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A Poet in Your Pocket: Contemporary Poetry for Middle School Students

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A Poet in Your Pocket: Contemporary Poetry for Middle School Students

By Maria A. Perez-Stable & Mary Hurlbut Cordier

When John Adams, second president of the United States, advised his son, Johnny, to keep a poet in his pocket so that he would never be lonely, he had no idea that poets in the 20th and 21st centuries would write specifically for young adolescents. In poetry for middle school students published since 1990, youngsters, their language arts and core teachers, and other significant adults in their lives will discover those magical moments when words, cadence, and insights come together in uniquely age-appropriate, revealing, and appealing ways. The language of poetry brings together extraordinary uses of sights, sounds, and words through playfulness, emotional impact, and imagination to reveal perspectives of self, others, and the larger world. Poetry celebrates the young adolescents' joys and hopes, helps them laugh with each other, and mourn what is lost, while seeking to bring understanding to their unfathomable middle school years.

The recently published poetry books discussed below focus on middle school students' exuberant interests and passions as explored through these topics: family and relationships, transitions and growing up, school encounters, exploring things to do, and broader perspectives and other voices.

Family and Relationships

In *Love Letters*, Adoff (1997a) presents a series of 20 short poems on the different kinds of love and the myriad of relationships experienced by youngsters. In "Dear Playground Girl," a boy named Frosty the

Snow Boy expresses his liking for a girl at his school, but despite his heartfelt entreaty, Icicle Eyes responds: "Maybe tomorrow. / Maybe not. / I love to run / when it's hot / or cold, / but I always / run / a l o n e." (p. [9]) In an interesting dichotomy, two students write poems about their teacher—one calling her Mrs. Nicely and the other addressed to Mrs. McNasty. The topics of the other poems include shooting baskets with friends; feelings of love for pets; the joy of riding bikes together; and feelings towards family members including parents, grand-



A student records her thoughts after listening to a poem focused on young adolescent interests.

PHOTO BY DOUG MARTIN

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parents, and siblings. In a touching poem, a son expresses his love for his father:

**Dear Hard Working Dad:
Even when you snore
on the couch. I am
proud
with**

**a
full
heart for
you.**

Your Son With Earplugs. (p. [23])

The poems are honest, from the heart and imbued with just the right amount of humor. Youngsters reading this book will find *at least* one poem that will speak to them. Lisa Desimini's original artwork in collages, oils, sculptured models, photographs, and computer graphics expands the fresh views of love and will appeal to readers.

An 11-year-old boy in *Relatively Speaking: Poems about Family* by Fletcher (1999) narrates a collection of 42 poems that tell of the everyday events in his family throughout the course of a year. Young adolescents will recognize the changing family dynamics when an older brother at the age of 16 is into girls, cars, and pumping iron, rather than spending time with his younger brother. Readers will identify with a father with a weird sense of humor and the strains and excitement of a huge family reunion in the summer. But nothing can top the bombshell of the year—Mom is expecting a baby! In the poem "Middle Child," the boy is looking forward to having a younger sister because as he deduces in the final stanza of the poem:

**Dad and Mom will be
so busy with the baby
plus keeping track of
my brother's social life
they won't have time
to crack down on me
and I like it that way. (p. 40)**

Middle school youngsters will relate to the content of these poems, which, in their entirety, give a solid portrait of the narrator's rather ordinary family. This book will inspire students to write about their family experiences and to view their own families in a new light.

Rosenberg (2001), in *Roots and Flowers: Poets and Poems on Family*, presents a unique offering—40 poets talking about what poetry and family mean to them, accompanied by examples of each author's work. The poems are about connections—poems about children and parents, grandmothers and great-grandfathers, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and aunts and uncles—and how our present touches both the past and the future. Ianniello (Rosenberg, 2001) states it well when she says, "Writing family poems feels personal, like sitting in my favorite chair. I know every detail of the story; I can feel every emotion, smell every familiar scent. My challenge is to create a world for these poems outside of my mind where others can share my memories." (p. 67)

Young adolescents will gain new perspectives on the relationships within their own families when they read about a father who wakes up at 6:00 a.m. every day in the winter to shovel coal into his family's furnace. In another poem, a new father is trying to protect his young son from all the dangers in the world, but does not know how he will accomplish that since there is no map to guide him. In "Learning to Dance" by Vallone (Rosenberg, 2001), the poet's mother is teaching him the box step behind the closed drapes of their living room, while the boy longs to dance like they do on *American Bandstand*. The readers of these poems will learn that many of their feelings about family are universal—both the love and hate they bear, along with feelings of frustration, embarrassment, belonging, and bewilderment that are part of family life. Rosenberg has included many photographs of the authors, both current and as children, and the biographical notes at the end of the book provide readers with more information about each poet.

Transitions and Growing Up

Nye (2000) in *Come with Me: Poems for a Journey* offers 16 original poems on the topic of discovery and change. In "Observer," a child watches simple things traveling, including clouds, a doodlebug, a horse, and a caterpillar on the kitchen floor and even watches things when nothing moves. Other poems explore the journeys from babyhood to childhood, the secret longings and thoughts that each of us carries deep within us no matter where we travel, riding in an airplane while thinking of Conestoga wagons making

the trip across the American West, and the beauty of spring after the bleakness of winter.

Some of Nye's journeys can be simple, as in the poem "When You Come to a Corner":

**Do you turn?
Do you pause?
What if you can't bear
to leave the street you're on? ...**

What if you have to move?

