Knock Poetry Off the Pedestal: It’s Time to Make Poems a Part of Children’s Everyday Lives

Marilyn Singer

Abstract
In this article, published with permission from School Library Journal, Marilyn Singer shares ideas from her fellow children’s poets about strengths and values of poetry written for children and ways it can be presented and represented in classrooms. Many of the poets suggest ideas for teaching their own specific poems and books.

It was last October, and I was feeling self-congratulatory. I had already booked the 11 participants for the next “Poetry Blast,” the reading by children’s poets at the American Library Association’s annual conference. Once again, we were going to spread the good word that poetry is an aural art.

Then I got an email from Richie Partington, friend, critic, and kids’ lit missionary. He’d been invited to teach a class on children’s and young adult poetry at San Jose State University’s School of Library and Information Science. “What important concepts about poetry would you like library school students to learn about?” he asked.

“Well, Richie,” I started to reply, “As I’ve always said, to appreciate poetry, you have to hear it.” But then all of my assurance went out the window. Surely, I thought, that isn’t the only concept that future school librarians need to embrace. I know firsthand that most kids seem to like poetry. But something amiss happens along the road to adulthood, and many of those same students end up actively disliking poetry or not relating to it. And who can blame them? Poetry is often presented as a rarefied thing that exists only to be analyzed by professorial types or as greeting-card sentiments to be enjoyed by love-struck girls (and the guys who hit on them). So, I mulled, what can librarians do to buck this trend? I know! I’ll ask some other poets who write for young readers.

One of the first to respond was poet-photographer Charles R. Smith, Jr., whose latest book, My People (S & S/Atheneum), nabbed the 2010 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, thanks to his stunning photos. He immediately came up with a grand mantra: “Poetry needs to be taken off the pedestal.” He added, “While poetry month is a good idea in theory, it ultimately confines poetry to that one month. As a black poet, I’m
busy in February [Black History Month] and April [National Poetry Month], but I’m still a black poet the other 10 months of the year!” The solution? “By exposing students to poetry on a daily basis, by connecting it with their everyday lives, they begin to see the beauty and value in words,” says Smith.

Yes! I agree. And so does Julie Larios. Perhaps “librarians don’t use more poetry because they’re afraid of it,” and some believe it’s “nowhere near as sturdy as fiction or nonfiction . . . or it’s too cute, maybe, for kids,” says Larios, winner of the 2006 Pushcart Prize for poetry and a teacher in Vermont College’s Writing for Children program. “That’s why poetry comes out for only one month of the year and at holidays. I would love to have librarians stop thinking poetry should only be about snowmen, hearts, dancing flowers, bunnies, ice cream, witches, pumpkins, turkeys, jingle bells, and the wind.”

The beautiful thing about poems is that they can be enjoyed on many levels, and they can create so many connections. Not only are there poems that tie into any subject—from science to social studies—but there are all types of poems for all types of people. “The most important concept I’d love to see librarians and media specialists embrace is that poetry is available for everyone—from the rainbow-unicorn-loving kids to the goth kids,” says Laura Purdie Salas, the author of Stampede! Poems to Celebrate the Wild Side of School (Clarion, 2009). “Library holdings that reflect a wide array of styles and moods are so great for young readers. Let them read silly and serious, escapist and thought-provoking, rural and urban poetry. Show them passionate and sarcastic poems. If we can share enough kinds of poems with children, I think all kids can find themselves somewhere in them.”

What’s the best way to present poetry? Monica Gunning, a former elementary school teacher, remembers what her famed poetry instructor, Myra Cohn Livingston, used to say: “Poetry invites children to participate in the delights of bounding rhythm, to clap their hands, to tap their feet, move their bodies if they wish to do so.” And Joan Bransfield Graham, whose concrete poems take on the shape of what they’re describing, endorses a similar strategy. “Begin with the pleasures and joy of poetry—luxuriate in it—the rhythms, rhymes, luscious language and playfulness,” she says. “I love to do poems in an interactive call-and-response way so that children can be part of the poem.”

Kristine O’Connell George thinks that Charlotte Huck, the late children’s literature expert, would have approved of these kid-friendly approaches. “Huck recommended reading poems at least twice—not only to allow a child time to revel in the language but also to create an opportunity for the child and the poem to connect,” says George, who served as poetry consultant for Storytime, a PBS series aimed at turning young kids into lifelong readers. “Charlotte saw children as active participants in the poetry experience and honored their ability to have a personal encounter with a poem without adult interference.”

What other strategies work with young readers? Joyce Sidman, a two-time Cybil Award winner, offers some road-tested advice. “I try to avoid the phrase ‘What does the poet mean when she says?’ I think we need to start with asking questions about a poem: What pictures does this poem paint in your head? What words do you like? What don’t you understand? What surprises you? How does this poem make you feel?”

