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# Sharing Poetry with Children

Sylvia M. Vardell



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**Sylvia M. Vardell** is currently a professor at Texas Woman's University in the School of Library and Information Studies, where she teaches graduate courses in children's and young adult literature. She received her PhD from the University of Minnesota in 1983. Vardell has published articles in *Book Links, Language Arts, English Journal, Reading Teacher, New Advocate, Young Children, Social Education,* and *Horn Book,* as well as several chapters and books on language and literature, including *The Poetry Teacher's Book of Lists, Poetry People: A Practical Guide to Children's Poets,* and the popular *Poetry Friday* series coedited with Janet Wong. Her current work focuses on poetry for children, including a regular blog, *Poetry for Children.* Since 2006 Vardell has organized and hosted the annual Poetry Round-Up at the Texas Library Association Conference. She recently was coeditor of the international journal *Bookbird* and previously was president of the Children's Literature Assembly and of the United States Board on Books for Young People.

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# Acknowledgments

AM SO PLEASED TO BE INVITED TO OFFER A SECOND EDITION OF THIS book. That means that poetry may be catching on even more and that this book may be helping in some small way. That makes me very happy! Since writing the first edition of this book, I started a blog, Poetry for Children, and maintain it weekly; I started the regular "Everyday Poetry" column for the American Library Association's magazine Book Links; and I've kept the Poetry Round-Up of poet readings rolling at the annual conference of the Texas Library Association. All this has put me in touch with many poets and poetry lovers, and what a privilege that has been. It has also fostered the development of many more poetry projects (like my books, Poetry People and The Poetry Teacher's Book of Lists) and more blogs (like creating "toolboxes" with reader's guides and digital trailers for promoting all the major poetry awards for young people). I've even had the opportunity to collaborate with the poet Janet Wong in publishing the first digital anthologies of original poetry for young people (*PoetryTagTime*, *P\*TAG*, *Gift Tag*) as well as a massive collection of new poetry for children, a *Poetry Friday* anthology, which has a poem a week for every grade from kindergarten through fifth. And I am not alone in these endeavors, as I rely on the help and support of many people in each and every instance. My heartfelt thanks go to the following:

The generous children's poetry community, which cares so deeply about pro-

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# How to Read a Poem Aloud

by April Halprin Wayland

To begin, tell the poet's name and the title to your friend.

Savor every word let each line shine.

Then read it one more time.

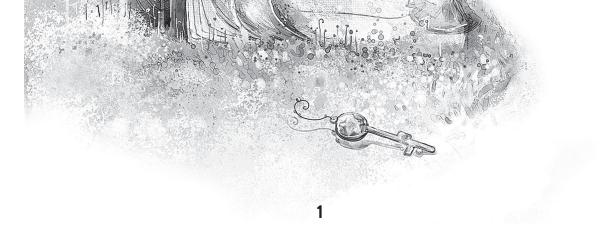
Now, take a breath and sigh.

Then think about the poet, at her desk, late at night, picking up her pen to write—

and why.

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# Why Make Poetry a Priority?

We have no borders when we read. —Naomi Shihab Nye, poet

RECENTLY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO EDIT A JOURNAL (BOOKBIRD) focused on children's poetry around the world. We included articles that explored the genre in South Korea, Slovenia, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, France, and beyond. One writer discussed images of Africa as they appeared in Slovenian poetry for young people. Another examined Korean picture books featuring traditional songs, labor songs, children's songs, and classic and contemporary poems, and how diverse cultural and linguistic aspects of Korea were revealed. Two major movements in poetry for children in Greece were discussed, with a special focus on poetic themes, forms, and types. Another writer studied the Slovak movement of "nonsense poetry" for children, with a particular focus on the changing historical and political context, and another explored the links between surrealism and the remembrance of childhood. French publisher Alain Serres (Rue du Monde) discussed his goal of sharing poetry from around the world with children of all ages, and the Dutchbased Poem Express, an international poem poster competition for children, was highlighted. The U.S. poet Helen Frost wrote about her experiences as a visiting author in two schools—in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the United States, and on the Isle of Barra in Scotland—and how students connect with one another through her novel in poems, The Braid.

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We also featured reviews of global nursery rhymes collected in New Zealand, railroad songs from Canada, poems about the days of the week and months of the year in French, lighthearted German poems by Jürg Schubiger, poems about childhood games and toys of Nicaragua by Oscar Corea, an anniversary collection of poems by Saša Vegri of Slovenia, and the innovative poems of Spanish poet Juan Carlos Martín. Full-text poems by award winners Shuntaro Tanikawa and Tone Pavček were showcased, as was the *Arche Kalender* from Germany, which highlights a children's poem each week of the year in multiple languages. Isn't it fascinating and inspiring to consider how poetry for young people is valued in cultures around the world?

