

The Library of America interviews Christopher Benfey about Stephen Crane

In connection with the publication in April 2011 of [*Stephen Crane: Complete Poems*](#), edited by Christopher Benfey, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Stephen Crane: Complete Poems collects all the poems that appeared in the two volumes Crane published during his life—*The Black Riders and Other Lines in 1895* and *War Is Kind in 1899*—and another thirty-three uncollected poems. Most readers seem especially to like his first collection. How do the two differ?

Crane wrote the sixty or so poems of *Black Riders* in a single period of creative intensity, during the first three months of 1894, when he was living hand to mouth as a freelance newspaper writer in New York City. It was like Rilke in Duino or Van Gogh at Arles, with the creative lightning striking again and again. Crane felt, at the time, that he could “turn the poetic spout on or off.” The book has a tight unity of form and focus (mainly brief, free-verse parables of an ironic bent). Crane was aiming to shock; in his writing he wanted, he said, to be “unmistakable.” And he achieved what he was after in *Black Riders*. Nobody else could have written poems like these. Here’s one of my all-time favorites, three lines of blistering warning about the self-fulfilling perils of paranoia:

A man feared that he might find an assassin;
Another that he might find a victim.
One was more wise than the other.

War Is Kind is a much more diverse collection, assembling some of the poems that Crane’s publisher thought were too shocking on religious or moral grounds to be included in *Black Riders*. But the book also takes Crane’s poetry into previously unexplored territory, especially the pity and the horror of war. The

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poem from which the ironic title is taken, “Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind,” is one of the greatest modern war poems by any poet in English, right up there with the best of Wilfred Owen and Randall Jarrell.

Crane is of course much better known for his fiction—The Red Badge of Courage, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, and his stories—than for his poetry. Is what he achieves in his poetry markedly different from what he achieves in his fiction?

Crane thought his poems were a “more ambitious effort” than his fiction, more a distillation of what he was trying to say. The creative overlap is greatest in his extraordinary short stories, which are among the very best in all of American literature. In “The Open Boat,” for example, Crane portrays a shipwreck, based on his own experience during the lead-up to the Spanish-American War, from the perspective of the terrified men. The story begins, “None of them knew the color of the sea.” From writing vivid prose sketches for New York tabloids, Crane learned how to grab his reader by the neck and quickly, deftly, convey a world of intensity through imagery. Spending the night in a homeless shelter, he noted one drifter who resembled “an assassin steeped in crimes performed awkwardly.”

How did Crane’s experiences as a journalist affect his poems? You say in your introduction that his poems are anti-lyrical. Did his journalism have anything to do with his negative attitude about “lyrical” poems?

You might think that journalism would be a bad singing school for poets, precisely the wrong line of work for achieving lyricism. But poetry moves forward by abandoning the clichés of what a previous generation thought was “poetic.” Crane’s tough-guy generation had to make a clean break with the sentimental melodies of James Whitcomb Riley and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the two most popular poets of the nineties. You can find traces of both poets in Crane, first in the little Riley-esque poem from his youth, about his disappointment in receiving “a nice warm suit of wool” for Christmas when “I’d rather be cold and have a dog, / To watch when I come from school,” and then in a blistering parody of Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life”:

Tell me not in joyous numbers
We can make our lives sublime
By—well, at least, not by
Dabbling much in rhyme.

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Crane was done dabbling in rhyme. He was searching for a kind of poetry adequate to his own generation's experience of war, economic depression, sexual liberation, and the loss of religious certainties.

In your biography of Crane you argue that two currents of thought in the 1890s influenced his poems: the Arts and Crafts movement and the intense interest at the time in psychic research. Could you point to instances in his poems where we see these influences?

Crane's generation was wary of the machine age, and the many ways in which industrialism was making life more "uniform," with less scope for individual expression and freedom. Crane liked to quote a passage from Emerson's essay on "Heroism": "Congratulate yourselves if you have done something strange and extravagant and broken the monotony of a decorous age."

The Arts and Crafts movement, inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris, called for a return to hand-made values, to "strange and extravagant" art. Crane's occasional medieval touches, in poems like "A youth in apparel that glittered" (XXVII), are related to the Arts and Crafts aesthetic, and so is the "rough-hewn" quality of the lines themselves, with their refusal of rhyme and regular "mechanical" meter. More importantly, however, Crane found enthusiastic publishers among the Arts and Crafts elite in America. Copeland and Day, who published *Black Riders*, gave the poems an Arts and Crafts presentation, printing the poems entirely in capital letters, as though they'd been set by a medieval monk. Many of Crane's later poems were published by the amazing Elbert Hubbard, a self-styled follower of William Morris who established his Roycroft community outside Buffalo and marketed hand-made furniture and handmade poems like Crane's.

Psychic research comes into Crane's poetry in the way he claimed the poems arrived in his head "in little rows," which he could access as though turning on a tap. I'm guessing that when he described the process to his friend, the writer Hamlin Garland, Crane knew of Garland's interest in psychic phenomena (an interest shared by William James and many other Americans during the nineties).

Do you think Crane would be unhappy that most publishers today ignore the convention of printing the poems from Black Riders entirely in upper-case letters? If printed that way today we would read each poem as if it were shouted. Is that what Crane intended?

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It wasn't Crane's idea to print the poems entirely in capital letters, like newspaper headlines, but he loved the effect. His publishers, for some reason, called the layout "classical," but the typological look of the poems is bracingly modern, like something out of E. E. Cummings or Mallarmé. Such a layout, as some critics have noted, insists on the *written* status of the poem, as opposed to seemingly orally based poetry like Whitman's. I like to think that Crane wanted his poems to be delivered by the strongest and loudest possible means, and capital letters had that effect on his first readers, like amplification. To use them now, though, would run the risk of making the poems seem merely eccentric or gimmicky. And it's by no means clear that Crane would want them printed that way.

