

JOHN BROWN'S BODY

by Stephen Vincent Benét

An unabridged 1929
Pulitzer Prize-winning book-length poem

Narrated by Dick Korf

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Recorded at the studios of
Zen Recording, Pinellas Park, Florida
and Studio KTK, Ithaca, New York
Produced by Noni Korf Vidal

Excerpts from the FOREWORD to the 1941 edition

John Brown's Body is a long poem dealing with some of the things that happened in our Civil War and how they affected various kinds of Americans, North and South, East and West. A good many of the people described in it are real people who played their part in history—Lincoln, Lee, Judah P. Benjamin, John Brown. A good many others—Jack Ellyat, Clay Wingate, Melora Vilas—are imaginary people, fictional characters. All I can claim is that nothing happens to any one of the fictional characters that did not happen or could not have happened to real people who lived in that time. It was a remarkable time—one of the great and crucial periods of our history—and it summoned forth great men and small, strong figures and weak ones. It decided how we were going to live as a nation—whether we were going to live as two nations or as one—and all the America we know today is built upon that decision. If we had decided to live as two nations instead of as one, our own daily lives would be very different. Moreover, the Civil War produced, on both sides, men and deeds of the heroic kind. And such things are worth writing about so that they can be remembered....

In closing this brief foreword, I should like to say one thing more. Poetry is meant to be read, it is meant to be heard. It is meant for everybody, not only for the scholars. It is not a highly complicated puzzle box which you can open only with a special set of keys. It tells its story in a different way from prose—it uses rhyme and meter and the words go to a beat. You cannot read it precisely as you read prose, any more than you can sing the words of a song without knowing the tune. With poetry, the tune is in the words themselves—and once you begin to hear it, it will stay with you. Nor is it so difficult to hear. Most of the basic rhythms of poetry are very old ones—rhythms hammered out by men who wanted to tell a story or convey an idea more intensely, more swiftly and memorably than they could in prose. Sometimes they succeeded in this, sometimes they did not. You will be able to judge for yourself whether an individual poem succeeds in making you see more clearly or deeply—whether it enters your stock of memories and remains there. But poetry itself is not restricted to any special class, to any special section of life. It is open to any reader who likes the sound and the swing of rhythm, the color and fire of words.

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

New York
November, 1941



Dick Korf's thoughts about this audio book

This recording was made in 2006, a last gasp of an 80-year-old lifelong actor, the culmination of a 20-year dream. It is dedicated to my actress daughter, Mia Korf, for encouragement, and to my wife, Kumi, for everything.

I grew up as a ravenous reader, encountering Steven Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* at the age of 14. I was captivated by the book, which I read and reread over the ensuing sixty-some years. It surely helped form me into an anti-war activist.

My acting career began at an early age at Riverdale Country School in New York City, eventually being cast in major roles in three annual outdoor productions of Shakespeare's plays. These contributed immeasurably to my appreciation of both drama and poetry.

Poetry has a very special place in my heart, and as a youth I began reading and writing poetry. I agree with Stephen Vincent Benét: poetry begs to be read aloud. The skilled poet may embed in his poems frequent "stage directions" in the choice of typographic tools (punctuation, the use of parentheses, italic typeface, paragraphs, long dashes, indentations), and of course changes in meter or rhyme. Benét's use of these tools simplified my narration of the poem; these are treated here as not only readers' but narrator's guidelines.

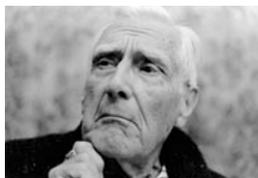
This recording is intended to bring this important poem about our American Civil War, the most destructive war in American history, to the attention of my family and close friends. While I recognize this is not a professional recording, it remedies the lack of an audio book version in the commercial market.

The theatre has been my lifelong passion. I performed during my college years at Cornell University (where I later became a professor) and I continued to perform and direct in the Ithaca, New York community, both on stage and in radio dramas. While on my final sabbatical leave before retirement I took a fling at off-off-Broadway performances of three plays while in New York City.

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of my granddaughter, Maïa Vidal, for her vocal solo and Emoretta Yang for a guitar version of the song *John Brown's Body*. My elder daughter, Noni Korf Vidal, contributed a violin version and is mainly responsible for post-recording production; her unstinting help and my wife Kumi's generosity made this audio book a reality. Pete Wetherbee helped me develop the reading with initial recording sessions in 2002 in San Bruno, CA, and later edited the discs. One of my twin sons, Ian Korf, helped me with recording techniques in 2005 in Davis, CA. My other son, Mario Korf, edited these liner notes.

DICK KORF

The narrator suggests that if you are interested in the details of the events and real people portrayed and in Benét's use of many unusual words you should look for the 1968 edition published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. That edition includes very useful notes by Jack L. Capps and C. Robert Kemble. Those notes greatly assisted his understanding of the text.



photographs of Dick Korf © 2005 by Maïa T. Vidal