



Oliver, Mary (b. 1935)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver has not been an outspoken lesbian activist. Although she has been a respected and widely published writer since the 1960s, she has publicly acknowledged her lesbianism only since the early 1990s, and then only in subtle, discreet ways. However, her poetic voice--a neo-Romantic expression of the unity of nature, creature-hood, and spirit--is one that is deeply resonant with contemporary lesbian consciousness, and many lesbians claimed Oliver as one of their own long before she "officially" came out in 1993.

Oliver was born on September 10, 1935 in the Cleveland, Ohio suburb of Maple Heights, the daughter of Edward William and Helen Oliver. She spent a year studying at Ohio State University in Columbus in 1955-56 and another at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1956-57. However, the greatest part of Oliver's education has been spent as a student of the natural world both in her native Ohio and later in New England.

During the late 1950s, she lived in upstate New York at Steepletop, the former home of poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, where she worked as secretary to Millay's sister. There she met photographer Molly Malone Cook who, several years later, would become her partner in business and life until Cook's death on August 26, 2005. Oliver and Cook lived together for decades, largely in the Massachusetts artist community of Provincetown, where they owned the East End Bookshop.

The two women also lived in Ohio for a time during the early 1980s when Oliver had a job teaching at Case Western Reserve University, and in Virginia during the early 1990s, where Oliver served as writer in residence at Sweetbriar College while Cook traced her family connections in the South.

Though Oliver revealed her deepest longings for connection to the earth and its creatures in her poetry, she was reticent about her personal life. Only in 1993, when she stood to accept the National Book Award for her eighth volume of poetry, *New and Selected Poems* (1992), did she publicly acknowledge Molly Malone Cook as "the light of my life."

Beginning in 1963 with the publication of *No Voyage and Other Poems*, the prolific Oliver has published over twenty books, including poetry, essays, prose poems, and two volumes on the craft of writing poetry. In 1984, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for her volume *American Primitive* (1983).

Her poetry is characterized by a conversational style, conventional forms, unadorned diction, a deep appreciation of the sensuous world, a sense of wonder, and sometimes an ecstatic voice as her solitary speakers discover both their affinities with and differences from nature and the natural. She is described by Annette Allen as "one of America's finest nature poets."

Oliver's poetry has gained a loyal following of readers who, like Oliver, seek to put aside human alienation from the natural world and seek a sense of connection with nature. This seeking to understand and feel oneself a part of the forces of nature speaks compellingly to many lesbians, who view a spiritual connection

to animals and the earth as part of a woman's birthright.

Though Oliver's work is not political in a direct sense, and contains few explicit references to lesbianism (though bodily desire is a frequent motif), it contains a strong message about the writer's sense of what is wrong in the world and offers devastatingly simple solutions. Queer readers may not find themselves explicitly mentioned in Oliver's work, but they will feel their most tender dreams exposed in poems like "Wild Geese," published in *Dream Work* (1986):

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

Love what it loves

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Oliver's prophetic vision of a oneness with nature owes much to such mystics as William Blake and Walt Whitman, while her powers of observation and quiet statement are reminiscent of the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elizabeth Bishop. In her prose collection, *Blue Pastures* (1995), she pays particular tribute to Whitman as the brother she never had.

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, Oliver has also been honored with fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts and awards from the Poetry Society of America and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.