



# Playing with Words: Two Children's Encounters with Poetry from Birth

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## Playing with Words: Two Children's Encounters with Poetry from Birth

Virginia Lowe kept a record of her two children's responses to literature from birth until adolescence in 6,000 handwritten pages from 1972-1987. She took notes verbatim rather than use a tape recorder, partly because of its intrusiveness and partly because she was aiming to record *all* book-references in play and conversation as well as in reading sessions. She used this material for her doctoral thesis which later became **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell**. Here **Virginia Lowe** explains the importance of poetry in her children's lives.

Playing with words is what infants do; babbling is all about rhyme and alliteration and my children's first encounter with poetry predictably begins with rhyme.

My daughter Rebecca is three years and three months older than her brother Ralph (1). Both Rebecca and Ralph recognised favourite nursery rhymes – especially ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’ – at six months or earlier, demonstrating their enthusiasm with excited physical responses. By 1-1, Rebecca objected strenuously to nursery rhyme repetitions sung on a long car trip: three repetitions in a row were allowed, then she insisted on new rhymes! At 1-6 she would demand ‘more-ee’ before the end of each rhyme, and fill in some of the rhyming words herself. By two, both Rebecca and Ralph could sing about ten nursery rhymes with the words and tunes more or less correct. At 1-11, Rebecca often added made-up words when she couldn't remember the actual ones, and then remarked ‘funny song?; at 2-7 she described one of her own versions as ‘a nonsense poem?.

Quotations from nursery rhymes served various purposes. At first the children would chime in with the reader, then they used the words as a label for the rhyme to request it or name it on the page. At 1-1, Rebecca used ‘awfawdow? [all fall down] as a request for a singing session. ‘Nut tree. Mummy sing?’ was one of Rebecca's longest utterances at 1-10. Eventually these phrases became part of their lexicon and were used appropriately with the activity at hand, such as ‘I'm sure I don't know?’ (‘London Bridge?’) or singing ‘Jack and Jill?’ when pretending to fall off a lap. At 2-8, asking for help in climbing a fence Ralph beseeched me with, ‘But my heart will break if you don't!’ Rebecca at 3-6 still occasionally used her baby term for ‘pick me up’, so plaintively: ‘Uff uff me, or my heart will break.’ (‘There was a lady loved a swine?’)

## Delicious items of vocabulary

A A Milne's poems were quoted more often than any other author. Rebecca at 2-3 would often ask: ‘Where are we going this nice fine day?’ (‘Puppy and I?’) She could recite several of Milne's short poems at 2-1 when given the opening words. It was noticeable that poetry learned by heart by both children, right up to adolescence, was always rhyming and usually humorous – ‘Jabberwocky?’ and verse by Ogden Nash and Doug McLeod, for instance. At 10 Rebecca told me that ‘Poems are meant to be funny, or there's no point to them?’. She enjoyed listening to serious

poems, but she never chose to learn them.

Rebecca, learning to speak, enjoyed 'literary' words that were not in the family lexicon, the meaning less important than the sound. Delicious items of vocabulary from Beatrix Potter were 'soporific', 'fortnight' and 'tippet', while 'mackintosh' and 'tasty' came from Milne. She enjoyed saying 'marmalade is tasty if it's very thickly spread' at 2-1 and a missing boot was 'lost, stolen or strayed' at 2-4. A reference to 'The King's Breakfast' 'butter eh? And bounced out of bed?', was frequently recited and acted out during meals at 3-4. Ralph, almost at his fourth birthday, remarked, 'When I was three I was hardly me.' ('The End') Rebecca at 3-5 used Eliot's **Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats** to tempt our new kitten to stay in a house of cardboard cartons she had built for him: 'If I put you in a house, then you want to have a flat/ if I put you in a flat then you want to have a house.'

### Unusual grammatical constructions

There were rhyming picture book texts as well. Dr Seuss's **Green Eggs and Ham** was a favourite: 'Would you like it in a box?' (Rebecca), 'I no like it in a box' (Ralph) and so on at 5-8 and 2-5 respectively. After hearing **Fox in Sox** only a couple of times, at 3-2 Rebecca remarked, 'Fox and box rhyme because they've both got an X'. Nursery rhymes often employ unusual grammatical constructions. Ralph noticed at 3-4 that the Robin Hood song ('An outlaw bold was he') 'is like Old King Cole, because they both say, 'was he.'?

