

Stephen (Vincent) Benét (1898-1943)

American poet, novelist, and writer of short stories, best-known for *JOHN BROWN'S BODY*, a long epic poem on the Civil War, which Benét wrote in France. Benét received two Pulitzer prizes for his poetry. He was one of those rare poets who was both popular and critically acclaimed.

**"American muse, whose strong and diverse heart
So many men have tried to understand
But only made it smaller with their art
Because you are as various as your land,**

**As mountainous - deep, as flowered with blue rivers,
Thirsty with deserts, buried under snows,
As native as the shape of Navajo quivers
And native, too, as the sea-voyaged rose."**

(from John Brown's Body)

Stephen Vincent Benét was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, into an army family. His father was Colonel J. Walker Benét. Frances Neill (Rose) Benét, Stephen's mother, was a descendant of an old Kentucky military family. Because his father was an avid reader, who especially loved poetry, Benét grew up in home, where literature was valued and enjoyed. Most of his boyhood Benét spent in Benicia, California. At the age about ten, Benét was sent to the Hitchcock Military Academy. However, he preferred reading to athletics and did not like the insensitivity of his school mates. Later wrote about his experiences in his poem about Shelley at Eton: "His pile of books scattered about his feet, / Stood Shelley while two others held him fast, / And the clods beat upon him." Benét completed his secondary education in Augusta, Georgia, where his father had been assigned a new post. Benét's first book, *FIVE MEN AND POMPEY* (1915), a collection of verse, was published when he was 17. It showed the romantic influence of William Morris as well as the influence of modern realism.

Benét was rejected from the army because of his defective vision. During the war he worked in Washington as a cipher-clerk in the same department as James Thurber, who also had poor eyesight. Benét received from Yale his master's degree, submitting his third volume of poems, *HEAVENS AND EARTH* (1920), instead of a thesis. In Yale his contemporaries included [Thronton Wilder](#) and Archibald MacLeish.

Benét's first novel, the autobiographical *THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM* (1921), showed the influence of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He continued his studies at Sorbonne, France, where lived somewhat

bohemian life and met his wife, the writer and journalist Rosemary Carr. In 1923 he returned to the United States. During the 1920s he wrote three other novels, *YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRIDE* (1922), serialized in *Harper's Bazaar*, *JEAN HUGUENOT* (1923), and *SPANISH BAYONET* (1926), a historical novel about the 18th-century Florida. It focused on Benét's ancestors. *JAMES SHORE'S DAUGHTER* (1934), a story about wealth and responsibility, is usually considered among Benét's best achievements.

In 1926 Benét went back to France, where he lived for four years, and started to write his poem about the Civil War, *John Brown's Body*. It won the [Pulitzer](#) Prize in 1929. "So, from a hundred visions, I make one, / And out of darkness build my mocking sun." Already in his childhood, Benét had been fascinated by his father's old Rebellion Records and his *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. While working with poem in France, he collected background material from libraries. Seen from the perspective of a young, small town boy, *John Brown's Body* interweaved stories of historical and fictional figures, from the raid of Harper's Ferry to General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. Benét's collection of verse appeared with the acclaim of critics, although Harriet Moore labelled it a "cinematic epic" in *Poetry*, and some other critics, in tune with the times, tried to find from it important social issues.

Before starting any new work, Benét published a collection of ballads and poems, written over a period of fifteen years. It celebrated American names and people, such as William Sycamore, whose "... father, he was a mountaineer / His fist was a knotty hammer..."

**"I have fallen in love with American names,
The sharp names that never get fat,
The snakeskin titles of mining claims,
The plumed war bonnet of Medicine Hat,
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat."**

Benét was elected in 1929 to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and nine years later to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In the 1930s Benét published among others *A BOOK OF AMERICANS* (1933) with his wife. It was nostalgic excursion to the past, "When Daniel Boone goes by, at night, / The phantom deer arise / And all lost, wild America / Is burning in their eyes." Benét popular poem, 'American Names', appeared first in *BALLADS AND POEMS* (1931). The poem ends with the line 'Bury my heart at Wounded Knee'. *THE BURNING CITY* (1936) included the bitter 'Litany for Dictatorships', in which Benét attacked fascism and mass mentality: "We are all good citizens here. We believe in the / Perfect State." *THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN* (1937) was an one-act play, inspired by Washington

Irving's story.

A short story collection, THIRTEEN O'CLOCK (1937), included the famous 'The Devil and Daniel Webster', originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was later made into a play, and opera (music by Douglas Moore), and a motion picture entitled *All That Money Can Buy*, directed by William Dieterle and starring Walter Huston as Mr. Scratch. The music by Bernard Herrmann was awarded an Oscar. In the story a hard-pressed farmer, Jabez Stone, makes a deal with the Devil, but is saved from the pit by a famous lawyer's pleading at his 'trial'. The jury which he calls to hear Webster's case is composed out of the greatest villains of American history. Benét based his tale on Faust, but set it in the 19th-century New England. This work had also two sequels, 'Daniel Webster and the Sea Serpent' (1937) and 'Daniel Webster and the Ideas of March' (1939).

In another work, 'Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer', published in TALES BEFORE MIDNIGHT (1939), Benét Americanized the Death, whom the hero outsmarts by refusing to accept an offer of immortality. Besides the horror, mystery and fantastic, Benét was interested in science fiction. The dystopic tale, 'By the Waters of Babylon', was first published in 1937, years before the Atomic Bomb. The tale was set in the future, in a world after the Great Burning - the fire which fell out of the sky. Poor vision had plagued Benét throughout his life, and he was also crippled by arthritis and suffered a bout of mental illness. These personal problems perhaps affected his later fantasies, such as 'The Minister's Books' and 'The Angel Was a Yankee', collected in THE LAST CIRCLE (1946).

Benét also made a number of radio broadcasts and worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter. He wrote a series of radio scripts, including LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE (1941) and THEY BURNED THE BOOKS (1942). His short stories, produced during these years, were often written under pressure to pay bills. In the early 1940s Benét was a strong advocate of America's entry into the war - in the United Nations Day speech President Roosevelt read a prayer specially composed by the author. For the Office of War Information Benét wrote a short history of the United States, which was translated and distributed in Europe. Benét died of a heart attack in New York City, on March 13, 1943. He was posthumously awarded in 1944 the Pulitzer Prize for WESTERN STAR. The poem was the first volume of a large verse epic about the American frontier. Benét's elder brother, William Rose Benét, became a journalist, and a Pulitzer Prize winner, who helped found the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Benét's *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (1948) was for decades the standard American guide to world literature.

