



1984

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Walhquist, Elizabeth (1984) "Article: Play Earnest," *Children's Book and Media Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol5/iss3/2>

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Walquist: Article: Play Earnest

Play In Earnest

Anytime I contemplate doing anything with poetry with young readers (or any age reader) or making suggestions to others about how to approach poetry with young people, I become aware of how much I am conditioned by and under the influence of the poet Robert Frost and the poet John Ciardi, who was very much under the influence of Robert Frost.

They stressed that the very young are the natural audience for poetry. Robert Frost said a child of two or three has a gift the poets envy, using words and sounds in ways we've never seen or heard before. The child and the poet both create sounds, patterns, images which capture and convey something--Frost's "momentary stay." Young people of all ages should have the pleasure of poetry, and the play. Robert Frost said, "Except you enter poetry as a child you can't really enjoy, appreciate, and understand poetry." If the individual does not enter as a child, he has to become as a little child again to find his way into poetry, or miss the wonderful world waiting for him. We may need to play with poetry in ways that will help the young reader become that child again.

Sometimes we are in such a hurry to get them to the great poetry or for them to be able to say what the poem means that we forget to let and help young people experience the pleasure and have the play; we lose them as an audience for poetry and they lose that wonderful world of insight and delight. Frost often reminded us that "Happy is the man who enters poetry without having to study it. It comes pretty hard on poetry that which it has to bear in the teaching process. I remember his saying students should start with the poetry and then turn to the poet when they were interested enough and wanted to know more for insight into the poems. He said we shouldn't memorize on purpose, but should care enough about the poetry that some of it clings to us.

If they start young experiencing the patterns, the rhymes, the sounds, the images, the joy--they become poetry readers who come away from the poems with a wholeness of the experience without feeling they are putting the poems on the operating table, which Frost said he would never do. It's best to teach poetry to them without their knowing we are doing it. They experience the "pleasure of taking pains," both those the poet took and those they are taking. John Ciardi reminds us that every game ever invented was a way of making something hard for the fun of it. That goes for

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the poet and the reader of the poetry. Yes, it is a game, but the game is all there is. It's play in earnest.

I had the privilege to be literally in Robert Frost's audience a number of times, to hear him read his poetry and talk about poetry. He said he always wrote for a listening audience that was a blend of all the interesting people he had ever known. Sound was important to him. He insisted the ear is the only true writer or reader; that the sentence will often say more than the words; the words exist in mouths, not in books; that the sentence is a sound itself on which other words and sounds may be strung; that we should pay attention to the hearing imagination; that the sound of every word does something to the other words; that silences are part of the sound too. I've heard him say how proud he was of the silences in some of his poems, that we should listen for them. When I play with poetry and students I try to help them listen, to hear the sounds and silences.

When I'm playing with poetry with students I'm concerned about how much to do with poems, about the right balance in finding, as John Ciardi expresses it, "How does a poem mean." I hear Frost saying he wouldn't want to do anything with poetry that would enrage the muses. That leaves write, print, read, enjoy, remember. I hear his telling us not to chew a poem for an evening's pleasure, but to touch it. Rather than ask young readers what a poem means, Frost would have us to ask what experiences they have had with the poem or what the poem has helped them to experience. Poets are indirectionists; we shouldn't try to pin the poetry down to something too direct.

As we play with poetry with young readers we should help them to be careful readers of the poems, to read the poem that is there. But we should allow room for individual ideas. Robert Frost also said that the poet is entitled to everything the reader can find in the poem. He even admitted, "I have been amused by meanings that people give to my poems. You can read it many times and it becomes different to you." I've heard him respond to another's reading of a poem with, "I've never thought of that before, but it's there. Of course it is. That's good." He warns "There is great danger that your mind will get too busy over a poem. You don't have to get busy as all. Just let it alone. On the whole it's kind of fun." Let's have fun with poetry and the young readers who are experiencing it.