HISTORY This Week EP 329: Walt Whitman’s First Fan Mail
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. July 21, 1855. I’m Sally Helm.

About ten days ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson read something new. A self-published manuscript by an unknown Brooklyn journalist. Which you might think would be beneath Emerson’s notice—he is, at this time, the king of American letters. But Emerson reads a lot—his house, as it’s preserved today, has some 3500 books on the shelves. He once wrote to his brother that he hoped to “crowd” so many books and papers into the place that “it shall have as much wit as it can carry.”

But even among all that competition—this manuscript stood out. So today, Emerson sits down to write its author a letter.

“Dear Sir,” he begins. Then he calls the new work a “wonderful gift.” “The most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed.” It’s the kind of praise that a young writer could only dream of getting from a writer of Emerson’s stature. And yet, here it is. Laid down in ink by Emerson’s own hand.

The recipient of this letter is Walt Whitman. Who, at thirty-six years old, has just published his very first work…an astonishing volume of poetry called Leaves of Grass. He’s unknown at this moment—but Emerson is among the first to see where Whitman is heading.

“I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” Emerson writes. Which “must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.”

Today: the foreground. And some of the ground. What made Walt Whitman’s work so electrifying to a man like Emerson? And why, just five years later, would Emerson be walking in circles with Whitman around the Boston Common, imploring him not to publish?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Getting a letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson may not sound like a big deal—especially if you’ve heard the name Walt Whitman. But understand, in 1855, Whitman is a nobody. And Emerson is THE tastemaker in American life—the writer whose opinion matters most.

Jerome Loving: I think I would be nervous in his presence.

Sally Helm: Jerome Loving taught American literature at Texas A&M for over 40 years. He's the author of several books on Whitman, and one double biography on the literary lives of Whitman and Emerson.

Jerome Loving: One big influence on Whitman's poetry was opera. The other influences were the king James Bible and Emerson.

Sally Helm: When Whitman sets out to be a poet, his resume is as spotty as Emerson’s is sparkling. Whitman attended a public school in Brooklyn until the age of 12, when he left to take a menial job.

Emerson is a scholar, a writer, a philosopher. He was once a Unitarian minister, but he left that job to invent a new literary and spiritual movement. He calls it, "transcendentalism."

Jerome Loving: He decided, as he proclaimed in his most famous essay “Nature” in 1836, that scripture of the Bible was testimony of dead men. It was in the past rather than the present. And if you looked at nature itself, maybe that's where we're being told something.

Sally Helm: For Emerson, evidence of God is all around us – you can see that in the natural world. And, he says, we connect with God through the soul. The body, on the other hand, is just the soul’s “temporary abode.”

This idea is very Victorian. A lot of people at the time looked askance at the body.

Jerome Loving: You did not talk about the body in America, you wouldn't even refer to somebody's arm you would say limb as if a tree. I mean, you didn't go near it.

Sally Helm: Emerson is publishing his philosophy in essays, talking about it in well-attended lectures. He's hanging out with the Henrys and refining his thoughts on Transcendentalism. But all the while, he is also on a personal quest. Nursing a kind of obsession. Emerson himself writes prose. But he wants to find the person who can distill his ideas into poetry.

Jerome Loving: This is Emerson: we'll have our conversations with nature, but can we report those conversations back to the rest of us? No, you need a poet. A poet not only has his conversation with nature, but he has the linguistic talent or gift to bring that back to the rest of us.

Sally Helm: The poet would bring Emerson’s transcendental ideas to the people. Make them better understand. And Emerson thought that poet needed a voice that was new…and uniquely American.

Jerome Loving: Before the 1850s, English literature was literature and the English themselves made fun of, of American literature. There was one critic, a Scotsman I think, declared, he says, whoever reads an American book?

Sally Helm: The most popular novelist at the time is the Englishman Charles Dickens.

Jerome Loving: He made two visits over to this country and he was worshiped.

Sally Helm: The most popular poems are rhyming epics written by people like Emerson’s friend Henry Longfellow. But Emerson feels like none of this is quite right. It’s not enough. He wants American writers and artists to develop something new, something homegrown, to reflect the spirit of the young country.
In March of 1842, he’s on the road giving lectures.

