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WORDPLAY for Kids

A Sourcebook of Poems, Rhymes, and Read-Alouds

TIM WADHAM

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To Katie Blake and Cynthia Daniels.
Also to Bonnie Anderson and Carol Hopkins
who developed several of the after-school programs in this book.
CONTENTS

Foreword / ix

CHAPTER 1
Shared Warmth: A Parent-Child Reading Program / 1

CHAPTER 2
Wordplay for Five- to Seven-Year-Olds / 5

CHAPTER 3
Wordplay for Eight- to Twelve-Year-Olds / 63

CHAPTER 4
Literature I Like to Share with Children / 211

Index / 215
THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK BEGAN IN 1985. I HAD JUST COMPLETED MY
master’s degree in library science. While I was looking for a full-time, profes-
sional position, I spent a year working as a part-time public library clerk and a
part-time school library aide. It was in the school library, under the tutelage of
an outstanding school librarian named Katie Blake that I experienced a program
that has influenced, to this day, my approach to literature-based programs and
activities in public libraries.

One benefit of working in a school library setting is the potential of having
a captive audience you can impact on a regular, usually weekly basis. Katie
Blake took advantage of this opportunity and created a program she originally
called Childread—in her words, “an attempt to organize that gigantic subject,
children’s literature, so that it may be introduced in a systematic way during
weekly ‘library’ time.” As her aide, I was able to spend a year implementing this
program, which is really quite elegant in its simplicity. As classes came in for
their scheduled time, they would sit down on steps in a sunken kiva-like area,
and we would start with choral poetry reading. The poems were written on a
large easel pad so that the kids could read along together out loud. We would
follow up with a few books with the younger grades or a chapter from a book
for the upper grades. Then there would be an activity based on the book. Being
involved with this program for almost an entire school year allowed me to see
the impact of the program over time. What I saw happening that year was really
quite remarkable. Of course, the children memorized the poems, but as they did
so, I could see a progression in their literacy skills over the year. The improve-
ment in their vocabulary and verbal skills was visible.
Knowing that I was going into public librarianship, I began to wonder how I could achieve the same results in a public library setting, where I did not have the benefit of a captive audience. The answer came in the form of another wonderful school librarian, Cynthia Daniels, who approached me after I began work at the Dallas West branch of the Dallas Public Library in Texas. She had just received a grant and asked if I would be willing to create an after-school program to which she and another school librarian could bring children two days a week. My thoughts immediately went to adapting Katie Blake’s program for a public library setting. The kids began coming twice a week. I began the program just as I had done in the school library, with choral poetry reading. Since these kids were mid- to upper-elementary age, I would read a chapter of a book each time they came. Most memorably, we made it through *The Whipping Boy*, by Sid Fleischman. When I suggested the book, Cynthia and her coworker were skeptical. West Dallas was the most economically disadvantaged community in the entire city, and I was working with minority students who lived in a massive government-housing project. The librarians weren’t sure that a book about a prince in an inferred eighteenth-century setting would have any relevance for their kids. *The Whipping Boy* turned out to be one of the favorites of all the books we read over the three years I ran the program in West Dallas. I believe it was because although the setting of the book was admittedly far removed from the daily reality of these kids from the projects, it resonated with them on a more universal level because of the idea of the whipping boy himself: every kid can relate to the trauma of being punished for something you didn’t do.

I did not see the real impact of this program until fourteen years later, when one of the kids from the after-school group came into the branch library where I was then working in Dallas and remembered that I used to read books to him. He was now an adult, using the library and reading to his own children.

During my years in Dallas, from there to Arizona, and now in Washington State, I have continued to successfully use variations of this program, even when there were not school librarians with a grant to transport their students twice a week. This has become my go-to style of programming, and I have done entire sessions on one book, the work of a specific author, or different activities each week connected by a common theme, such as fantasy or mysteries.

Developed as a companion program to Childread, Shared Warmth was a program that Katie Blake developed as a way to extend the program beyond the school library to a child’s parents or caregiver, and as a way to encourage parents to read out loud to their children. Chapter 1 of *Wordplay for Kids* describes a new take on implementing the Shared Warmth concept in a public library setting.

The original Childread program was arranged sequentially by grade level. Since it would be difficult to create public library programs restricted to grade
levels, this book is divided into two basic sections with suggested poems, books, and programs for five- to seven-year-olds and eight- to twelve-year-olds.

The emphasis of chapter 2 of *Wordplay for Kids*, for ages five to seven, is to help children develop a “literary ear”: artful language patterns, correct and interesting language usage (grammar), and a large and rich vocabulary. *Wordplay for Kids* features almost 100 nursery rhymes and a great deal of poetry designed to share orally. Because of copyright issues, the texts of most poems not in the public domain are not included. However, I have included multiple ways to find sources for the text of as many of these poems as possible, both online and in books and anthologies. As in traditional storytimes for preschool children, a major focus for younger students is to listen to books read out loud. Children of this age are ready to move on from simple picture books and can be challenged with more complex stories, including folklore and fables. I include lists of recommended picture books, easy fiction, and fiction that can be shared. My experience with this age group is that we should never underestimate the ability of children to understand and respond to literature that we might think is too difficult. I was introduced to Greek mythology in the second grade through the Sullivan Programmed Reading curriculum, which made a huge impact on me at the time. Suggestions for introducing Greek mythology are included here, along with some recommended collections. I have also included one sample program for this age group, based on the fourteen Oz books by L. Frank Baum, as an example of a way to use longer, chapter-length books with five- to seven-year-olds. Reading out loud should always be followed by a chance for children to participate in activities, such as creative dramatization, visual art, or music activities, directly based on the books just shared. A central goal of *Wordplay* is to help children lose their video-game passivity and turn them into active participants.

Chapter 3 of *Wordplay for Kids*, for ages eight to twelve, features poems, most of which are short, many humorous, and all selected with kid appeal in mind. The poems are divided into categories, including classic, longer narrative poems. Although it might seem at first glance that some of these longer poems might not be appropriate for this age group, I would note as above never to underestimate a child’s ability to understand. Also, since the purpose of the Wordplay program is to make children familiar with unfamiliar words and more complex and rich language, challenging children with longer narrative poetry can make a huge impact on their vocabulary and literacy skills. Book lists that introduce children to more advanced fairy-tale adaptations and folktales are included in addition to a recommended fiction book list. The primary way of presenting these books is through reading them aloud in a *Wordplay for Kids* session. Titles can also be presented using booktalks and media. Finally, a series of sample after-school program ideas are presented, all of which have been successfully used in the field.
This book is not just for public librarians working with children. It is for school librarians, who I hope will begin utilizing this program as it was presented in its original setting. It is for homeschoolers and their parents and teachers as well, and it can easily be adapted as a way of creating a literature curriculum for homeschool support groups. I believe in this program. I believe that it can make a real and lasting difference in the lives of children. It will help create a love of poetry and the sound and rhythm of language. As children’s facility with oral language improves, their vocabulary as well as their writing skills will also be strengthened. The books and stories to which they are exposed will provide an essential element of cultural literacy that will serve them all their life. *Wordplay for Kids* is presented with the purpose of helping children want to read; to encourage them to be lifelong readers; and, by being familiar with literature’s wide range of experiences, to be sensitive, informed, and loving human beings.

