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Poet

Confessions of a collector

At a recent school visit in a Chicago suburb, I was working with a group of middle school teachers. One of the teachers asked me what I would tell a kid who asked, “Why do this? Why bother with poetry?” I was taken aback by the question. How could anyone doubt the value of poetry? My answer was glib. “We need to read and write poetry,” I told the teachers, “so that our hearts don’t die.” I then tried to explain what I meant. I’m not sure I did a very convincing job. So, when I was deciding what I would say in this article, I knew I had to attempt to answer that teacher’s question, the same question I ask whenever I work on a new poetry anthology: Why poetry for young readers?

First, some history. I didn’t start out to be a poet or anthologist. I started out as a kid in New Jersey who had two major goals in life: 1) to survive one more year of delivering newspapers without being attacked by Ike, the one-eyed, slobbering, crazed cur that lurked in the forsythia bushes at the top of the hill; and 2) to become more than a weak-hitting, third-string catcher on our sorry Little League team. I failed at both.

Had I announced at the dinner table, “Mom, Dad, I’ve decided to be a poetry anthologist,” my parents—particularly my mother—would have been thrilled. In truth, they would have been thrilled that I’d decided to be anything other than the top-40 disk jockey, Edsel salesman, or bullpen catcher I constantly talked about becoming in grammar school. But at that point in my life—as an affable joker who endured hours sitting in a desk whose design, I was convinced, had originated in a 15th-century Spanish dungeon—poetry meant no more to me than 1066, George Washington’s wooden teeth, or dangling modifiers. I was “gifted” only on Christmas and my birthday.

In my grammar school classroom, I had my own burning question about poetry: why did it always rhyme? I tried to look it up, as I’d been taught, but I couldn’t find an answer. I turned to one of my friends, who told me, with the flawless logic of a fifth grader, that it had to rhyme or it couldn’t be poetry. It was some sort of law, like not bunting with two strikes or stepping on the cracks in the sidewalks. All very mysterious and inexplicable. “But what would it be,” I asked, “if it didn’t rhyme?” My friend shrugged. “Not-poetry,” was his reply. So I grew up thinking that if poetry didn’t rhyme, it was Not-poetry. And, of course, my classmates and I were given stacks of “poetry,” *i.e.*, the stuff that rhymed. I’m sure that many of you can recall poems from grammar school. They were usually found in thick books with titles like *Come Hither* or *Poet’s Gold*.

When I started high school, my attitudes toward poetry came with me. Another suspicion I had about poetry was soon confirmed. Poems were written, I surmised, only about subjects on the Official Approved List of Subjects You Can Write Poems About. I think you know the list. Among the subjects on that list were: **NATURE**, in which the things of nature are given strangely unnatural qualities. (“Trees” by Joyce Kilmer fell into this category.); **PURE (and usually BROKEN-HEARTED) LOVE; COURAGE**, especially the moral variety; **FAMILY** was another Approved Subject, and this section usually contained a group of sad pet poems; and **PHILOSOPHY**, which was a sort of catch-all for poems that were supposed to edify, enlighten, or illuminate. Ideally, all three.

It was some time during college that I started reading more poetry on my own. I can’t put my finger on the exact date or even the year when I came to realize that poetry was much more than

the quaint rhymed verse that I had read in grammar school or high school. I wish I could name the poet who turned me around, but I can't. It may have been William Butler Yeats, who touched me with "When You Are Old," his poem of long-lasting love. Or, maybe it was Walt Whitman, the Good Gray Poet, whose robust voice resonated in his long, sprawling lines. Or, it could have been Emily Dickinson, who noted with remarkable clarity in her short, precise poems the details of the world around her Amherst home.

The truth is, of course, that it was the poetry itself that showed me what poetry could be. The more poetry I read, the more good poems I discovered. Finally, it became clear to me that the Official Approved List of Subjects You Can Write Poems About was as wide as the universe. And, as we all know, the universe doesn't always rhyme.

I became a poetry junkie. I feel safe confessing that to you. I read poetry the way some people watch soap operas, work in their gardens, or follow the Red Sox—irrationally, compulsively, endlessly. I read poems nearly every day whenever I find myself with a few unfilled minutes. In fact, I've found some wonderful poems while waiting to have my car repaired, eating breakfast, and sitting out an early April blizzard.