Filling in rhyming words was always popular. At 1-8 Rebecca shouted 'hop?', 'stop?', 'tail?' and 'flew?' in the right places in 'Once I saw a little bird?'. The imperative of rhyme also inspired the youngest deliberate joke from either of them. It was Ralph who at 2-3 chimed in, as so often, to a book of rhyming verse: the verse goes 'Here's a shy kitten/ soft and sweet/ and here's a white lamb/ with four little black?' 'WHEELS!?', he shouted.

Here is Rebecca perched in a tree at 4-9 composing her own poem on the pattern of Russell Hoban's **A Birthday for Frances** 'Happy Chompo to me, is how it ought to be':

Living in a tree  
Is how I ought to be  
Can't you see  
Living in a tree  
How I ought to be  
It's just like I have to be  
Doing what I have to do  
Living in a tree is all that I can do...

### Haiku

When Rebecca was turning 2, I decided it was time for something different, so for her birthday I gave her **In a Spring Garden** 'a book of haiku by famous Japanese poets with delightful illustrations by Ezra Jack Keats:

The moon in the water  
turned a somersault  
and floated away. ('Ryôta')

'Decca [Rebecca] somersault!' she cried, with much delighted laughter. She also wanted many repeats of Issa's:

The puppy asleep  
biting  
the willow tree.

One morning when she was 2-4, I was reading Rebecca animal haiku from an adult collection. After hearing many of these she suddenly announced: 'A frog jumps up in a willow?'. After that she made up many short 'haiku' of her own,

which she insisted we write down. They showed that she had understood the essence of this poetic form. For example: "Frog goes in the water and croaks in the grass" and "A hibiscus hides in a tree and wiggles his head, head, head."

Strong feelings are inspired by poetry. We were in our first intense passion for Jansson's **Moomintrolls** when Ralph at 4-3 asked me whether the threatening Groke was always awake. Then he went off to find the book, chanting to reassure himself:

We don't know and we don't know  
"cause we've never seen one  
and there's nothing real about them.

The children encountered death in nursery rhymes. "Who killed Cock Robin?" fascinated Ralph at 3-1. When the title of a picture book version was read at 2-9, he replied: "A bird " a sparrow with an arrow " see?" However some months later he was still musing on it as Rebecca was singing the rhyme: "What made him killed, Becca?" Anxiety was not the only emotion; there was also consolation. Rebecca at 3-10 quoted gently to a disturbed baby Ralph: "Come little cub, don't look so sad" from Aileen Fisher's **Do Bears Have Mothers Too?** A year later she comforted him with a lullaby of her own based on "All the pretty little horses":

When you wake up in the morning  
you'll find a lamb in your cot.  
You'll find a mouse.  
A sheep, a mouse and a horse in your cot.  
The horse is a toy one,  
but the lamb and the mouse are real.  
Baa baa, squeak squeak, neigh!  
Little baby, go back to sleep now  
I've sung to you.

At 11-9 she wrote a poem on the drought in seven stanzas. Here are the first and fifth:

I am happy,  
I lie back in the dewy grass  
I watch the river as it gleams in the sun  
the cockatoos screeching high in the trees.  
The river and I: we are one.

The old gum  
see him  
happy like me  
in every limb.

## **Metaphor and simile**

Although many scholars maintain that metaphor/simile is not available to young children, I recorded many examples of their use by my children. "They're as green as emeralds" " of peas " said Rebecca at 2-7, and, at 4-11: "I've got a pail of water " I'm going to Jack and Jill it on Ralph!" Ralph at 7-7, talking about the problems of changing schools, came up with this telling analogy: "It's as if you're climbing up a big mountain and you know what the landscape is like when you go down, but there's been an avalanche, and it's all different." A couple of years later he was still struggling with school in metaphorical language. Having tried all week to wear the class medal and being bitterly disappointed, he observed: "It's as if you'd killed a lion and then got killed by a mosquito!"

This is just a brief indication of the part that poetry played in the lives of two young children who were not exceptional except for the amount of contact with verse. The poetic language they heard and read gave richness to their expression,

different ways of perceiving the world and aided their understanding of other people. Amazing what something as simple as playing with words can do!

(1) I have used 1-6 to indicate that the child was 18 months old, 5-2 to show 5 years 2 months old etc.

**Dr Virginia Lowe** lives in Ormond, Victoria, Australia. For the past 14 years she has been the proprietor of Create a Kids? Book, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops on creating the picture book or children?s novel, runs interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children?s literature generally. See [www.createakidsbook.com.au](http://www.createakidsbook.com.au) [3] for further details.

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