

# Mary Oliver

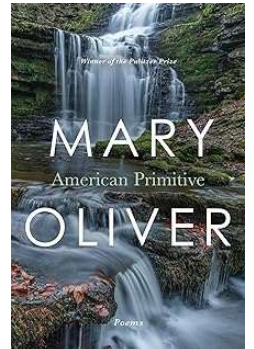
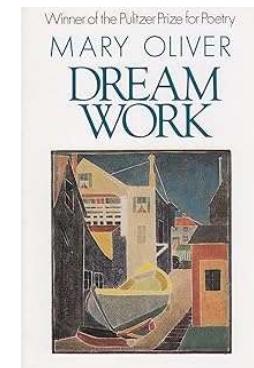
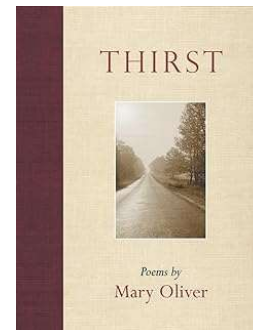
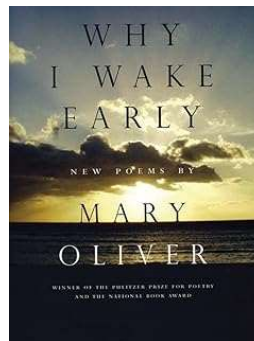
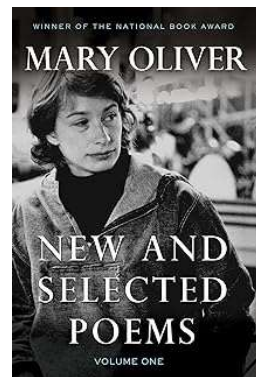
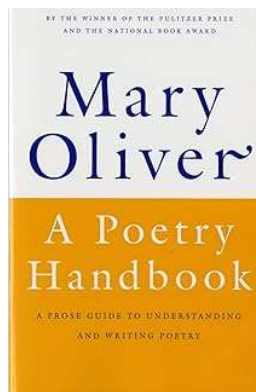
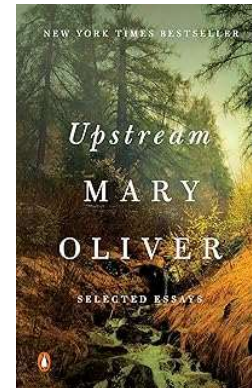
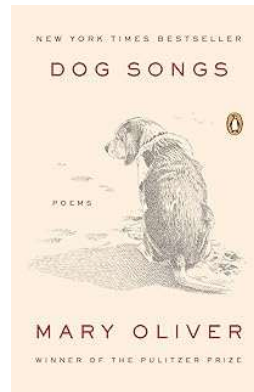
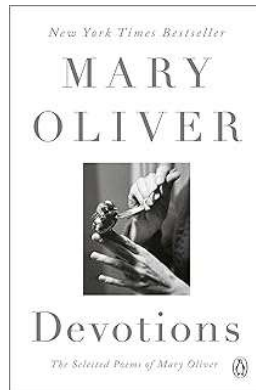
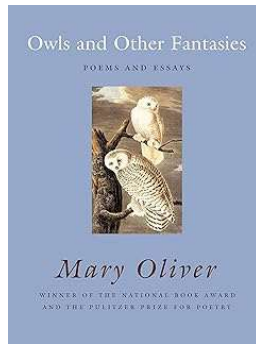
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Adapted from Wikipedia

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# Books of Poetry by Mary Oliver



# Biography



- Mary Jane Oliver (September 10, 1935 – January 17, 2019) was an American poet who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.
- Her work is inspired by nature, rather than the human world, stemming from her lifelong passion for solitary walks in the wild. It is characterized by a sincere wonderment and profound connection with the environment, conveyed in unadorned language and simple yet striking imagery.
- In 2007, she was declared to be the country's best-selling poet.
- Many consider her to be a Unitarian poet laureate, who ironically reverted to her childhood Catholic faith upon the death of her long-time partner, Molly Malone Cook.

# Biography



- In 2011, in an interview with Maria Shriver, Oliver described her family as dysfunctional, adding that though her childhood was very hard, writing helped her create her own world. Oliver revealed in the interview with Shriver that she had been sexually abused as a child and had experienced recurring nightmares.
- Oliver began writing poetry at the age of 14. She graduated from the local high school in Maple Heights. In the summer of 1951 at the age of 15 she attended the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan, now known as Interlochen Arts Camp, where she was in the percussion section of the National High School Orchestra. At 17 she visited the home of the late Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, in Austerlitz, New York, where she then formed a friendship with the late poet's sister Norma. Oliver and Norma spent the next six to seven years at the estate organizing Edna St. Vincent Millay's papers.
- Oliver studied at The Ohio State University and Vassar College in the mid-1950s but did not receive a degree at either college.

