



At Blackwater Pond: Mary Oliver reads Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver

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It is not essential to have recordings of great poets reading their verse, but it certainly is wondrous. Only in the last 100 years have listeners been able to hear poets' interpretations of their own words, and while audio technology may not deepen listeners' understanding of—or relationship to—particular poems, it can enhance their relationship with the creators. In that spirit, this release is occasion for celebration.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, the National Book Award, and the Lannan Literary award, this poet is renowned and beloved around the world for her work. Her poems, steeped in the natural world, are borderless. Yet the first thing revealed in Oliver's personal delivery of these forty offerings taken from her numerous books, is that they are, in the best sense, American poems. Hearing her perform "Some Things, Say The Wise Ones" makes clear that this poem is rooted in American landscapes and sensibilities. It is an elusive quality about more than regional accent, and her observations about "living things" are universal. Yet it is clear that, like Whitman, Oliver takes her inspiration from her native shores, trees, and hills.

With a poet's voice so definitely her own, it is difficult to tease out her literary influences just by reading the words on the page. When she performs, however, the voices of poets who may have spoken to her speak out between stressed and unstressed words. In "Goldenrod," for example, the listener moves through wind-blown fields of flowers, hearing both Oliver and a whisper of, perhaps, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The most important connection to be made here is with the author herself. Oliver offers a unique combination of gentleness and strength as she lures readers into her world, bringing to life her own experience and, by extension, that of her audience. In "Five a.m. in the Pine Woods," she communicates a deep, unsentimental love of the deer she meets, and the insight they provide. What one catches in her performance, which might be missed by mere book reading, is that the lines: "so this is how you swim inward / so this is how you flow outward / so this is how you pray" constitute more a wonder-filled question than a declaration.

There is only one small technical complaint to be made of this recording. The sound engineer leaves too little space between the CD tracks, so listeners move too quickly from one poem to the next, but this is a small price to pay for spending an hour with perhaps America's finest living poet. In her short essay accompanying the CD in its tasteful green binding, Oliver defines a performance as a completion, in this case the completion of the poetic process. For those already enthralled by Oliver's gift, and those who come to these poems for the first time, this recording is a wondrous completion indeed.

VICKI HUGHES (August 8, 2006)

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