



The writer and her mother, lifelong book lovers, visited the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst. On their tour of the poet's house they saw that "certain slant of light" that inspired one of her poems.



Two for the Read

A mother and daughter bask in Amherst's literary limelight

BY JAMIE STRINGFELLOW

Last fall, my mom, Fran, and I took a short trip to celebrate our birthdays—someplace where we could see the sights but also have time to just read and talk about books. When she was seven, mom was bedridden for months with scarlet fever. Reading helped pass the time during her recovery, and, ever since then, she's devoured books. She imbued in my brothers and me a love of reading, too.

For voracious readers like us, the area around Amherst, in western Massachusetts, is paradise. Some of the best American writers of the 19th and 20th

centuries made their homes there, and five colleges sit along the Connecticut River, so the region has many literary destinations. I picked up my mom from her home in Dover, New Hampshire, and we took the three-hour drive southwest to Amherst.

As we toured the Emily Dickinson Museum on Main Street, our guide, Jeanne Shumway, told us that the Belle of Amherst was not as shy and reclusive as most think. "She was quite a letter writer," Shumway said. Emily "wrote maybe 10,000 letters in her lifetime, and had a pool of about a hundred known correspondents."

"She would have loved e-mail," my mom whispered.

Emily asked that her papers be destroyed at her death (in 1886, at age 55), but her sister Lavinia kept the poems. "Vinnie" knew that Emily had written poetry but had no idea how much until Emily died. As we explored the house, we saw the places—including a bureau and a trunk—where Vinnie found hundreds of poems, many unfinished, that Emily had scribbled on paper envelopes and even a chocolate wrapper. Ultimately, there would be close to 1,800 poems, revealing Emily's innermost thoughts in her "true voice." We



Getting There Amherst is in central western Massachusetts, just off Interstate 91. Amtrak (amtrak.com) offers service to Springfield (SPG), where travelers can transfer to the Amherst station (AMM), which is around the corner from Main Street.



The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art has a light-filled art studio; kids of all ages can walk in and learn how to make tissue paper collages like the ones that fill Carle's best-selling book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. In the galleries, the artists' works are treated like fine art.

could practically see Emily walking around in her ever-present white dress.

As Vinnie had kept her sister's legacy alive for word lovers like me and my mother, we're passing on our love of reading down to my kids. My 15-year-old son, Ian, had loved Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* when he was younger, so mom and I were excited to visit the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst. A giant caterpillar book nook greeted us when we walked in, and I teared up a bit when mom asked me if I remembered Ian poking his "fat little finger" through the hole in the page where the hungry caterpillar ate through the fruit.

The light-filled museum—whose windows look out to apple orchards and allow sunlight to flood in—showcases the historically underrated art of illustration. Not given the same respect as traditional fine art, illustrations were generally produced on nonarchival materials, so the original art either decayed or was frequently thrown away after being reproduced. Rotating exhibits, such as the one we saw that

showed how to "paper engineer" a pop-up book, display the storybook illustrations as the fine art they truly are. The museum also hosts story hours and has an art studio that lets children make their own art.

"At our museum, many children experience original art for the first time," said marketing manager Sandy Soderberg, as she led us through the building. "They actually recognize what's on the wall. One child came in and said, 'There's the caterpillar! These are all my friends!'"

We had more to see and do in the days to come—sculptures of Dr. Seuss' famous characters, the National Yiddish Book Center's extensive collection of Jewish books and culture—but for now we had books to read, including a doorstep-size collection of Dickinson poems. Mom and I sat in comfy chairs in our room at the Amherst Inn, by windows that overlooked the Dickinson house, read our books and drank our tea. "There is no frigate like a book," wrote Amherst's most famous resident, "to take us lands away." 🍌

DO The Amherst-area literary sites are listed on the **Massachusetts Center for the Book** website (massbook.org). The **Emily Dickinson Museum** (280 Main Street; 413-542-8161; emilydickinsonmuseum.org) offers tours Wednesday–Saturday, March through mid-December. Tickets are \$4–\$8. Anyone who has read a children's book will love the **Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art** (125 West Bay Road, 413-658-1100; picturebookart.org), open Tuesday–Sunday. Admission is \$6–\$9.

STAY The **Amherst Inn** (257 Main Street, Amherst; 413-253-5000; allenhous.com; rates are \$75–\$195) is classic Victorian New England, with several rooms that look out at the Emily Dickinson House. The **Hampton Inn** (24 Bay Road, Hadley; 413-586-4851; hampton.com; rates begin at \$119, including breakfast; AAA discount available) is an easy drive from Amherst.

EAT The **Eastside Grill** (413-586-3347; eastsidegrill.com) in Northampton has lots of small-dish options. Sesame scallops with lobster and sake highlight the menu. **Chez Albert** (413-253-3811; chezalbert.net) in Amherst's town center is authentically French. The butternut squash soup with crème fraiche pairs well with a simple green salad.

For tourism information, call (800) 723-1548 or go to valleyvisitor.com.

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