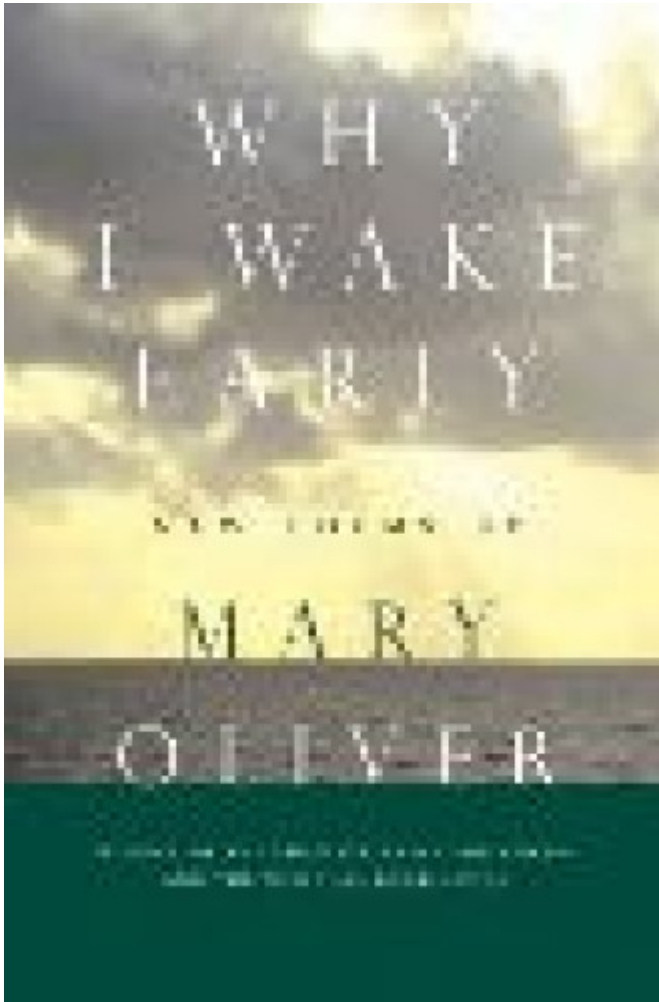


Why I Wake Early

reviewed by [Debra Rienstra](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Why I Wake Early: New Poems

Mary Oliver
Beacon

In an interview with poet Mary Oliver published a few years ago in *Giving Their Word* (University of Massachusetts Press), Steven Ratiner remarked that “poets of praise”

are “almost an endangered species” and that the “happiness necessary to write in praise of life is almost considered a weakness in the art world’s very definition of modernity. How can you be truly contemporary if you still feel *that!*” Oliver has never bothered to follow poetic fashion. Instead she has persisted for over 40 years in simply doing what she does well: practicing loving attention to the natural world.

Since her first volume appeared in 1963, the Ohio-born Oliver has published steadily, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *American Primitive* (1983) and the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems* (1992). *Why I Wake Early* will please Oliver fans with its characteristic poems about the wild citizens of her native haunts near Provincetown, Massachusetts: marsh hawks, snakes, owls, lilies, daisies. The volume also is a lovely introduction for readers new to her work, because in these poems Oliver’s role in the world seems clearer and more singular than ever. In the poem “Mindful” she writes:

It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.

Oliver’s best poems, here and elsewhere, describe small events with delightful economy and then move toward a graceful gesture of insight. In “Luna” the brief life and death of a luna moth evokes this observation:

How quietly,
and not with any assignment from us,

or even a small hint
of understanding,
everything that needs to be done

is done.

These surprise turns in Oliver's poems delight me. In one piece the poet lies in a field of goldenrod until she weeps from an allergic reaction (I was glad for the realism). In another, a tense, silent encounter with an owl leads the poet to imagine what it would feel like if the creature were to carry her off, "one orange knife for each shoulder," while she uttered

praise, praise, praise as I cried
for my life.

Oliver has been compared to the Romantic poets, but thankfully her encounters with nature are not so tiresomely self-referential. The focus remains on the world itself, the world "frisky" and "fancy," wonderful in its every detail. For Oliver its beauties exist not primarily for our pleasure and use but are animated, as in the Psalms, with the praise of their Creator. The theology infusing the poems remains subtle, however, perhaps partly because, as Oliver remarks in "Bone,"

truly I know
our part is not knowing,

but looking, and touching, and loving.

Oliver's work as a whole presents a world that could carry on very well without us; yet as long as we are here, our never-finished task is to attend and to acclaim.

As with any volume of poems, a few in this one fell flat for me or seemed unfinished ("Beans" and "Snow Geese," for example). And I couldn't help feeling—in the midst of my own daily routines of traffic and work and family life—a certain jealous distance from a poet who has spent most of her days walking in the wilds. Oliver has, in fact, been criticized for being escapist and apolitical; in the Ratiner interview she admits that her "good work" is only "partial." But readers can be grateful that in a world full of cynicism and ill attention, Oliver continues to claim her vocation and, through her poems, to call us to ours.