Katie Blake passed away on November 26, 2012. Although she is not able to see this project come to fruition, she did give full permission for me to use her original Childread materials and expressed great enthusiasm when I let her know that this book was under contract. A statement in her obituary reads: “Of particular delight to her was her students’ mastery of nursery rhymes and tongue twisters. She called it setting their ear to the language.” It will be a fitting tribute if those who use this program can develop a similar love and mastery of the language with the students who participate.
As part of Librarian Katie Blake’s Childread program, introducing children to literature, she also implemented a reading program that involved parents that she called Shared Warmth. The Shared Warmth program encourages families to read together. The success of Shared Warmth caused the program to be implemented in other schools and to be included as a recommended program in M. Ellen Jay and Hilda L. Jay’s *Ready-to-Go Reading Incentive Programs for Schools and Libraries* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1998).

**Philosophy behind Shared Warmth**

What makes the difference between a person who identifies him- or herself as someone who loves to read, someone who is a voracious reader, or someone who never chooses to read but reads only what is required? Why did that person become one type of reader instead of the other?

You will find, almost without exception, that people who love to read attribute that love to the home. Either their mother or their father or both read to them regularly. Parents who read a lot themselves typically provide books in the home for their children as well.
Teachers and librarians, though they have the power to be highly influential in creating readers, can never be as influential as parents. So what can a public library do? Public libraries face lots of challenges with children who come into the library as well as children who must be reached by going outside the walls of the physical building. Children have video-game and electronics-induced passivity. Often, one or both parents are working and have little time to interact with their children. What can the public library do to capture attention? This is where Shared Warmth comes in. Libraries need to develop a family/home/library reading program.

What Is Shared Warmth?

Shared Warmth’s family/home/library reading program is what Wordplay for Kids is reaching for—a climate where the love of reading is fostered by parents, children, and public librarians together. Shared Warmth is reading done at home, not only by the child, but also by the parent reading to the child or vice versa. That is the key. It is such a simple thing, but there is no question that one of the very best things that parents can do for their children from day one is to simply read to them out loud.

Requirements, Recognition, and Record Keeping

To kick off a library’s Shared Warmth program, parents are invited to attend a special “Back to School/Back to the Library” night. While children’s librarians provide a storytime that includes choral poetry reading and activities for the children in a separate location, the parents attend a session explaining the Shared Warmth program and detailing the importance of reading aloud to their children and of having books in the home. At such a program, librarians can also demonstrate booktalks for the parents. Librarians can make sure that everyone is registered for library cards. Next, the children come back into the room with their parents and, for example, perform a short poem that they learned in the storytime. At the end of the program, each child may receive a book of his or her own to take home, and each family receives a Shared Warmth calendar. Any calendar can be used, or even a printout of a month, so parents and kids can write on it.

On the calendar, the parent or guardian initials each day when one of the following is accomplished:

1. Parent reads to the child
2. Child reads to the parent
3. Child reads silently
Public libraries can set a specific length of time for the program and come up with the required reading time. Five- to seven-year-olds may only need to read or be read to fifteen minutes a night. Eight- to ten-year-olds might be challenged to read twenty to thirty minutes. Eleven- and twelve-year-olds could be reading thirty minutes or more per night.

Required reading nights are Mondays through Fridays, and if a night is missed, Saturday or Sunday can be used as makeup days. This means that children and parents should be participating in Shared Warmth twenty-one to twenty-two days per month.

The child or parents should return their Shared Warmth calendar to the library for the previous month on a designated day, such as the third working day of each month. Parents should initial each day the goal was met on the calendar. Children who return the calendar with the required days checked off could have their names (first name and last initial) displayed prominently in the children’s area of the library.

There should be a reward each month for children who complete the required days. This reading incentive can take almost any form—coupons, a book or DVD, candy—whatever works for your community and your budget.

When Shared Warmth is conducted in a school setting, it takes place during the school year—from August or September to May or June. In a public library setting, it can also span the school year. Children who complete the required nine months can be honored at an end-of-the-year party at the library. They can receive specially designed T-shirts, have their names engraved on a plaque permanently placed in the library, and be featured in a group photo. This sort of program, done correctly, can challenge students and truly galvanize both the parents and the larger community.

The original Shared Warmth program had an incredible response. Parents were checking out books. Parents loved doing Shared Warmth and the new quiet reading time in the evening. Parents mentioned that some children would not go to bed without doing their reading time and having their calendars initialed. From a statistical standpoint, the local school’s achievement tests showed significant increases, particularly with the ten- to twelve-year-olds.

Libraries doing Shared Warmth might also find other ways to provide positive reinforcement to children who are participating in the program. Children’s librarians need to reach those children who might not have any encouragement to read at home and whose parents are not interested in Shared Warmth.

We can’t expect our young people, in their most sensitive, formative years, to love what we do not love, or to value what we do not value. Facts go into our brain cells. Living examples go into our bone marrow. A child caught up in the joy of reading is marvelous; even better are the moments when young and
old share the joy together. There’s no happier combination, and that indeed may be the only magic formula. —Lloyd Alexander

To facilitate that magic combination between child and parent or adult is at its heart the goal of Shared Warmth.
This chapter of Wordplay for Kids provides resources for introducing younger children, ages five to seven, to literature in a public library or school library setting. The materials provide a great deal of flexibility for programmers to develop a variety of programs for a variety of audiences and settings, including homeschools. This style of programming is meant to be a next step after preschool storytimes. Although these programs may include some elements that will be familiar to storytime kids, they should also feel different. The resource sections are in the order in which they are most effectively used in programming. When introducing any of these types of literature, children should be given the context of the form that they are hearing. For example, they should know that fables are a type of story that includes a moral.

I. Poetry for Choral Reading

Programs should always begin with choral poetry reading. This activity is one of the most defining and unique features of this style of programming. It is also crucial to achieve the potential literacy benefits. The text of the poems should be either projected on a screen or written on a large notepad placed on
an easel. The text should be large enough for young children to be able to read from where they are sitting. An alternative could be to provide children with a printed handout with the text of the poems from which they can read.

II. Nursery Rhymes for Choral Reading

The inclusion of nursery rhymes serves another central purpose of this programming, which is to introduce children to classic literature, in whatever form. It is possible that many children might never hear these rhymes unless they are introduced to them in a library setting. *Wordplay for Kids* provides the opportunity for children to not only hear these rhymes, but also to say them out loud. The nursery rhymes are presented in three sets, with the idea that each set contains enough poems for children to master during a multiweek Wordplay program. When children have mastered one set, you can move on to the next. There are some rhymes that are repeated from one set to the next.

Hearing and saying these poems out loud will give children a greater appreciation for the fun of language: sound, rhyme, and rhythm.

