

CHAPTER 5 Poetry, Drama, Humor, and New Media

Focus Box 5.1

Stories Told through Free-Verse Poetry



Fortune's Bones: *The Manumission Requiem* by Marilyn Nelson. Front Street, 2004. Nelson tells the true story of a slave who in the late 1700s was owned by a Connecticut doctor. When he died, the doctor dissected his body and boiled down the bones to use for anatomy studies. Nelson's rich telling of this unique story could be an effective reader's theater production.

Frida: *Viva la Vida!* by Carmen T. Bernier-Grand, Marshall Cavendish, 2007. Free-verse poems, each paired with one of Frida Kahlo's paintings, do a good job of introducing a new generation to this famous Mexican painter.

Heartbeat by Sharon Creech. HarperCollins, 2004. Middle school readers will enjoy the rhythm of the verses in this story of twelve-year-old Annie who loves to run, not to win a race, but to feel the earth and sky.

Hoop Kings by Charles R. Smith, Jr. Candlewick, 2004. Shaq O'Neal's shoe sole (actual size) is featured as a fold-out in this gorgeous book of sports poems. The pages feature twelve super-heroic basketball players with equally vibrant poems.

Locomotion by Jacqueline Woodson. Putnam's, 2003. Woodson uses a teen voice to create the free verse, the sonnets, and the haiku that tell Lonnie's story as he moves through group and teen homes.

Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff (Holt, 1993), winner of the National Book Award, was one of the earliest books in which the author lent dignity to a problem novel by using a spacious free-verse format. In the sequel, *True*

Believer (2001), LaVaughn's horizons extend beyond her neighborhood, but she does not lose her determination.

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse. Scholastic, 1996. In diary-like entries, Billie Jo tells how her dreams get lost in the swirling winds of the 1930s Oklahoma dustbowl. The book won the Newbery Medal.

Split Image by Mel Glenn. Morrow/HarperCollins, 2000.

Poems from observers show how Laura Li, a dutiful Asian daughter, has a hard time figuring out how to manage her heritage and her new life. Glenn's other poetic stories include *Foreign Exchange: A Mystery in Poems* (1999), *The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems* (1997), *Jump Ball: A Basketball Season in Poems* (1997), and *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?* (1996).

The Voyage of the Arctic Tern by Hugh Montgomery. Candlewick, 2002. Unlike most of the new prose poets who are writing realistic problem stories, Montgomery spins a high-seas adventure story.

The Way a Door Closes by Hope Anita Smith, illustrated by Shane W. Evans. Holt, 2003. The first twelve poems are about the happiness that C. J. experiences in his family, but the thirteenth, "The Way a Door Closes," lets readers know that the father of the family is leaving. The rest of the book (twenty-two more poems) describe C. J.'s up-and-down emotions.

Who Will Tell My Brother? by Marlene Carvel. Hyperion, 2002. Carvel's sensitive story treats the issue of offensive Indian mascots used by sports teams.

Young Adult Authors Speak Out

Naomi Shihab Nye on the

Poetry Bridge



To cross the Mississippi River when I was a child, my family could drive over a noisy bridge with a strange surface that made tires rattle and squeal, or a silent humming bridge with elegant spires. Of course, we all cheered for the noisy bridge, but once I started reading and writing poetry at age six, I realized quiet bridges had a deeper appeal.

Simply by reading a poem written long ago, one could feel transported into the heart and mind of another time. Emily Dickinson or William Blake offered startling wisdom-sparks that made a whole day swerve, sit up, take on a shinier, more attentive tone.

Or by reading a poem by a poet from another country—Rabindranath Tagore of Bengal was a childhood favorite of mine, and Robert Louis Stevenson from Scotland—one felt connected. Distances dissolved as the bridge of shared experience and insight linked us. I also knew what it was like to swing high in a swing or stare into a stream. So these far-away people were my secret friends.

Of course, the reality of connectedness is only one of the tragedies that haunts devoted readers during a time of war. How many details and impulses do we really have in common with all the people who are dying? What shared understandings might have moved us past whatever desperation leads human beings to commit acts of violence against one another? What could we have done better?

