

Opal Whiteley self-published “The Fairyland Around Us” in 1918. Two original copies of the book, featuring Whiteley’s notes and pictures she pasted in herself, were donated to Singing Creek Educational Center by historian Steve Williamson. (This is not a scan of the donated copy, but a digitized copy from the Duke University Libraries.) Credit: Internet Archive

## LATEST NEWS

# Historian donates rare 1918 copies of Opal Whiteley book



BY ANNIE AGUIAR

6 hours ago

## QuickTake:

Steve Williamson donated two original copies of “The Fairyland Around Us,” featuring famed Cottage Grove author Opal Whiteley’s original notes and pasted-in animal pictures. Proceeds from the sale of the book will go to a Cottage Grove immersive history education center.



Historian donates rare 1918 copies of Opal W

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More than a century ago, a young woman who grew up in a logging town near Cottage Grove self-published her first book, part fantastical memoir and part textbook about the flora, fauna and “fairies” she described encountering day-to-day.

“The Fairyland Around Us,” published in 1918, helped propel its author, Opal Whiteley, to a unique literary stardom.

Now, two original copies of the book with Whiteley’s original notes and pasted-in pictures, have been donated by a longtime historian of Whiteley’s life and work to a Cottage Grove immersive history education center named after another one of Whiteley’s books.

“It’s just so wonderful that something she produced out of the love of her heart will now help support this nonprofit in honor of the work that she did,” [Singing Creek Educational Center](#) executive director Karen Rainsong said.

Historian Steve Williamson said he wanted to donate the books to Singing Creek because the center’s hands-on history education provides the closest modern version of Whiteley’s nature walks. (The center, where Williamson became a board member after years of history presentations at the center, is named for Whiteley’s book “The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow.”)

Williamson, 74, also said that as he’s getting older, he wanted to make sure the books were in good hands, as proactive estate planning. Though “The Fairyland Around Us” is rare, it’s been [digitized in full](#), and the relevant museums and historical societies have a copy, which made him more comfortable knowing the book would be sold online.

One copy of the book was sold on eBay by Eugene’s Tsunami Books, on behalf of Singing Creek, for \$950. After Tsunami’s fees, the educational center will take home around \$600 of that,

which Rainsong said will go toward scholarships for low-income families to fund attendance at the center. The other copy will remain in its archives.



Singing Creek Educational Center executive director Karen Rainsong and Opal Whiteley historian Steve Williamson accept a check from Tsunami Books' Scott Landfield (right). Landfield sold a copy of a rare, original book by Whiteley that Williamson donated to Singing Creek. Credit: Annie Aguiar / Lookout Eugene-Springfield

After decades of work on Whiteley and her story, Williamson said he was too connected to the books to auction them off on eBay himself. One was a gift from a mentor at the University of Oregon, and the other was purchased on eBay when the auction website was new.

“I just couldn’t quite bring myself to do that,” he said. “It’s been an old friend to me. It’s a book that Opal actually worked on and touched.”