Crane hated the posturing of poets and preferred to call his poetic writing "lines" or "pills" rather than poems. What was this all about?

Crane was a "manly" man, someone who felt most comfortable on fishing and hunting trips, and discussed his stories with his pal Teddy Roosevelt (who complained when Crane published a story about Mexicans outwitting the white guys). He thought the word "poems" had a sissy ring to it. At the same time, "lines" emphasized the stark reality of the lines on a page. Crane was getting back to basics, clearing the poetic ground of timeworn conventions and sentimental reassurances. His poems were bitter medicine, "pills." In one of his best-known "pills," Crane sees a creature "naked, bestial," squatting in the desert and eating his own heart:

I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."

Joyce Carol Oates used those last ten words as the title of one of her novels.

Crane rarely wrote or spoke about his poetry. Is it possible to tell who he liked and which poets influenced him?

For a long time it was assumed that Crane was influenced by Emily Dickinson. A story went around that William Dean Howells, one of Crane's mentors, had read some of Dickinson's poems to him. I think there's an affinity there, a shared ironic stance about God and a preference for brief, enigmatic

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parables. Crane certainly was familiar with the usual Decadent mix of Beardsley, Swinburne, and the like. And he may have been influenced by early translations from Japanese poetry, as Garland suspected. But I think Crane's major source was probably the King James Bible, which he had had drilled into him as a child, by his father, a prominent Methodist minister, and many other relatives in the ministry. The psalms, the parables, the deserts and mountains of the Holy Land—these, along with the daily newspapers, gave Crane what he needed for his “lines.”

Are there any later poets who were significantly influenced by Crane?

The Imagists, such as Amy Lowell and H.D., certainly read Crane during the 1920s and found some confirmation for their own telegraphic poems. And the generation that came of age during World War II, including Jarrell and John Berryman, was fascinated by Crane's stories and his poetry. But “significantly influenced”? No, I wouldn't say so. I really think that right now might be Crane's moment as a poet, and for a couple of reasons. First, I think young poets today are looking for a way to write poems that are both distinctive in their language and fully engaged with the political and social problems of our time. And second, our ears are attuned to a new “anti-lyrical” kind of poetry that came out of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Empire—I mean the poems of Szyborska and Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert. I like to think that Crane's often strikingly similar poetry may somehow have made its way to Poland via Crane's close friend Joseph Conrad—a topic for another day!

John Berryman was one of the few poets to appreciate Crane, writing a critical biography of him and calling him “the important American poet between Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson on one side, and his tardy developing contemporaries Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost with Ezra Pound on the other.” Do you see affinities between Crane's poetry and Berryman's? Does Berryman get Crane's place right?

Like many readers of my generation, I came to Crane through Berryman, though not originally through his brilliant biography (which has a superb chapter on the poems), but rather in a forgotten textbook that Berryman and Allen Tate put together called *The Arts of Reading*. Berryman's assessment of where Crane “fits” in American poetry is on target. I think what Berryman learned from Crane is how to use two contrasting voices, one more traditionally lyrical and one deadpan and “journalistic,” to light up the landscape of human toil and

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trouble. You get those contrasting voices in poems like Crane's "Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind," with lines like these, with the surprising and deliberately unpoetic word "gulped":

"Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died.

And you find a similar contrast in the wildly divergent voices of Berryman's *Dream Songs*.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, mentor and correspondent to Emily Dickinson and editor of her posthumously published poems, seems to have been one of the few contemporaries to recognize something distinctive in Crane's poetry, calling him "a condensed Whitman or an amplified Emily Dickinson." Given comparisons like these by influential literary figures, how do we account for Crane's poems having been largely overlooked for most of the past century?

Most American poetry is overlooked! It goes with the territory. Even Dickinson, whose supreme achievement seems obvious to us now, has been overlooked for long periods of time. Fortunately, the brilliance of Crane's stories, such as "The Blue Hotel," which Mencken considered the greatest of all American short stories, will continue to lead curious readers to Crane's poetry. Crane's poems, as he intended, have never quite "fit" any of the schools of American poetry; he anticipates the Modernists in various ways, and Berryman liked the more "symbolic" poems of his later years (like the gorgeous and mysterious poem about the "blue battalions" that begins "When people reach the top of a hill"), but Crane—it's his distinction and his curse—remains utterly distinctive. Right at the moment, we're living through a period that resembles, in certain ways, the 1890s, with financial turmoil, high unemployment, small-scale wars all over the world, and a great deal of spiritual uncertainty. Time to read Crane!

You wrote a biography of Crane after writing two books on Emily Dickinson. Was that a natural progression? What led you to want to write his biography?

Unlike many biographers who like long paper trails and coherent subjects, I prefer to write about people who are enigmatic, opaque, badly documented. That's why I'm drawn to elusive subjects like Dickinson, Crane, and

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Degas. These are hard nuts to crack. I thought I saw a pattern in Crane's life and work that no one else had noticed. Crane wrote about shipwrecks, then managed to be in one. He wrote the definitive novel about the Civil War before, as he put it, he'd even seen a sham battle; then he became a high-profile war correspondent. And he wrote a novel about a vulnerable young "girl of the streets" before shacking up with a real life whorehouse madam, the redoubtable Cora Crane, for the final years of his life. Crane, in this sense, imagined his life before he lived it. He wanted to live "a life of fire," as he put it in a poem in *The Black Riders*, a life that "glowed" and was "indelible." That's how his poetry comes across. Indelible.