A path to understanding USU's best-known poet

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At a lookout point over Bear Lake on Hwy. 89, a placard bears a poem by May Swenson, who was inspired by the sprawling lake as she stood on this very spot. The lookout point is among stops on the May Swenson Poetry Path.

A walk in her shoes: The May Swenson Poetry Path maps Swenson sites in Logan and beyond. One way to enter an author's world is to open a book. Other gates exist, like this one into the landscape of famed poet May Swenson. Open and cross through, step, and step. Catch your breath at the sudden beauty that lies below.

Swenson, too, stood here on this mountain crest off Logan Canyon's Highway 89 overlooking Bear Lake. Her eyes, your eyes, fix on the "every colored Rocky Mountain flowers," glance up at "slashes of sky." This stop on the May Swenson Poetry Path "brings us directly into her path," says fellow poet Star Coulbrooke. "We stand on the very ground she remembered and was inspired by."

Stop, see. Shiver at the sudden gooseflesh on forearms. "... below we see the whole, / the whale of it," she wrote of Bear Lake, "deep enormous blue— / that widens, while the sky slants back to pale / behind a watercolored mountain." Or you could enter her life at the end of it, resting on the bench that is her grave stone in the Logan Cemetery. The stanzas on the marker itself remind us she's returned to the very same earth that formed her life.

"It is for you to find me," she whispers to the lonely wayfarer. "Read me. Read my mind."

Specific sites like these offer a kind of bridge to Swenson, one of the most famous and respected American poets of the 20th century. She was born in 1913, the oldest of a boisterous clan of 10 children who spoke their parents' native Swedish at home. She died in 1989 after a life lived mostly at a distance from her large Mormon family.

Still, says English professor Joyce Kinkead, "There are many sites here in Logan that connect us to her." Kinkead, along with fellow professor Paul Crumbley and undergraduate researcher Marissa Shirley Allen, have gathered information about Swenson's life path into a literary map that guides us to sites throughout the Cache Valley that were important in the poet's life.

The May Swenson Poetry Path map is available as a brochure from the Cache Valley Visitors Bureau and is downloadable online. The map pinpoints nine sites that can be visited individually or as an automobile tour. Coulbrooke, who in addition to directing USU's Writing Center is also the poet laureate for Logan City, says Swenson inspired her own younger self, allowing her to find her voice through poetry.

And, even though the buildings and the people Swenson knew then are mostly gone, adds Coulbrooke, "it is still the original place of her poetry and is, therefore, the inspiration for our own writing."

As Kinkead explains, "Knowing the geography of a literary figure is very important."

Kinkead is herself a pioneer of sorts when it comes to the phenomenon of literary maps. In 1990, she provided research for the first such map in Utah that placed many of the state's famous authors in their hometowns. The illustration, "Literary Utah," charts a route from Swenson in the north all the way south to Mountain Meadows massacre historian Juanita Brooks in St. George. Such maps are not only fascinating to us grown-up readers, but they can be used to great effect in K-12 schools where students are often surprised to learn these authors walked the same streets they do, Kinkead said in an article published in Teacher|Librarian, a journal for school library professionals. Allen, the student researcher, co-authored the article.

The May Swenson Poetry Path includes several sites on the USU campus. For instance, the May Swenson Room in Ray B. West Building, home to the English Department (but temporarily closed for summer-time building renovations), is the closest Logan has to a Swenson museum. Visitors to the room can see and touch her aged oak desk and chair (rather hard by today's standards), or view the medallion that commemorates the honorary degree conferred by USU in 1989.

The fourth-floor May Swenson Study Room in the Merrill-Cazier Library hosts Swenson's framed poems. Other stops include Logan High, where she edited the school newspaper; Willow Park Zoo; and the empty lot near 500 North and 500 East where her family home once stood.

Maps and literary trails," said Kinkead, "really help us understand the author in their place and time."
And, in the words of a fellow poet, Coulbrooke, they inspire us. “To be in that very place, reading her work and writing our own poems from models she crafted creates a tangible and lasting appreciation for Swenson’s poetry and history,” she said.

In her article in Teacher|Librarian, Kinkead offers this insight: “Salinas, California, has John Steinbeck; Lenox, Massachusetts, has Edith Wharton; and Flat Rock, North Carolina, has Carl Sandburg,” she wrote in the journal article. “Logan, Utah, has May Swenson, a 20th century writer who has been called ‘America’s Poet.’”

This writer from Logan, adds Kinkead, went on to have her first poem published in The New Yorker, earn a MacArthur Fellowship — also known as the “genius grant” — and was dubbed a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. (Others inducted into this pride of Literary Lions include Isaac Asimov and Margaret Atwood.)

“We just continue to try and get in front of the community what an influential person May Swenson is in the world,” said Kinkead, “and that she’s right here.”

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Download the Poetry Path map and find out more about the poet

Much is being done to honor the legacy of this influential Aggie. Check out the May Swenson mini site to download a map of the May Swenson Poetry Path, as well as a copy of the state wide author map of ‘Literary Utah’.