Award in Poetry. He died in 1993 in Lake Oswego, Oregon.

Wixon, scholar in the William Stafford Archives at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, is the author of three books of poetry: Blue Moon, The Square Grove, and Seed. He has coproduced documentary films on Lawson Inada and William Stafford. His article written with Merchant, “William Stafford and His First Publishers: The Making of West of Your City and Traveling through the Dark,” can be read on the Stafford Archives website.

Merchant is the former director of the William Stafford Archives at the Aubrey R. Watzek Library, Lewis & Clark College. He is the author of several poetry collections including Bone from a Stag’s Heart and Some Business of Affinity. He coedited, with Wixon, The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life and Crossing Unmarked Snow: Further Views on the Writer’s Vocation.

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