Classic Poetry Books

By Lillian Heil
Professor Emeritus
Department of Teacher Education
Brigham Young University

After the classic picture books chosen by the New York Public Library appeared in the May/June 2000 issue of Children's Book and Play Review (CBPR), several questions came to mind. Why aren't there lists of poetry books? Why are only three annual awards given to poets (which didn't begin until 1977) when other children's book awards number in the hundreds (beginning in 1922 with the Newbery award and the Caldecott in 1937)? Why has the Symposium for Young Readers at BYU invited only three poets in its eighteen-year history? Why do most teachers spend less than five minutes a week on poetry? Why did Poetry Week only begin a couple of years ago? The answer to these questions is easy—poetry is a neglected literacy form, particularly in schools.

Poetry should be taught and celebrated in schools for many reasons. The most basic reason is that children love it. After a program of poetry writing and public poetry readings began at the Brooklyn Public Library, the increase in poetry circulation in some branches rose 300 percent. The young people couldn't get enough of it! A children's bookstore in Texas reports that for five years it has had highly successful programs in writing poetry and then holding public readings of the winning poems (“Poet-Tree Grows in Brooklyn” by Susan Asis and “Oh, The Joy of Poetry!” by Tiffany Durham, The Children's Book Council 2000). Dramatizing poetry is an activity enjoyed by children of all ages. Poetry's carefully constructed rhythms and sounds appeal to children before they even begin to understand meanings. The word play in poetry increases and expands their understanding of language because the vocabulary in poetry is anything but ordinary. Poets work hard to find words with sounds and meanings that fit exactly. Poetry is an expression of the innermost feelings and passions of the human mind.

Knowing these benefits of poetry, it is time to begin sharing it with children. Poetry Week in the middle of April is a good time to start, and it also allows a couple of months to prepare—discovering new poets and finding ways to present them to children. Visit the Children's Book Council's web site at www.cbcbooks.org and find the posters and materials that are available to help you and the children in your care enjoy poetry.

To help you get started, a bibliography follows this article. Not all poems will be to everyone's liking, but the bibliography will be a start in finding poetry that speaks to each individual. If personal favorites have been omitted, feel free to send additional book titles to CBPR (c/o Marsha D. Broadway, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602-6887), and an addendum will be printed to this first list.

The bibliography will help you select poetry, but the next step is to share it with children. Because most people haven’t had poetry read aloud to them, they are very reluctant to read it aloud to children. Now is the time to practice reading aloud. Poetry, like music, is an oral form of art, and the rhythm and music of the words will be missed if it is not heard. Lee Bennett Hopkins has given some guidelines for reading poetry aloud that will help those who are apprehensive about reading poetry. (Pass the Poetry, Please by Lee Bennett Hopkins. HarperCollins, 1998. ISBN 0-06-446199-8, pp 20-22). These same points can be shared with children, for they, too, should be reading and sharing poetry aloud.

they
come
slowly,
thinking-ly
from our
mouths.

After following Hopkins advice, try tape-recording your efforts and hear where improvements can be made in your poetry reading.

Writing poetry is not the only activity that builds students' understanding of this genre. Poetic minidramas can be done in thirty to forty-five minutes using part of the class to read the poem and part to pantomime the actions. When the actions and reading are recorded on video, children can quickly see their successes and mistakes and make rapid improvements in their ability to interpret poetry. Poetry can also be put to music, especially if the adult has some training in reading and writing music. The poem sets the rhythm for the song; the task remaining is to find a melody that fits the words. Children will enjoy illustrating their favorite poems, using the numerous poetry picture books as models. Creative movement can also be put to poetry. In this activity, the focus is on the rhythm of the words and phrases, which greatly enhances children's understanding and appreciation of all aspects of poetry. Choral reading, a time-honored favorite, continues to be a rewarding activity with poetry. One word of caution, however—don't limit choral readings to programs, where prolonged practices for a performance may dampen some children's enthusiasm for poetry. Do it just for fun!

With the list of poetry books that follows, the hope is that adults will become poetry lovers and presenters by April and will help children do the same.

**POETRY BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

**ANTHOLOGIES OF POETRY**


An anthology of poems that focus on sounds of bands, trains, water, fish, storms, yaks, and finally a small ghostie.


This 1991 winner of the Signal Poetry Award in Great Britain is a marvelous collection of poems that don't rhyme. The introduction gives a concise discussion of problems with rhyme and lists others ways to pattern words in poetry.


Bober has collected fantasy poems in the following categories: My Inside Self, Magical People, Secrets, A Taste of Nature, My Animal Friends and Wondering.


Old favorites and new rhymes are shown with diagrams for telling the stories with the finger actions.


A collection of old and new poetry, enlivened by the illustrations of nine Caldecott Medal artists.
A collection of poems especially for adults who are often with children from birth to age three. The poems are grouped by age level and include advice from language expert Opal Dunn and actions to accompany the rhymes.

Poems about the magic of poetry and the mysterious process of creating them.