And if you just look around you, you may be surprised at the poetry you'll find right here, too. For example, I encountered the following examples of poetry and poetic language all in a single day:

I heard a wedding toast (in rhyme) on a morning TV show.

- I found a penny on the ground and spontaneously recited the rhyme "see a penny, pick it up, all day long, you'll have good luck" and remembered the teen version that I have seen on a T-shirt and always makes me laugh: "see a penny, pick it up, all day long, you'll have . . . a penny." I listened to music on the car radio (with rhyming lyrics).
- I reviewed a biography of Ben Franklin that ended with one of his proverbs told in rhyme.
- I scanned a magazine in a doctor's waiting room and found an ad that used rhyme ("the potion's in the lotion").
- I stumbled upon the middle of a movie on cable television, *Desk Set*, in which Katharine Hepburn's character spouts multiple stanzas of several classic poems.
- On an electronic discussion list I read a posting about a friend who had a loved one in hospice care who wanted to hear poetry read aloud.

As we stop and think about the language we encounter in our everyday lives, it is interesting to observe how often that language takes poetic form. It may not always be in the form of a published poem on a piece of paper, but the presence of poetry is interwoven throughout our lives and around the world.

# Life without Poetry

To approach things from another angle, the gadfly poet Charles Bernstein shared this opinion about poetry's place in society:

As an alternative to National Poetry Month, I propose that we have an International Anti-Poetry [M]onth. As part of the activities, all verse in public places will be covered over—from the Statue of Liberty to the friezes on many of our government buildings. . . . Parents will be asked not to read Mother Goose and other rimes to their children but only . . . fiction. Religious institutions will have to forgo reading verse passages from the liturgy and only prose translations of the Bible will be recited, with hymns strictly banned. . . . Poetry readings will be replaced by self-help lectures. Love letters will have to be written only in expository paragraphs. . . . No vocal music will be played on the radio or sung in the concert halls. Children will have to stop playing all slapping and counting and singing games and stick to board games and football. (www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/044106.html)

An interesting prospect . . . Clearly, the world would be far less interesting if poetry were absent!

# What Does Poetry Do?

Poetry is all around us. Published poetry and classic poetry are more present than you might think—and informal verses and rhyming language are so ubiquitous that we take them for granted. We have experienced a renaissance in poetry publishing in recent years, with greater general interest in poets, poetry books, poetry jams and slams, poetry websites, National Poetry Month, and the like. Why? What does poetry do for us? In her essay "Spiral Staircase," the poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote, "Poetry wasn't trying to get us to DO anything, it was simply inviting us to THINK, and FEEL, and SEE" (2005, 253). Booth and Moore put it this way:

Like film makers or photographers, poets manipulate our ears and eyes at the same time, using close-ups, long shots, slow motion, fast forward,

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and soft focus; they juxtapose sound and image to make new meanings; they weave in subplots and overlap scenes; and they do it at lightning speed, in a few lines, in one word. (2003, 12)

First Lady Michelle Obama, an avid poetry lover, reminds us:

Think about how you feel when you read a poem that really speaks to you, one that perfectly expresses what you're thinking and feeling. When you read that, you feel understood, right? I know I do. You feel less alone. I know I do. You realize despite all our differences, there are so many human experiences and emotions that we share.... And even if you don't grow up to be a professional poet, I promise that what you learn through reading and writing poetry will stay with you throughout your life. (www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/11/remarks-first-lady -poetry-student-workshop)

Through the ages, great minds have hypothesized where the power of poetry lies. The words? The sounds of words? The structure and shape? Meaning? Emotion? Effect? The philosopher Plato wrote, "Poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand." The poet Robert Frost noted, "Poetry is the renewal of words forever and ever. Poetry is that by which we live forever

# PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Although my first experiences with poetry were positive, I often felt inept in high school and college as we were forced to dissect, analyze, and memorize poems. Invariably, my analyses were different from those of my teachers or professors. While some instructors were flexible and open to discussion, others were dogmatic and thought that what was written in the teacher's guide was the only correct response. My own negative experiences with inflexible teachers have caused me to be open to all responses from students. They often think in new and creative ways that open new vistas for me.

> Hilary Haygood, librarian San Andres Elementary School, Andrews, Texas

and ever unjaded. Poetry is that by which the world is never old." Years later, at the dedication of a library named for Robert Frost at Amherst College, President John F. Kennedy said:

When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment. (www.arts.gov/ about/Kennedy.html)

Whatever the reasons, our human capacity for language has long manifested itself in poetic expression.