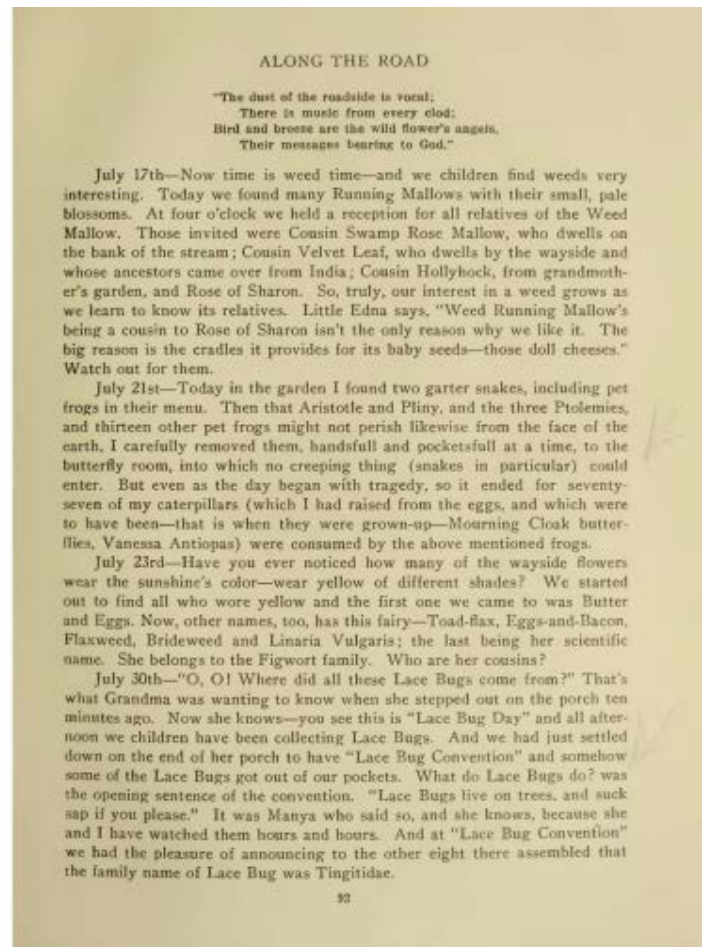


## Whiteley and 'The Fairyland Around Us'

Though "The Fairyland Around Us" was Whiteley's first book, it wasn't the title that brought her fame as an Oregon-grown literary star.

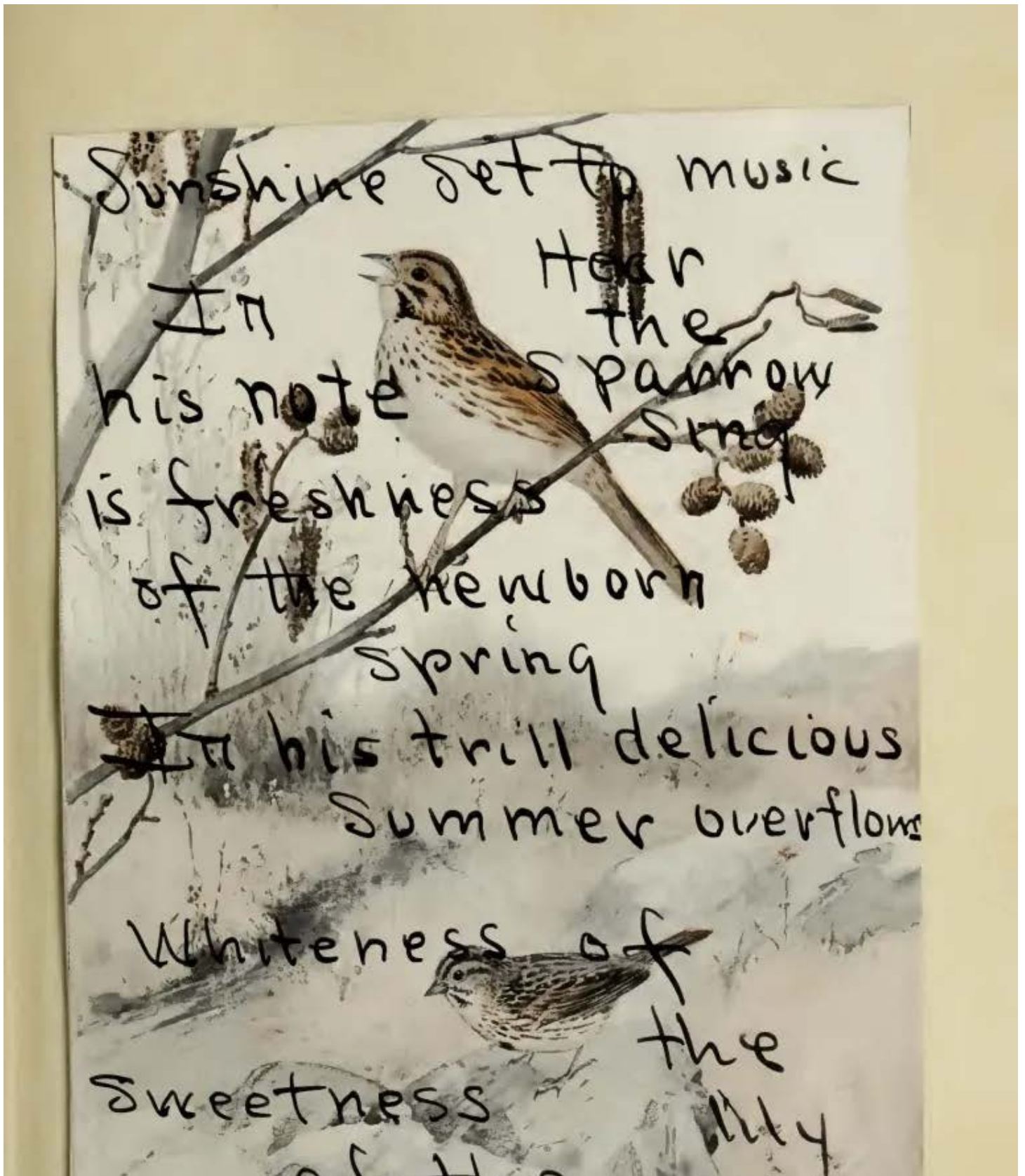
Whiteley, born in Washington state and raised largely in Oregon, wrote "The Fairyland Around Us" shortly after leaving the University of Oregon for California. She had been teaching at a California school and was about to leave for Boston, Williamson explained, when the mothers of her students asked how they could keep teaching the children once she was gone.

