



Poetry for Children - Ten Questions and Some Answers

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Philippa Milnes-Smith looks at the current state of children's poetry.

When **BfK**'s Editor asked me to write an article about children's poetry in 1800 words I knew it would be impossible. With 18,000 words one might make a start but *1800*? After several chewed pencils I decided instead to look at 10 questions about children's poetry worth considering. But first a job application:

<!--break-->

Dear Sir or Madam

I wish to apply

For the post as Po-

etry Editor

At Viking Puffin.

I have been writing

Verse for many years

So far without suc-

cess. The position

Therefore would give me

A wonderful opp-

portunity to

See myself in print

I look forward to

An early reply.

Yours faithfully etc.

Sylvia Tendrill

Roger McGough from **Lucky**

The job at Penguin is filled. But there are few children's publishers today who don't publish poetry in some form.

Question 1 - So where would children's books today be *without* poetry?

Answer: Much the poorer, of course! It's impossible, now, to imagine a world of children's books without poetry but the real rise in popularity (and the commercial boom) of children's poetry began only around the early 1980s. That's not to say good children's poetry hadn't existed before. Poets such as Charles Causley and Ted Hughes had been around for much longer; and Eleanor Graham's **A Puffin Quartet of Poets**, for example, had been in print since 1958. (And if you remember this was a Puffin original from the *first* Puffin editor. Original paperback poetry has a longer history than many might think.) Surprisingly, however, the numbers of poetry books published are still small, probably accounting for less than 5% of children's books published. Considering this, the impact has been, and remains, quite astonishing.

Question 2 - Where would the success of children's poetry be without live performances by the poets themselves?

Answer: It's hard to avoid the correlation between children's poets who are successful as live performers and children's poets who are successful with their published work. Poets can bring their poetry alive in a way no-one else can and sell their work in a way nothing else can. Once you've heard Benjamin Zephaniah, for instance, the most unfamiliar words, inflections, or rhythms make sense on the page. The poetry becomes irresistible to even the most reluctant non-rapper.

TALKING TURKEYS!!

Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas

Cos turkeys jus wanna hav fun

Turkeys are cool, turkeys are wicked

An every turkey has a Mum.

Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas,

Don't eat it, keep it alive,

It could be yu mate an not on yu plate

Say, Yo! Turkey I'm on your side.

Benjamin Zephaniah from **Talking Turkeys**

Question 3 - Is the word 'Poetry' a turn-off for most people? Is 'Verse' better or would people rather have books that almost pretend not to be poetry at all?

Answer: Looking at it from a publisher's perspective you certainly can't rely on the word 'poetry' or the word 'verse' to sell a book. **Please Mrs Butler** by Allan Ahlberg, one of the most successful of Puffin's poetry books ever, has been a success (I think) not because it is a book of poetry but because it captures so perfectly the primary school world. Could so complete, so diverse and so rich a picture have been created in the same way by a novel? The staff and children of Mrs Butler's school spring to life on every page. Their voices speak directly to us:

Slow Reader

I - am - in - the - slow

read - ers - group - my ? broth

er - is - in - the ? foot

ball - team - my - sis ? ter

is - a - ser - ver ? my

lit - tle - broth - er ? was

a - wise - man - in ? the

in - fants - christ - mas ? play

I -am- in-the- slow read - ers - group - that ? is

all - I - am - in ? I

hate - it.

Allan Ahlberg from **Please Mrs Butler**

Question 4 - Should publishers be trying to find more of a balance between classic and contemporary poetry? And is there just *too much* light and humorous verse?

Answer: I think it's true (although some might well argue against this) that it's been the humorous, child-centred verse that has led a revival in children's poetry, but a greater awareness of what classic poetry can also offer children has followed. Certainly, the best of today's children's poets tend to bring together in their collections both serious and comic verse - and comic verse, in any case, often has a serious edge to it. The best anthologies, too, often draw from classic and contemporary verse. A good anthologist won't shirk from counterpointing Shakespeare with Shel Silverstein.

Question 5 - Why do we get so many complaints about poetry books?

Answer: There is the feeling amongst some adults that poetry is a 'pure' art form that should be on a higher plane beyond the realities of life. Because people are rarely explicit about their reasoning - only their outrage - one can merely guess at the precise nature of their ideas about poetry and their expectations. I quote from a letter sent by an anonymous timber merchant (supplier of chipboard, ladders, wall boards, doors, plywood, steps etc) who wrote to Puffin about **You Tell Me** by Roger McGough and Michael Rosen:

'You cannot understand my complete disgust as I read through some of these so called poems. One called The Lesson, which is in very bad taste, and full of violence, the second, which is called Nooligan, is also full of violence, Snipers, is also very violent and in very bad taste, also political...'