# POET PROFILE

# Why I Write Poetry: A Really Good Poem Can Reach Kids in Wondrous and Unexpected Ways

# BY JOYCE SIDMAN

eople often ask me—in a slightly mystified tone of voice—why I write poetry. I know what they're thinking: poetry is a bit outside the mainstream; many readers don't seek it out, and some avoid it. So why deliberately choose it?

In some ways, I think poetry chose me. I've loved it right from childhood, drawn to those tiny sculptures of words on the page. The words themselves enchant me: so vivid, so concise, so rich and full of allusion. I love the music in them—so satisfying to the ear. I love the way a really good poem explodes inside of me, taking the "top of my head off," as Emily Dickinson so famously wrote. There's great power in poetry, and great mystery. It's not easily pinned down, and its allure is difficult to explain. Why do I embrace it? And why do I believe it is absolutely essential for children? Allow me the old Zen trick of answering questions with stories.

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#### Story No. 1: Capturing the Moment

My husband and I have been hiking all morning in the fall sunshine. We reach a beautiful open field, where we decide to eat lunch (hurrah!). Lake Superior glitters in the distance. Bright scarlet sumac leaves dot the undulating grass.

Overhead, an aspen gleams yellow against a blindingly blue sky. Heaven. As we drowse in the sunlight, a single raven soars over the field. I've just been studying ravens, and I was hoping to see one on this trip! It spots us, does a flip in the air, warbles, burbles, rasps, and carries on a comical conversation with itself before disappearing.

For me, this is a moment of pure happiness. One that will stick in my brain . . . until, eventually, it's relegated to the trash heap of all my memories. Unless I write a poem about it, which I immediately start to do in my head. Poetry can capture a moment—its sights, sounds, smells, feelings—so vividly, it's like you're back inside it. "Think you'll always remember what it's like to be ten years old?" I ask students in schools I visit. "You won't. Write a poem about your life right now, and you will have it forever."

### Story No. 2: Everything Is Connected

I'm walking with my six-year-old nephew along a sunny beach. We dance in and out of the waves. The tide has strewn shells across the sand, and he pounces on them, one after the other. "Look!" he cries out. "This shell's like a hat!" He holds it triumphantly. "And this one looks like a fish! And this one's a hammer!" He dashes about, consumed by his discovery both of the individuality of each shell and of its link to something else in his life. Using his eyes and imagination, he's making sense of what he sees—and taking delight in it. This power, which we call metaphor, is at the heart of poetry.

Aristotle said that "ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh." Comparing one thing to another—"fear is a spider web in the heart," as one of my students once wrote—creates a new and flexible understanding of both things. Children are natural metaphor makers, but research has shown that they lose this capacity as they grow older, probably from learning more linear ways of thinking. Poetry both the reading and the writing of it—creates links back to that more imaginative, explosive, creative way of thinking. The whole world is connected, says Poetry. It's up to you to figure out how.

And so, why do I write poetry? For the chance to feel connected to everything around me. For the chance to capture a moment of joy. For the chance to ease the heart. And why do I encourage children to write poetry? To watch them take a crisp, clean dive into the mysteries that confront them every day, find what glitters beneath the surface, and emerge triumphant. Try it. You'll see.

> Excerpted from "Why I Write Poetry: A Really Good Poem Can Reach Kids in Wondrous and Unexpected Ways," by Joyce Sidman. School Library Journal, April 1, 2012. Used with permission.

# This Book

by Joyce Sidman

Small. Square. Opens, shuts; this eye with cardboard lids. This tree of milk-white leaves. This stack of wings. This trick window.

This escape route, travel-pouch, dream-pillow.

This treasure. Open it.

> From Joyce Sidman's website: www.joycesidman.com/bookmark.html. Used with permission.

**CLASS EXERCISE** You will also find this poem formatted as a bookmark on Sidman's website. Make a list of the metaphors for *book* that are found in this poem, such as *eye, tree, stack of wings, window, escape route, travel-pouch,* and *dream-pillow*. Then brainstorm a new list of words or phrases that could describe a book and create a group-made poem variation on her theme using some of those new words and phrases. Create a bookmark out of the children's new poem, too.

