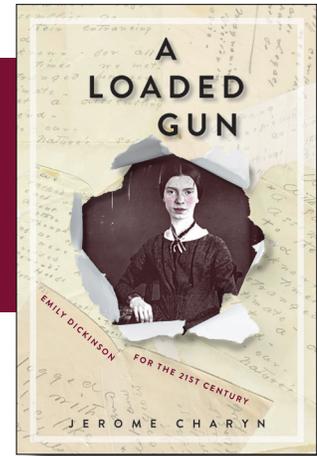




A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century by Jerome Charyn

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PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography Longlist

“A magnetic nonfiction reevaluation of the mystifying, radical, perhaps bisexual, and maybe greatest-ever American poet.” —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“In *A Loaded Gun*, [Charyn] is again out to release Dickinson from the myths that have enclosed her. . . . With essayistic chapters on Dickinson’s mother, her dog, her servants, her photographic image, her poetic fragments—Charyn’s book is perhaps best viewed as yet another imaginative attempt to get to the source of Dickinson’s emotional intensity, and to imagine an ‘Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century.’” —*New York Review of Books*

INTRODUCTION

We think we know Emily Dickinson: the Belle of Amherst, virginal, reclusive, and possibly mad. But in *A Loaded Gun*, Jerome Charyn introduces us to a different Emily Dickinson: the fierce, brilliant, and sexually charged poet who wrote:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—

...

Though I than He— may longer live

He longer must—than I—

For I have but the power to kill,

Without—the power to die—

Through interviews with contemporary scholars, close readings of Dickinson’s correspondence and handwritten manuscripts, and a suggestive, newly discovered photograph that is purported to show Dickinson with her lover, Charyn’s literary sleuthing reveals the great poet in ways that have only been hinted at previously: as a woman who was deeply philosophical, intensely engaged with the world, attracted to members of both sexes, and able to write poetry that disturbs and delights us today.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. We now have two daguerreotypes of Emily Dickinson. How has the most well-known image shaped our perception of the great poet? How might the second, more recently discovered image, change that perception? Are Jerome Charyn’s speculations about it convincing?
2. Do you agree with Charyn that viewing the great poet as a reclusive spinster is a dangerously false assumption? Where did this stereotype come from and how has it affected our reading of Dickinson’s poetry?
3. A number of modern scholars believe that Dickinson was bisexual. How did her attraction to both the men and women in her life affect her art?
4. Poet and critic Susan Howe believes that Dickinson was a woman with “Promethean ambition.” How did this ambition manifest itself in a woman of the nineteenth century and a poet who was so secretive about her own work?
5. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a critic, soldier, and feminist, was one of the real “discoverers” of Dickinson. What role do you think Higginson really played in her life and her work?



6. Dickinson called her dog, Carlo, her “Mute Confederate” and considered him one of her muses. Charyn claims that Carlo was her closest companion for sixteen years, and that she became more reclusive only after Carlo died. Why would a pet have played such an important role in Dickinson’s life?
7. Charyn is one of the first writers to discuss how the poet’s mother’s painful silence may have influenced the explosiveness of Dickinson’s poetry. Do you find his argument compelling?
8. We almost lost the great treasure of Dickinson’s poetry. The poet asked Lavinia, her sister, to burn her correspondence upon her death, which Lavinia did. Dickinson also told her loyal maid, Maggie Maher, to burn her poems, but Maggie could not do it. She left them for Lavinia to find. Lavinia, herself a failed poet, wanted to resurrect her sister through these poems. What would our culture have lost if these poems had been destroyed? What do Dickinson’s wishes tell us about her and about the precariousness of creation?
9. Charyn compares Dickinson with Vincent van Gogh—both “thrust out of obscurity in spite of [themselves].” How did these artists suffer and how were they redeemed?
10. In the mid-twentieth century, artist Joseph Cornell devoted a series of shadowboxes to Dickinson. In most of these boxes, the poet has already departed for what Cornell called “The Blue Peninsula.” How do these boxes relate to Dickinson’s life and to her art?
11. Charyn, himself a novelist, describes the significant impact Dickinson’s work has had on visual artists, dancers, actors, and, of course, other writers. Why do you think her work appeals to artists across so many disciplines? What insights into the great poet can artists offer that critics cannot?
12. On page 205, Charyn recounts a conversation he had with critic Christopher Benfey about neurologist Oliver Sacks’ essays in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*—speculating that Sacks’ description of idiot savant twins with an exceptional affinity for numbers may be related to Dickinson’s genius and unique perception of language. Do you believe modern science has a role to play in helping us understand Dickinson and unlocking the secrets of the creative mind?
13. This book’s title is taken from what Charyn finds to be Dickinson’s most difficult, complex and significant poem: “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun.” He believes it is one of the strangest poems in the English language because it is narrated by the loaded gun itself. Do you agree or disagree with the author about what kind of prey Dickinson is seeking in this poem? Who is the hunter and who is the hunted?
14. *A Loaded Gun* is subtitled “Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century.” What makes her poetry particularly relevant to readers today? How might her life—and her poetry—been different if she had lived in the twenty-first century?
15. How would you describe this book? As a biography? As a work of literary or cultural criticism? Something else entirely? Did reading it change your understanding of Dickinson’s life? Did it enrich your reading of Dickinson’s poetry or illuminate the reasons her influence is still so strongly felt today?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerome Charyn is the author of more than fifty works of fiction and nonfiction, including *Jerzy: A Novel*, *Bitter Bronx: Thirteen Stories*, *I Am Abraham: A Novel of Lincoln and the Civil War*, and *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson: A Novel*. Among other honors, he has been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, was named a Commander of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture, and is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in New York. Visit his website at www.jeromecharyn.com.

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