I am interested in the bridges between images and ideas, layers of thinking, reality and metaphor—the unexpected seams that writing helps us sew. I am interested in how writing about one thing so often opens a door to another thing. The act of writing itself is an opening. Even if you don't like what you write first, you may move around within words on a paper and allow them to lead you somewhere else. I am interested in placement of parts of language, and the shining unspoken stream of meaning that often flows brightly right below the little bridges we carefully construct.

When I write about the Middle East, or anywhere else on earth, the poem or story is only trying to shine a little light on human realities which exist for all people in the world, not just some of us—that is the ground the poem grows out of. Not a “message”—not a “slogan”—as in politics—but creation of a simple scene. The people in the Middle East appreciate their homes, like good food, love children, want to water their plants and tend their trees and have friends in school and be respected in work, just as we do over here. It is impossible to explain the desperation that creates so much violence, but it is *possible* to describe regular human life and its hopes and fears.

I would hope readers feel at home in my poems, wherever the poem is taking place. “Oh, I know that feeling” or “That’s sort of like me.” Poetry is not just a surface glance at something, it is a deeper gaze. It tries to look *into*, not just at something. It slows us down, which is good, since we usually move too fast anyway. It helps us see something worth seeing everywhere, whether inside or outside us.

A girl in Calgary, Canada, wrote to me that after reading my work she could never look at the world headlines in the same way again. She would always be thinking about “regular people” everywhere—not “enemies” or “foreigners” or “strangers.” Her letter, in which she also mentioned she had asked her mom to cook only Middle Eastern food for her while she was reading *Habibi* the second time, was the best review I ever got.

My happiest moment as a writer is when someone else sees something of their *own* in one of my stories or poems.

That’s the bridge—and it doesn’t make a lot of noise.

* Naomi Shihab Nye’s books include her *Habibi* (Simon and Schuster, 1997), *19 Varieties of Gazelle—Poems of the Middle East* (Greenwillow, 2002), *A Maze Me* (Greenwillow, 2005), and *I’ll Ask You Three Times, Are You OK?* (Greenwillow, 2007).



The Teaching of Poetry

When we ask our college students about their in-school experiences with poetry, on the negative side they tell us about teachers who did not like poetry themselves and so flooded lessons with technical terms or turned poems into guessing games that made students feel stupid. On the positive side, they tell us about teachers who seemed to take genuine pleasure in poems and shared them with students as a gift. Their actions match the advice of Richard W. Beach and James D. Marshall:

1. Never teach a poem you don't like.
2. Teach poems that you're not certain you understand. Teach poems about which you may have some real doubt.
3. Teach poems that are new to you as well as your store of "old standards."
4. Become a daily reader of poems, a habitué of used bookstores, a scavenger of old *New Yorkers* and other magazines that contain poetry.
5. Give students the freedom to dislike great poetry.⁶

Books about teaching literature inevitably give suggestions on teaching this or that genre, but readers can almost palpably sense the urgency of suggestions for teaching poetry. Recommended books include Louise Rosenblatt's seminal *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*; Patrick Dias and Michael Hayhoe's *Developing Response to Poetry*; and Stephen Dunning's *Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Poetry*. See Chapter 11 for helpful ideas on writing poetry. With the help of these books and poems gleaned from teachers' reading, any teacher can soon have several hundred poems worth reading and using in class. Here we offer some other suggestions.

1. Avoid units on poetry. Poems deserve to be used frequently but not en masse. It is better to use poems in thematic units where they can be tied in with short stories or drama.
2. Drop a funny poem—or a monster poem—into class just for the fun of it.
3. Let students, at least occasionally, help choose the poems that a class will study.
4. Remember that poetry takes time and plan accordingly. This is not to see how many poems you can knock off in one class, but to allow students to hear poems again and again and to talk about them. We saw one teacher who obviously hated poetry set a record by killing thirty-six Emily Dickinson poems in less than one class period. It takes time to recognize kinship with a poet, to find someone who expresses a feeling or makes an observation that the reader has come close to but has not quite been able to put into words.
5. Surround your students with as many beautifully designed poetry books as you can borrow from libraries, scrounge from friends and neighbors, or buy. For suggestions, see Focus Box 5.2, More Poets and Poetry.