III. Folktales and Fairy Stories

Children should be introduced to the original versions of the classic folktales and fairy stories. This prepares them not only with general cultural literacy, but also helps them better appreciate the many popular “fractured” fairy tales. Many children now become familiar with folktales and fairy stories through the postmodern versions, like *The Stinky Cheese Man* and *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*. The book list includes some of the most well-known tales. It includes a list of different versions of specific tales and a further list of individual folktales. The list also includes some of the classic versions and retellings in picture-book form.

IV. Fables

Fables are also an important part of folk literature to which children ought to be introduced. Because, as opposed to fairy tales and folktales, fables have such a distinctive form, they merit a separate program. Also, there are new fables to which children can be introduced along with the classic Aesop fables.

V. Greek Mythology

Learning Greek mythology is a crucial part of cultural literacy. This section gives an outline of myths and mythical characters from the Greeks and books that can be used to introduce this important legacy to children.
**VI. Picture Books and Easy Fiction**

The list of recommended picture books and easy fiction includes picture books and easy readers that can be shared in an after-school, home, or school library setting with the post-preschool storytime crowd.

**VII. Fiction**

As kids learn to read better, they are also prepared for more thematically complex stories, regardless of length. This list presents some recommended titles.

**VIII. Sample Program: Discover the Oz Books**

Books like *The Wizard of Oz* can be effectively introduced to children as early as age two or three as read-alouds. I was first introduced to Oz when I was five years old, and my mother purchased a set of all fourteen of L. Frank Baum’s Oz books for Christmas. I still remember being downstairs and hearing her call, then running upstairs to find the box full of books. She began reading them out loud to me, and it is from them I taught myself to read. I also remember reading one of them to my baby sister and stopping in the middle of a sentence when I suddenly had the awareness that I was actually reading. Reading the Oz books aloud has great appeal for younger children.

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**I. Poetry for Choral Reading**

Every session of choral poetry should begin with the following poem, by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers. This is a perfect poem to demonstrate the delight of poetry and the rhythm and the sound of the words. Make this the entry point for choral poetry reading.

*"Keep a Poem in Your Pocket"*  
*by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers*

Keep a poem in your pocket  
And a picture in your head  
And you’ll never feel lonely  
At night when you’re in bed.

The little poem will sing to you  
The little picture bring to you  
A dozen dreams to dance to you  
At night when you’re in bed.
So—
Keep a picture in your pocket
And a poem in your head
And you’ll never feel lonely
At night when you’re in bed.

This poem can be found in the following:
and Bacon, 1963.
Larrick, Nancy. *Piping down the Valleys Wild: Poetry for the Young of All
for Young Readers, 1999.

“Calling All Readers”  
by Laura Purdie Salas

First lines: “I’ll tell you a story. / I’ll spin you a rhyme”

This poem can be found in the following:
Salas, Laura Purdie. *Bookspeak! Poems About Books*. Illus. by Josée Bisail-

“Mud”  
by Polly Chase Boyden

First line: “Mud is very nice to feel”

This poem can be found in the following:
Arbuthnot, May Hill, and Shelton L. Root, eds. *Time for Poetry: A Repre-
sentative Collection of Poetry for Children, to Be Used in the Classroom,
Home, or Camp; Especially Planned for College Classes in Children’s Litera-
and Bacon, 1963.
1984.
I. POETRY FOR CHORAL READING / 9


“The Swing”  
*by Robert Louis Stevenson*

How do you like to go up in a swing,  
Up in the air so blue?  
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing  
Ever a child can do!

Up in the air and over the wall,  
Till I can see so wide,  
Rivers and trees and cattle and all  
Over the countryside—

Till I look down on the garden green,  
Down on the roof so brown—  
Up in the air I go flying again,  
Up in the air and down!

*This poem can be found in the following:*


“I’m Glad the Sky Is Painted Blue”  
*—Anon.*

I’m glad the sky is painted blue  
And the earth is painted green,  
And such a lot of nice fresh air  
All sandwiched in-between.

“Winter Clothes”  
*by Karla Kuskin*

*First line:* “Under my hood I have a hat”

*This poem can be found in the following:*


www.alastore.ala.org
“The More It Snows”  
by A. A. Milne

First lines: “The more it / SNOWS-tiddely-pom”

This poem can be found in the following:

“Maytime Magic”  
by Mabel Watts

First lines: “A little seed / for me to sow?”

This poem can be found in the following:

“Yellow”  
by David McCord

First lines: “Green is go / and red is stop”

This poem can be found in the following:

“Antigonish”  
by Hughes Mearns

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn’t there
He wasn’t there again today
I wish, I wish he’d go away
INDEX

Titles of poems and rhymes are shown in quotes. Titles of books are shown in italic. f denotes figures.

A
“Abou Ben Adhem” (Hunt), 103
“About the Teeth of Sharks” (Ciardi), 72
“Accidentally” (Kumin), 117
“Acrostic” (Morris), 208
Adoff, Arnold, 68, 116–117
“Adventures of Isabel” (Nash), 130
“Advice to Small Children” (Anthony), 12
Aesop’s fables, 6, 46, 168
after-school programs
Chasing Vermeer Book Club, 184–190
Discover the Oz Books, 7, 58–62
on fantasy, 172–174
The Invention of Hugo Cabret Book Club, 174–184
on Lois Lowry, 190–192
on mysteries, 171–172
Suzanne Selfors Book Club, 65, 192–202
template for, 169–171
Wendelin Van Draanen Book Club, 202–210
“Against Idleness and Mischief” (Watts), 145–146
Aldis, Dorothy, 126, 131
Alexander, Cecil Frances, 158
Alexander, Lloyd, 4, 165, 167
“Algy Met a Bear” (anon.), 75
“All Things Bright and Beautiful” (Alexander), 158
Allen, Marie Louise, 18
“Always Finish” (anon.), 12
“America for Me” (Van Dyke), 96–97

Anastasia Krupnik series, 190–192
“The Animal Fair” (anon.), 74
animal poems, 70–80
“The Animal Store” (Field), 74–75
anonymous poems, 9, 12, 19, 71, 74, 75, 80, 114–117, 119, 121–122, 124, 136, 144–146, 154, 157, 180, 210
anthologies, poetry, 68–70
Anthony, Edward, 12
“Antigonus” (Mears), 10–11
“Apartment House” (Rafferty), 142
“An Apple a Day” (Mother Goose), 26
“Arbuckle Jones” (Wesley-Smith), 115
“Arithmetic” (Sandburg), 140
art appreciation, 184–190
“Art Is Hard” (Lancaster), 206
“Arthur the Artist” (Nesbitt), 207
“As I Was Going to St. Ives” (Mother Goose), 35
“Attitude of Gratitude” (Wilcox), 15
Austin, Mary, 8, 18, 70, 75, 118, 127
authors, recommended, 56, 58, 167
automata, books on, 175

