

William S. Merwin '44  
Haiku, Hawaii

William S. Merwin is a giant in American letters. Known worldwide for his poetry, he is a highly respected essayist and translator of Latin, French and Spanish poetry. He has won many prizes and awards in poetry, such as the Pulitzer (1971), the Tanning Prize, the Bollingen Prize, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the PEN Translation Prize, the Wallace Stevens Award and others, and many prestigious grants and fellowships. He has written 20 books of poetry, 21 books of translation, several plays and five books of prose, the most recent being a translation of a portion of Dante's Divine Comedy called "Purgatorio" (Knopf, 2000). This fall, National Geographic Directions will publish his new prose travel book, "The Mays of Vendadorn," and Knopf will release his new translation of the story "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."

Acclaimed as one of the most widely read and imitated poets in America, William began to demonstrate his considerable talent during his two years at Wyoming Seminary. Living in Scranton, the son of a Presbyterian minister, he arrived at Sem in 1942 and excelled in the Independent Society, won the 1944 Oratorical Contest and was active in Declamation and dramatics; he also wrote for the student newspaper *The Opinator* and created the senior class poem. He competed on the varsity football and junior varsity wrestling teams, and was considered something of a "ladies' man." Graduating at the height of World War II, he considered applying to Annapolis and joining the Navy.

Instead William enrolled at Princeton where he majored in English and studied with John Berryman and R. P. Blackmur. After graduation he spent the next several years traveling in France, Spain and England, tutored the children of poet Robert Graves and earned his keep as a translator. His first book of poems, "A Mask for Janus," won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, selected by W. H. Auden. He continued to travel and write, living in France, Boston, Mexico, New York City and, since 1975, Hawaii. His poetry also evolved, moving from a formal, neoclassical style to the more wide-ranging and free-flowing style for which he is so well known. His latest work is described as dream-like, full of praise for the natural world while warning of man's spiritual emptiness and destruction of nature.

William and his wife Paula own a restored pineapple plantation where he cares for endangered trees and plants.