A few of the poems talk about Santa Claus and winter weather, but most focus on the birth of Christ.

This volume is the winner of the 1992 British Signal Award. Her collection of "green" poems reflects the hope and inspiration associated with this color, but is noticeably less flippant than modern American poetry for children.

Hopkins has selected poems that vividly describe the joys of reading.

A joyous collection of seventy-five poems about holidays and seasons from approximately forty-five authors.


In this book, almost forty poets share their poetry as well as their thoughts and anecdotes about writing poetry.

These poems are songs from different Native American tribes telling about events in Indian life.

A collection of short poems by more contemporary poets than found in the collection by Nancy Larrick. A new version is available with 80 or so new poems added.

The elusive and mysterious nature of cats is described in words and elegantly portrayed in Young's illustrations.

A great collection of poetry up to 1968. For more recent collections, turn to X.J. Kennedy or Prelutsky.

A beautifully illustrated collection of Haiku from well-known authors of this form.
A collection of religious and humorous poems and illustrations of Thanksgiving.

To expand awareness of other cultures, try using poetry from sixty-eight countries of the world, complete with notes about the contributors.

This is a selection from the rhymes collected by the Opies, the experts on mother goose rhymes. In the foreword Iona Opie gives a brief explanation of the history of their search for children's rhymes, songs, and stories.

This is a small collection of lighthearted poems.

A variety of topics, including nonsense, word play, and fantasy, are covered in this collection of poetry for children.

More than two hundred verses in this anthology offer insights into experiences that young children have.

From the misery of a winter cold to the drama of snowstorms these poems celebrate both the frosty outside and the cozy warmth inside during the winter season.

Rhymes, parodies, riddles, and nonsense are all included in folk poems from all over, with sources and variants in the notes.

A collection of rhymes old and new with concise information about the history of nursery rhymes and notes from the illustrator pointing out interesting details in her illustrations, which are set in the eighteenth century.

A collection of twenty-six children's rhymes and poems about Ireland and its traditions. Some are folk rhymes; those with authors are listed in the acknowledgments.

The brilliant collage and watercolor illustrations of Eric Carle suit the mood of each animal poem selected by Whipple. The book is now available in paperback.

Yolen has created phonetic transliterations of each gentle rhyme in its original language, along with the English translation next to it.

**SINGLE AUTHORS**
(Note: Each author is purposely limited to one book. Many of them have written twenty or thirty books of poetry. The hope is that this list will provide the opportunity to get acquainted with many authors. If you find an author you especially enjoy, find out what other books that author has written, and perhaps one of these other books will be more pleasing than the one on the list.)

Prolific poet Adoff has written twenty-five books of poetry. Known for the way he "shapes" each poem on the page, he writes on many topics. This book focuses on the changes in the seasons.


Short poems for young children about everyday things like sliding on ice, having a cold, and kicking a stone.


A charming "I Spy" game in rhyme with a cleverly half-hidden answer to the game on each page.


Lyric unrhymed poetry and wonderful art capture the feeling of Navajo life past and present.


Fifty of Behn’s poems, selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins, show Behn’s rhymed verses about beautiful images, make-believe and familiar objects.


Winner of the 1993 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, this is a collection of poems and pictures celebrating all aspects of life. Bryan’s concise, unrhymed style is as bright as his pictures.


A rhyming text describes the fox’s hunt for food on a wintry day.


An old paperback edition of some of Carroll’s nonsensical rhyming stories. Feel free to pick your own favorite illustrated version of “Jabberwocky.”


From top to bottom, Cassedy’s poems explore the rooms in a house. Her verses abound in unusual, vivid choices of words, as in the poem about a boy imagining what is making noises in the closet.


Winner of the 1987 British Signal Poetry Award. In this book, Causley writes poems after the style of nursery rhymes. Twenty of the rhymes have been set to music by composer Anthony Castro.


Chandra’s unrhymed verses capture a diversity of subjects—balloons, fireworks, the sea, snowfall—all in the thoughtful, concise language of poetry.


Ciardi invites readers to join in reading his light-hearted rhyming verse about both real and fantastic situations.
A rollicking rhyming celebration of berries of all kinds, real and made up.

One of the ever-popular rhymed stories by Dr. Seuss.

Edwards' light-hearted verse is witty and imaginative as he focuses on a wide variety of topics, from a maggot in an apple to Percy Pot-Shot, who destroyed the world.

Esbensen's collection of animals ties the sound and rhythm of animals' names to the characteristics of each animal—hence the word *elephant* has wrinkled knees.

The Newbery award-winning book of poetry for two voices that recreates the sounds, rhythms, and life-style of insects.

Fisher's rhymed verse gives an insight into what bugs might think about if they could think.

This prolific artist and author, who has written witty and imaginative poetry about such topics as fish, winter and birds, turns to laughter as a theme.

Readers rush through this rhyming story to discover that the reason Donna is being chased was given on the first page.

