

Hi Friends,

You will see in this month's letter that Sandburg kept his child's heart into old age, publishing his final book of poetry for children when he was eighty-two years old. He said that "when a child is learning to talk, to shape words on its tongue, [it] is a proper time...to speak poetry. And that children "are the only people I never lie to." He was the type of father and grandfather who would get down on the rug to play.

And for the locals on the mailing list, my play, *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, is coming this summer: June 1 at Treska's on Highland Lake at 2:00 with brunch at 12:30; June 15 at the UU Fellowship of Hendersonville at 3:00; and July 7 at the Silvermont Senior Center in Brevard at 1:00. More performances will come in late summer through early winter. Stay tuned.

Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

May 2025

Letters from a Docent – May 2025

John W. Quinley



Poems for Children and Adults Who Keep a Child's Heart

[Children should write poetry] whenever they feel like it, starting when they first begin to speak...Poems are made of words and when a child is learning to talk, to shape words on its tongue, is a proper time for it to speak poetry—if it can.

Dear Readers,

By the time Sandburg published his first book of poems for children, *Early Moon*, in 1930, all but one of his children were in their teens. He published another children's poetry book, *Wind Song*, in 1960, when he was eighty-two years old. Comparable to his two Rootabaga books published in the 1920s, Sandburg plays with sounds and the meanings of words, and gives gentle advice for growing up.

In his poem “Nobody,” Sandburg explains that “Nobody is yourself when you feel like nothing, /like a naught, like a cipher, like a zero.” And in “Phizzog” he encourages children to accept themselves as they are:

This face you got,
This here phizzog you carry around,
You never picked it out for yourself
at all, at all—did you?
This here phizzog—somebody handed it
to you—am I right?
Somebody said, “Here’s yours, now go see
what you can do with it.”
Somebody slipped it to you, and it was like
a package marked:
“No goods exchanged after being taken away” —
This face you got.

Sandburg wants children to be open to life. In “Doors,” he asks, “If a door is open and you want it open / why shut it?” He advises children to be careful (and careless) in how they use words in “Little Girl, Be Careful What You Say,” “for words are made of syllables / and syllables, child, are made of air— / and air is so thin—air is the breath of God—.” In “Primer Lesson,” he warns of proud words that are not easy to call back for “They wear long boots, hard boots; they / walk off proud; they can’t hear you / calling—.” And in “Manners,” he describes how to behave. He says manners is “Excuse Me” or “I beg your Pardon”/Instead of “how do you get there?” or/” I’ll knock your block off.”

Sandburg often encourages children to pay attention to nature. In “Landscape,” he tells them to “See the trees lean to the wind’s way of learning.” In “Summer Grass,” he reveals that if the

summer grass wants something, “it calls and sings; it pours/out wishes to the overhead stars.”
And with a nod of understanding to youthful struggles at school, in “Arithmetic,” he explains:

Arithmetic is where the answer is right and every-
thing is nice
and you can look out of the window and see
the blue sky—or the answer is
wrong and you have to start all over and try
again, and see how it
comes out this time.

Sandburg loved his time with children. Long after his grandchildren had grown up and left, Joseph Wershba (one of original producers of CBS’s *60 Minutes*) and his family visited the Sandburgs. Sandburg said, “The children filled, temporarily, the vast emptiness.” Wershba listened as his daughter and the old poet swapped nonsense words and stories. Giggling, the girls told Sandburg to “cut out that silliness.” Sandburg responded pensively, “Without my silliness, I would die.”

He also respected children. In “People with Proud Chins,” Sandburg confesses that:

I TELL them where the wind comes from,
Where the music goes when the fiddle is in the
box.
Kids—I saw one with a proud chin, a sleepyhead,
And the moonline creeping white on her pillow.
I have seen their heads in the starlight
And their proud chins marching in a mist of
stars.
They are the only people I never lie to.

I give them honest answers,
Answers shrewd as the circles of white on brown
chestnuts.

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg* and the play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, and is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may reach him at jwquinley@gmail.com.