Even though the age range of those who can read and enjoy a particular poem is usually much wider than for prose, there is still a subtle dividing line between children's and young adult books. While teenagers may be amused by the humorous poetry of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, they are likely to feel slightly insulted if offered serious children's poetry. Many young adults are ready to read and enjoy the same poetry that educated adults enjoy, especially if teachers smooth the way by first providing access to poets whose allusions they are likely to understand and then gradually leading them into poetry representing cultures and times different from their own. It may help to ease students into appreciating the work of some poets by first offering various kinds of biographical reading, as with Neil Baldwin's *To All Gentleness: William Carlos Williams, The Doctor-Poet*; Jean Gould's *American Women Poets: Pioneers of Modern Poetry*; or Paul Janeczko's *Poetspeak: In Their Work, About Their Work*. In a similar way, someone who has read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* will probably be ready to appreciate the poems in her *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning: Poems*. Readers of Ray Bradbury's science fiction may want to read his fifty-plus poems in *When Elephants Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*. Students who have read Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* will probably be interested in her poetry.

One of the delights and challenges of working with modern poetry is that students (and teachers) have no source to turn to for determining the meaning or worth of the poems. Comments on a T. S. Eliot poem are easy to come by, and a glance at criticism tells us whether this poem is major Eliot or minor Eliot. We hardly need to read the poem to comment on it, to determine its place in the canon, or to chase down all those wonderful symbols and allusions. With a modern poem, teachers and students must fall back on honest responses to the poem. Years ago, Luella Cook, one of the great people in English education, warned teachers about the dishonesty of canned responses to literature, and although she referred to students alone, her warning might be extended to teachers as well.

The problem of teaching literature realistically faced, then, becomes one of widening the range of responses to literature, of guiding reading experience so that reaction to books will be vivid, sharp, compelling, provocative. The great tragedy of the English classroom is not that students may have the "wrong" reactions—that is, veer from accepted judgment—but that they will have no original reaction at all, or only the most obvious ones, or that they will mimic the accepted evaluations of criticism.⁷



Making Drama a Class Act

We used to say that playwrights did not write plays for teenagers because teenagers were not the ones buying tickets to Broadway plays or flying to London on theater tours. That's still true, but as we discussed in Chapter 3, teenagers make up a healthy portion of television and movie audiences, so that talented writers are now writing serious plays designed for young people either to read or to perform.

More Poets and Poetry



Crush: Love Poems by Kwame Alexander. Word of Mouth, 2007. Naomi Shihab Nye wrote the title poem; other featured poets are Pablo Neruda, Nikki Giovanni, and Sherman Alexie. An intriguing variety of verbal formulas may inspire teens to submit their own poems to a related website.

Good Poems, compiled by Garrison Keillor. Viking, 2002. After a lighthearted introduction, Keillor presents three hundred poems that he has read on his PBS radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. They range from the well-known to the obscure, but they are all accessible.

Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art, edited by Jan Greenberg. Abrams, 2001. In this Printz Honor Book, Greenberg commissioned poets to write in response to some of the greatest twentieth-century American paintings. She arranged the paintings and the poems according to the poet's approach.

I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by African Americans, revised edition, edited by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by Benny Andrews. Simon & Schuster, 1997. Since its publication in 1968, this has been the premier anthology of black poetry. Twenty-one new poems are

included with pieces coming from nine women, including Rita Dove and Maya Angelou.

I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry, edited by Catherine Clinton, illustrated by Stephen Lalcorn. Houghton Mifflin, 1998. This attractive, large-sized book is a good resource for classrooms and libraries.

Immersed in Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent and Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet's Life by Allan Wolf, illustrated by Tuesday Mourning. Sterling/Lark, 2006. This is both a how-to and a book of encouragement for anyone who's even slightly tempted to write a poem. The illustrations add an upbeat tone.

Love Speaks Its Name: Gay and Lesbian Love Poems, edited by J. D. McClatchy. Knopf, 2001. The 144 poets include Sappho, Walt Whitman, Frank O'Hara, and Muriel Rukeyser.

Pierced by a Ray of Sun: Poems about the Times We Feel Alone, selected by Ruth Gordon. HarperCollins, 1995. These seventy-three poems all explore human loneliness. Also recommended are Gordon's earlier collections including *Time Is the Longest Distance* (1991), *Under All Silences* (1987), and *Peeling the Onion* (1993), all HarperCollins.