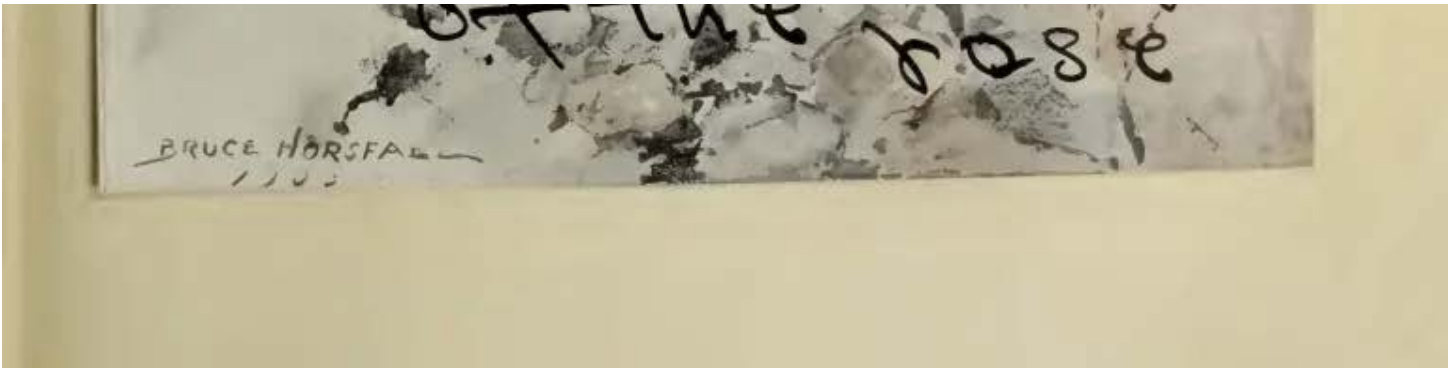
In response, Whiteley compiled "The Fairyland Around Us," which is structured as part exercise book, part memoir and part illustrated tour of what animals and plants were visible through the seasons. (It also features photos of her students.)



"The Fairyland Around Us" is part textbook and part fantastical memoir about Whiteley's time in the woods. Whiteley pasted in images she had cut out from different books to illustrate her work. Credit: [Internet Archive](https://www.archive.org/details/the-fairyland-around-us-by-whiteley-edna)

The book didn't interest Ellery Sedgwick, the then-editor of The Atlantic Monthly, when Whiteley visited Boston in hopes of a bigger publishing run. But the book, which included diary entries, piqued his interest enough to ask her if she kept a childhood journal.





The copies of “The Fairyland Around Us” that Williamson donated contain Whiteley’s original handwritten notes, like this digitized copy. Credit: [Internet Archive](#)

She did, and “The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart,” was serialized in The Atlantic and published as a book. That book, with its precocious and mystic descriptions of nature, became a 1920s literary sensation. Williamson also donated two original signed copies of that book to Singing Creek. One will, like the copy of “The Fairyland Around Us,” remain in its archives. The other is currently on sale on eBay, [with a starting bid of \\$450](#).

But “The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart” sparked discussion over its authenticity as a childhood diary. Whiteley’s life did not lack intrigue after that: She claimed to be the daughter of Henri, Prince of Orléans, relocated to England, and remained in a psychiatric hospital until her death in 1992 at 94 years old.

Williamson said that the enduring questions around Whiteley, her writing and mental health make her a compelling figure, 105 years after she became famous.

“She still fascinates people,” he said. “You can’t put your finger exactly on all the mysteries.”