# **Reclaiming Poetry**

What is it about life's big and little moments that calls for a poem? At weddings. At funerals. On greeting cards. In church. On the radio. At moments of great happiness or deep sadness. At beginnings and endings. Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder remind us that "poetry is a shorthand for beauty; its words can cause us to tremble, to shout for joy, to weep, to dance, to shudder or to laugh out loud" (1995, 4). Poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." And actress Helena Bonham Carter, who served as a narrator for the first poetry app for children, iF Poems, observed:

There is little that is as deeply satisfying as the apt poem. It's like chocolate for the soul. Except less fattening. It resolves the nervous system, captures the elusive experience of being alive so we may always have it and never lose it. Give your child an appetite for poems and they will never be bored . . . with poems in your pocket, you'll be armed with beauty and food for the soul and you will never be lonely. (http://ifpoems.com/#iF+Poems+App)

Professor and author Charlotte Huck wrote, "Fine poetry is the distillation of experience that captures the essence of an object, feeling, or thought" (2003, 359). Poetry is brief and full of interesting language, but it is the capture of emotion or experience in a nutshell that gives poetry its power. And amazingly, poetry does this in fewer words than any other genre. And unlike with other genres, we often return to the same poems over and over and over again. We can cherish one poem throughout a lifetime, gaining new meaning from it as life experiences color our perceptions and understanding. Research commissioned through the Poetry Foundation noted that most poetry readers (80 percent) first

encounter poetry as children, at home or in school; 77 percent of all readers were read nursery rhymes as children; 45 percent of current poetry readers also had other forms of poetry read to them as children.

If this is so, why is there often such a disconnect when the topic of poetry comes up in our work life? Even the word *poetry* puts off many adults. It reminds them of forced memorization, searching for hidden symbolism, or counting meter for iambic pentameter. So many adults have had negative experiences that keep them from sharing poetry with children. Children then grow into a similar dislike or apathy for poetry. Maybe we need to remodel our poetry memories. Sara Holbrook in her book *Practical Poetry* (2005) writes:

I believe in functional poetry. Much like functional pottery, this is poetry that holds water. It makes sense to keep it around. It does something for us. Makes a connection. It doesn't just sit there on the shelf and look mysterious. Art for art's sake is a silly philosophy that relegates us to that room down the hall in which we run the risk of losing our connection to the real world. I would argue that art is for the sake of everyone. Art, poetry included, should be an intramural event, not simply a spectator sport. (xvi)

If we think about poetry in this way, we may begin to see both the beauty and the utility in this form of literature. We can reclaim poetry as something new.

# The Value of Poetry for Children

Why make poetry a priority when our shelves are full of many choices and our days are full with many tasks? Scholar Lissa Paul makes a case for the importance of children's poetry, from traditional verse to more literary poetry, in her introduction to "Verse" in the seminal work *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English.* She reminds us that "the history of poetry written for children begins in oral tradition" (Zipes et al. 2005, 1132) and includes lullabies, baby songs, nursery verse, riddles and wordplay, playground verse, nonsense, and standard poetry collections. It is a rich tradition that has stood the test of time and has nurtured us from the cradle onward. It is also a shared experience that brings adults and children together by virtue of its oral dimension. Poetry for children begs to be heard, to be shared out loud, to be talked about. It is a social connection as well as a language experience.

### **PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE**

One thing I did with my first-grade classes this year was a big hit. I shared a different Douglas Florian poetry book with each class that came in and then let their teachers check them out to keep in the room for everyone to have a chance with the book. This was very popular. Now, a few months later, first graders are still my most frequent poetry customers.

> Diana Ellis, elementary school librarian Frisco, Texas

#### POET PROFILE

Exploring the Self BY PAT MORA

pportunities prompt creativity. I grumbled when I was a student and had to write essays, poems, or book reports; but when I finished, I had written what would probably never otherwise have arrived on the page. I'm grateful to my friend Sylvia Vardell for inviting me to write about sharing poetry aloud. I like Sylvia so much that I told her that even if I had no writing implements and had to carve the poem with a stick or rock, I'd be happy to try.

Poems incubate. I knew I had this "assignment" and wanted to write a poem that might be useful for teachers and librarians working to excite students about presenting poems, theirs or poems written by others. When I was in elementary school in El Paso, Texas, we memorized many poems, but we really didn't experience the pleasure of investing ourselves in sharing them. In high school and college, I competed in oral interpretation. I'd prepare poems I liked to share with an audience. I never thought about sharing my own poems.

In New York recently, accompanied by Sylvia's request, I just let the possibilities simmer. I love museums and folk art, so I returned to the American Folk Art Museum, where I discovered *Self and Subject*, self-portraits by folk artists. "Hmmm," I thought as I strolled. "Animal self-portraits by children." The tradi-

#### APPENDIX C

# **Bibliography of Children's Poetry Books**

A comprehensive list of all the poetry books cited in the text (and suggested pairings of fiction and nonfiction books), as well as additional recommended books of poetry for young readers.

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