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Chapter 2 : Carol Ann Rinzler | Open Library

"The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English" as edited by Ian Ousby does what most average readers need: brings us into the know about literature without requiring a PhD. It is cleanly edited, with a succinct but not crowded design.

Heim is a Century assistant editor. This article appeared in The Christian Century, March 22, , pp. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.Keillor.com. Keillor is a powerful reciter of varied kinds of poetry, as we discovered when we heard him give a reading in Chicago as part of a recent book tour. That event also gave us the chance to ask him some questions. What kind of poetry do they read in Lake Wobegon? Inspirational poems, the sort of poems they tape to the refrigerator door or Mrs. Bunsen uses to fill space in the Lutheran church bulletin. The sort that seems to give a little thrill to the older and devout and that makes the young sophisticates grind their molars. In school, all the grand old masters of literature are brought out for the children to study and to struggle with, with those dorky Questions for Class Discussion: What rhetorical device does the writer employ when he refers to "poems they tape to the refrigerator door"? In what other ways do poems remind you of food? Did you have breakfast this morning? What sorts of thoughts or feelings do you associate with refrigerators? Clumsily, with good intentions, the teachers thrust poetry at the children -- Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, Wordsworth, Keats, Whitman, Dickinson. And, just as in gym class, some children endure it in misery and others get excited. Do high schoolers in Lake Wobegon really respond to Shakespeare? Disgrace is part of the daily life of a high school kid. Dignity is everything, and pitfalls lie everywhere: And in this moment of horror and shame, your thought of a loved one could pull you back from the brink, exactly as Shakespeare says. And he says it with such spiky grandeur and gorgeous language and such a fine poetic arc, the lines rising and arching forward. Yes, they respond passionately to this. Do pastors in Lake Wobegon ever quote poetry in their sermons? If so, is that a good thing? What kind of poetry is it? Pastor Ingqvist frequently quotes from the psalmist. Not so much from the Proverbist or from the Song of Solomon, which is too easily misread. But the Book of Psalms is a staple of sermons. Is it a good thing? Very few people are listening because usually there is so little to listen to. The doors of their attention slammed shut after the first humorous anecdote and the first reference to the scripture reading for the day. Based on the preaching heard in Lake Wobegon, what books do you think pastors are reading? They are reading good uplifting books, the sorts of books that one feels One Really Ought to Read. So Pastor Ingqvist and Father Wilmer are reading books about Islam and the Middle East and the environment and corporate farming, and mining these books for small inspiring anecdotes. Has Lake Wobegon produced any notable poets, or any infamous ones? But there have been no poets who anybody would tape to the refrigerator. Does it have a "Christian bookstore" yet? Lake Wobegon has no bookstore, neither a Christian one nor a pagan one. The first section of Good Poems is titled "O Lord. Does gratitude seem like the fundamental religious dimension of life? Gratitude is where spiritual life begins. Thank you, Lord, for this amazing and bountiful life and forgive us if we do not love it enough. Thank you for this laptop computer and for this yellow kitchen table and for the clock on the wall and the cup of coffee and the glasses on my nose and for these black slacks and this black T-shirt. Thanks for black, and for other colors. Thank you, Lord, for giving me the wherewithal not to fix a half-pound cheeseburger right now and to eat a stalk of celery instead. Thank you for the wonderful son and the amazing little daughter and the smart sexy wife and the grandkids. Thank you for the odd delight of being 60, part of which is the sheer relief of not being I could go on and on and on. Begin everyday with this exercise. List your blessings and you will walk through those gates of thanksgiving and into the fields of joy. It is to break through the thin membrane of sourness and sullenness -- though we should be thankful for that too, it being the source of so much wit and humor -- and to come into the light and enjoy our essential robustness and good health. Are there other categories of "religious" poems you might include if you were to put together another volume? True confession is extremely

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rare in poetry, as in life. When a poet pretends to confess, usually he does it in a pretty heroic manner; Forgive me, Lord, that I have foolishly bestowed love on these raving idiots. You seldom hear someone cop to the real basic stuff: Forgive me, Lord, for being this self-righteous prick and walking around with a mirror held up in front of my face. Believe me, Lord, of this stupid self-consciousness, this absolutely insufferable ego. God, it is making me miserable. I lust after recognition, I am desperate to win all the little merit badges and trinkets of my profession, and I am of less real use in this world than any good cleaning lady. Scripture tells us to confess our sins to each other, and I wish that the poets I know would do this more often. They could use a little more humility, frankly.