Gunning captures the rhythm of island speech as she describes life in the Caribbean.

Heller's rhymed definition and examples of collective nouns is as brilliant as the colors in her illustrations. This is only one of her vivid books on parts of speech.

Hoberman expands the concept of the word *house* in her limerick-style poem about all kinds of houses.

This playful collection of poems about events in a child's life captures the delight and wonder with which children view the world.

Hughes' book of hopes and dreams first appeared in 1932, and his poems continue to speak for all people.

Ivimey has created verses that tell what happened before and after the three blind mice had their tails cut off.

Jacobs’ whimsical poems (incidentally, Jacobs was a master at reciting poetry—his audiences were spellbound) tell of the many places and experiences children enjoy.


The Galapagos is a pretty specialized and not too well known topic, but the poetry is well worth reading, and perhaps it will motivate readers to discover other poetry by Tony Johnston.


Keats’ illustrations fit the mood and lilt of this folk rhyme that starts with vigor and winds down at the end of the day as the fireflies “light up the soft shady glen.”


This poem of animal sounds is Kuskin’s first, written for a college project. It should lead you to her other books, such as *Dogs and Dragons, Trees and Dreams or Near the Window Tree*.


Lear wrote humorous nonsense rhymes about the alphabet that child writers easily imitate. Newsom’s mice add fun and continuity to Lear’s creation.


Breaking my own rule about one book per author, Jan Brett’s illustrations add a parallel visual romance to Lear’s that shouldn’t be missed.


Lewis writes about all members of the animal kingdom in rhymed verse that is joyful and witty.


Livingston’s short rhymed and sometimes unrhymed verses capture the feelings of children.


This book is McCord’s collected works for children—a large collection on a variety of topics.


British poet McGough has written witty poems containing wonderful plays on words as he writes about real and imaginary animals.


McNaughton’s theme is globe trotting, and he fills the book with real and imaginary adventures for travelers.


With rhymed and unrhymed verses, this prolific writer celebrates weather, animals, children, grownups and places. Don’t miss some of her many other volumes of poetry.

Michelson’s approach to flies is both whimsical and informative. The rhymed verses and colored illustrations play on the names of each fly; each verse is followed by a page showing a drawing of the actual fly and gives interesting factual information about it.


All the poems about Christopher Robin are in this book. It’s a wonderful collection of familiar and unfamiliar poems for Winnie-the-Pooh fans.


Another Signal Award winning book (British award) for 1998. Words used in the poetry are a bit more unusual than those used by U.S. writers, and the graphics are not as flamboyant as those in U.S. books.


This is a wonderful collection, beginning with fifteen of her new poems and continuing with poems from earlier works.


Brigham Young University’s own poet-in-residence wrote most of these poems for a BBC radio program for children. Subjects of the poems are animals and country living.


This collection often appears in anthologies and is a favorite to inspire children to write their own feelings about color.


Signal Poetry Award winner for 1986. City poems of England in the eighties seem more civilized and less violent than city poems of the U.S.


Prelutsky is an old “kid on the block” now, but readers do not tire of discovering poems that tell about things they never thought about and creatures they have never heard of. As well as being one of the most active collectors of anthologies, he has invented baby Uggs, explored the world of dragons, etc. Don’t miss some of his many other inventive books of poetry.


Riley’s Victorian poem still holds the attention of children as a read-aloud story.


One of England’s recognized poets, Rosen creates patterns in his poetry without rhyme. He uses word play and repetition as he recreates the feelings he had as a child.


Rounds’ Picasso-like line drawings add a hilarious dimension to the familiar chant about an old lady who swallowed a fly.


A recently discovered group of poems for children by Sandburg. They invite the reader to look at familiar objects and our own eyes, ears, and nose in new ways.
Sendak takes the reader through each month, “sipping once, sipping twice, sipping chicken soup with rice.”

Accompanied by Buehner’s playful illustrations (look for hidden animals on every page), Schertle describes the egotistical, independent, mysterious, and teasing cat.

A book that will provide fun and frolic to first graders in Utah in their new social studies curriculum, which adds a worldview to each age level.

The well-known collection of witty, fanciful and sometimes outrageous poems by Silverstein.

Singer’s free verse catches the life and feeling of a different animal for each season.

This is one of many illustrated versions of Stevenson’s poetry; pick your favorite.

Trina Schart Hyman’s illustrations add the continuity of a multiracial family’s activities for each of the twelve months of the year in twelve poems.

A book of poems that might help someone turn worries into laughter. Viorst published another book for children and their parents in 1995 entitled, *Sad Underwear and Other Complications*, which has the same purpose of helping children to laugh at themselves.

Worth writes brief poems that capture the essence of whatever object or animal she describes. Her free verse makes the ordinary extraordinary.

Vivid, unrhymed descriptions of birds make this collection a celebration of the winged creatures that make us envious of their ability to fly.

Zolotow sees things in ways that are understood by children. She talks about such things as animals, people, seasons, and bedtime thoughts.