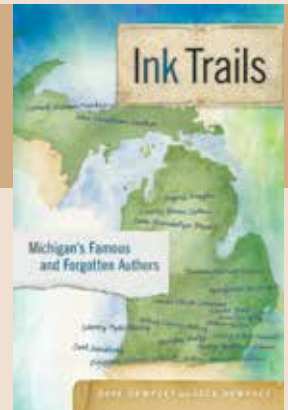


# Ink Trails: Michigan's Famous and Forgotten Authors

By Dave Dempsey and Jack Dempsey,  
published by Michigan State University Press,  
softcover, 183 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1-61186-060-3 (2012)  
<http://msupress.org/books/book/?id=50-1D0-25FF>



Reviewed by Frederick Baker Jr.

**I***nk Trails* is the story of Michigan authors, both famous (think of Ring Lardner, Bruce Catton, John Voelker a/k/a Robert Traver, and Carl Sandburg) and forgotten (who today reads or recalls James Oliver Curwood, Theodore Huebner Roethke, or George Matthew Adams?). A more distinguished or qualified duo to author this work could not be conjured. Indeed, it is arguably only out of modesty that they did not include themselves among their subjects. Dave Dempsey, an accomplished writer with a deep love of Michigan (his five books include one about the endangered sturgeon, and another about our precious Great Lakes), is the recipient of two Michigan Notable Book Awards. Elder brother Jack is a distinguished lawyer, but that is the least of his credentials for this work: he is chair of the Michigan Historical Commission and author of *Michigan and the Civil War: A Great and Bloody Sacrifice* (The History Press, February 2011). His touch is most clearly evident in the profile of Michigan author and Civil War historian Charles Bruce Catton, who, in *This Hallowed Ground*, “took on the notions [a la Professor Donald] that the South had not fought the War because of slavery and had lost solely due to its inferior resources.”

Together these brothers have assembled in one small work accounts of the surprisingly deep Michigan connections of some of the brightest literary lights of the twentieth century. These include Robert Frost, Arthur Miller, and Jane Kenyon, each of whom, with Jane Kenyon's husband, Donald Hall—whose writing class I crashed after my roommate raved about this amazing poet who had written a little memoir called *String Too Short to be Saved*—sojourned

and created in Ann Arbor at significant periods in their careers. They also have catalogued the notable authors native to Michigan, although they omitted Jim Harrison, apparently because he lacks the one qualification for inclusion—being deceased—that all the other subjects share.

But Michigan State University, Harrison's beloved alma mater, has not been slighted, because the Dempseys included Liberty Hyde Bailey, one of Michigan's greatest native intellects. He was a Renaissance man who invented the academic discipline of landscape gardening; published 200 books on subjects as diverse as philosophy, poetry, and horticulture; and, with Gregor Mendel, was one of the first two individuals to be inducted into the American Society for Horticultural Science's Hall of Fame.

For Michiganders who suffer from the understandable sense of inferiority that Midwesterners often have when comparing their literary heritage to that of certain southern states (who, after all, does Michigan have to compare with Faulkner or Piercy, both products of a backward southern state with less than half our population), *Ink Trails* can serve as a source of pride, because Michigan authors have certainly had their day in the literary sun: Who knew that James Oliver Curwood, now probably most famous as the builder of Owosso's castle on the Shiawassee, was the first author in history to earn \$1 million in a single year, eclipsing even Dickens and Twain? His works served as the grist for the fledgling motion picture industry and were, in his time, the most widely read fiction in the United States.

Authors whose works will not soon be forgotten, such as John Voelker, whose *Anatomy of a Murder* rode the best seller list

for 66 weeks and was the archetype for the modern courtroom novel; Bruce Catton, who ranks among the foremost Civil War historians; and Carl Sandburg, who recovered his health and completed his Lincoln biography on the shores of Lake Michigan, round out this catalog of Michigan's literary heritage.

This book is meticulously and lovingly researched. It includes extensive bibliographies for each author that will prove useful to readers who wish to learn more about them and their work. The authors have traveled Michigan's byways, exploring and photographing the authors' homes and hometowns, and often interviewing those who knew their subjects.

This book touched me, because it is so clearly a labor of love—for Michigan and for its culture, which has produced authors who have made lasting and significant contributions to the world of letters. I recommend it to all who want to know more about the literary achievements and accomplishments of Michiganders. *Si quaeris peninsulam literatus, circumspice.* ■



*Frederick Baker Jr. served 28 years on the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee, the last 24 as its chair. He continues to contribute occasional reviews of books by Michigan authors or*

*on Michigan law-related subjects. Formerly a Supreme Court commissioner, he retired in May to rejoin his former partners at Willingham & Coté in an of-counsel role.*