**Jerome Loving:** It was a lecture series called the times.

**Sally Helm:** About like our times, the times.

**Jerome Loving:** Our times. Yes. And there was on different subjects, and one was the poet.

**Sally Helm:** "The Poet." Emerson stands in a lecture hall in New York City and reads his essay. We need a great poet, he says, a great *American* poet. "When he lifts his great voice...men gather to him and forget all that is past."

**Jerome Loving:** And there was a 22-year-old journalist in the audience. And he heard that lecture and wrote about, he said it's the finest thing we've heard anywhere at any time.

**Sally Helm:** That 22-year-old journalist? Walt Whitman.

Professor Karen Karbiener of New York University told us that when we find Walter Whitman in the audience of this lecture, he’s a 22-year-old reporter, coming of age in New York. He yearns for greatness …but has a long way to go.

**Karen Karbiener:** He reminds me a lot of my students. He's a bit aimless. He's not quite sure if he's going to write a book of poetry, a novel or a play.

**Sally Helm:** Whitman has been building houses in the developing city of Brooklyn, just across the river from New York—or Manhattan, as we’d say today. He's from a working-class family, largely self-educated. He reads everything he can get his hands on. And he’s tried writing some poems.

**Karen Karbiener:** Some 20 odd poems, all rhyming, all sort of Gothic feeling, you know, nothing really outstanding.

**Sally Helm:** In his free time, Whitman likes almost nothing better than to plunge into city life. Riding the omnibuses up and down Broadway, chatting with the drivers. Standing on a crowded ferry as it crosses from Brooklyn to Manhattan. And while working as a carpenter, he starts writing down what he sees.

**Karen Karbiener:** The legend goes that while he's working, he's carrying a bucket to work with his lunch and also some handmade notebooks and constantly writing notes down about what he's seeing, and Whitman is learning just from street level, about people, about culture, but mostly just really about himself.

**Sally Helm:** He’s looking, feeling, smelling, touching, listening. And when one day, in that lecture hall, he hears Emerson call for the great American poet…it’s like he suddenly knows what he’s meant to do.

**Jerome Loving:** Whitman was quoted as later saying I was simmering, simmering, simmering. Emerson brought me to a boil.
Sally Helm: Emerson will later wonder what the foreground of Whitman’s career was. And on that day in 1842, Whitman is in it. He’s working as a journalist. And the poems that he now begins to write show off a reporter’s eye for detail. He describes “The blab of the pave... the tires of carts and stuff of boot soles and talk of the promenaders.”

Jerome Loving: Journalism, it gets your head out of the clouds, I guess you might say. You know, it’s coming from the streets, where Emerson, he comes out of the church.

Sally Helm: Whitman writes about the everyman. What he knows. "The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor."

He works and writes for years. And by 1855, he is finally ready to publish a book of his poetry. He calls it: "Leaves of Grass."

Jerome Loving: Grass by the way, was a slang term for printing that the printers would do of their own things when they weren’t busy. Leaves, of course, would be the pages of a book. But for Whitman, grass was something else. It was green. Hopeful. It was everywhere, rich or poor. And listen to this:

Sally Helm: Loving told us, Whitman does something unusual in the poem that opens this book, "Song of Myself." He reflects on grass. Grass as a part of nature, sure, as Emerson would see it. But also…

Jerome Loving: Growing among Black folks as among white…

Sally Helm: Grass as an equalizing element. Available to all.

Jerome Loving: I give them the same. I receive them the same.

Sally Helm: And he takes it a step further. He doesn't just write about the grass as a gift of nature shared by the people. He writes about the people themselves. "A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker; A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest."

Jerome Loving: Whitman said, I am the poet of the body, and I am the poet of the soul. Now for Emerson, the body or nature was simply an emblem to get to the soul. Whitman celebrated them equally.

Sally Helm: He’s also writing in a new way. His poems in this book—they don't rhyme at all.

Karen Karbiener: Free verse of course existed before Whitman's time. But he sort of pushes this at an America that's eagerly digesting, very rhymed, very predictable verse.

Sally Helm: Whitman’s verse is not predictable. It hurtles forward like river rapids. He writes of “the sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind.” And of “A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms.” This is not Victorian. And it’s not like the popular poetry that has come before.
No wonder no publisher would touch it. Especially because Whitman was a working man with no standing in the literary world.

**Karen Karbiener:** Here was a guy who grew up in a household of barely literate parents. Didn't really go to school, right? Had to drop out at age 11 or 12 so he just didn't have any connections to work.

