



# Karbiener, Karen, ed. Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman. Illustrated by Kate Evans [review]

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)  
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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## Recommended Citation

Franklin, Kelly S. "Karbiener, Karen, ed. Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman. Illustrated by Kate Evans [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (2017), 206-209. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2279>

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define it” is the work of the answerer Whitman anticipates in “Poets to Come.” And so the last words go to Folsom and his extraordinary gift with them, as demonstrated in his explanation of several key phrases in section 15: “So it is always what Whitman calls an ‘influx’ and an ‘efflux,’ the world incessantly whirling toward our senses, and our senses reaching out to absorb that world. And that, more or less, is what we are: we are the things we have seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled: ‘such as it is to be of these more or less I am.’ No idea we have, no word we use, no love we feel did not originate ‘out there.’ They all entered in through our open senses, our senses which extended out to embrace them and then tended to them as we absorbed them, and out of all those endless stimuli, we each weave the unique song of our self.”

*New York University*

KAREN KARBIENER



Karen Karbiener, ed. *Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman*. Illustrated by Kate Evans. Lake Forest, CA: MoonDance, 2017. 48 pp.

The last quarter century has seen numerous illustrated Walt Whitman books for children, ranging from Robert Sabuda’s folksy linocut version of “I Hear America Singing” (1991) to Barbara Kerley’s hagiographic biography, *Walt Whitman: Words for America* (2004; with art by the Caldecott-winning Brian Selznick). The most recent arrival is Karen Karbiener’s 2017 anthology, *Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman*, with line-drawing and watercolor illustrations by Kate Evans.

Karbiener’s edition offers a healthy selection of verse: twenty-eight Whitman poems, ten of which are excerpts from his longer works. Along with the usual suspects (“A Noiseless Patient Spider,” “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”), Karbiener also includes less frequently anthologized poems such as the wonderful “A Font of Type,” along with intimate lyrics like “Calamus 9,” and “Thanks in Old Age.” The collection includes a short introduction describing Whitman’s revolutionary contribution to poetry and high-

lighting the poet's desire for an intimate, personal relationship with his reader. The organization of poems makes sense: the book begins with an invitation from "Song of the Open Road" ("Camerado, I give you my hand!") and closes with the hortatory "Poets to Come"; in between, Karbiener arranges the poems to create a kind of narrative of Whitman's life, moving from "There Was a Child Went Forth" to "Thanks in Old Age." The editor also offers brief interpretive commentary that situates the poems in Whitman's life, draws out their important themes, or suggests some way the verse might be relevant to Whitman's young readers today.

Those familiar with Whitman will note the quiet suppression of his sexual themes, a standard practice across children's editions of Whitman. The excerpt from "A Woman Waits for Me" includes only a few lines celebrating women's equality, and somewhat ambiguously states that the poem was banned for being "progressive." Likewise, the commentary on "Calamus 9" couches the poem's homoeroticism in notably indirect and implicit terms: "Many have found in this poem the brave voice of a person who tried to express himself freely—not just who he was, but whom he chose to love."

Whitman scholars may object to certain interpretive and textual decisions made by the editor. First, Karbiener oversimplifies Whitman's attitude toward formal education and knowledge, essentially interpreting "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "Beginning My Studies" through the lens of "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." Of the first, she writes, "Walt claims that his poetic gift was not given to him by teachers or even his family, but by nature." While Whitman does see nature as his inspiration, the poem itself takes no stance against teachers or education, notwithstanding what Karbiener's statement seems to imply. The editor reinforces this reading in her commentary on the next poem, "Beginning My Studies": "In this poem, we meet one of his ideal pupils: someone who might not like lessons or lectures, but obviously loves to learn." Or, as she glosses "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer": "Science is a noble pursuit that is necessary to sustain and better our lives; poetry is what we stay alive for."

No one doubts Whitman's Romantic emphasis on intuition and

natural inspiration. But we should not forget that the speaker of “Song of Myself” exclaims, “Hurrah for positive science!” and—although admitting that “the facts . . . are not my dwelling”—nonetheless insists that he will “enter *by them* to an area of my dwelling” (emphasis mine). Against Karbiener’s reading of Whitman as tolerating science but preferring poetry, we need to see that for Whitman all knowledge—scientific learning included—is the raw material, the building block, and the inspiration of poems. As such, this partial reading of Whitman risks perpetuating for young readers an artificial divide (or worse, an antagonism) between the disciplines—a dichotomy that Whitman himself would have rejected.

Furthermore, it is perhaps unfair to hold children’s anthologies to the standards of scholarly editions, but the collection does invite some questions as it enters the textual minefield of editions and revisions of Whitman’s poems. Karbiener chooses to date the poems according to the final publication of that version of the text. This means that eleven of the poems she dates as 1892 had actually been finalized in 1881-82, and we might prefer the editor to follow Bradley and Blodgett’s practice of giving the date when the poem takes its final form. This would provide distinction between, for instance, the two poems Karbiener includes that did not actually appear in *Leaves of Grass* until the so-called “Deathbed Edition.”

Karbiener also makes the understandable but problematic choice to pair early editions of poems with Whitman’s later titles, using the 1860 text of “Enfans d’Adam 4” but the title “A Woman Waits for Me.” Furthermore, the editor’s decision to include one excerpt from the final version of “Song of Myself” alongside five from the untitled 1855 version seems to reflect her interest in representing Whitman as a poet of New York, since the only substantial difference in that excerpt lies in the phrase “of Manhattan the son.” More seriously, the book erroneously dates the text of “On the Beach at Night” as 1867 (the poem first appeared in the 1871 *Passage to India*, and took its final form in the 1881-82 *Leaves*) perhaps mistaking it for “On the Beach at Night Alone,” a different poem that originated in 1856 but took its substantial form in 1867. Finally, Karbiener makes the somewhat tenuous claim that Whitman once intended to title “I Sing the Body

Electric” as “Poem of a Black Person.” The manuscript to which she apparently refers—Whitman’s jottings for a proposed poem—bears no similarity whatsoever to Whitman’s eventual poem, and the accompanying notes in the Trent Duke manuscript collection find no link between this manuscript and any finished Whitman poem.

There is much to love in this volume. In her introduction and criticism, Karbiener shows a real knowledge of, and affection for, Whitman’s body of work. Evans’s earth-toned illustrations of homely, common people might have appealed to the poet’s democratic sensibilities. Teachers and younger readers will also benefit from the vocabulary definitions of difficult, archaic, or idiosyncratic words in Whitman’s poetry.

The only other illustrated children’s anthology of equal value might be Jonathan Levin’s 1997 *Poetry for Young People: Walt Whitman*, with illustrations by Jim Burke. With twenty-two poetry selections, vocabulary definitions, and a detailed biography, the book also includes several accomplished poems that Karbiener leaves out: “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” “Sparkles from the Wheel,” and “The World Below the Brine.” Like Karbiener’s volume, this book has mild textual problems, such as the silent inclusion of selections from different versions of “Song of Myself” (under invented titles) as well as the forgivable but erroneous claim that Whitman published nine different editions of *Leaves of Grass*. But the greatest strength of this anthology lies in Jim Burke’s luminous pastel illustrations that capture the beauty of the human body in a way that the simpler and flatter pictures by Kate Evans do not. Still, with anthologies two decades apart, editors Karbiener and Evans, and illustrators Levin and Burke, have done a great service to Whitman by introducing the next generation of young readers to the poet’s magnificent American verse.

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