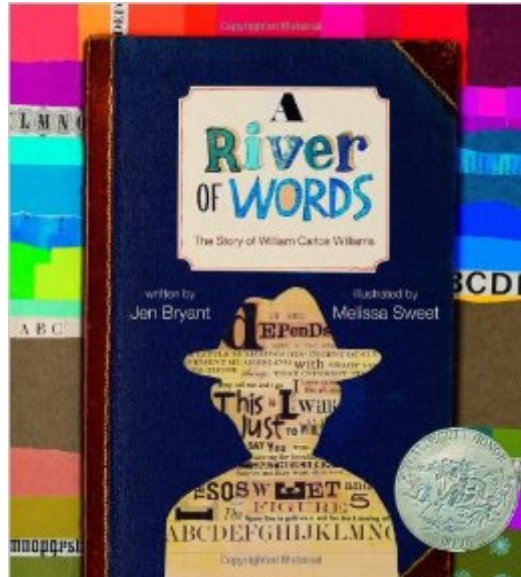


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# A River Of Words: The Story Of William Carlos Williams



## Synopsis

2009 Caldecott Honor Book  
An ALA Notable Book  
A New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book  
A Charlotte Zolotow Honor Book  
NCTE Notable Children's Book

When he wrote poems, he felt as free as the Passaic River as it rushed to the falls. Willie's notebooks filled up, one after another. Willie's words gave him freedom and peace, but he also knew he needed to earn a living. So he went off to medical school and became a doctor -- one of the busiest men in town! Yet he never stopped writing poetry. In this picture book biography of William Carlos Williams, Jen Bryant's engaging prose and Melissa Sweet's stunning mixed-media illustrations celebrate the amazing man who found a way to earn a living and to honor his calling to be a poet.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 820L (What's this?)

Hardcover: 34 pages

Publisher: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers; First Edition edition (July 9, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0802853021

ISBN-13: 978-0802853028

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.3 x 10.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars  
See all reviews (20 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #35,033 in Books (See Top 100 in Books)  
#20 in Books > Children's Books > Biographies > Literary  
#266 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry  
#2948 in Books > History

Age Range: 7 - 18 years

Grade Level: 2 and up

## Customer Reviews

William Carlos Williams is one of those dead American poets about whom I have always had vague-yet-positive sentiments. I believe that some short-time high school girlfriend admired him a lot. I think that I've also seen him listed as an influence on the back of some musician's record sleeve, or perhaps he is mentioned in a young adult novel. And I am confident that I have briefly encountered his work both in a class (undoubtedly, amidst some anthology of poems) and amongst the reading comprehension questions on some long-forgotten standardized test. And so, as the result of some influence or other stored in the recesses of my brain, I react positively to the name

William Carlos Williams and was thus pleased to discover last night that the UPS guy had delivered a copy of *A RIVER OF WORDS*, a picturebook biography of the poet. I was even more pleased by the true story I found within the book. "But when the other boys went inside, Willie stayed outside..." William Carlos Williams was not one to text message, play video games, or hang out in the mall. (Not that those diversions existed during his lifetime, but you know what I mean.) Instead, he was one of those kids who wandered in the woods, using his senses to absorb details of the world, and then pouring out his visions into poems. Of course, writing poetry is oftentimes just slightly more lucrative than is writing *Richie's Picks*, so Williams's mom persuaded him to become a family doctor. And the wonderful thing is that he became friends with some brilliant and artsy students at the university, which helped him to not lose sight of his first love -- poetry -- when he grew up and subsequently went around doctoring: "On his prescription pads, he scribbled a few lines whenever and wherever he could. In those precious times, the rhythm of the river he had rested beside as a child seemed to guide him. Like the water that sometimes ran slow, smooth, and steady, and other times came rushing in a hurried flood, Willie's lines flowed across the page." I love how the book's illustrations are filled with words, as if Willie could see lines of poetry splashing in the river or scrolling down the side of a patient's house. Written in verse, the text throughout is brief in word count yet full of the essence of the poet's life. A two-page timeline follows the story, while bits and pieces of his poems decorate the endpages. In the same way that I was influenced as a child by *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS JEFFERSON* -- the book that taught me how one can seem to always be doing ten different things at the same time -- *A RIVER OF WORDS* will be an empowering revelation to creative young adolescents who are beginning to toy with ideas of what they might do in their lives when they grow up.

I always feel a little bit inadequate when I review a book of poetry or a book about a poet, even if it's for kids. I feel like I'm encroaching on someone else's territory or something. Like I'm some kind of verse-based interloper trespassing where I am ignorant. And the feeling only gets worse when I'm dealing with a person with whom I am not truly familiar. Fortunately, if I ever needed a book to give me the skinny on a poet in terms even an eight-year-old could appreciate, "*A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*" fits the bill. I'm not ashamed to admit that I didn't know even the smallest smidgen of a fact surrounding Mr. Williams before I started this book (well . . . maybe I'm a little ashamed). But this book has melded text and image alongside fact and narrative so seamlessly, you'll walk around for days wondering why more picture book bios aren't written about the great poets of the past. There is no good answer to this question. What makes one poet's life