B
“Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” (Mother Goose), 29
Baba Yaga fairy tales, 40
Balliet, Blue, 184–190
“Band-Aids” (Silverstein), 129–130
“Barber, Barber” (Mother Goose), 21
A Barrel of Laughs, a Vale of Tears (Feiffer), 213
Baruch, Dorothy W., 18
“Be Glad Your Nose Is on Your Face”
(Prelutsky), 198
Beauty and the Beast fairy tales, 40
Bell, J. J., 76
Belloccio, Hilaire, 77
Bennett, Henry Holcomb, 101–102
Bennett, Rowena, 141, 152
Berenstain, Stan and Jan, 56
“Betty Botter” (Mother Goose), 20
Beyer, Evelyn, 75
Bible verses, 102, 113–114, 127
bibliographies
fiction books, 56–58, 162–167
folktales and fairy stories, 43–45,
168–169
nursery rhymes, 39
picture books, 43–45, 50–55
poetry, 68–70
“Bigfoot” (Pekrul), 194–196
“Bigfoot’s Shoe Emporium” (Nesbitt), 194
Bishop, Morris, 118
Blake, Katie, vii–x, 1, 19, 63–64
Blake, William, 123–124
“Bleezer’s Ice Cream” (Prelutsky), 206
“Blessed Lord, What It Is to Be Young”
(McCord), 159
“Boa Constrictor” (Silverstein), 73
Bogan, Louise, 201–202
book clubs. See after-school programs
book lists. See bibliographies
Book of Enchantments (Wrede), 172f
Book of Nonsense (Lear), 67
texts, poems about, 149–151
Bourdillon, Francis William, 157
“Bow, Wow Wow” (Mother Goose), 21
“Bow-Wow, Says the Dog” (Mother Goose),
38–39
Boyden, Polly Chase, 8
Brady, June, 132
“Brand New Shoes” (Nesbitt), 206
The Bremen Town Musicians fairy tales, 40
Brenner, Adam, 139
Bridwell, Norman, 211
Brooks, Gwendolyn, 143, 161
Brooks, Walter, 132–133
“Brow Brinky” (Mother Goose), 30
Brown, Abbie Farwell, 189–190
Brown, Marcia, 10, 18, 43, 68, 125–126, 130,
135, 143, 152
Brown, Palmer, 152
Browning, Robert, 127–128
“Bubble Gum” (Payne), 119
“Bubbles” (Sandburg), 128
“Buffalo Dusk” (Sandburg), 135
“A Bug Sat in a Silver Flower” (Kuskin), 74
“Bugs” (Kuskin), 73
“A Bundle Is a Funny Thing” (Farrer),
159–160
Burgess, Gelett, 75, 119
Burkey, Pene, 207
“Bye, Baby Bunting” (Mother Goose), 23
“Bystander” (Niekerk), 209
C
Caldecott Medal, 58, 68
calendars
for family record keeping, 2–3
for program planning, 61–62f, 169–170f,
177–179f, 186–187f, 194–195f, 204f
“Calling All Readers” (Salas), 8
Campbell, Alice B., 76
Cane, Melville, 127
“The Captain Was a Duck” (Mother Goose), 27
Carroll, Lewis, 78, 84–85, 102–103
Cary, Alice, 200–201
The Case of the Marble Monster (Edmonds), 212
“Casey at the Bat” (Thayer), 82–84
“Catherine” (Kuskin), 138
“Cats” (Merriam), 78–79
“Celery” (Nash), 114–115
“Charge of the Light Brigade” (Tennyson), 64,
103–105
“Charley Barley” (Mother Goose), 24
Chasing Vermeer (Balliet), 184–190
Child, L. Maria, 13–15
Childread, vii–x, 1, 19, 63
children. See eight- to twelve-year-olds; five-
to seven-year-olds
choral reading, necessity of, 5–6, 64, 66
“Christmas Bells” (Longfellow), 161–162
“Christmas Finger Play” (anon.), 19
“Christmas Is Coming” (Mother Goose), 15, 39
“A Christmas Package VII” (McCord), 160
Christmas poems, 15–19, 159–162, 171f
Chute, Marchette, 125, 129, 160
Ciardi, John, 68, 72, 120, 124, 138, 143, 146,
155
Cinderella fairy tales, 40
cinquains, 131–132
“City Rain” (Field), 127
classic poems, 81–114
Clery, Beverly, 162, 166, 167, 171f
Clifford, W. K., 212
“The Clock of Life” (Smith), 177
Coatsworth, Elizabeth, 126–127, 145, 147, 159
“Cobbler, Cobbler” (Mother Goose), 24
“Cocks Crow” (Mother Goose), 38
Cole, William, 72, 73, 78, 116–118, 128, 134, 140, 156
concrete poems, 67
contingency plans, 60–61, 177, 185, 194, 203–204
Cooper, Susan, 166, 167, 172ff-173
Copp, Jim, 212
“The Cow” (Nash), 76
“A Cradle Hymn” (Watts), 99–100
Crapsey, Adelaide, 126
“The Creature in the Classroom” (Prelutsky), 155
“The Crocodile” (Carroll), 78
“Cross Patch” (Mother Goose), 34
“The Crossed Apple” (Bogan), 201–202
“Curly Locks” (Mother Goose), 35
“Daddy Fell into the Pond” (Noyes), 133–134
“Daffadowndilly” (Mother Goose), 31
Dahl, Roald, 212
Daniels, Cynthia, viii
“Day before Christmas” (Chute), 160
De La Mare, Walter, 133
de Regniers, Beatrice Schenk, 7, 10, 18, 54, 68, 125, 126, 130, 135, 143, 152
“Dickery, Dickery Dare” (Mother Goose), 31
Dickinson, Emily, 144, 149, 188
“Diddle, Diddle Dumpling” (Mother Goose), 23
“Digging for Diamonds” (Nesbitt), 199
digital photography, books on, 175–176
“A Diller, a Dollar” (Mother Goose), 36
“Dingty Diddledy” (Mother Goose), 26–27
Discover the Oz Books program, 7, 58–62
Dixon, C. M., 208
“Doctor Foster” (Mother Goose), 29
Dodge, Mary Mapes, 145
Donnelly, Ruth, 205
“Don’t Worry” (anon.), 144
Dr. Seuss, 52, 55, 57, 58, 164
“The Dragon on the Playground” (Nesbitt), 199
“Dragons” (Link), 199
drawing, books on, 175
“Dreams” (Hughes), 146
Driscoll, Louise, 158
“The Duel” (Field), 81–82
Dunann, Louella, 140
DVDs and films, 171f, 175–176
E
“Each Sold Separately” (Scieszka), 213
“The Eagle” (Tennyson), 78
“Easy Diver” (Froman), 74
easy fiction, 7, 50–55
“Eat-It-All-Elaine” (Starbird), 117
Edmonds, I. G., 212
“Egg Thoughts” (Hoban), 120
eight- to twelve-year-olds
fiction for, 64, 162–167
folktales and fairy stories for, 64, 168–169
poetry fundamentals for, 64, 65–70
wordplay elements for, 63–65
See also after-school programs
“Elsie Marley” (Mother Goose), 20
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 159
F
fables, 6, 46, 171f
Fables (Lobel), 46
“Fair Warning” (Smaridge), 123
fairy tales, 6, 40–45, 64, 168–169
fantasy, 172–174
“Far Trek” (Brady), 132
Farjeon, Eleanor, 150–151
Farrer, John, 159–160
“Father and Mother” (Kennedy), 155
“Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum” (Mother Goose), 25
“Feelings about Words” (O’Neill), 151
Feiffer, Jules, 213
fiction
for eight- to twelve-year-olds, 64, 162–167
for five- to seven-year-olds, 7, 56–58
Field, Eugene, 79, 81–82
Field, Rachel, 74–75, 127
films and DVDs, 171f, 175–176
“Fir” (Hanson), 160
“First Snow” (Allen), 18
Fisher, Aileen, 80
five- to seven-year-olds
fables for, 6, 46
fiction for, 7, 56–58
folktales and fairy stories for, 6, 40–45
Greek mythology for, 6, 47–50
nursery rhymes for, 6, 19–39
picture books for, 7, 50–55
poetry for, 5–6, 7–19