Clearly, a poem that isn't a *nice* poem cannot be called a poem at all.

Question 6 - Why do the poetry books people complain about the most usually sell the best?

Answer: That's probably because they're interesting, exciting, complex, engage thought and emotion and, as a result, children respond to them. In comic verse, too, children find a world of anarchy and irreverence they can't resist. One of my favourite press clippings on file is still: MUM CALLS FOR BAN ON REVOLTING NOSE POEM. The mother in

question never understood how or why Brian Patten's **Gargling with Jelly**, with its famous poem 'Pick-a-Nose Pick', was a bestseller or indeed why it was ever published. It's certainly not to every adult's taste but realistically it's unlikely to cause nationwide rioting. And who, under the age of 10, hasn't picked their nose at some time after all...

Pick-a-Nose Pick

Pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose Pick

Picked his nose and made me sick.

Pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose Pick

Picks his nose very quick.

Pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose Pick

Gets rid of it with one fast flick

Flick flick flick flick flick

Pick-a-nose-pick-a-nose makes me sick.

Brian Patten from **Gargling with Jelly**

Question 7 - What could children's experience, knowledge and development of language be like if more of them shared the enjoyment and excitement of poetry?

Answer: Children learn, understand, and respond to the power of rhyme and rhythm from a very early age and to the power of words themselves. It's in nursery rhymes, it's in playground chants; it belongs to a world of soothing lullabies as well as to the bullies' taunts on the street; it's associated with pop songs as well as literature. And so the good foundations are laid from an early age only to be followed by the collective failure of the adult world to build further. The failure rests squarely on our shoulders. With a little more imagination, a little more experimentation, children could experience a very different world of oral and written language. Try, for instance, just having fun with some shape poems:

GIANT ROCKET

A moonshot

falling short,

it bursts

in a shower

of stars,

then spirals

down

to distant trees

an ember

dying

Wes Magee from **Madtail, Miniwhale**

Question 8 - Why is it so rarely recognised that poetry anthologies are better value than almost any story collection?

Answer: There cannot be anything more wonderful than a well-researched, well-constructed and well-presented poetry anthology. Every Christmas there are beautifully illustrated gift collections to be found in the shops but poetry anthologies don't have to be lavishly produced to be satisfying. A good anthology will be read, re-read, returned to and loved for years and it's worth remembering that one good anthology is worth 10 bad ones. Make sure you research what is available well. The only poetry book I had as a child was the **Oxford Book of Verse** which began, I think, with 'Sumer Is I-cumen In' and then ended with 'The Darkling Thrush'. It was the only poetry book we had on the family bookshelf but it kept me going from when I was 11 until I left for university. There aren't many collections of stories that provide such a complete library in one book.

Question 9 - Why does poetry *never* get shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal when it is supposedly eligible?

Answer: That's really the question to ask all the librarians who choose the books to put forward for the award. When I've asked the question before, I've been given a number of different answers. The first is that librarians might feel far less confident about judging poetry than they do fiction. The second is that the Carnegie has become a fiction award whether or not, strictly speaking, it was first created as such. The third is that poetry is most used in schools - and used far less in the context of public libraries. These are all interesting points. But the net result is that every year, when this important and now high profile award comes round, children's poetry is disregarded and its significance is seemingly ignored by some of the most knowledgeable inhabitants of the world of children's books.

Question 10 - How would I advise anyone to update their poetry bookshelves in time for the next millennium?

Answer: If you feel you're out of touch or your family bookshelf or library bookshelf or school bookshelf needs updating, your best bet is to buy the forthcoming **Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Poetry: 0-13**. You won't find a better starting place.

Quotes are from the following Puffin books:

Lucky, ill. Sally Kindberg, 0 14 036172 3, £3.99

Talking Turkeys, 0 14 036330 0, £3.99

Please Mrs Butler, ill. Fritz Wegner, 0 14 031494 6, £3.99

Gargling with Jelly, ill. David Mostyn, 0 14 031904 2, £2.99

Madtail, Miniwhale and Other Shape Poems, ill. Caroline Crossland, 0 14 034031 9, £3.99

Philippa Milnes-Smith is Publisher, Penguin Children's Books. Penguin produce its own poetry list, edited by Anne Harvey, which is available free of charge through your normal book supplier or via the Puffin Schools line on 0500 807981.

The **BfK Poetry Guide** will be published in May this year. An order form comes with this issue of the magazine, or you can telephone **BfK's** London office (0181 852 4953) for more details.

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