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Spring shoots and green peas: Separated from her brothers in early childhood only to be permanently reunited as adults, an understandably emotional Dorothy found ways of coping with what was clearly an acute sense of loss on their departure. That day, 14 May, she resolved to start writing what was to become *The Grasmere Journal*. Away from the steeply-rising pleasure garden at Dove Cottage, Dorothy chiefly organised and tended the productive kitchen garden as part of her housekeeping tasks. This she undertook with the help of the out-living day servants Molly, Aggy and John, who with William, helped perform heavy tasks: Read *Timon of Athens*. To plant each row the seeds were placed at regular intervals in a drill drawn across the ground. Not fully above the ground in May, they were still vulnerable to competition from ramping weeds. Peas are known for their rapid development, so soon shoots of that first row of peas at Dove Cottage would have vined, the point when the first tendrils appear. Pea sticks can be cut from such trees as hazel, beech or hornbeam, the previous winter. The broom-like, prepared twiggy branches are placed in the ground like small leafless trees for the pea tendrils to bind to as the plant grows up into the supporting matrix. In an alternative practice, tent-like frames were created from straight pollarded poles of hazel or birch. As William was still making more pea sticks in June it appears he was, in fact, utilising the trees in the woods around Grasmere. Most suitable for full-sized variety of peas, as opposed to the dwarf type, these unwieldy pea sticks could be over two metres long. Whichever system was actually used, the pea and the support together created an intimately entwined and productive structure. A man trims cuttings from a hedge on his farm in the Pennines, to re-use them as pea sticks in the garden. The pea is most frequently mentioned vegetable in the *Journal* in This was a consequence of the demanding horticultural procedure the Wordsworths had planned which prolonged the season of this quick growing crop. The poorest cottager might be able to sow a single row of peas, or perhaps two rows in succession for an extended harvest. The Wordsworths confidently planned at least six rows in succession, probably more. If each reference to this essential task from 19 May to 13 June represents a complete row of peas, it would suggest that, at its height, the rows had been originally sown at the horticulturally approved interval of a fortnight. I weeded a little. A new tempo now began as it was necessary to keep harvesting pods that were ready to pick. By doing so the plants were stimulated into further flowering and pod production. Each promising pod would have been carefully judged as picking too early was wasteful, but leaving the peas bulk up too much meant they were losing their tender sweetness. From now on the consecutive rows of plants would be developing in steady sequence from seedlings to, finally, podding plants. Caught up in a laborious sequence of imperative tasks, the Wordsworths were probably too weary to care. In spite of this it must be said that the figurative possibilities of the entire pea plot are too tempting to completely ignore, constructed as it is in the form of a metrical store of peas with its own tuneless prosody. As we shall see there is a greater potential for structure, if not form, when they are considered collectively. When you next have an opportunity, consider a vegetable garden or allotment. As verse manipulates words and the ideas of language, the individual plots can be seen as imposing an order on the otherwise feral plants such as the unruly pea. Both variously create something sustained, productive and, in some way, potentially nourishing. Dorothy could now afford to be generous. The day after the first peas were picked more pods were ready, this time they were to be a gift for neighbours. Considering the customary frugality of the household we might take this last statement literally. The sugar content decreases sharply after picking, hence the need for urgency. No doubt the Coleridges at Greta Hall relished the sweet, fresh peas which were presumably sent at some expense. Bags and baskets of peas continued to be pulled over the coming weeks until, a month later, the season was turning and the longer rhythm of year was making itself felt. It was time to let the peas that remained on the plants completely mature into viable seed. Stripped of all that was useful, the remaining unproductive plants could