any more noteworthy than another's? Sometimes it is found in the very ordinariness of their life. William Carlos Williams, Willie to his friends, was an inquisitive boy with an ear for poetry, both in nature and in the words of the great linguists of the past. He wrote poems in his spare time, honing his craft, but when practical matters were at hand he trained as a doctor and set up a practice in Rutherford, New Jersey. Over the years he would continue to work on his poems, shaping them when he was able. An extensive Timeline and Author's Note at the end go on to explain how William finally was recognized as a great poet in his sixties. An Illustrator's Note explains how Melissa Sweet found a way to illustrate the book. A small bibliography is included for further reading (with websites and a suggested video) and nine poems (three excerpted) are visible on the endpapers for closer examination, though they appear throughout the book in one form or another. I was talking with someone the other day about the essential puzzle of the picture book biography. Throwing aside the concerns about the millions of subjects out there who have led less than entirely child-friendly lives (for example I suspect you won't be seeing the picture book bio of Robert Evans anytime soon), there's also the puzzle of what to tell and how much. When you've only 32 pages with which to work, how do you cull a life into its most essential moments? Now add to all of this the problems that come with artists. You couldn't write a bio of Andy Warhol without looking at his paintings, could you? You couldn't mention Michelangelo without getting in a shot of David, right? But do you include ALL their famous works, or just a sample? And if it's just a sample, does that really and truly reflect who the artist is? If we're a sum of our parts, why on earth would you pick and choose amongst them? Now in the case of William Carlos Williams, Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet had an advantage. He was a poet? Then the poetry must be everywhere. It should inform every image, appear in the details and borders of the pages. And then, if you want the book to also be practical, you can put a selection of the man's greatest or best-known poems on the endpapers for easy access. Do it wrong and you've got yourself a noxious muddle. Do it right and you've a delicate balance between fact and art. And Bryant and Sweet are definitely in the latter category. Bryant's decision here was to tell only as much of William's life as would fit within her story. The focus isn't on related rote facts about a great man (though there are plenty of those at the end of the book if needed) but to show the process through which a person becomes a poet. The story embodies the idea of living and breathing your art, even when you have other practical day-to-day considerations to attend to. It's not a very romantic notion, that of a man holding down a steady job AND writing poems on the sly, but it is a rather inspiring one. It suggests that no matter how ordinary a life is it can be made extraordinary by its subject's appreciation of that ordinariness. Williams wrote poems about plums and chickens and wheelbarrows for a reason, and Bryant has

perfectly hit upon why that is and how he found a way to make each poem, "find its own special shape on the page." In her Illustrator's Note Melissa Sweet writes, "Every project furthers an artist, but this book was a true gift." She is implying that the gift was to her, but I'd quibble with that and say it was instead a gift to us. I look at another of Sweet's 2008 publications, "Tupelo Rides the Rails" and while it's a touching tale, the art is certainly different from Bryant's tale. In "A River of Words" Sweet goes wild. She illustrates book covers and ephemera, report cards and title pages. Words are handwritten on scraps of paper, or stuck together like exalted ransom notes. They gleam gold or burn blue, and the images of Williams are fit in so that instead of being lost in the whirl of words, they stand out and grab your eye. In a sense this book reminded me of "The Boy Who Loved Words" by Roni Schotter but with a softer, more practical edge. Words really are everywhere in this art. They're embedded in bowls of plums and writ large within the roofs of homes. Visually, the book pairs rather well with another small publisher title from 2008, "The Storyteller's Candle" by Lucia Gonzalez. I sometimes feel that mixed media is becoming more and more popular with artists in this age of computers, technology and smooth shiny gadgets. And certainly cut magazines and newspapers are cropping up in everything from Carin Berger's, "The Little Yellow Leaf" to this, Sweet's latest. I do not think that it is a stretch to say that a lot of kids get their first introduction to William Carlos Williams through Sharon Creech's "Love That Dog". I do not think that it is a stretch to say that a lot of parents, teachers, and librarians probably ALSO discover Mr. Williams that way (though most would be loathe to admit it). So perhaps a unit on poetry or an assignment in conjunction with Poetry Month would pair beautifully with Bryant and Sweet's newest book. Picture book biographies of poets can be tricky, difficult things. They demand an artistic sensibility entirely of their own making. Both Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet have found their own ways of dealing with the challenges that come with such a book as this. And these solutions when brought together make for a visual and audible stunner. Kudos to everyone involved. Kudos all around.

ReviewSource School Library Journal(tm) - 09-01-2008 Starred Review Gr 3-6-This stunning picture-book biography combines a lyrical text with wonderfully creative mixed-media illustrations in an impressive and personable homage to an extraordinary and accomplished man. Bryant's poetic writing-"Gurgle, gurgle-swish, swish, swoosh.... The water went slipping and sliding over the smooth rocks, then poured in a torrent over the falls, then quieted again below"-describes beautifully how, as a child, Williams would lie peacefully by the Passaic River, listening to the sounds of the water; he appreciated nature and the ordinary experiences of life. Book pages form a background for some of the illustrations and prescription pads become the paper for the doctor's poetic scribbling. A

lovely spread shows a display of constellations while in the foreground, the poet sits framed in the light of an attic window, with one of his poems about a night sky laid out on a book cover. Williams's poems, which appear in the book in a variety of colors and fonts as part of the art, are highlighted in uniform type with standard line breaks on the inside cover pages. A time line of his life juxtaposed with a list of world events, a brief author's note about his significance as a poet, and an illustrator's note that explains how Sweet researched the project are appended.-Kirsten Cutler, Sonoma County Library, CA Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.Copyright School Library Journal(tm) - 2008. Used with permission.

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