

WALT WHITMAN

AND THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN CELEBRITY

DAVID HAVEN BLAKE

David Haven Blake situates Walt Whitman in an expanse of nineteenth-century American popular culture that stretches from patent medicines to presidential politics, revealing the poet's complicated, often inconsistent views on poetry, commerce, and celebrity. Like his contemporary P. T. Barnum, Walt Whitman understood that, in the emergent culture of celebrity, fame was less a fact than a performance. He drew on the rhetoric of advertising not just to promote his poetry but to expand its vocabulary, construct its audience, and tutor his readers in the proper reception of his work. The mark of the truly democratic poet, Whitman felt, was the crowd that had gathered around him.

Making use of notebooks, photographs, and archival sources, Blake provides a groundbreaking history of the rise of celebrity culture in the United States. He sees *Leaves of Grass* alongside the birth of commercial advertising and the nation's growing obsession with the lives of the

famous and the renowned. As authors, lecturers, politicians, entertainers, and clergymen vied for popularity, Whitman developed a form of poetry that routinely promoted and, indeed, celebrated itself. *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* proposes a fundamentally new way of thinking about a seminal American poet and a major national icon.

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