www.alastore.ala.org
five- to seven-year-olds (cont’d)
sample programs for, 58–62
wordplay elements for, 5–7
“The Flag Goes By” (Bennett), 101–102
“The Flea” (Young), 73
Fleischman, Paul, 66, 69
Fleischman, Sid, viii, 163
“A Fly and a Flea in a Flue” (anon.), 74
“The Folk Who Live in Backward Town” (Hoberman), 130
folktales and fairy stories, 6, 40–45, 64, 168–169
food poems, 114–120
*The Foolish Frog* (Seeger), 214
“Foolish Questions” (Cole), 128
“For Want of a Nail” (Mother Goose), 35
*Fortune’s Magic Farm* (Selfors), 193, 195f, 200–202
“Four Stiff-Standers” (Mother Goose), 27
fractured fairy tales, 6
Francis, Robert, 135
free verse, 67–68
“Friends” (Brown), 189–190
Fritz, Jean, 171f
“From a Railway Carriage” (Stevenson), 180–181
Froman, Robert, 74
Frost, Robert, 68–69, 124
Fyleman, Rose, 72

Gardner, John, 76
Gasztold, Carmen Bernos de, 141–142
“The Gecko” (Nderitu), 207
*The Gecko and Sticky* (Van Draanen), 203–204f, 207–208
George, Jean Craighead, 166, 167, 172
“George Washington Is Tops with Me” (Silverstein), 134
“Georgie Porgie” (Mother Goose), 30
“Get Up and Bar the Door” (anon.), 136–137
“The Giant Jim” (Mother Goose), 29
The Gingerbread Boy fairy tales, 40
“The Gnats” (Rudziewicz), 77
“Going to Bed” (Chute), 129
“Good Advice (of Counsel)” (Guiterman), 147
*Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* (Schlitz), 66
*Goosey Bird Greene* series, 191–192
“Goosey, Goosey, Gander” (Mother Goose), 24
“The Grand Old Duke of York” (Mother Goose), 27
“Granfa’ Grig Had a Pig” (Mother Goose), 27
“Grass” (Sandburg), 105
Greek mythology, 6, 47–50
*The Gremlins* (Dahl), 212
growing up, poems about, 12, 143–149
Guiterman, Arthur, 146, 147

H

haiku, 67, 126
“Halfway Down” (Milne), 11
Halloween poems, 12–13, 151–156
Hamilton, Virginia, 167, 171f
“Handy Pandy” (Mother Goose), 30
Hansel and Gretel fairy tales, 41
Hanson, Joan, 160
Hanson, Steve, 205
“He Who Has Never Known Hunger” (Coatsworth), 159
Heck, C. J., 207
“The Hedgehog Sleeps beneath the Hedge” (Bell), 76
“Hello, Is This Number One-One-One-One?” (Cole), 134
Henny Penny fairy tales, 41
Hercules myths, 49
“Here I Am, Little Jumping Joan” (Mother Goose), 26
“Here Lies a Greedy Girl” (anon.), 119–120
Herford, Oliver, 126
“Hey! Diddle, Diddle” (Mother Goose), 27
“Hiawatha’s Childhood” (Longfellow), 85–92
“Hickory, Dickory, Dock” (Mother Goose), 26
“The Hidebehind” (Rosen), 13
“Higgledy, Piggledy, My Black Hen” (Mother Goose), 30
“Higgledy, Piggledy, Pop” (Mother Goose), 30
“The Highwayman” (Noyes), 64, 105–108
Hillert, Margaret, 130, 158
historical fiction, 171f
Hitchcock, Alfred, 213
Hoban, Russell, 51, 54, 120, 163
Hoberman, Mary Ann, 115, 130
Hoeft, Robert D., 11
holiday poems, 12–19, 151–162, 171f
“Hot Cross Buns” (Mother Goose), 35
“Hot Line” (Dunann), 140
“The House at the Corner” (Livingston), 155
*The House on Hackman’s Hill* (Nixon), 213
The House That Jack Built fairy tales, 41
“How Many Miles to Babylon?” (Mother Goose), 36
How to Care for Your Monster (Bridwell), 211
“How to Eat a Poem” (Merriam), 149
“However They Talk” (anon.), 144
Hubbell, Patricia, 11
INDEX / 219

“Huckleberry, Gooseberry, Raspberry Pie” (Watson), 81
Huff, Barbara A., 150
Hughes, Langston, 124, 136, 146
“Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall” (Mother Goose), 25
“Hungry Morning” (Livingston), 123
Hunt, Leigh, 103
“Hush-a-by Baby” (Mother Goose), 34–35
Hymes, Lucia M. and James L., 115, 128, 156

I
“I, Too” (Hughes), 136
“I Am” (Laura), 209–210
“IFound a Silver Dollar” (Lee), 80
“I Heard a Bird Sing” (Herford), 126
“I Love Little Pussy” (Mother Goose), 34
“I Love You, I Love You” (anon.), 80
“I Never Saw a Purple Cow” (Burgess), 75
“I Raised a Great Hullabaloo” (anon.), 121
“I Saw a Little Girl I Hate” (Spilka), 81
“I Should Have Stayed in Bed Today” (Prelutsky), 116
“I Think” (Schwartz and McMahan), 131
“I Think I’m Related to Bigfoot” (Nesbitt), 194
“I Went to the Farm Where Spaghetti Is Grown” (Pincus), 207
“I Wish I Had a Dragon” (Silverstein), 200
“I Wouldn’t” (Ciardi), 72
“Ice Cream” (Hanson), 205
“IF” (Kipling), 97–98
“If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking” (Dickinson), 144
“If I Could Be a Super Hero” (Lazarowitz), 210
“If Things Grew Down” (Hoeft), 11
“If You, Like Me” (Kuskin), 71
“If You Ever, Ever, Ever Meet a Grizzly Bear” (Austin), 70–71
Ignatow, David, 148
“I’m a Superhero!” (Dixon), 208
“I’m Glad the Sky Is Painted Blue” (anon.), 9
The Imaginary Veterinary (Selfors), 193–200
“In a Dark Time” (Roethke), 173
“In Flanders Field” (McCrae), 101
“In the Train” (Pinto), 181
“Insomnia the Gem of the Ocean” (Updike), 139–140
“Intery, Mintery, Cutery Corn” (Mother Goose), 29
The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Selznick), 174–184
Irish Blessing on Parting, 114
“It’s Abstract” (Kelly), 206
“It’s Raining, It’s Pouring” (Mother Goose), 37
“It’s Such a Shock, I Almost Screech” (Cole), 118–119
“I’ve Got a Dog as Thin as a Rail” (anon.), 71
“I’ve Got a Rocket” (Mother Goose), 36

