

# Mary Oliver

Ware Lecturer, 2006

UUA General Assembly



Mary Oliver was born on September 10, 1935, in a small town in Ohio, a pastoral setting. From her earliest days the surrounding farms and fields and the deep woodlands attracted her, and she spent many hours there, walking, listening, even reading in a hundred congenial places. She graduated from the local high school therefore, where she was a decent enough student she says, with what is probably a still-standing record for truancy. Later she studied at Ohio State University and Vassar College, but took no degree. For several years she lived at the home of Edna St. Vincent Millay, in upper New York state, companion, sometimes secretary, sometimes fellow gardener, with Norma Millay, the poet's sister, and her husband, the painter Charles Ellis. In the late fifties she met Molly Malone Cook, and together they made a home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. They lived together, until Ms. Cook's death, for more than forty years.

Oliver's third book, *American Primitive*, won the Pulitzer Price for Poetry in 1984. During the next years she traveled widely, giving readings and holding residencies and workshops at various colleges and universities including Case Western Reserve, Bucknell, University of Cincinnati, and Sweet Briar College. Beginning in 1995, for five years, she held the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College. Her work appears in many magazines, among them *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *Spiritus*, *Orion*, *Shenandoah*, *Oearth*, *The Southern Review*, *Five Points*, and *Appalachia*. In April 2006, the UUA's Beacon Press will release *At Blackwater Pond*, a compact disc recording of Oliver reading a selection of forty of her poems.

Oliver's honors include fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts (1972-1973) and the Guggenheim Foundation (1980-1981). She has also received an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Achievement Award, a Lannan Literary Award, the 1991 Christopher and L.L. Winship/PEN New England Awards, and the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Memorial Prize.

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