

Shel Silverstein, 1930-1999: Poet, Writer, Composer, Singer, Musician and Artist

One of his best known books is "Where the Sidewalk Ends." *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
06 January 2008

VOICE ONE:

This is Phoebe Zimmermann.

VOICE TWO:



And this is Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Shel Silverstein. He was a poet, writer, composer, singer, musician and artist.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Shel Silverstein wrote hundreds of poems and published many books. He is most famous as a writer of books for children. He won several awards for his children's books. But he also wrote many stories and created many drawings for adults.

Shel Silverstein was born in Chicago, Illinois in nineteen thirty. His birth name was Sheldon Allan Silverstein. Sometimes he called himself Uncle Shelby. He never planned to write children's books. Still, he is most famous for writing them.

Shel Silverstein once told a reporter that when he was growing up, he wanted to be a good baseball player. He also said he wanted to be popular with girls. But he could not play baseball, and girls did not like him. So he started to draw and write. Shel Silverstein said he developed his own way of writing. By the time girls were interested in him, he found that work was more important.

VOICE TWO:

Shel Silverstein served in the United States Army in the early nineteen fifties. He worked as an artist for the American military newspaper, Pacific Stars and Stripes. He wrote his first book in nineteen fifty-five. "Take Ten" was about life in the army, and included drawings.

After leaving the army, he worked for Playboy magazine for almost twenty years. He wrote stories and drew funny pictures for the publication.

Shel Silverstein was also a musician. He released his first album in nineteen fifty-nine. It is called "Hairy Jazz." He began writing folk music in the nineteen sixties. Famous artists have recorded his songs. The Irish Rovers, Johnny Cash, and Loretta Lynn have sung his songs. Ten years later, he released "A Boy Named Sue and His Other Country Songs." The most famous song from the album is called "A Boy Named Sue." It is about a boy whose father gave him a name usually given to girls. Johnny Cash made the song famous.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Shel Silverstein is best known for his books for children. However, people of all ages like his poems and stories. He published his first children's book in nineteen sixty-three. It is called "Lafcadio, the Lion Who Shot Back." It is about a lion that eats hunters and lives like a human. The lion has to make some important decisions.

One year later, Shel Silverstein published what may be his most popular book. It is called "The Giving Tree." This story is about a boy and a tree that loved him. The tree gives the boy everything until it can give no more. Both adults and children have enjoyed reading this book. This book is still very popular today. It has sold more than five million copies. Listen as Faith Lapidus reads from the beginning of "The Giving Tree."

FAITH LAPIDUS:

There was once a great apple tree and a little boy. They would spend hours and hours together. The boy would play in the tree's branches, sleep at her roots and eat of her apples. And the tree loved the boy.

One day, the boy came to the tree. The tree was delighted and beckoned, 'Come and play!' But the boy was no longer a boy; he was now a young man, and he was interested in making a living, but he didn't know how.

'Here,' the tree said, 'take my apples and sell them.' The young man did just that, and the tree was happy.

VOICE TWO:

In the nineteen seventies, Shel Silverstein produced music for several movies. His first movie soundtrack was for the film "Ned Kelly." It is based on a true story about a famous Australian criminal. Here is a song from the album. It is called "Ned Kelly."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Shel Silverstein is also famous for his poetry. His first children's poetry book was "Where the Sidewalk Ends." It was published in nineteen seventy-four. It contains more than one hundred poems, and many drawings. The poems and drawings are creative, funny and wise. In the book, readers meet a boy who turns into a television set. They meet a girl who eats a whale.

Imaginary creatures like the Unicorn and the Bloath live there. So does a girl called Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout who will not take the garbage out. "Where the Sidewalk Ends" is a place where you can wash your shadow. You can plant a garden of diamonds. It is a place where shoes can fly. And a crocodile goes to the dentist because his tooth hurts. Silverstein reads one of the poems in his book, called "Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me, Too."

(SOUND)

Shel Silverstein's second children's poetry book is called "A Light in the Attic." It also contains many funny poems and drawings. This book was so popular that it was on the New York Times newspaper's list of best-selling books for more than three years. Listen as he reads his poem "Ations."

(SOUND)

VOICE TWO:

In the nineteen eighties, Shel Silverstein began writing plays. He wrote about twenty of them. His first play is called "The Lady or the Tiger Show." It is a funny play about a game show. The game show player has to choose between two doors. Behind one door is a beautiful woman, and behind the other door is a tiger.

VOICE ONE:

Shel Silverstein died of heart failure in nineteen ninety-nine. He was sixty-eight years old. Some of his works were released after his death. Shel Silverstein once said: "I would hope that people, no matter what age, would find something to identify with in my books." He hoped people would "experience a personal sense of discovery."

Shel Silverstein once said that he wanted to go everywhere, look at and listen to everything. He said people could go crazy with the wonderful things in life. And he communicated this in all of his writings, drawings and songs. We leave you now with a song by Shel Silverstein that was a huge hit around the world. The Irish Rovers sing "The Unicorn."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This program was written by Chi-Un Lee and produced by Lawan Davis. Our studio engineer was Bill Barber. This is Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And this is Phoebe Zimmermann. Listen again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.