

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE



Walt Whitman

Monday, April 14, 2008 at 9pm (check local listings)

“I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul. I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters. And I will stand between the master and the slaves, entering into both so that both will understand me alike.”

Walt Whitman

He is today one of the most-recognized figures in American literary history: poet, patriot and faithful advocate of democracy. His name graces shopping malls, highway rest stops, and local high schools. He has adherents around the globe. But in his own time, critics denounced Walt Whitman as a “lunatic raving in pitiable delirium.” They pronounced his signature book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, “slimy,” “vile,” and “beastly.” One reviewer wished to see him whipped in public; another suggested he commit suicide. He was famously “banned in Boston.”

Even by his own measure, Walt Whitman failed in so many ways in his own lifetime: failed in his attempt to reach a vast audience of ordinary men and women; failed to achieve the laurels he craved; and most painfully, failed to talk the nation out of an impending civil war.

On Monday, April 14, PBS’s AMERICAN EXPERIENCE premieres *Walt Whitman*, a two-hour documentary from acclaimed filmmaker Mark Zwonitzer (*Jesse James, The Massie Affair*), featuring Academy Award-winning actor Chris Cooper (*Seabiscuit, Adaptation*) as the voice of America’s first great poet. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa, novelist Allan Gurganus, poet and essayist Martin Espada, and former Poet Laureate Billy Collins appear to recite some of Whitman’s most important works, and reflect upon his enduring influence. Actor J.K. Simmons (*Juno, The Closer*) narrates.

In 1841, twenty-one year-old Walt Whitman, the self-educated son of a working class family from Long Island, New York, left home for the bustle of New York City. He spent the next fourteen years as a newspaper editor, novelist, political pamphleteer, and shopkeeper, shuttling between Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island and New Orleans, Louisiana. He soaked up the wild energy of New York City, the peaceful wilderness of Long Island and the unguarded sensuality of New Orleans.

As tensions between the North and South intensified in the 1850s, Walt Whitman despaired. He was passionately devoted to the young Republic, but he had grave doubts about the ability (and the desire) of the nation’s leaders to heal the divide. In his own working-class house in Brooklyn, Whitman began to search for a poetic voice that could bind America and Americans – a voice that was of, by, and for the common people.

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In the summer of 1855, Whitman self-published the fruit of that effort, *Leaves of Grass*, a slim volume of twelve unnamed poems. It broke all of the established rules: ignored traditional rhyme and meter, spoke directly to the reader, and celebrated the beauty, the flaws and the animal sensuality of the human body. Whitman used the first person to create an image of himself as a reflection of the America he saw: "turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding."

"Here was the first truly American poet who broke out of the form of formal poetry. *Leaves of Grass* is a poem without boundaries so that everything can flood into it: People, professions, landscape, memories, engineering, water, children, Native Americans. There's no boundary keeping anything out," explains Billy Collins.

Whitman hoped for large sales and critical success, but he got neither. The first edition of *Leaves* sold poorly. Most critics lambasted Whitman's home-made book. One went so far as to label it a "a mass of stupid filth." A notable exception was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the high arbiter of literary America. In a letter to Whitman, Emerson wrote that *Leaves of Grass* was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed... I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

Between 1855 and 1860, Whitman's family began to disintegrate, he suffered romantic heartbreak when his lover, Fred Vaughan, abandoned him, and the country raced headlong toward civil war, but Whitman never stopped writing poetry. His third edition was published on the eve of the Civil War. "I think that Whitman believed that *Leaves of Grass* was going to prevent a civil war. I think he had that much faith in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*," says Whitman scholar Ed Folsom. "As the war begins, as Whitman sees it turn from what everyone thought would be a two-week series of skirmishes into a brutal and long-lasting war, he begins to believe that *Leaves of Grass* is a failure."

In the first years of the War, Whitman abandoned poetry in favor of volunteer work in hospitals in the Washington, D.C., area. He spent the last three years of the War providing daily companionship and comfort to tens of thousands of sick, wounded and dying soldiers. His horrifying experience inside the wards wrecked Whitman physically, but renewed his belief in the American future—and caused him to revise and renew his commitment to *Leaves of Grass*. As the country itself was forced to do, Whitman folded all the horrors and grim death of war into his beloved book of poetry and emerged with a new *Leaves*. Today, the book continues to stand the test of time.

"It's hard to imagine one voice with the strength and the power to unite the polarized nation we currently live in," says executive producer Mark Samels, "Walt Whitman saw himself as that kind of voice, and he sacrificed nearly everything, his financial well being, his family, his personal life and his health, in hopes of being able to heal and unify the country as it raced towards one of its greatest conflicts."

CREDITS

Directed and written by
Mark Zwonitzer

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Produced and co-directed by
Jamila Wignot

Edited by
Penny Elliott Hays

Director of photography
Michael Chin

Music by
Joel Goodman

Voice of Walt Whitman
Chris Cooper

Narrator
J.K. Simmons

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston
Series producer Sharon Grimberg
Executive producer Mark Samels

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ACCESSIBILITY

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and
described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at
WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and
VCRs.

ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as
"peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television"
(*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On
air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have
shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award,
including twenty-four Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and fourteen
George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for *Two Days in October*.

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WGBH Boston is America's preeminent public broadcasting producer. More than one-third of PBS's prime-time lineup and companion Web content as well as many public radio favorites are produced by WGBH. The station also is a pioneer in educational multimedia and in access technologies for people with disabilities. For more information visit wgbh.org.

For more information about AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and *Walt Whitman*, visit pbs.org/americanexperience

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