Another surefire way to connect kids to poetry is to ask them to tuck a favorite poem inside a library book. That way, when their classmates pick up a novel or nonfiction book, they’ll also have a poem on hand, says Lee Bennett Hopkins, winner of the National Council for Teachers of English 2009 Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. “Librarians can encourage readers to add another poem,” he explains. “Within months one novel might have three, four, or more verses relating to the plot, characters, or setting inside its covers for future readers to
enjoy.” As an alternative to leaving a poem, kids can keep the ones they find. After all, who doesn’t love a freebie—especially one that has just “turned up” in a book, perhaps with the title “Take This Poem.”

Hopkins’s anthologies, which feature the works of diverse groups of poets writing in a variety of forms on a range of subjects and themes, also help students connect with poetry, as do those compiled by Jack Prelutsky, Bobbi Katz, Betsy Franco, Mary Ann Hoberman and Linda Winston, and many others. So much wealth is contained in anthologies such as Hopkins’s Sharing the Seasons (S & S, 2010), Prelutsky’s The Beauty of the Beast (Knopf, 1997), Katz’s Pocket Poems (Dutton, 2004), Franco’s You Hear Me? (Candlewick, 2001), and Hoberman and Winston’s The Tree That Time Built (Sourcebooks, 2009)! And, as Susan Marie Swanson, whose The House in the Night (Houghton), illustrated by Beth Krommes, snagged the 2009 Caldecott Medal, points out, anthologies don’t demand to be read from cover to cover. There’s a freedom in knowing that you can start in the middle of a collection or skip around.

Anthologies also provide a great service by introducing young readers and librarians to the many talented poets who aren’t household names. After all, with all due respect to the creator of The Giving Tree, “there is life after Shel Silverstein!” says poet and literacy specialist Tracie Vaughn Zimmer. “While kids do love humorous verse, it’s also important to show them why adults turn to poetry whenever the world weighs heavy on their shoulders, how words become a refuge. We do children a disservice when we only show them poetry that is funny and rhymed.”

To help kids discover new poets, Juanita Havill, the editor of Book Love (Phoenix College, 2000), suggests grouping individual collections alongside anthologies. J. Patrick Lewis, who has written poems about everything from Blackbeard to an underwear salesman, and Swanson, who works with kids in the Twin Cities’ schools, are big fans of creating a “poetry corner,” where rotating groups of books are constantly on display.

And how about making poetry trading cards? It’s another way to fall in love with poems and the poets who write them. Plus, it’s easy to do. Start by asking your students to find a poem they like in an anthology. Then have them find a book written by the same poet and pick out another poem that appeals to them. Next, kids can copy their poems on blank cards and illustrate these with their own drawings or pictures from old magazines. Finally, it’s time to trade. If students don’t like the poems they receive, they can keep trading for another one.

Trading poems is one way to fall in love with poetry and the poets who write it. Another method is former lawyer–turned–children’s writer Janet Wong’s “poetry suitcase.” Kids get roughly 15 minutes to look through poetry books, select poems, and write them on index cards. Then students take their poems home. A week later, they bring back their cards, each tied to a prop. For example, a poem about the wind might be attached to a broken umbrella, or one about a birthday party might go with a balloon. Then the props and poems go into a suitcase. When there’s a spare minute, the librarian lets a student choose a poem from the suitcase and read it aloud.

David Harrison, who has the distinction of having had an elementary school, in Springfield, MO, named after him, knows of a teacher who hosts “Fishbowl Fridays.” Her students drop their favorite poems into a fishbowl, and at the end of the week, she draws out a few for her kids to read aloud. With permission from colleagues, the teacher then brings the kids to other classrooms to read the poems aloud.

All of these activities show that poems are something to enjoy. As Naomi Shihab Nye, who’s new book, Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets Under 25 (Greenwillow, 2010), features the creations of some exciting young talents, says, “Poetry is fun . . . sometimes people just need
to be reminded.” And, she adds, “it's even 'fun' to express painful things with clarity, sometimes. More fun than not speaking.”

Taking an even broader view of what librarians can do to spread the gospel of poetry, Larios sees both libraries and poems as “community builders” and suggests that poetry and prose can be presented in conjunction with a wide range of hot topics and events—everything from a discussion of climate change to the opening day of the baseball season. “Can you imagine what the local media would do if they heard that a branch library, on the occasion of a global conference on climate change, had organized a reading of nature poetry and passages from Walden—and that the readers included kids?” asks Larios. “Wouldn't that be wonderful?”

So, that brings us back to my own mantra: poetry demands to be heard. In fact, “kids have more trouble reading a poem than hearing it,” explains Jane Yolen, whom Newsweek magazine dubbed America’s Hans Christian Andersen. “So read these things aloud. First you, then a single child, then the entire class—then you again. Heard that often, the poem will have wormed its way into the child’s ear.” What a marvelous way to take poetry off that pedestal and make it live among us—warm and welcome.

**Poetry Is A Blast**

But don’t just take my word for it. Here are some additional ideas from my fellow poets.