**Sally Helm:** Well, he did have one...to a little printing shop in Brooklyn Heights, owned by two Scottish brothers. They mostly print legal forms, that kind of thing.

**Karen Karbiener:** But Whitman was good friends with these two guys and said, look, you know, I've got this book and I'd really like to print it. And they, they liked him. So, they agreed and they said, but you're going to have to help.

**Sally Helm:** Whitman has to pay to print the book all by himself. And he has to work on it in the print shop, setting the type. That part, Karbiener says, doesn't bother him.

**Karen Karbiener:** I think he was a bit of a control freak, really a DIY conceptual artist.

**Sally Helm:** He designs this book, cover to cover. It's dark green, with the title on the front in gold. The letters are styled like plants—the L and the G seem to be growing roots. On the inside:

**Karen Karbiener:** All it says, leaves of grass, period, huge type Brooklyn, New York, 1855. Usually, especially on the title page, you would have the name of a publisher on there, proudly with the author. There's no author. The way this title page looks, it looks like Brooklyn wrote it.

**Sally Helm:** But...Whitman isn't just being modest. On that title page, he also includes an image. Of himself.

**Karen Karbiener:** Most of the time frontice pieces were just headshots, because the head is the seat of learning and really why should you be interested in anything except the mind of a poet. But Whitman kind of puts almost his entire body up. Looking kind of like an everyman in Brooklyn, Chino pants, an Oxford shirt, and this incredibly confident, almost sexually aggressive person looking right at the reader.

**Sally Helm:** Even Whitman's choice of font is bold and in-your-face. He picks out a title page typeface that's typically used, not for literary works, but for advertising.

**Karen Karbiener:** Normally you'd want a more discreet. I mean, this is poetry, right? This is sophisticated stuff, but Walt was thinking much more broadly about what poetry is and also who should read it.

**Sally Helm:** And he wants this book, which he's making himself by hand in the print shop, to express that vision. For him, the physical object is almost as important as the poems inside.
Karen Karbiener: So, when you are holding that book, as Whitman says, this is no book who touches this touches a man. Right? He really put himself into that book. So, the reading experience is visceral, right? Almost palpably physical. You are holding that poet.

Sally Helm: Whitman prints about 800 copies of *Leaves of Grass*. And puts them up for sale for two bucks apiece. But they’re not selling—so he has to lower the price to a dollar 25. No critics are paying the book any attention, so Whitman writes some anonymous reviews himself. All about how great the book is. And he sends out some free copies to notable writers, hoping that they might take an interest.

None of them *does* take an interest except one. When Ralph Waldo Emerson reads *Leaves of Grass*, he knows he’s found “the poet.” So, he writes the unknown Walt Whitman a letter.

Karen Karbiener: And apparently Whitman carried that letter physically on his person, like folded it and put it in a pocket, you know, breast pocket and just treasured it.

Sally Helm: Jerome Loving has seen the original letter, which is kept in the Library of Congress. But he also showed us a copy:

Jerome Loving: This is Emerson's famous letter to Whitman written in Whitman's hand.

Sally Helm: He copied it out? He recopied it?

Jerome Loving: Yes. And here it is.

Sally Helm: Whitman doesn't keep the letter to himself. He tells a newspaper editor; *you'll never believe who wrote to me*. And the editor says:

Jerome Loving: ‘Well let me publish this letter.’ So, without thinking that maybe you might want to ask permission of the author before publishing his letter to you. It was published in the New York Tribune; I believe on October 10th.

Sally Helm: This kind of self-promotion just isn’t done. Up in Boston, Emerson’s circle of Henrys cannot believe the gall.

Jerome Loving: They were outraged at this blue-collar New Yorker that dared to do that, but Emerson himself, while he thought it was probably a bit out of place, did not take it back. Didn't complain. In fact, in his journal for December of that year, he said, I struck my task and went to Brooklyn.

Sally Helm: I struck my task. So, I dropped what I was going to do that day.

Jerome Loving: Yes, yes, came to New York city. He took, took the Brooklyn ferry, which Whitman would make famous, over to Brooklyn.