J
“Jabberwocky” (Carroll), 84–85
“Jack and Jill” (Mother Goose), 23
“Jack Be Nimble” (Mother Goose), 31
“Jack Sprat” (Mother Goose), 30
Jay, M. Ellen and Hilda L., 1
Jeffers, Susan, 68, 92
Johnson, Pyke, 116
“Josephine, Josephine” (Resnikoff), 80–81
“The Journey” (Monro), 182–184
Joyful Noise (Fleischman), 66, 69
“Jump or Jiggle” (Beyer), 75
“June” (Livingston), 125
“Just Me” (Hillert), 130

K
“Keep a Poem in Your Pocket” (de Regniers), 7–8
Kelly, Sean, 206
Kennedy, X. J., 69, 72, 114, 118, 120, 132, 140, 143, 149, 155, 159, 160
“Ketchup” (anon.), 115
“Kind Hearts Are Gardens” (anon.), 145
Kipling, Rudyard, 97–98
Koch, Kenneth, 141
“Komodo Dragon” (Wilson), 207
Kumin, Maxine W., 117
Kuskin, Karla, 9, 17, 68–69, 71, 73–74, 125, 138

L
“Lady Bird, Lady Bird” (Mother Goose), 37
Lancaster, Gareth, 206
Lang, Andrew, 19
“Lasagna” (Kennedy), 114
Lazarowitz, Steve, 210
“A Lazy Thought” (Merriam), 17
Lear, Edward, 67, 121
“Learning” (Viorst), 146
“Leaves” (Walker), 124
Lee, Dennis, 80
“Lemonade” (Johnson), 116
Lenski, Lois, 132
“The Library” (Huff), 150
library settings, viii–x, 1–3

www.alastore.ala.org
“A Light Exists in Spring” (Dickinson), 188
limericks, 67, 121–122, 171f
“Lincoln” (Turner), 96
Lindsay, Vachel, 70
Link, George W., 199
“Little Bo-Peep” (Mother Goose), 28
“The Little Boy and the Old Man” (Silverstein), 136
“Little Boy Blue” (Mother Goose), 19, 30
“Little Jack Horner” (Mother Goose), 29, 31
“Little Jack Sprat” (Mother Goose), 31–32
“Little Miss Muffet” (Mother Goose), 21, 26
“Little Nancy Etticoat” (Mother Goose), 31
“Little Orphant Annie” (Riley), 152–154
“Little Poll Parrot” (Mother Goose), 20
Little Red Riding Hood fairy tales, 41
“Little Tommy Tittlemouse” (Mother Goose), 32
“Little Tommy Tucker” (Mother Goose), 21, 28
“The Little Turtle” (Lindsay), 70
Liu, Chang, 208
Livingston, Myra Cohn, 69, 123, 125, 143, 154, 155, 157, 161
“The Lizard” (Roethke), 76–77
“The Lizard Is a Timid Thing” (Gardner), 76
“The Loch Ness Monster” (Lochhead), 197–198
Lochhead, Fiona, 197–198
The Lonely Lake Monster (Selfors), 193, 195f, 197–198
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 69, 85–95, 161–162
love poems, 80–81
Lowry, Lois, 190–192
“A Lullaby” (Carroll), 102
lyric poems, 67–68

M
magic, books on, 175
“The Magic Bonbons” (Baum), 211
The Magician’s Boy (Cooper), 172f–173
Magliaro, Elaine, 198
“March and I Are Different,” 123
Marshall, James, 32, 33, 39, 41, 43, 53, 57, 163
“Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary” (Mother Goose), 20–21
“Mary Had a Little Lamb” (anon.), 119
“Mary Had a Little Lamb” (Mother Goose), 22
“Maytime Magic” (Watts), 10
McCord, David, 10, 12, 69, 155, 159, 160
McCrae, John, 101
McDonald, Violet, 206
McGee, Shelagh, 13
Mearns, Hughes, 10–11
“Meditatio” (Pound), 72
Méliès, Georges, 175–176
“Mercy” (Shakespeare), 148
“Merlin” (Muir), 173
Merriam, Eve, 17, 69, 78–79, 132, 139, 149
“Mice” (Fyleman), 72
Milligan, Spike, 117, 129, 151
Milne, A. A., 10, 11, 190
“Mirror rorriM” (Updike), 141
“Misnomer” (Merriam), 139
“Miss T.” (De La Mare), 133
Mitchell, Stephen, 188
“Mix a Pancake” (Mother Goose), 31
“A Modern Dragon” (Bennett), 141
“Monday’s Child” (Mother Goose), 37
Monro, Harold, 182–184
Moore, Clement Clarke, 15–17
Moore, Lilian, 69, 122, 154
Mora, Julio, 139
morals, of fables, 46
“The More It Snows” (Milne), 10
Morris, Alice, 208
“My Cat and I” (Fisher), 80
“My – Oh Wow! – Book” (Viorst), 144
“My Father Owns the Butcher Shop” (anon.), 116
“My Favorite Word” (Hymes), 128
“My Foot Fell Asleep” (Nesbitt), 208
“My Gift” (Rossetti), 160
“My Invisible Dragon” (Nesbitt), 199
“My Little Sister” (Wise), 116
“My Mouth” (Adoff), 116–117
“My Nose” (Aldis), 131
“My – Oh Wow! – Book” (Viorst), 144
“My Robot” (Silverstein), 180
mysteries, 171–172
“The Mystery of the Seven Wrong Clocks” (Hitchcock), 213
mythology. See Greek mythology
INDEX / 221

N
narrative poems, ix, 64, 67
Nash, Ogden, 69, 76, 114, 118, 130
nature poems, 8–10, 122–128
Nderitu, Alexander, 207
“The Neck of a Running Giraffe” (Silverstein), 67, 72–73
Nelson, Donald, 197
Nemerov, Howard, 186
Nesbitt, Kenn, 194, 199, 206–208
“Nessie” (Magliaro), 198
“The New Mother” (Clifford), 212
“New Sounds to Walk on Today” (Moore), 122
Newbery Medal, 63, 66
“The New-England Boy’s Song about Thanksgiving Day” (Child), 13–15
Niekirk, Katie, 209
“Night Comes” (de Regniers), 152
“The Night Has a Thousand Eyes” (Bordillon), 157
“Night Thought of a Tortoise” (Rieu), 78
Nixon, Joan Lowery, 213
“November” (Cary), 200–201
“November Night” (Crapsey), 126
“Now” (Redcloud), 122
Noyes, Alfred, 105–108, 133–134
nursery rhymes, 6, 12, 15, 19–39

