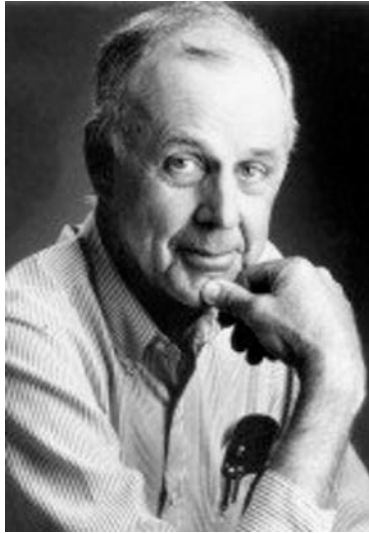


INTRODUCTION



Wendell Berry

(1934-)

Wendell Berry is the outstanding nature poet of his generation. He has also established a respectable reputation as both a novelist and an essayist. Remarkably, he has managed to do all of this while running a working farm on conservationist and recyclist principles and holding a professorship at the University of Kentucky. Born into a family that had farmed in central Kentucky for five generations, Berry attended local schools before entering the nearby University of Kentucky at Lexington in 1952. Already interested in pursuing both writing and agriculture, he concentrated on literature as an academic major, acquiring his bachelor's and master's degrees at Kentucky. Attempting to focus exclusively on an academic career at the time of his marriage to Tanya Amyx in 1957, he accepted a position at New York University. That experience taught him that he could not live without farming, without maintaining the contact with the earth that he found vital. In 1959 he returned to Kentucky, joined the faculty at the university, and began working on one of the family farms.

His writing career began with the publication of the novel *Nathan Coulter* in 1960, first of the Port William series he revised it extensively, cutting it by almost one-third, for republication in 1985. The events depicted in his first work, like those in all of Berry's work, parallel his own life. The novel tells of the maturation of the title character as he passes from the heedless selfishness of youth to accepting responsibility for taking over the family farm. Woven into the work are the stories of several other people who form the Port William community; by the end, the novel is about all of them, underscoring one of Berry's major themes: that a rural community shares a common spirit rooted in the earth, that through it each individual becomes more than himself. These characters and motifs continue in *A Place on Earth*, which makes this theme even clearer with the absence of a single central character.

In their revised forms both novels have been highly praised, some critics going so far as to call them masterpieces. Along with *The Memory of Old Jack*--which approaches the same themes from the point of view of the oldest member of the community, his memory fusing pasty and present instances of this common spiritual force--these works are the pinnacle of Berry's art. Unlike his poems and essays, they remain independent of ideology, of shared convictions on the part of writer and reader, for fiction, unlike other forms of writing, creates its own context; that is, fiction depends less than other forms on what might be called the truth factor, or at least the consensus factor. These novels, and the stories in *The Wild Birds*,

create a successful and brilliantly integrated world of their own, our ideally suited for the illustration of Berry's abiding convictions about the necessary spiritual interaction of man and his environment.

Whereas Berry's fiction was relatively slow to gain adequate appreciation, his recognition as a poet was early and widespread. The early volumes *The Broken Ground* and *Openings* clearly announce that his business as a poet will be to celebrate farming as a symbol of the union of spirit and man in a cyclic, creative, and life-sustaining act. These themes found receptive readers in the late 1960's, when a number of factors coalesced to promote ecological awareness and the advantages of subsistence farming. Berry was quickly adopted as a poet laureate to the so-called Whole Earth movement; his poems decorated the pages of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, especially the famous *Last Catalog*. *Farming: A Hand Book* was actually published in both hard- and softbound editions, unprecedented at the time; his contemporary essays also found prestigious publishers.

These early volumes established Berry's major themes, identical to those of his prose and largely unchanged over a career of three decades: the sacredness of the land; man's interaction with nature as a religious ritual; and this interaction as the source of order, love, harmony, and propriety in man's social acts. These ideas form the substance, and the strength, of *Collected Poems*. Some reviewers call Berry's 1985 collection the document of a major poet, and others find it relatively easy to dismiss the collection as limited and minor. It is certainly true that he has not yet gained the public recognition of the middle-aged Robert Frost or Carl Sandburg as a 'people's poet'; none of Berry's poems has passed into the common parlance, as 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' or 'Chicago' has. Further, his work is no longer sought by major publishers. Still, by most measures Berry's achievement is substantial. He works in a variety of lyrical forms, disarming in their apparent simplicity yet reflecting great technical complexities. In this sense his forms are almost always the perfect vehicles for their themes, for they reflect both technical sophistication and earthly simplicity, the natural rhythms of man's interaction with the land.

Berry's essays present the detailed substantiation, the rational explication, of the themes stated imaginatively in the fiction and poetry. His later books appear under less prestigious imprints than his earlier books. Apparently his ideas are perceived as less significant (or less timely and marketable) than they were in the 1960's. Yet his arguments have the same cogency they did then, his demonstrations the same force. Pretending that megalopolises such as New York or Los Angeles can continue to function as they are functioning now is foolish, he seems to say. Berry's proposed solutions are sane and rational--and ultimately convincing. That they are no longer popular does not mean that they are wrong. Berry's work has provoked comparisons with that of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who were also not always popular. He deserves to be in their company, for they were as intent as he upon the preservation of the environment and the American way of life.

James Livingston
"Wendell Berry"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 185-86



Wendell Berry with his father and dog