

JAMES MERRILL PULITZER-WINNING POET

b. March 3, 1926

d. February 6, 1995

His work received every major award for American poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize.

*“Let the mind be ...
a landing strip for sacred visitations.”*

James Ingram Merrill was a great 20th-century literary figure. Celebrated for his poetry — including collections like “Divine Comedies” and the three volumes constituting his epic poem, “The Changing Light at Sandover” — his work earned every major American poetry award including the Pulitzer Prize.

The son of Charles E. Merrill, founding partner of Merrill Lynch Investment Group, Merrill enjoyed an exceptionally privileged New York City upbringing. He showed literary promise as a child, writing his first poem at age 8. Merrill’s parents divorced

when he was 13, the impact of which featured in his writing. While attending Amherst College, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and served for eight months at the end of World War II. He graduated from Amherst summa cum laude in 1947.

Merrill’s earliest book, “First Poems,” published in 1951, earned critical acclaim. In 1955 he moved to Stonington, Connecticut, sharing a home with his partner, David Jackson. For two decades, the couple spent part of each year in Athens, Greece, a location that inspired much of Merrill’s work.

A master of polished, formal lyrical poetry, Merrill frequently drew inspiration from his personal life and past experiences. His work garnered praise for its elegance, wit and wordplay.

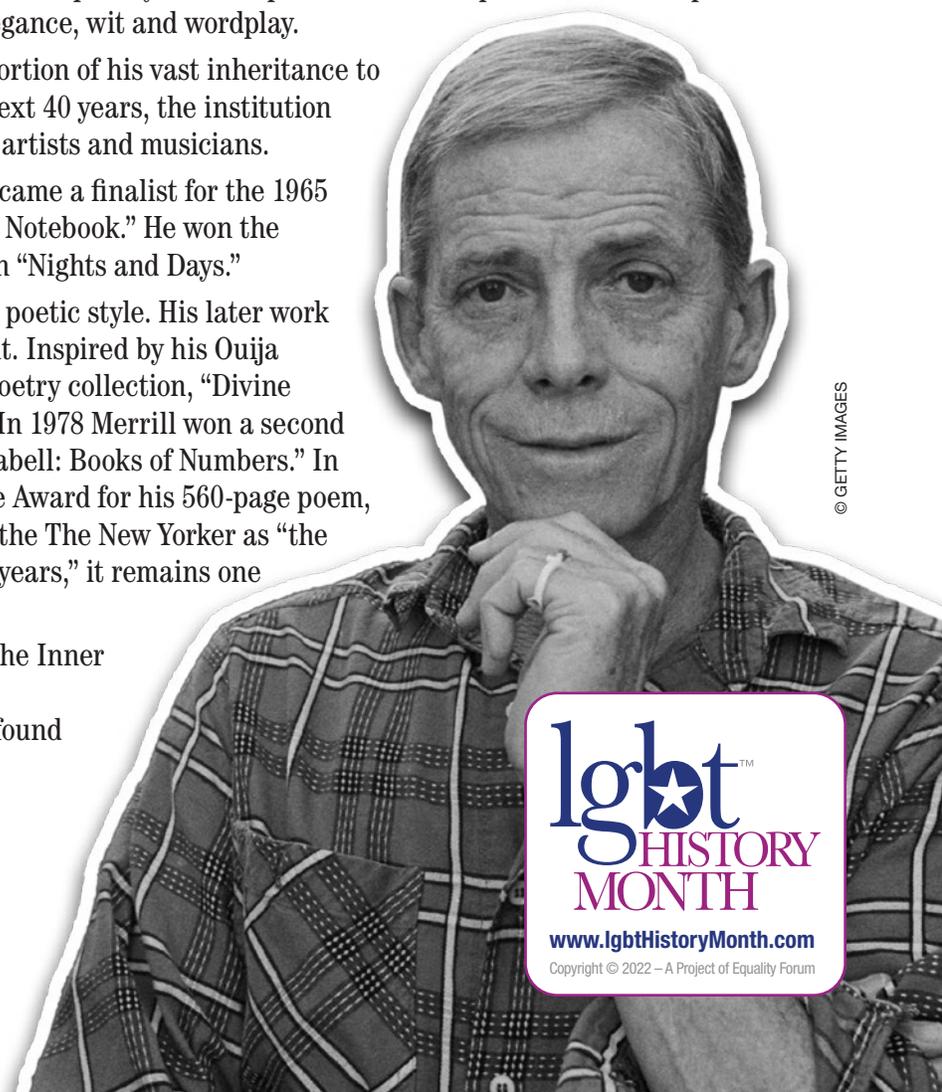
After his father’s death in 1956, Merrill used a portion of his vast inheritance to start the Ingram Merrill Foundation. Over the next 40 years, the institution awarded millions of dollars in grants to writers, artists and musicians.

The author of 19 books and two plays, Merrill became a finalist for the 1965 National Book Award for his novel “The (Diblos) Notebook.” He won the award the following year for his poetry collection “Nights and Days.”

As he matured, Merrill adapted a more informal poetic style. His later work reflected his interest in mysticism and the occult. Inspired by his Ouija board sessions with Jackson, Merrill’s seventh poetry collection, “Divine Comedies,” earned him the 1977 Pulitzer Prize. In 1978 Merrill won a second National Book Award for his poetry volume “Mirabell: Books of Numbers.” In 1982 he received the National Book Critics Circle Award for his 560-page poem, “The Changing Light at Sandover.” Described by the *The New Yorker* as “the most ambitious American poem of the past fifty years,” it remains one of the longest ever published.

Merrill’s late poetry, including his collections “The Inner Room” (1988) and the posthumously released, “A Scattering of Salts” (1995), addressed the profound effect of the AIDS crisis on his life.

Merrill died from complications of AIDS. He and Jackson remained partners for 40 years.



© GETTY IMAGES

lgbt[™]
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright © 2022 – A Project of Equality Forum