O
“O, That I Were” (Mother Goose), 36
“Ode on Intimations of Immortality” (Wordsworth), 108–113
“Ode to a Sneeze” (Wallace), 138
“Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?” (Mother Goose), 22
“Old King Cole” (Mother Goose), 24
“Old Mother Hubbard” (Mother Goose), 20
“Old Woman, Old Woman” (Mother Goose), 35
“On the Ning Nang Nong” (Milligan), 129
“On the Wiggley-Woggley Men” (Milligan), 151
“One, Two, Three, Four, Five” (Mother Goose), 34
“One, Two; Buckle My Shoe” (Mother Goose), 34
“One Misty, Moisty Morning” (Mother Goose), 37
“One Thing at a Time” (Mother Goose), 38
O’Neill, Mary, 151
“Oodles of Noodles” (Hymes), 115
“Opposites” (Wilbur), 157
“Otto” (Brooks), 161
“Our New Robot” (anon.), 180
“Our Washing Machine” (Hubbell), 11
out-of-print titles, 63–64
“Over the Wintry Forest” (Soseki), 126
“The Owl and the Pussy-cat” (Field), 79
Oz series (Baum), ix, 7, 58–61

P
“Painting Feelings” (Heck), 207
parent-child reading, viii, 1–4
Park, Frances, 142–143
“Paul Revere’s Ride” (Longfellow), 67, 92–95
Payne, Nina, 119
“A Peanut Sat on a Railroad Track” (anon.), 117
“Peas” (anon.), 115
“Pease-Porridge Hot” (Mother Goose), 32
Pekrul, David Ronald Bruce, 194–196
people, poems about, 10–12, 128–143, 171f
“People” (Zolotow), 133
“Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater” (Mother Goose), 19
“Peter Piper” (Mother Goose), 32
“Peter White” (Mother Goose), 29
Phoenix Learning Resources, 47
photography, books on, 175–176
“The Pickety Fence” (McCord), 12
picture books, 7, 50–55
“The Pig” (Young), 77
Pincus, Greg, 207
Pinto, V. De Sola, 181
“Pippa’s Song” (Browning), 127–128
“The Pizza” (Nash), 118
“The Plant Cut Down to the Root” (Coatsworth), 147

poetry
in after-school programs, 177, 180–184, 186–190, 194–202, 205–210
animal poems, 70–80
bibliography of, 68–70
classic poems, 81–114
for eight- to twelve-year-olds, 64, 65–70
for five- to seven-year-olds, 5–6, 7–19
food poems, 114–120
fundamentals of, 65–68
about growing up, 12, 143–149
holiday poems, 12–19, 151–162, 171f
love poems, 80–81
about nature, 8–10, 122–128

www.alastore.ala.org
poetry (cont’d)

about people and things, 10–12, 128–143, 171f
See also individual poems

“Poetry” (Farjeon), 150–151
“Polly Put the Kettle On” (Mother Goose), 33
“Polonius’ Advice to Laertes” (Shakespeare), 148–149

Potter, Beatrix, 52, 56

“Puppy” (Tyler), 71

Puss in Boots fairy tales, 41

“Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat” (Mother Goose), 23, 28

R

“Raccoon Rex” (Donnelly), 205

Rackham, Arthur, 27, 37

“Rain, Rain Go Away” (Mother Goose), 39

The Rain Dragon Rescue (Selfors), 193, 195f, 199–200


Rands, William Brighty, 189

Rapunzel fairy tales, 42

Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young (Prelutsky), 9, 10, 18, 68–69, 75, 115, 118–119, 125, 141, 151–152

reading aloud

importance of, viii–ix, 2, 64
sample programs with, 7, 65, 175–176, 184–185, 190–193, 202–204