# Poetic Identity



- Mary Oliver's poetry is grounded in memories of Ohio and her adopted home of New England, with Provincetown acting as the principal setting for her work after she moved there in the 1960s.
- Influenced by both Whitman and Thoreau, she is known for her clear and poignant observations of the natural world. In fact, according to the 1983 Chronology of American Literature, the "American Primitive," one of Oliver's collection of poems, "...presents a new kind of Romanticism that refuses to acknowledge boundaries between nature and the observing self."
- Nature stirred her creativity, and Oliver, an avid walker, often pursued inspiration on foot. Her poems are filled with imagery from her daily walks near her home: shore birds, water snakes, the phases of the moon, and humpback whales. In Long Life she says "[I] go off to my woods, my ponds, my sun-filled harbor, no more than a blue comma on the map of the world but, to me, the emblem of everything."
- She commented in a rare interview "When things are going well, you know, the walk does not get rapid or get anywhere: I finally just stop and write. That's a successful walk!" She said she once found herself walking in the woods with no pen and later hid pencils in the trees so she would never be stuck in that place again. She often carried a 3-by-5-inch hand-sewn notebook for recording impressions and phrases.
- Maxine Kumin called Oliver "a patroller of wetlands in the same way that Thoreau was an inspector of snowstorms." Oliver stated that her favorite poets were Walt Whitman, Rumi, Hafez, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats

# Poetic Identity



- Oliver was also compared to Emily Dickinson, with whom she shared an affinity for solitude and inner monologues. Her poetry combines dark introspection with joyous release. Although she was criticized for writing poetry that assumes a close relationship between women and nature, she found that the self is only strengthened through an immersion in the natural environment.
- Oliver is also known for her straightforward language and accessible themes. The Harvard Review describes her work as an antidote to "inattention and the baroque conventions of our social and professional lives. She is a poet of wisdom and generosity whose vision allows us to look intimately at a world not of our making."
- In 2007 The New York Times described her as "far and away, this country's best-selling poet."

# Critical Reviews



- Maxine Kumin describes Mary Oliver in the *Women's Review of Books* as an "indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects."
- Reviewing *Dream Work* for *The Nation*, critic Alicia Ostriker numbered Oliver among America's finest poets: "visionary as Emerson [... she is] among the few American poets who can describe and transmit ecstasy, while retaining a practical awareness of the world as one of predators and prey."
- New York Times reviewer Bruce Bennetin stated that the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *American Primitive*, "insists on the primacy of the physical" while Holly Prado of *Los Angeles Times Book Review* noted that it "touches a vitality in the familiar that invests it with a fresh intensity."

# Critical Reviews



- Vicki Graham suggests Oliver over-simplifies the affiliation of gender and nature: "Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature that many theorists claim put the woman writer at risk."
- In her article "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver", Diane S. Bond echoes that "few feminists have wholeheartedly appreciated Oliver's work, and though some critics have read her poems as revolutionary reconstructions of the female subject, others remain skeptical that identification with nature can empower women."
- In The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review, Sue Russell notes that "Mary Oliver will never be a balladeer of contemporary lesbian life in the vein of Marilyn Hacker, or an important political thinker like Adrienne Rich; but the fact that she chooses not to write from a similar political or narrative stance makes her all the more valuable to our collective culture



# Ten Selected Mary Oliver Poems



- The Swan
- Starlings in Winter
- Invitation
- Wild Geese
- Dogfish
- The Summer Day
- Don't Hesitate
- When Death Comes
- The Uses of Sorrow
- The Journey

# Additional Source Materials

- [Mary Oliver on What Attention Really Means and Her Moving Elegy for Her Soul Mate](#)
- [Of Owls and Roses: Mary Oliver on Happiness, Terror and the Sublime Interconnectedness of Life](#)
- [Mary Oliver's Advice on Writing](#)
- [Staying Alive: Mary Oliver on How Books Saved Her Life and the Greatest Antidote to Sorrow](#)
- [The Third Self: Mary Oliver on Time, Concentration, the Artist's Task, and the Central Commitment of the Creative Life](#)
- [Mary Oliver on Love and Its Necessary Wildness](#)
- [A Seizure of Happiness: Mary Oliver on Finding Magic in Life's Unremarkable Moments](#)
- [Mary Oliver on the Measure of a Life Well Lived and How to Maximize Our Aliveness](#)