

Because It's Poetry

David L. Harrison

Tim, thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts about poetry and why I think it's important to introduce poems to young people at an early age. The other night my wife Sandy and I were sitting in the living room, she with a newspaper, I with no visible means of entertainment. When she asked what I was thinking about, I answered that to myself I was reciting the first stanza of "The Raven," by Edgar Allan Poe. It's a poem I admired enough to memorize part of nearly seventy years ago. If recalling favorite lines of a poem strikes you as unusual, remember that large numbers of people of all ages – enough to pack concert stadiums around the world -- can quote the lyrics of dozens of songs, just as rappers, hymn singers, and Christmas carolers easily perform from memory.

The engine that drives this phenomenon is structured language, verse poetry known for its rhyme and meter. This kind of poetry has many names: nursery rhymes, Shakespearean plays, Broadway musicals, opera, doggerel, limericks, jump rope rhymes, rhyming jingles, and every kind of song imaginable. These are all examples of structured language, the kind that makes them easy to remember and fun to recite. Compare any of these with prose and with rare exceptions poetry sticks with us more readily than prose.

This fact is why it's so important to introduce young people to poetry, the younger the better. There are reasons why kids relate to poetry. Often the poem feels like a conversation between the poet and the reader. There's a certain "me-to-you" sense, as though the poet sat down, thought about something the reader would like, and then wrote about it. In long prose, the reader may feel like a spectator. In a poem, the reader often feels like a participant. This sense of intimacy is an important link that connects the poet with the reader. It has to do with how a poet writes. It has to do with how the reader responds.

Plenty of well-documented research shows ways that using poetry in the classroom supports reading skills – phonemic and phonological awareness, vocabulary development, understanding, fluency -- but kids tell us, too, why they like poetry and have fun with it. They tell us in surveys that they like poems because they have short lines. Because there aren't many lines in a stanza or stanzas in a poem. Because the words paint pictures in their minds. Because poems help them understand new words. Because some poems make them laugh and they love to laugh. Because poems can be about feelings they have too. Because many poems tell stories and kids love good stories. Because many poems rhyme and kids love rhyme. Because many poems are about animals and kids like animals. Because poems are fun to read aloud and perform.

But there is another important advantage of sharing poetry in the classroom. Because of reasons given in the previous paragraph for why kids like to hear and read poetry, they also like to write poems of their own. The poems we introduce to kids can make excellent models for poems they write (or make up) themselves, which is all the more reason to stock the classroom library with a variety of poetry collections that students like. Early efforts at writing a poem may not be much more than stringing a few words and thoughts together. But oh! What a glorious accomplishment that is! The very act of writing provides experience in framing what we want to say so that someone else may learn about it. Starting off by writing a novel is out of the question. Same with a short story of much length. But a poem? Yes. A poem is just the right size. I've interviewed dozens of poets across America and asked when they started writing poems. Very often they tell me they were six or seven. At least one was younger. She "wrote" her first poems on walls in her house.

Tim, you, Richard Allington, and numerous other authorities on early literacy stress over and over the importance of reading to students and giving them opportunities to read on their own. Here again, poetry provides an ideal option for both. Bernice Cullinan used to urge teachers to marinate their kids in poetry. Because most poems are short, they fit easily into busy days. Kenn Nesbitt, former Children's Poet Laureate, published a book of poems that can be read in one minute.

I'll conclude with a quote I love by actress/writer Helena Bonham Carter in Sylvia Vardell's guest column in *Poetry from Daily Life*. "Give your child an appetite for poems and they will never be bored ... with poems in your pocket, you'll be armed with beauty and food for the soul, and you will never be lonely."

David L. Harrison is Poet Laureate for Missouri and Drury University. He writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for children and co-writes books for educators. His work has sold millions of copies worldwide, been anthologized in 200 text books and collections, translated into more than a dozen languages, published in Braille, sandblasted into a library sidewalk in Arizona, and painted on a bookmobile in Colorado. In Springfield, Missouri, David Harrison Elementary School and David Harrison Conference Room in the main library are named for him. His numerous awards include The Christopher Medal and Pioneer in Education Award. His books have represented Missouri at the National Book Fair in Washington, D.C., been selected by NYC Public Libraries as one of six best children's poetry books in 2021, and NCTE has five times chosen his work for its Most Notable Books of Poetry for Children list. Harrison has two degrees in science, two honorary doctorate degrees in letters. He lives with his wife, Sandy, in Springfield. His current projects include hosting a poetry column seen by more than 100,000 readers weekly and creating a free video library of sixty poets nationwide and internationally who have contributed guest columns. More at <http://davidlharrison.com> .