

# Famous New Yorker Ogden Nash

Ogden Nash understood that poetry is often unintentionally funny. Nash meant to be funny, and became one of the most popular poets in American history.

Ogden Nash was born in Rye, Westchester County, on August 9, 1902. The Nash family spent half the year in Rye but summered in Savannah, Georgia. After graduating from the fashionable St. George's boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island, Ogden attended Harvard for one year before dropping out.

After teaching briefly at St. George's, Nash moved to New York City. He toiled in a Wall Street mailroom before finding work writing advertisements for streetcar sign cards. He moved on to write ads for the Doubleday publishing firm, where he rose to an editorial position. Nash had to decide if manuscripts were worth publishing, and helped authors polish their work before publication.

By 1930 Nash was a successful editor in charge of his own line of detective novels. He still dreamed of becoming an author in his own right. He had co-written a children's book back in 1925 and had published poetry in a few magazines, but nothing had made an impression yet.

As an editor, Nash read a lot of bad poetry manuscripts while struggling to write his own poems. Inspiration struck when he decided to laugh at his own writing before anyone else did. He started writing humorous verses – Nash didn't call them poems -- that made a joke out of their labored rhymes. He used bad puns and made-up words to get the effect he wanted. One of his earliest efforts is a good example of his style:

*I sit in my office at 244 Madison Avenue*

*And say to myself, you have a responsible job, havenue?*

Almost by accident, that poem was accepted by *The New Yorker* magazine. Founded in 1925, the magazine was already famous nationwide for its sophisticated humor writing. As more of Nash's verses were published there, other magazines started publishing them. With growing confidence he published his first book of verse, *Hard Lines*, in 1931. It was a huge hit for a poetry book. Its success inspired Nash to quit his editorial job and devote himself entirely to his own work. During the worst period of the Great Depression, Nash was one of the only people in America able to make a living as a poet.

For the rest of his life Ogden Nash was one of the country's best-selling poets. His verses appeared in mass-circulation magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*, and in more than a dozen books. He worked in movies and on the Broadway stage and scored a hit in

1943 with the musical *One Touch of Venus*. He became a radio celebrity in the 1940s and appeared often on early TV shows in the 1950s.

Ogden Nash once joked that he'd succeeded by saying what others had already said, only worse. He saw himself less as a poet than as a humorist in a cheerfully self-mocking tradition that was uniquely American. Later in life, he worried that the tradition might die out as people took themselves and the world ever more seriously. He may have been partly right. Since Nash died on May 19, 1971, no one has taken his place in American literature.



**Rye** is the oldest permanent settlement in Westchester County and is located about 60 miles northeast of New York City.



Ogden Nash stamp, issued August 19, 2002.  
Image courtesy of the U.S. Postal Service

To read some of Ogden Nash's poetry go to <http://allpoetry.com/Ogden-Nash>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2015.