

# Walt Whitman at 200: Songs of Divinity and Humanity



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Two unusual things occurred this morning. A sharp-shinned hawk swooped by the window, landing on the eave above my head. With a quick glance, she flexed her feathers and flew. Something fat and furry waddled by the door, and it wasn't a bear or my own reflection in the glass. A healthy-looking groundhog paused to pose on his haunches, scan the scene, and waddle off across the grass.

These images fresh in mind—na-

ture's wildness in motion, swooping, glancing, waddling – I pondered the poetry of it all, and that naturally led me to Walt Whitman – a kind of swooper and waddler himself.

Walt was born 200 years ago this month (May 31, 1819) on Long Island, New York. As a young man he gathered a handful of leafy-green thoughts into poems and published those "Leaves" in 1855.

His famous "Song of Myself" is much more than navel-gazing – though he loved his navel, too. His poetic tune teems with the music of life as he mingles the atoms of his body with the stuff of the earth, including stuff like us. He is "the caresser of life." delightfully "ab-

sorbing all."

His footsteps startle a pair of ducks and he kicks up a creed: "I believe in those wing'd purposes." He meets a tortoise and a jay, a bay horse and wild geese flying overhead; "listening close" he feels personal "purpose and place" – a participant in the great pageant.

"The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog, the litter of the grunting sow ... the brood of the turkey-hen ... I see in them and myself the same old law."

This ancient law of life and living greets him at each step.

"The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections."

This is Walt's virescent verse wafting across the years. A walk in woods, on city streets or from bed to bed in Civil War hospitals, he breathes the same breath of kindred creatures. From his affections he exhales a living book of songs and humanistic hymns.

Whitman hands us a book sprouting with limbs and leaves and the book is himself. Intently observing his world, he writes, sings and celebrates himself – mind and body – alongside you and me. He tells us of his God, then stuns our assumptions to claim his own divinity as well as ours.

In "A Song for Occupations" he calm-

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