



# White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson

By Brenda Wineapple

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As the Civil War raged, an unlikely friendship was born between the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a literary figure who ran guns to Kansas and commanded the first Union regiment of black soldiers. When Dickinson sent Higginson four of her poems he realized he had encountered a wholly original genius; their intense correspondence continued for the next quarter century. In **White Heat** Brenda Wineapple tells an extraordinary story about poetry, politics, and love, one that sheds new light on her subjects and on the roiling America they shared.

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## **White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson** By Brenda Wineapple Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a noted man of letters and radical activist for abolition and women's rights, asking if he would look at her poems. He did and recognized immediately their strange power. As Wineapple points out in this brilliant study, Dickinson's letter marked the blossoming of a complicated lifelong friendship. Although the two met face-to-face only twice, Higginson found Dickinson's explosive poetry seductive. Drawing on 25 years' worth of Dickinson's letters (Higginson's are lost), Wineapple contests the traditional portrait of her as isolated from the world and liking it that way. In her poems and her letters, Wineapple shows, Dickinson was the consummate flirt, a sorceress, a prestidigitator in words. Wineapple resurrects the reputation of Higginson, long viewed as stodgy in his literary tastes (he reviled Whitman) yet who recognized Dickinson's genius and saw her work as an example of the democratic art he fervently believed in. As Wineapple did previously with Hawthorne (*Hawthorne: A Life*), she elegantly delves into a life and offers rich insights into a little-known relationship between two of the late-19th century's most intriguing writers. 32 photos. (Aug. 13)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Critics embraced this new angle on the life of Emily Dickinson, one of America's best-loved poets but also one of the most difficult to understand. While the subject of the book may seem rather narrow, reviewers claimed that Wineapple's excellent narrative and literary sensibilities keep *White Heat* from becoming overly obscure. Only the *Boston Globe* faulted Wineapple for reading too vaguely between the lines, literally, of Dickinson and Wineapple's correspondence and for rehashing older material. Overall, however, the result is a book that balances literary criticism, biography, and history, while never straying too far from the few available facts about Dickinson and her life.

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* With this unexpected query—"Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"—a reclusive young poet opened a quarter of a century of revealing correspondence with a prominent critic for the *Atlantic Monthly*. That critic—Thomas Wentworth Higginson—figures in most recent accounts of Emily Dickinson's remarkable career as an obtuse meddler, blind to her living talent and inept in preparing her work for posthumous publication. In this revisionist assessment of the Dickinson-Higginson relationship, Wineapple delivers a far more favorable portrait of Higginson, a portrait that vindicates Dickinson's judgment in choosing him as her longtime confidant. Higginson may have comprehended Dickinson's revolutionary verse only falteringly, but he recognized and fostered the genius of its creator. Higginson embraced Dickinson's fearless prosody, Wineapple argues, because he had devoted his entire life to breaking down restrictive barriers. Fighting to free slaves and emancipate women, Higginson naturally responded sympathetically to Dickinson's daring assaults on traditional aesthetics. Because Higginson's letters have mysteriously vanished, Wineapple must infer much from Dickinson's missives. But as the conduit of more than 100 of Dickinson's wonderful poems, those missives radiate the luminous warmth of a friendship that forever enriched American literature. A nuanced and insightful study. --Bryce Christensen

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