

Our World

reviewed by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

In Review



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Mary Oliver, with photographs Molly Malone Cook
Beacon

The work of Mary Oliver is one of those rare and lovely convergences. She is a lyric artist with a riveted eye and an enormous heart, one of the nation's great spiritual sentinels. She was also graced for more than 40 years with the love of her life, the late photographer Molly Malone Cook. Here the two hearts are braided gently together within covers—some 50 of Cook's pictures, with notes, comments and poems by Oliver.

"When [Cook] was a small child someone asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up and she answered 'I want to see every face in America,'" writes Oliver. Cook's great gift as a photographer was indeed portraying faces—a dozen of the portraits here are as revelatory and remarkable as anything by Walker Evans or Edward

Steichen (friends of hers, along with Minor White, Ansel Adams, Eugene Smith and many other fine eyes). She was among the first photographers hired by the nascent *Village Voice* in the late 1950s, ran a photography gallery and then a bookshop on Cape Cod, and spent years as a literary agent before her health waned.

The great virtue of this small book, the great gift Oliver gives her beloved, is that *Our World* is not biography, elegy, epitaph or rage against loss; it is that quieter and far stronger thing, witness. “It was a forty-year conversation,” writes Oliver. “M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles. I think of this always when I look at her photographs, the images of vitality, hopefulness, endurance, kindness, vulnerability. Her world certainly wasn’t daisies or birds or trees, as mine was; we each had our separate natures; yet our ideas, our influence upon each other, became a rich and abiding confluence.”

Readers who savor Oliver’s exquisite gifts of attentiveness, her lean lines, her celebration of the holiness of what is, will delight in her gifts applied to the being she loved longest. And anyone who sees the best of Cook’s photographs here will celebrate a remarkable eye, now returned to the Light.