Karen Karbiener: Quote unquote way out in Brooklyn. Nobody had been to Brooklyn.
Sally Helm: Karen Karbiener is familiar with the Whitman family home. She often takes her classes there. It's on 99 Ryerson Street in an area called Clinton Hill, close to the Brooklyn navy yard. In 1855:

Karen Karbiener: There's like a big free Black neighborhood down there and Brooklyn is still being built so there's empty lots. It's not like going to Lenox, Mass and seeing, you know, Emerson's grand house.

Sally Helm: The Whitman House?

Karen Karbiener: It's a wood-frame building, built around the time that Whitman moved in. A very strong looking, but very simple looking house. So, I can only imagine how Mr. Emerson, Mr. Harvard Emerson, Mr. Unitarian minister Emerson, when he's walking down Myrtle Avenue and he comes up to this house, apparently he met Louisa, Walt's mother, a big woman, usually wearing a Quaker cap.

Jerome Loving: And Whitman that recalled it later. And he said, my mother answered the door. And he said, 'is Mr. Whitman there' in a very soft voice. And then they walked all the way back from Brooklyn to Manhattan, where Emerson was staying at a hotel.

Sally Helm: During that visit, Whitman takes Emerson to a restaurant that's so loud, and shocking to Emerson's Boston sensibilities, that he describes it as "a fire engine society." One of Emerson's biographers, Ralph L. Rusk, writes that Emerson “seems to have been only mildly surprised when his poet shouted for a tin mug for his beer.” The two men talk about poetry. Presumably, about how much Emerson loved Leaves of Grass. And when Whitman is ready to publish a revised edition of the book the following year, he'll take the liberty of using Emerson's letter once more.

Jerome Loving: On the spine of the book, he took the words ‘I greet you at the beginning of a great career, RW Emerson’ in gold letters. He turned Emerson into a book blurber.

Sally Helm: It's a genius move. It's like a really great self-promotion—

Jerome Loving: Yes, but for that particular book, which was an expansion of leaves of grass from 12 poems to, I think 36, Emerson hadn't even read that book!

Sally Helm: It does make me curious about Whitman's ego, I guess.

Jerome Loving: Gigantic.

Sally Helm: It's gigantic. Okay. And does he think I'm this new American poet, I'm doing something no one's ever done before?

Jerome Loving: I think he did. I'm not sure Emerson ultimately agreed.
Sally Helm: A new, prolific period of Whitman’s writing career will put a strain on this relationship. Because Whitman is about to stray even further from the hallowed realm of the immortal soul, and towards the wild domain of the body.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Over the course of his life, Whitman will revise *Leaves of Grass* again and again. But this period, between editions two and three, sees an especially radical change.

Karen Karbiener: Whitman loved controversy. I think one of the most famous lines in *Song of Myself* is, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Sally Helm: Whitman, during these years, is spending a lot of time in New York’s bohemian scene. And frequenting a beer cellar called Pfaff’s. There, he joins a group that’s now considered to have been one of the first gay men's clubs in the country.

Karen Karbiener: I think many of us who work on Whitman fully realize, that he favored the love of men, though he never admitted that.

Sally Helm: In the late 1850s, Whitman writes a series of poems called "Live Oak, With Moss."

Karen Karbiener: Really his secret same-sex love poems. And, for me, they are among the most moving, beautiful poems that he wrote.

I'd love to read one of these poems now just to highlight that if that's okay.

Sally Helm: Karen Karbiener has published a book on this series of poems. She read to us from one called Calamus 9.

Karen Karbiener: “For the one I cannot content myself without, soon I saw him content himself without me. Hours when I am forgotten. Oh, weeks and months are passing, but I believe I am never to forget sullen and suffering hours. I am ashamed, but it is useless. I am what I am.”

I think every time I read that I actually want to cry a little bit because, it's been such a meaningful poem, not just for me, but for so many of my students, who find this such an honest confessional. This poem written sometime in the 1850s. Well, before the invention of the word homosexual, and yet this, I mean, it's a coming out poem. He's like, “I am ashamed, but it is useless. I am what I am.” And he's clearly using a male pronoun for the loved one that is missing here.

Sally Helm: In other poems in that third edition, Whitman talks radically and openly about bodies—of both men and women—in a way that Americans just were not doing at the time.
Karen Karbiener: We are talking about Victorian America. Right. Even curved piano legs were covered with pantaloons. Right. And then you get Walt Whitman writing. I sing the body electric with this glorious listing of body parts.

Sally Helm: Reading that list aloud takes Karbiener almost three minutes.