then be unearthed. If the pea plot can be seen fancifully as a sort of horticultural verse form, then, as the final pods are left on the plants to mature into viable seed, we can see it as a some sort of sonnet. In the course of the last few rows there is an abrupt change of focus and tempo from the immediacy of harvest to an anticipation of the coming year. Do gardeners feel the experience of cultivating in some way the same as being inside a tight verse form, either a creator or consumer? I do not know. If it is then to some degree it is in the maintenance of integrity and the creation of form and structure. As with many vegetables in the kitchen garden, the cultivation of peas was an exercise in painstaking care, but in maintaining this horticultural order one was rewarded with abundance. The humbleness of the cottager is indicated by the modest length of the rows of peas. Here William invokes bindweed, one of the most nightmarish of garden weeds. Described with funereal imagery, the overwhelming weight of its unimpeded growth pulls down anthropomorphically the whole structure, both the crop and its support. The cumbrous bind-weed, with its wreaths and bells, Had twined about her two small rows of peas, And dragged them to the earth. Away from its use in imagery, the physical act of creating and maintaining the vegetable plot no doubt had its therapeutic effects on both brother and sister. The concentrated cycles of the kitchen garden are one of the most intimate everyday relationships between humanity and the plant world. William formulated a joke on the sort of mental diversion that work in the kitchen garden can bring about, no doubt at times both necessary and welcome. Summer in the kitchen garden imposed an exacting external order on the Wordsworths, a mind-emptying physical exertion that helped support both their corporeal existence and creative lives. Gareth Evans writes articles on the history and culture of plants and their use garethhevens.com. He worked in, and with, botanic gardens for 16 years, specialising in the history of plants and medicine. Recollection inevitably involves aging. Recollection helped him mentally and physically to adapt to aging: There are in existence spots of time, Which with distinct prominence retain A renovating virtue, *The Prelude*, , Book Twelfth, ll. Dorothy and William lost their mother Ann when she was thirty-one and when they were six and seven respectively. Their father John died aged forty-two when Dorothy was twelve and William thirteen. It is as if at the age of twenty-eight to thirty, Wordsworth was observing and learning the lessons of old age, rather than associating himself closely with its travails. This displays a more empathetic approach. By March Wordsworth had developed a profound awareness of his own aging. Such a loss would be tantamount to dying. 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She fed this intimate pet and shed tears for it when the household was given a cat William then saw to it that cats were banned from the house. The last lines are imbued with a profound truth about the power of love and friendship in old age: O that the good old Man had power to prove, By message sent through air or visible token, That still he loves the Bird, and still must love; That friendship lasts though fellowship is broken. Fred Blick is an independent scholar from a multi-disciplinary background. In the next room, a silhouette of Dorothy Wordsworth and a painting of Mary Wordsworth hang over a simple washstand. In a tour, it can be easy to over-emphasise Dorothy and briefly gloss over Mary. Dorothy is the passionate one, with her dramatic stories and endearing journal entries. She adds a spark to the story of the country poet, and through the publication of her *Grasmere Journal*, Dorothy has been given a voice. She not known for having written any particular works of literature. At the time, I had recently finished transcribing the letters of George Ticknor, an American correspondent with William Wordsworth. Many of his letters are letters of introduction, so they are focused on others, but through them it is easy to get a sense of who Ticknor*

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was. His letters were often meticulously written with a strong, measured hand. They are full of conventional courtesies, classical allusions, and travel notes and his style gives the impression that he is well-educated, well-connected, and confident. Her letters are littered with terms of endearment and sweet imagery. She talks about the health of her daughter-in-law Isabella, the weather, people who have come to visit, and the latest news from those she cares about. We wish much to see you. A handkerchief owned by Mary Wordsworth Equally important to Mary were the letters which were received at Rydal Mount. She is a connector, and whether she is connecting Isabella, Dora, Sara Hutchinson, or Mary Stanger, Mary seems to enjoy bringing people together. The cameo brooch Mary is wearing in the portrait above Ticknor was the type of person I could turn to for debating philosophical points. Mary Wordsworth, in contrast, was the type of person who would carry on an intelligent and deeply meaningful conversation whilst bringing you tea. Her stories are full of warmth and humour. In fact, quite the contrary. The sheer number of letters she writes attest to her strong voice. It is warm and welcoming. On a nice day, the colours on the wall dance as the sunlight streams through the window. Either way you choose to imagine Wordsworth, it is hard to fully and correctly imagine him without the cottage and the women who made this place a home.

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