**Shel Silverstein Biography**

Although Shel Silverstein (1932-1999) did not intend to become a children's writer, he is best known for his poetry for children. *The Giving Tree*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and *A Light in the Attic* are some of his most notable works.

Shel Silverstein was born in 1932 in Chicago, Illinois. He started drawing and writing in his early teens because, according to him, he was not popular with the girls and was not good at sports. He did not have a lot of influences when he started to write and draw. But as he told Jean F. Mercier of Publishers Weekly, "I was also lucky that I didn't have anyone to copy, be impressed by. I had developed my own style." Indeed, that style is what has made him what some call a "literary cult figure."

Silverstein served with the U.S. armed forces in the 1950s, spending time in Korea and Japan. While in the service he drew cartoons for the Pacific Stars and Stripes. In 1952, he began his career as a writer and cartoonist for Playboy magazine. He was introduced to the distinguished book editor at Harper and Brothers, Ursula Nordstrom, who convinced him he could write for children.

**A Unique Style**

Silverstein's poetry for children is often silly, humorous, and a little strange. The accompanying black-and-white illustrations, amusing and sometimes rather morbid, are an integral part of the poetry, often needed in order to interpret the poem itself. Silverstein has been compared to poets such as Edward Lear, A. A. Milne, and Dr. Seuss. Many of his poems are adapted from his song lyrics, and the influence of his song-writing background is apparent in the poems' meters and rhythms. Eric A. Kimmel, in Twentieth-Century Children's Writers, characterized Silverstein this way: "His poems read like those a fourth grader would write in the back of his notebook when the teacher's eye was turned." Kimmel goes on to say: "that may be precisely their appeal."

To say there is more than one interpretation of Silverstein's work is an understatement. Some believe it is simply amusing and fun; others contend that the silliness hides deeper symbolism. That symbolism has been classified by some as educational; by others as harmful to children. Regardless of the mixed critical reaction, Silverstein's books seem to be everywhere: libraries, classrooms, children’s bookshelves, and they are being widely used in elementary schools to teach poetry.

Silverstein's first book for children, *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book: A Primer for Tender Minds*, was published in 1961. This was followed by *Uncle Shelby's Story of Lafcadio*, and *The Lion Who Shot Back* in 1963, about a lion who had kept a gun from an earlier encounter with a hunter and with practice became a good marksman. Zena Sutherland, in Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, called the book "daft" and described it as "a nonsense story about utter success."

**The Giving Tree**

One of Silverstein's most successful early books was *The Giving Tree* (1964). At first, publishers rejected the story. They thought that it fell between child and adult literature and would not sell. The story begins simply: "Once there was a tree … " and tells the story of a tree who gives everything. Despite some negative reviews and some concerns that the book may be too advanced for children, it put Silverstein on the best-seller list for the first time.

## Where the Sidewalk Ends Brought Continued Popularity

Silverstein published three other children's books in 1964, in addition to *The Giving Tree*. They include *A Giraffe and a Half, Uncle Shelby's Zoo: Don't Bump the Glump, and Who Wants a Cheap Rhinoceros*? It was not until ten years later that he wrote his next children's book, but it became an instant success. *Where the Sidewalk Ends: The Poems and Drawings of Shel Silverstein* (1974) is considered a classic by many. Kimmel in Twentieth-Century Children's Writers asserts that, "No discussion of children's poetry can ignore *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and A Light in the Attic. [1981]. For better or worse, the monumental success of these two books has transformed the way poetry is taught in American schools." *Where the Sidewalk Ends* won the Michigan Young Readers' Award in 1981. The book was immensely popular, despite some content that was deemed "indelicate." For example, the collection includes poems about belching, nose picking, and smelly, disgusting garbage. Some critics continued to point out that Silverstein was "by no stretch of the imagination, a great poet"

## Another Best-Seller

In 1981, Silverstein published another collection of poems and drawings, *A Light in the Attic*. This book was chosen by School Library Journal as one of the best books of 1981. Leigh Dean in Children's Literature Review credited it with making Silverstein the guru of elementary school teachers' poetry units. It remained on the New York Times best-seller list for more than three years. Containing 136 poems and 175 pages, *A Light in the Attic* again incorporates sometimes bizarre drawings with light, humorous rhymes about the fears and fantasies of children.

## Music and Film

Although Silverstein is best known for his children's poetry, he is also a folksong composer and has written dozens of songs. Some of these include *"A Boy Named Sue," "One's on the Way," "Boa Constrictor," and "So Good to So Bad."* Many artists have performed his work, including Johnny Cash, Lynn Anderson, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Silverstein also collaborated with the band Dr. Hook, producing a series of successful singles and albums. In 1980, he produced a folksong album titled *The Great Conch Train Robbery*. Albums of Silverstein's songs recorded by others include *Freakin' at the Freaker's Ball* (Columbia, 1972); *Sloppy Seconds* (Columbia, 1972); and *Bobby Bare Sings Lullabys, Legends, and Lies: The Songs of Shel Silverstein* (RCA Victor, 1972).

## Something for Everyone

Silverstein continued to work as a roving reporter and cartoonist. He was divorced and had one daughter. Because he kept a low profile and avoided publicity in general, little more is known about his personal life. He was a "free spirit," as is evidenced by his statement to Jean F. Merier in Publishers Weekly: "I'm free to leave … go wherever I please, do whatever I want; I believe everyone should live like that. Don't be dependent on anyone else-man, woman, child, or dog. I want to go everywhere, look at and listen to everything. You can go crazy with some of the wonderful stuff there is in life." As mentioned in Something About the Author, he did "hope that people, no matter what age, would find something to identify with in my books, pick one up and experience a personal sense of discovery." Silverstein died at his home in Key West, Florida on May 10, 1999.