

Author Spotlight with Marty Rhodes Figley



What inspired you to write a book about Emily Dickinson that focused on her relationship with her dog, Carlo?

Dogs. Over the years I've loved a few—Joli Beau, the French poodle; Uncas and Zelda, the Samoyeds; Duncan, the Scottish terrier; and now Scarlett, the Airedale terrier. I can't imagine life without a loyal "best friend" by my side. When I found out that Emily Dickinson's constant companion for sixteen years was her Newfoundland, Carlo, I knew I had to write that story for myself and for young readers. I wanted to find out what Carlo had meant to the enigmatic poet.

What was the most interesting thing you learned while doing research for this book?

There were so many things. I was amused to learn that Emily's sister, Vinnie, was a cat lover, while Emily clearly preferred dogs. On occasion, this caused tension at the Dickinson Homestead. Carlo chased Vinnie's cats, and the cats killed the birds that frequented Emily's garden. Emily plotted to "find assassins for them," while Lavinia, at least once, "cuffed" Carlo when he annoyed her on the porch.

How did your view of Emily Dickinson change when you learned of her relationship with a shaggy, floppy, drooly canine?

Before learning about Carlo, I, like many people, had a preconceived notion of Emily Dickinson as a rather esoteric, delicate woman dressed in white, untouched by the more earthy aspects of life. But, having a Newfoundland around makes this impossible. These big, brave, loyal dogs weigh well over 100 pounds. They shed and have loose, wet mouths. Copious amounts of dog drool and hair can't help but end up on clothes. Emily Dickinson's dog was her protector, confidante, and guide to the outside world. She missed this friend terribly when he was gone. Knowledge of their special relationship twists the lens on Emily Dickinson. She seems more human, more accessible because of her love for Carlo.

Do you enjoy writing poetry? Would you want to write a book of poetry for children?

I don't write poetry, but do admire its economy, beauty, and intensity. I don't envision a book of poetry in my future, although I certainly enjoyed writing about one of America's greatest poets.

What is your favorite Emily Dickinson poem?

There are so many. I'll share one that demonstrates how Carlo was firmly woven into the tapestry of her life. Emily's beloved dog sometimes acted as her friendly, perceptive connection to nature.

*Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel –
Whose spokes a dizzy music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill –*

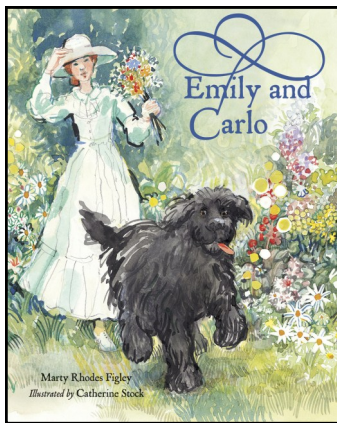
*He never stops, but slackens
Above the Ripest Rose –
Partakes without alighting
And praises as he goes,*

*Till every spice is tasted –
And then his Fairy Gig
Reels in remoter atmospheres –
And I rejoin my Dog,*

*And He and I, perplex us
If positive, 'twere we –
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This Curiosity –*

*But He, the best Logician,
Refers my clumsy eye –
To just vibrating Blossoms!
An exquisite Reply!*

By Marty Rhodes Figley



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Ages 5–8

Marty Rhodes Figley's lyrical text and Catherine Stock's luminous art create a fresh look at the life of poet Emily Dickinson, focusing on her relationship with her dog, Carlo, a large, floppy, drooly Newfoundland. Carlo was her constant companion, her "shaggy ally" in the world. Together they explored the woods and town around them, visiting friends and enjoying each other's company.

Includes quotations about Carlo from Emily's poems and letters.