

# America The Beautiful: The Stirring True Story Behind Our Nation's Favorite Song



## Synopsis

We've all sung it a thousand times, and most of us know at least the first verse by heart. "America the Beautiful" has been called a hymn, a prayer, even the "national heartbeat set to music." Numerous proposals and half a dozen bills in Congress have tried to replace our national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," with this more lyrical, less militaristic song. But who knows the story behind the song? In *America the Beautiful*, Lynn Sherr tells the story of Katharine Lee Bates, a poet and pioneering young English professor at the newly established Wellesley College, who penned "America the Beautiful" at age 33, as she gazed over the glorious panorama from the top of Pike's Peak, Colorado. The poem, published two years later on July 4, 1895, struck a chord. Americans embraced it and immediately set it to music, trying out at least 74 different melodies. There were even Mexican, Canadian, and Australian versions. Analyzing the lyrics of "America the Beautiful" and the story of Katharine Lee Bates's unusual life, Lynn Sherr opens a window onto the shifting world of late 19th century America. She explores the lingering impact of the Civil War and the dramatic developments in commerce and technology, which shaped the American Century and the popularity of one brilliant, stirring song.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Adult/High School-This attractive book tells of Katherine Lee Bates's journeys preceding and following the writing of "America the Beautiful." Scherr brings a visual as well as literary focus to the story of this song, which has evolved into an unofficial national anthem, especially since the tragic

attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Bates was an English professor at Wellesley College and a prolific poet and scholar, but she will always be remembered for contributing much to the patriotic feelings of both her times and ours. In understated prose and evocative illustrations, the author transports readers back to the not-so-halcyon days at the turn of the last century and the not always graceful coming-of-age of the United States. The history of the anthem from poem to icon is clearly traced while the times are brought to life in plentiful period illustrations and photographs, both in color and black and white; posters; song sheets; facsimiles; and maps. This book might be useful for history, music, literature, or sociology assignments, but it is also a joy to look through and to read for pure interest. Susan H. Woodcock, Chantilly Regional Library, VA Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

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This book was chosen as a gift for one completing a citizenship status. Having a copy of this story of the song myself, there was question that it would be welcome.

An excellent exploration of educator and poet Katharine Bates--and her beloved national song, "America the Beautiful."

The comprehensive story of the two people who came up with the lyrics and the music to our most beautiful national song. This is a relatively short book but it goes into great detail on both of these people without being exhaustive. I would have given it a higher rating if the author did not start to veer off slightly into her clearly left wing political point of view. Leave out the politics and keep it to

the song.

The story behind "America the Beautiful" is as emotionally moving as the song it produced and Lynn Sherr has captured all of this in her timely new book. I read it this evening and found myself on more than one occasion needing to go to my piano and play and sing through this wonderful national song. Many facts leap out at the reader...the poet and author of "America the Beautiful", Katharine Lee Bates, never met the composer, Samuel A. Ward, and except for one \$5 fee, neither received any money for it...Mr. Ward died before the tune and text ever appeared together in print...and that dozens of other tunes were proposed to be wedded to Miss Bates's poem yet it wasn't until shortly before her death in 1929 that tune and text became the accepted national version that we sing today. There are many more rich details to this story and Ms. Sherr has put them forward with colorful prints throughout the book, many of them reminders of the times in which these two gifted people lived. Fate certainly played several pivotal parts. The biggest was Miss Bates's trip west in the summer of 1893 where she was inspired in at least three places to pen lines that exist in the song today... "alabaster cities" (from seeing the "White City" of the Chicago World's Fair), "amber waves of grain" (while passing through Kansas on a train) and "spacious skies", "purple mountain majesties" and "above the fruited plain" from her view atop Pikes' Peak. But we also learn that it is quite plausible that Samuel Ward wrote the tune on a friend's linen cuff as he left Coney Island one day aboard a boat. And if it hadn't been for a conscientious clergyman from Rochester New York, the words and music might never have been paired. I'm glad that a few other musical attempts that tried to be tied with the poem are printed in this book...play through them and you'll see why Mr. Ward's music is clearly superior. After the story itself is finished, Ms. Sherr goes on to give her thoughts on the meaning of the song and the fight to get it established as our National Anthem to replace the "Star-Spangled Banner". This point has been fought over for a long time and will continue to be. For those of us who much prefer "America the Beautiful" it is reassuring to know that in almost every gathering I have attended since September 11 where music has been sung, "America the Beautiful" is one people request. It's no wonder. This great song reflects on the America in which we live, hope and dream. Lynn Sherr has done a magnificent job.

This book is a gem. A small coffee table book which you really want to read and linger over. Author, Lynn Sherr, has crafted a true treasure. I read about it in a magazine & ordered one for a Christmas present. Am now returning for a copy for myself and will probable order more for gifts.

I've read just three pages of the text and found two glaring errors. Thus, I shall not be using anything in the book for the research I am doing. Glaring is the word as she writes: "Katharine Lee Bates boarded a train in Boston..." "She barely made it to the Fitchburg Railroad Station..." Hey Fitchburg is NOT in Boston. (p. 13) Even more glaring (p. 16) she states that Mount Holyoke Female Seminary is ... "the first institution of higher education for women only." It was founded in 1837. The Troy (NY) Female Seminary was founded in 1821 for the exact same purpose. So, Mount Holyoke FS was NOT the first. I shall not be reading any more of this worthless piece. I worry that some will believe what she has written. So sad.

thanks to all for the wonderful reviews -- and just a note about one poster who commented on some errors. First, "Fitchburg" on p. 13 of the Kindle edition, is a typo; it's "Fitchburg," and is accurate in the original print edition. I never was given the Kindle edition to proof. Second, Troy Female Seminar (now Emma Willard School), p. 14, was/is a college-prep level school for women; Mt. Holyoke was the first for women at college/university level. Facts are accurate! Thanks again. Lynn Sherr

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