Karen Karbiener: Ribs, belly backbone, joints of the backbone, hips, hip sockets, hip strength, inward and outward round men balls. Man, root strong set of thighs while carrying the trunk above leg fibers. Knee...

It's so intense, right? Because, for me, I can actually feel the movement of those lines down my arm to like my fingernails. And in this piece, you get that kind of joy, right that Whitman has in every single part of the body.

Sally Helm: For Ralph Waldo Emerson, all of this is a lot. In 1860, Whitman is ready to publish his new, more risqué edition of Leaves of Grass. That March, Whitman is visiting Boston—he has a real publisher now, and he needs to go see them. And Emerson shows up at the office, too. The publishers have consulted him about this new edition. And he tells Whitman he wants to have a talk.

Jerome Loving: And they walked on Boston Common as they had this conversation for an hour or two hours. So, Emerson said, listen, I like your book. It's great.

Sally Helm: BUT, Emerson says, if you want this book to sell, just leave out those racy poems.

Jerome Loving: People are going to see that and they're going to see red, and they won't get to appreciate the great poetry that you've really written.

Sally Helm: It's not that Emerson himself thinks the poems are bad, or too much. But he thinks the public will think so. And that this raciness will distract from the poetry itself. The book won't get the attention it deserves.

It's an eminently reasonable argument. As Whitman himself later writes, "I could never hear the points better put—and then I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all." He doesn’t want to take out all the sexuality and bodily power that he’s put into this new edition.

Jerome Loving: Whitman, as he remembered it, he said, ‘I asked Emerson. If I cut it out, would there really be still a book there?’

Sally Helm: Emerson says yes. And Whitman says, “Will the book with the cuts be as good as the book without the cuts”

He watches Emerson's reaction. And later describes it: "this seemed to disturb him just a bit. Then he smiled and said: 'I did not say as good a book. I said a good book.'

That's not good enough for Whitman. So, he decides instead "to pursue my own way."
Jerome Loving: **He says, I decided to go ahead and do it.**

Sally Helm: He publishes the new edition, including parts of the “Live Oak with Moss” poems, in 1860. It was promptly banned in Boston. And The New York Times describes this new edition as more "reckless and vulgar" than Whitman's past work. And Emerson?

Jerome Loving: **Emerson sort of got blamed because he was kind of associated with Whitman because of that scandalous letter.**

Sally Helm: The Boston Post writes, "The most charitable conclusion at which we can arrive is that both Whitman's *Leaves* and Emerson's laudation had a common origin in temporary insanity." In other words: only a crazy person could be behind this book.

After this 1860 edition, the relationship between Whitman and Emerson fades. Emerson does help Whitman out a few more times, but they don't have the close relationship that that first admiring letter might have predicted. Though, Jerome Loving says, this might, in the end, have been to Whitman's benefit. Because he forges his own identity as a poet. He goes his own way. And by the time he dies in 1892, he's recognized as a lion of American letters. And he has disciples of his own.

Jerome Loving: **And they kept the drum beating for him even after he died.**

Sally Helm: He’s gone on to influence generations of poets, up to the present day.

Jerome Loving: **Whitman is very modern in many ways. The use of slang, the use of the colloquial, in poetry.**

Sally Helm: **And more focus on the body. Is that part of the impact too?**

Jerome Loving: **Oh yeah. Hey, because the body of course had, hadn't been invited to the party before that.**

Sally Helm: Today, Whitman's fame has probably eclipsed Emerson's. It's hard to overstate his impact.

Jerome Loving: **I mean, every poet loves Whitman. He's the father of American poetry. Everyone goes back to him.**

Sally Helm: Because Whitman opened up the vast new terrain of the body—but he could hardly explore it all himself. As the great modernist poet Ezra Pound once said of Whitman, "It was you that broke the new wood. Now is the time for carving."

[CREDITS]:

Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.
If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, Karen Karbiener, professor of literature at NYU and president of the Walt Whitman Initiative, and Jerome Loving, author of *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* and *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Karbiener published a new edition of Whitman’s *Live Oak, With Moss* poems along with illustrator Brian Selznick. You can find out more about the Walt Whitman Initiative’s programming, including efforts to preserve the Whitman home at 99 Ryerson Street, on their website: Walt Whitman Initiative dot org.

Thanks also to Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth Price, co-directors of the Walt Whitman Archive; and to Ivy Wilson, editor of *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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