

The Power of Poetry By David L. Harrison

For Timothy Rasinski's blog

Dear Tim,

Thank you for inviting me to contribute something to your blog, particularly on my favorite subject: poetry. As you know, I write poems for young readers, but it has also been my pleasure on several occasions to partner with authorities on early language and literacy development (such as you, for example!) to create books to support classroom teachers. Such books have stretched my thinking about poetry as a powerful teaching tool. For your blog today, it's the teaching power of poetry most on my mind.

Name three of your favorite books when you were a kid. Now recite something from memory in any one of them. Sure, "Where's Papa going with that ax?" is pretty hard to forget, but that was E. B. White for heaven's sake. I bet you remember some nursery rhymes though...

Hey, diddle, diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.

If you're old enough, you may remember some of these signs...

Thirty days
Hath September
April, June
And the speed offender
Burma Shave

...and radio jingles...

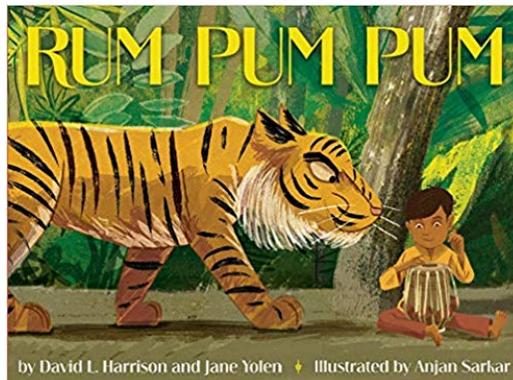
You'll wonder where the yellow went
When you brush your teeth with Pepsodent!

**The power of poetry,
Reason #1:
We remember it**



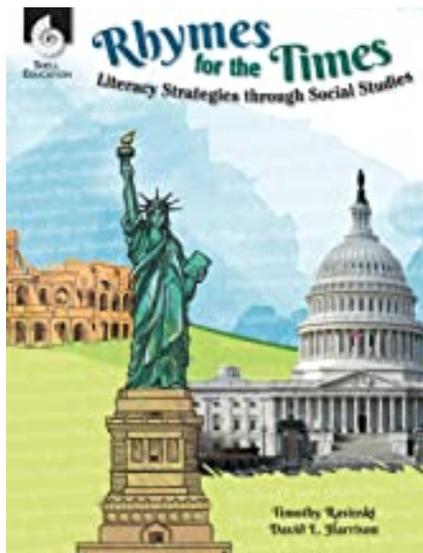
Read a good book lately? How many times did you stand up and read it aloud to appreciate the words more, the way they rolled along the narrative? That's what I figured. Kids don't much stand up and act out the books they read either. Unless, of course, it's poetry. As Dana Gioia writes ("Can Poetry Matter?" Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, 1992), "Meter is an ancient, indeed primitive, technique that marks the beginning of literature in virtually every culture..."

**The power of poetry,
Reason #2:
We feel the beat**



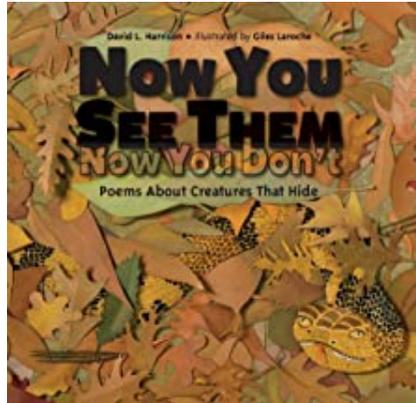
...poetry demands to be recited, heard, even memorized for its true appreciation. Shaping the words in one's mouth is as much a part of the pleasure as hearing the sound in the air."

**The power of poetry,
Reason #3:
We taste the words**



Elegant prose may beguile us with wit, charm, savoir faire, but it can't dance; only poetry can do that. From the most sophisticated verse to the meanest doggerel, rhyme has meter and meter is a dancer. When teachers stand and read poetry to their kids, a roomful of young ears take in the cadence of words used well, the rhythm of our native tongue singing its music in the form of a poem.

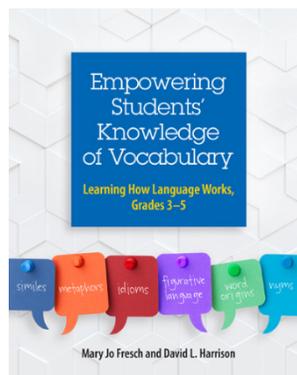
**The power of poetry,
Reason #4:
It teaches us fluency**



While reading a book, do you ever come across a word you don't know and have to stop to look it up? That's not likely to happen in a poem. Poets don't razzle-dazzle. They provide readers with enough information to decode and add unfamiliar words to their vocabularies. Ogden Nash helps us figure out two unusual words in one couplet, and leaves us grinning.

The cow is of the bovine ilk;
One end is moo, the other milk.

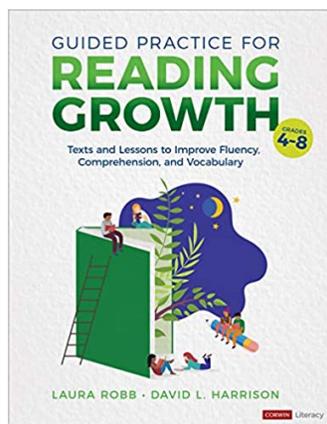
**The power of poetry,
Reason #5:
It builds vocabulary**



From cradle to grave, music, dance, and rhythm enrich our lives, soothe us, inspire us, energize us. Making poetry part of the classroom fabric is a natural act that can have positive consequences in early childhood literacy and beyond. It can be a game changer.

**The power of poetry,
Reason #6:
Add reasons #1-5 and active accordingly**

Recalling John Dewey’s words: “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself”; much the same can be said about poetry.



Thank you again for inviting me to your blog, Tim. And thank you for all you do for children everywhere who are developing their literacy skills.

Connect with David Harrison at his blog: <https://davidlharrison.wordpress.com/>

