

Topic Page: [Riley, James Whitcomb \(1849-1916\)](#)

Definition: **Riley, James Whitcomb** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1849-1916

US poet

Born in Greenfield, Indiana, he was dismissed from a newspaper job early in his career after forging a poem attributed to Edgar Allan Poe. He made his name from contributing dialect poems to the *Indianapolis Journal* (1877-85), and went on to publish several volumes of poetry. He was called the "Hoosier Poet" and is also known for his poems about children, including "Little Orphant Annie" and "The Raggedy Man", published under the pseudonym Benjamin F Johnson.

Revell, P, James Whitcomb Riley (1970).



Image from: [Related to cucumbers, pumpkins are soft-fleshed... in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **Riley, James Whitcomb**

From *Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*

R. was born and reared in a small town in Indiana. Judging by contemporary standards he was not a great poet, but he was extremely successful and popular, very much in tune with his times. He had a gift for writing fluent rhythmical verse using broad HUMOR and regional dialect to chronicle the ways of nineteenth century small-town America. While working as the editor of the *Greenfield News* in 1877, R. began publishing verse. In 1883 *The Old Swimmin'-Hole and'leven More Poems* was published, followed by *The Boss Girl: A Christmas Story and Other Sketches* in 1886. In 1897 R. became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and received an honorary degree from Yale University in 1902. R. was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1908. He was considered so popular by his home state that Riley Day was observed by the Indiana school system in 1910.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was a time that celebrated the common man. This was the hero who had pushed his way westward in midcentury and whose descendants on the farm and in the small towns and villages of the midwest formed the backbone of America. R. understood and wrote about this man with his shrewdness, homely wisdom, humor, sentimentality, humanity, and appreciation of America's folk heroes. His verses reflected locality in incident, character, and time. R. was well acquainted with rural America's love of gossip and celebration of everyday events. However, his reverence for his own childhood is that of an adult looking back on his past in a romantic, sentimental way that often obscured the deeper significance of an event. Selections of R.'s verses frequently appear in children's poetry anthologies, especially "Little Orphant Annie" (closer to a Raggedy Ann doll than to Harold Gray's Little Orphan Annie) and "The Raggedy Man."

Further Works

The Days Gone By. 1893.

A Tinkle of Bells. 1895.

The Book of Joyous Children. 1902.

The Best Loved Poems of James Whitcomb Riley. 1934.
The Gobble-Uns'll Git You If You Don't Watch Out."1975

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Serafin, Steven R., ed., *Encyclopedia of American Literature.* 1999.
Something about the Author. vol. 17, 1979

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Lipsitt, J. (2005). Riley, James Whitcomb. In B. E. Cullinan, & D. G. Person (Eds.), *Continuum encyclopedia of children's literature.* London, UK: Continuum. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/riley_james_whitcomb



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Harvard

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