Okay, here's the thing: if we value poetry, we must first of all, become poetry readers ourselves. James Dickey said it best: "What you have to realize ... is that poetry is just naturally the greatest goddamn thing that ever was in the whole universe. If you love it, there's no substitute for it." I love it. Poetry's important. Vital. It must be part of the lives of young people. And it is up to us to share our love of poetry with students and to help them hear the music.

It is up to all of us to allow young people plenty of opportunities to write poetry. As Robert Francis said, "One word cannot strike spark from itself; it takes at least two for that. It takes words lying side by side to breed wonders." The choices we can give kids are nearly limitless. Kids can write: elegies, parodies, rondeaus and plain odes, clerihew, haiku, epigrams and epitaphs, concrete poems, found poems, synonym poems, acrostic poems, light verse, blank verse, free verse, lyrics, limericks, and epics, couplets, tercets, and sonnets (Elizabethan and Italian), refrains and quatrains. And there are more.

Good poetry explodes with possibilities, and we must share those possibilities with young people. I've already mentioned some of those possibilities, but there are more. Young readers need to

recognize that poetry has functions other than to puzzle, intimidate, and infuriate. Poetry can mesmerize, mock, and mimic. Poetry can celebrate. Poetry can memorialize with dry humor, or it can memorialize by showing us what Robert Francis meant when he wrote, "A poem is like an arrow; it's got to wound you." That's what I tried to do when I wrote a poem after my father died early in the spring of 2000. The poem is called "On the Morning After my Father Died":

On the morning after my father died
two mourning doves,
pudgy spinsters
in gray coats,
sat in the road and gossiped.

Lilacs,
quiet all winter,
began to whisper
in violet and white.

Wind
hissed through
new leaves
green and bright.

Four hundred miles away
my mother,
married to the man for 59 years,
sat by his chair
bent with the weight
of her new silence.

Back to the original question: why poetry for young readers? Another answer: because poetry is not read as much as it should be read. Why not? I think people are afraid of it. Afraid they won't be able to "figure it out," as if it were one of those infernal word problems about two trains traveling in opposite directions at different rates of speed. In a country that boasts 2.2 million accordion players, it seems that poetry should have more readers than it does. At times I share Anatole Broyard's fear that we, as a society, do not read enough poetry. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Broyard asked, "Where will our flair come from, our hyperbole, our mots justes? Unless we read poetry we'll never have our hearts broken by language, which is an indispensable preliminary to a civilized life." This answer drives me to shape the very best, accessible poems into a personal offering that will speak to young readers.

By reading more poems, young people will see that good poetry explodes with the possibilities of form, language, images, structure, rhythm, voice, sound, feeling. The right poems show young readers how poetry can describe, confess, and lament. Young readers need to find the poems that speak to them in a voice they cannot resist.

The best poems ask questions we all ask. The best poems are like life itself—they celebrate the grace of little things. The best poems are alive with intense, inventive language. Mark Twain said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between “lightning” and “lightning bug.” Nowhere is that more crucial than in poetry. It can provoke, praise, and remember.

Adolescents need to know that poetry sings of human experiences, very often their own experiences. I want young readers to see that poetry is accessible, that it’s something that captures experiences, that it captures the meanings in life, and that it communicates with language wild and marvelous. I want kids to know that poems can narrate and commemorate.

Readers who lose themselves in a good anthology will quickly learn that the best poems are rich with the textures of life. By reading poetry, we come

to see that each poem has a purpose, described well by Jonathan Holden, as “to give shape, in a concise and memorable way, to what our lives feel like... Poems help us to notice the world more and better, and they enable us to share with others.” And today, with civilization seemingly destroying itself piece by piece, we all need to share. That’s what poets do to us and for us. That’s what my collections are all about—poets letting us connect with each other.

Philip Booth said that a good poem “makes the world more habitable.” Any good poem, he went on to say, “changes the world. It changes the world slightly in favor of being alive and being human.” I can think of no better reason why poetry should be a vital part of our lives and the lives of our young people.

Although I never even rode in an Edsel or caught a pitch beyond the Little League level, I did go on to become a reader and writer of poetry. And today, I consider myself lucky, given my staggering lack of interest and effort in school, not to mention the poetry I was expected to read. Now, when I am touched by a good poem, as I hope all young readers are, I recall the words of Stanley Kunitz, who said that if we listen hard enough to poets, “who knows—we too may break into dance, perhaps for grief, perhaps for joy.”