Ready-to-Go Reading Incentive Programs (Jay), 1
realistic fiction, 171f, 191

record keeping, for family reading, 2–3

“Red Queen’s Lullaby” (Carroll), 103

Redcloud, Prince, 122

“Remember Me?” (Viorst), 138

Resnikoff, Alexander, 80–81

“Ride a Cock-Horse” (Mother Goose), 33

Riley, James Whitcomb, 152–154

Ripley, Elizabeth, 121

“Rock-a-Bye Baby” (Mother Goose), 23

Roethke, Theodore, 76–77, 173

Rojankovsky, Fedor, 34, 37, 39, 42

Rosen, Michael, 13, 115

Rossetti, Christina, 123, 160

“Routine” (Guiterman), 146

“Rub-a-Dub-Dub” (Mother Goose), 22

Rudzwiez, Eugene, 77

Rumpelstiltskin fairy tales, 42

S

“A Sad Song about Greenwich Village” (Park), 142–143

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Coerr), 171f

Salas, Laura Purdie, 8

“Sally and Manda Are Two Little Lizards” (Campbell), 76

Sammy Keyes and the Art of Deception (Van Draanen), 203–204f, 206–207

Sammy Keyes and the Hotel Thief (Van Draanen), 203–204f, 205–206

sample programs. See after-school programs

Sandburg, Carl, 105, 128, 135, 140, 151

The Sasquatch Escape (Selfors), 193–197

Schlitz, Laura Amy, 66

school library settings, vii, x, 2–3

See also after-school programs
school-year-long programming outline, 171f

Scieszka, Jon, 6, 46, 213

Scoppettone, Sandra, 213

Scottish Blessing on Parting, 114

seasons, poems about, 8–10, 122–128

Seeger, Pete and Charles, 214

Selfors, Suzanne, 65, 192–202

Selznick, Brian, 174–184

Serrallier, Ian, 73

Seuss, Dr., 52, 55, 57, 58, 164

www.alastore.ala.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Fairy Tales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five-to-seven-year-olds</td>
<td>Seven Ravens fairy tales, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Shame” (anon.), 210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Warmth, viii, 1–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Shoemaker and the Elves fairy tales, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Short Love Poem” (Viorst), 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shredderman (Van Draanen), 203–204f, 208–210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silverstein, Shel, 67, 70, 72–73, 129, 134, 136, 156, 164, 180, 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Simple Simon” (Mother Goose), 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sing a Song of People” (Lenski), 132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sing a Song of Popcorn (de Regniers), 10, 18, 68, 125–126, 130, 135, 143, 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sing a Song of Sixpence” (Mother Goose), 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sing a Song of Subways” (Merriam), 132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Skateboarding” (Burkey), 207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Skeleton Parade” (Prelutsky), 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaridge, Norah, 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smells Like Dog (Seltors), 193, 195f, 198–199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Smiles Are Catchy” (anon.), 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smith, Robert H., 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smith, William Jay, 77, 118, 125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Snake” (Prelutsky), 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sneakers, Sneakers” (Mora and Brenner), 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sneaky Bill” (Cole), 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Snip, Snap, Snout” (Mother Goose), 25, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snow toward Evening” (Cane), 127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snow White fairy tales, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sobol, Donald, 167, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Soliloquy of a Tortoise” (Rieu), 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Solitude” (Wilcox), 98–99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Solomon Grundy” (Mother Goose), 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Some Things Don’t Make Any Sense at All” (Viorst), 137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Some Thoughts from Arthur Guiterman,” 147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Somebody Loves You Deep and True” (anon.), 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Someone’s Face” (Ciardi), 143–144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Something Is There” (Moore), 154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sometimes Poems Are” (Viorst), 149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song of Solomon 2:11–12, 127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Song of the Pop-Bottlers” (Bishop), 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Song of the Witches” (Shakespeare), 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soseki, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soto, Gary, 206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Spangled Pandemonium” (Brown), 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Speaking of Cows” (Starbird), 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spilka, Arnold, 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Spring” (Blake), 123–124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Spring” (Kuskin), 125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Spring Is Showery” (Mother Goose), 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Spring Rain” (Chute), 125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Spying on My Neighbor” (McDonald), 206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Stick to Your Task” (anon.), 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Stinky Cheese Man (Scieszka), 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Stop—Go” (Baruch), 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Frost), 68–69, 124–125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Sun Is Stuck” (Livingston), 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suzuki Beane (Scoppettone), 213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Swift Things Are Beautiful” (Coatsworth), 126–127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Swing” (Stevenson), 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Table Manners” (Burgess), 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Ten Kinds” (Dodge), 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tennyson, Alfred, 78, 103–105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Testimony of Sriwilai” (Liu), 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Thanksgiving” (Driscoll), 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Thanksgiving” (Hillert), 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thanksgiving poems, 13–15, 157–159, 171f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thayer, Ernest L., 82–84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Aren’t Any Ghosts” (Viorst), 154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Once Were Two Cats” (Mother Goose), 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Crooked Man” (Mother Goose), 22–23, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Little Girl” (Mother Goose), 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Man in Our Town” (Mother Goose), 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Rude Pig from Duluth” (Lobel), 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Young Hopeful Named Sam” (Ripley), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Young Lady of Niger” (anon.), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was a Young Lady of Ryde” (anon.), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Man from Peru” (anon.), 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Man of Blackheath” (anon.), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Man with a Beard” (Lear), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Man with a Beard” (Lear), 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Woman Tossed in a Blanket” (Mother Goose), 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Woman Tossed in a Blanket” (Mother Goose), 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe” (Mother Goose), 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“There Was an Old Woman Who Lived under a Hill” (Mother Goose), 28
Theseus and the Minotaur myths, 50
things, poems about, 10–12, 128–143, 171f
“Thirty Days Hath September” (Mother Goose), 21
“This Is Halloween” (Thompson), 154
“This Is Just to Say” (Williams), 120, 140
“Three Little Gray Geese” (anon.), 71
Three Little Ghostesses’ (Mother Goose), 12
Three Little Kittens” (Mother Goose), 23–24
The Three Little Pigs fairy tales, 43
The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig (Trivizas), 6
“Three Wise Men of Gotham” (Mother Goose), 28
“Through the Teeth” (anon.), 114
“The Tickle Rhyme” (Serallier), 73
“Tickly, Tickly” (Mother Goose), 31
“Tiptoe” (Kuskin), 17
“To Have Nothing at All Is to Have Much Still” (Coatsworth), 145
“To Market, To Market” (Mother Goose), 32
“To Scratch Where It Itches” (Mother Goose), 26
“Toast” (Smith), 118
“Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son” (Mother Goose), 25
“Tombstone” (Hymes), 156
“Too Messy for Nessie” (Nelson), 197
“Topsy-Turvy World” (Rands), 189
Tripp, Wallace, 27, 30, 32, 33, 36, 38, 39
“Tuesday I Was Ten, and Though” (Starbird), 130
“The Turkey” (anon.), 157
Turner, Nancy Byrd, 96
“A Tutor Who Tooted a Flute” (Wells), 121
“Tweedledum and Tweedledee” (Mother Goose), 25
Twenty and Ten (Bishop), 165, 171f
“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” (Mother Goose), 37
“Two Friends” (Ignatow), 148
“Two Legs” (Mother Goose), 26
Tyler, Robert L., 71

U
“Ugly Babies” (Mother Goose), 25
The Ugly Duckling fairy tales, 43
“Untitled” (Soto), 206
Updike, John, 125, 139–140, 141

V
“Valentine” (Silverstein), 156
Valentine’s Day poems, 156–157
Van Draanen, Wendelin, 202–210
Van Dyke, Henry, 96–97
“Variations on a Theme” (Koch), 141
Velde, Vivian Vande, 172f
Vermeer, 184–190
“Vermeer” (Mitchell), 188
“Vermeer” (Nemerov), 186
Viorst, Judith, 52, 55, 68, 71, 81, 137–139,
144, 146, 149, 154, 164, 198
“A Visit from St. Nicholas” (Moore), 15–17
A Visit to William Blake’s Inn (Willard), 66
“The Vulture” (Belloccio), 77

W
Walker, Paul, 124
Wallace, G., 138
“What—A Witch’s Cat” (McGee), 13
Watson, Clyde, 81
Watts, Isaac, 99–100, 145–146
Watts, Mabel, 10
“We Real Cool” (Brooks), 143
“We Thank Thee” (Emerson), 159
“Wear You a Hat” (Mother Goose), 38
“Weather” (anon.), 122
web resources, 196–197, 198, 200, 205
“Wee Willie Winkie” (Mother Goose), 25
Wells, Carolyn, 121
Wendelin Van Draanen Book Club, 202–210
Wesley-Smith, Peter, 115
“What Are Little Boys Made Of?” (Mother Goose), 21
“What Night Would It Be?” (Ciardi), 155
“What Someone Said When He Was Spanked” (Ciardi), 138
“When” (Aldis), 126
“When I Was Lost” (Aldis), 131
“Where Are You Going To?” (Mother Goose), 28
Where the Sidewalk Ends (Silverstein), 57, 60,
73, 129
Whiskers & Rhymes (Lobel), viii, 171f
The Whipping Boy (Fleischman), 66, 68
The White Marble (Zolotow), 214
“Who Has Seen the Wind?” (Rossetti), 123
Wilbur, Richard, 157
Wilcox, Ella Wheeler, 98–99
Wilcox, Val C., 15
Willard, Nancy, 40, 66
Williams, William Carlos, 120, 140–141
Wilson, Kris, 207
“Windsor Forest—Herne’s Oak” (Shakespeare), 173–174
“Winter Clothes” (Kuskin), 9
“Winter Moon” (Hughes), 124
Wise, William, 116
“A Wise Old Owl” (Mother Goose), 32
“The Witch of Willoughby Wood” (Bennett), 152
“Witch’s Broom Notes” (McCord), 155
The Wizard of Oz series (Baum), ix, 7, 58–61
“A Word Is Dead” (Dickinson), 149
Wordplay for Kids components for eight- to twelve-year-olds, 63–65
for five- to seven-year-olds, 5–7
words, poems about, 149–151
Wordsworth, William, 108–113
“The World’s Fastest Bicycle” (Nesbitt), 208
Wrede, Patricia C., 172f

Y
yearlong programming outline, 171f
“Yellow” (McCord), 10
“Yellow Butter” (Hoberman), 115
“You Cannot Hide in Snow” (anon.), 124
Young, Roland, 73, 77

Z
Zolotow, Charlotte, 55, 133, 214