

English and Modern Languages

Children's Book Reviews

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Review: *A River of Words: The Story of
William Carlos Williams*

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Bryant, Jen, *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*, illustrated by Melissa Sweet. Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2008. ISBN: 9780802853028, Grades 5-12.

Awards: Caldecott Honor, Junior Library Guild Selection, Notable Children's Book 2009, NCTE Notable Children's Book in the Language Arts, and at least ten other awards which are listed on Jen Bryant's website.

Description

As a child, William Carlos Williams loved two things with a passion: the sound of words, and the "gurgle, swish, and swoosh" of the Passaic River. The call of nature drew him away from his house and into the fields and woods near his home in Rutherford, New Jersey. However, even as a child, Willie knew that he must "make something of himself," and lying by the river did not seem to be the solution. In high school, poetry transported the teen to places where he could dream of the rhythms of life and of nature. Writing poetry freed his spirit, but would not pay bills, so Williams chose to become a doctor. Bryant tells the story of the influential poet through spare prose complemented by Williams' own verse. Sweet's mixed media illustrations add a feeling of authenticity as she borrows images from lines penned by Williams. Special features include: a timeline of the life of the doctor/poet, author's and illustrator's notes validating their research, and a suggested list for further reading. Bryant provides a discussion guide on her website for teachers who would want to use this title in their classrooms.

Critique

This picture book/biography is an outstanding addition to the nonfiction holdings for any library from elementary through secondary school. The life of Williams inspires readers because of his choice to accept the responsibility for financing his career while possessing an entirely different gift that he still made time to use. Stories from patients indicating that he was a dedicated doctor with a heart for service demonstrates sacrifice. Acclaim for his writings verifies that he was deserving of the honors that he received as a poet. Bryant allows the life to speak for itself; Sweet selects colors, themes, and poems that enrich the tale. It is not surprising that this thin volume is the recipient of numerous awards.