**Betsy Franco** ([www.betsyfranco.com](http://www.betsyfranco.com))

“I purposely wrote a collection of school poems for two voices, *Messing Around on the Monkey Bars,* to encourage children to read poetry out loud.”

**Kristine O’Connell George** ([www.kristinegeorge.com](http://www.kristinegeorge.com))

“Read my book *Toasting Marshmallows* by flashlight with the lights off or by a faux bonfire made of twigs and red cellophane.”

**Joan Bransfield Graham** ([joangraham.com](http://joangraham.com))

“My 'Popsicle' poem from *Splish Splash* is fun to do in ‘call and response.’ On my Website, I provide schools with a master for ‘Popsicle’ bookmarks so they can run them off in their favorite flavors.”

**Monica Gunning**

“Many poems in my books are good for dramatizing. For example, I have children take off and carry their shoes during ‘Walking to Church’ from *Not a Copper Penny in Me House*.”

**David Harrison**

([davidlharrison.wordpress.com](http://davidlharrison.wordpress.com))

“I share poems from my autobiographical collection, *Connecting Dots.* Then we start lists of what the students remember of their past experiences, and they write their own memory poems.”

**Juanita Havill**

“I have kids dramatize the scarecrow poem, ‘The Monster,’ from my book *I Heard It from Alice Zucchini.* I bring in a costume and invite someone to play the scarecrow. Other students get to be the various vegetables and birds that appear in the poem.”

**Lee Bennett Hopkins**

“I use ‘Let’s Talk’ by Rebecca Kai Dotlich from my collection *Wonderful Words* with children of all ages. The verse opens up so much discussion with readers about things they want to talk about.”

**Bobbi Katz** ([www.bobbikatz.com](http://www.bobbikatz.com))

“In my book *More Pocket Poems,* the opening piece speaks of what can only fit in a pocket when tucked in a poem. I suggest kids go on a treasure hunt for poems about animals, objects, emotions, etc., that those poems make portable.”

**Julie Larios** ([julielarios.blogspot.com](http://julielarios.blogspot.com))

“My book *Imaginary Menagerie* is filled with questions. We explore them, and then I have kids write poems that must include at least two questions.”

**J. Patrick Lewis** ([www.jpaticklewis.com](http://www.jpaticklewis.com))
"I recite riddle verse from my books such as Spot the Plot or Scienc-trickery. Kids get to be a part of the action when they can shout out their guesses."

Naomi Shihab Nye (www.barclayagency.com/nye.html) "I suggest using The Way It Is, by William Stafford, to get kids' brains on their 'poetry channel' and also Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets, which I edited."

Laura Purdie Salas (www.laurasalas.com) "With my book Stampede! I find that kids love to do different voices, bark and oink, call out the rhyming words, and do hand motions."

Joyce Sidman (www.joycesidman.com) "For a discussion starter, pair the poem 'This Is Just to Say' by William Carlos Williams with my book This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness. As an added activity, have participants try their hand at an apology poem."

Marilyn Singer (marilynsinger.net) "Have kids do paired readings of the reversos from my book Mirror Mirror, acting out the fairy tale characters."

Charles R. Smith, Jr. (www.charlessmithjr.com) "I perform Langston Hughes's My People, a book with photos by me. Teachers and librarians can use it with kids to get them to describe themselves or friends and family."

Susan Marie Swanson (www.susanmarieswanson.com) "I encourage discussion by showing connections. For example, I pair my picture book To Be Like the Sun, which is addressed to a sunflower, with 'Sandia,' a poem addressed to a watermelon, from Gary Soto's Canto Familiar."

Janet Wong (www.janetwong.com) "Start your 'poetry suitcase' with a dog toy and a selection such as 'Dog' from my book Twist or poems from Douglas Florian's Bow Wow Meow Meow and Kristine O'Connell George's Little Dog Poems."

Jane Yolen (janeyolen.com) "I tell kids to pick a poem to set to music and record it for the class. For example, several of my poems in Dinosaur Dances have been recorded by Lui Collins."

Tracie Vaughn Zimmerman (tracievaughnzimmer.com/TVZ/HOME.html) "Have students try writing an ode to poetry like my poem 'The Poems I Like Best' from 42 Miles."

For more ideas check out Hopkins's Pass the Poetry, Please (HarperCollins, 1998) and Sylvia Vardell's Poetry Aloud Here! (ALA Editions, 2006).

Winner of the 2015 Award for Excellence in Poetry, Marilyn Singer is the author of over one hundred books, many of which are poetry collections, including Mirror Mirror (Dial) for which she created the "reverso" form. Her latest poetry books are Rutherford B, Who Was He? Poems about Our Presidents (Disney-Hyperion); Follow Follow: A Book of Reversos (Dial); and A Strange Place to Call Home (Chronicle). She co-hosts the Poetry Blast, which features children's poets reading their work at ALA and other conferences. Marilyn and her husband live in Brooklyn, NY and Washington, CT with several pets.