Be warned, however, that these are not the kinds of nondescript plays that were found in books for high school students a generation ago. In an *English Journal* article, "Toward a Young Adult Drama," Rick E. Amidon described them as "works which question fitting in, popularity, sex, drugs, making choices, taking chances." He labeled Jerome McDonough the "father of young adult drama" because of his dozen "powerful, practical-to-produce, and effective plays for the young adult stage."⁸ His plays differ from those typically produced at high schools in that they are shorter (fifty to seventy minutes long); they deal with topics dear to the hearts of teenagers; most of the casts are flexible, so the plays can be adapted to how many actors are available; and they have contemporary settings. Hindi Brooks, who has been a writer for television's *Fame* and *Eight Is Enough*, has also written plays specifically for young adults. (Both McDonough's and Brooks's plays are available from I. E. Clark in Schulenberg, Texas.) Samuel French in Hollywood and Dramatists Play Service in New York also offer play scripts written for teenagers. For the first time, the ALAN Workshop was held in New York City in November, 2007, and included a panel of playwrights talking about their

Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath, edited by Elise Pashen and Rebekah Presson Mosby. Source Books, 2001. A bonus to this book are the three CDs presenting many of the forty-two poets doing interpretive readings.

Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle, edited by Stephen Dunning and others. Scott, Foresman, 1967, reissued, 1994. A landmark book, this collection proved that young readers could enjoy modern poetry without the help (or hindrance) of teachers. Its sequel, *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needles and Other Complete Modern Poems* (Lothrop, 1969) is almost as good.

Red Hot Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Being Young and Latino in the United States, edited by Lori M. Carlson. Holt, 2005. Continuing along the lines of her popular 1994 *Cool Salsa*, Carlson has gathered another wonderful collection of poems in both Spanish and English.

Revenge and Forgiveness: An Anthology of Poems, edited by Patrice Vecchione. Holt, 2004. Contemporary poets including Naomi Shihab Nye, Lucille Clifton, and editor Vecchione join "classic" poets ranging from the creator of a Native American myth song to William Shakespeare and Ezra Pound in illustrating different ways of dealing with grief and anger. The collection was inspired by the events of September 11, 2001.

Tour America: A Journey through Poems and Art by Diane Siebert, illustrated by Stephen T. Johnson. CIP Chronicle, 2006. Children, teens, and adults can all enjoy this book of poems and paintings that take readers to 26 of the author's favorite places in America—ranging from Alaska and a view of the aurora borealis to Chicago and a view of the El.

Truth and Lies: An Anthology of Poems, edited by Patrice Vecchione. Holt, 2001. Vecchione adds illuminating notes to help young readers enjoy the poems that she carefully chose from across centuries and across cultures.

Wachale! Poetry and Prose About Growing Up Latino in America, edited by Ilan Stavans. Cricket Books/Carus Publishing, 2001. A reviewer described the vivid word pictures in this bilingual collection as speaking from the heart and lingering in the mind.

Walt Whitman: Words for America by Barbara Kerley, illustrated by Brian Selznick. Scholastic, 2004. Beautiful pictures and a generous format make this a good book for introducing one of America's most famous poets.

Why War Is Never a Good Idea by Alice Walker, illustrated by Stefano Vitale. HarperCollins, 2007. Folk art paintings make Walker's poem especially powerful. Skilled teachers can use the book to bring both an artistic and a thought-provoking experience to groups from ages eight or nine on up.

scripts. Aaron Levy (see his statement on p. 158) was responsible for bringing the event together.

Without encouragement from teachers, few teenagers read drama because it needs to be read aloud with different voices and it is hard to visualize the scenery and the stage directions. One of our graduate students, Alison Babusci, who came to study in Arizona State University's well-known program in Children's Theater, drew up these five suggestions for teachers who are planning to have students read and study such plays as those listed in Focus Box 5.3.

1. Make students feel like they are "on the inside" of the theatrical world by bringing in photocopies of sets and costume designs. Obtain a stage diagram and teach students stage directions; the more they know about the production of a play they are reading, the more interested they will be.
2. Become "friends" with the cast by having students copy the cast list (dramatis personae) from the beginning of the play and then write their own descriptions of the characters and their relationships.