**What if the houses around the corner
don't have any Welcome signs hanging out?
Their eyes are closed and you don't know the name
of anyone who lives here (pp. 16-17)**

Nye's poems speak to young people's emotions, as in "Mad"—a poem about a girl who gets angry with her mother, flies to the moon, and eventually comes back down home on a silver thread her mother sends up to her. As the girl explains: "It gets cold at night on the moon. / My mother sent up a silver thread / for me to slide down on. / She knows me so well. / She knows I like silver." (p. 31)

In *Walking on the Boundaries of Change: Poems of Transition*, Holbrook (1998) presented a collection of 35 original poems, most only one page in length, that is perfect for young people experiencing changes in middle school and adolescence. The poet understands the feelings, anxieties, interests, and concerns of youngsters—friendships that have gone sour, the hurtfulness of cliques, budding love, the sadness at the sudden death of a classmate, body image, the danger of gangs, and the choices that young people must make to find their own voices.

In "A Real Case," Holbrook wrote about self-deprecation—a common experience in adolescence:

**Doubtful,
I have a fever
or any other measurable symptom.
I'm just down with a sniffly case
of sudden-self-loathing-syndrome.**

**TODAY!
It hit like a thwop of mashed potatoes
snapped against a plate,
An unrequested extra serving
of just-for-now-self-hate.**

**Today, I'm worthless,
a leftover bath,
a wad of second-hand gum.
I belong in a twist-tied bag
with the rest of the toys that won't run. (p. 24)**

In other poems adolescents dream about getting a nose job, about hurt feelings in a friendship, fear for a unique friend named Tony who no longer thinks for himself and just follows the dictates of the gang he joined, and just not fitting in all of the time. Holbrook provides just the right mix of humor and gravity, showing all aspects of the young teen experience in poems that speak volumes to adolescents.

Adolescent poets, who participated in poetry-writing workshops sponsored by the New York Public Library and Poets' House, contributed all the poems included in *Movin': Teen Poets Take Voice*, edited by Johnson (2000). The poets participated in meetings at branch libraries all over the city and their poems reflect their numerous neighborhoods and things familiar to them. Topics covered in the poems are as varied as the emotions and interests of the youngsters themselves. They write about such plain, everyday things as how to hold chopsticks, missing special friends who have moved away, the uniqueness of eyebrows, the joy of watching a boy on a tricycle, being stuck in math class, and dreams of being a famous ice-skater. One of the most lyrical poems in this collection is called "Pomegranate" and its beauty will make youngsters never again take for granted anything as simple as a piece of fruit.

Other poems touch on more personal feelings—wanting to break out of one's environment and fly free, feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, frightening changes encountered while growing up, feelings of awkwardness about one's body, jealous girlfriends, and one young man's love of the beauty of music. The genuine feelings and expressions written by these young adults will serve to inspire many budding poets to translate their own thoughts into words.

School Encounters

A perfect opening selection for brand-new middle school students is *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems* by George (2002). A young girl experiencing her first year in middle school narrates the poems in the first person. Middle school youngsters will identify with her feelings—getting accustomed to changing classes, having a locker, wondering who to sit with at lunch, navigating the strange halls, pop quizzes, learning a new instrument for band, snobby cliques, and having to make new friends. And of course, the excitement and trepidation of young love and her crush on a boy named Ryan.

The poem "Math" summarizes this young girl's experience in her new school:

5
5 squared
5 to the second power

Mrs. Bollo hands back my math quiz
doom
doom squared
doom to the second power

Mrs. Bollo explains, making it clear—
says, "I'm glad you're in my class this year.
Your work shows potential."
Happiness
Happiness squared
Happiness exponential! (p. 26)

The poetry takes on a variety of forms, including haiku and free verse, and occasional black-and-white drawings by Debbie Tilley enhance their impact and enjoyment. Many of the poems are humorous and will help middle school children survive the sometimes scary changes in their school lives.

Creech's (2001) *Love That Dog* is an unusual novel written in free verse. The narrator is a young boy named Jack who does not like poetry—he thinks writing poetry is girls' stuff and he wonders why the poets he reads do not just plainly say what they mean instead of making the reader ferret out hidden meanings. The assignment in Jack's class is to write some poetry every day in a journal. The poems in this book, many of them filled with humor, are presented in diary format from September through June, spanning a school year in Jack's life. Throughout the course of this year, Jack's teacher encourages him to find his own voice, and he learns to appreciate poetry and to express his own feelings through the medium of free-verse poetry. Towards the end of the year, Jack finally completes a cathartic poem about the loss of his beloved dog Sky in a car accident.

Jack is *very* taken with the poetry of Walter Dean Myers and after the famous poet comes to visit Jack's school on June 1, Jack writes the following poem in his journal:

I NEVER
in my whole life
EVER
heard anybody
who could talk
like that
Mr. Walter Dean Myers.

All of my blood
in my veins

was bubbling
and all of the thoughts
in my head
were buzzing
and
I wanted to keep
Mr. Walter Dean Myers
at our school
forever. (pp. 80-81)

In *Girl Coming in for a Landing: A Novel in Poems*, Wayland (2002) presents the life of a young high school girl through the autumn, winter, and spring of a school year. Young adolescents will identify with the angst of such events as drama tryouts, having to go to a school dance alone, a distressing fight with a close friend, and being at odds with an older sister. To balance the downswings there are times spent with an aged and special aunt, performing a musical duet with her best friend, the wonder of a first kiss, fun lessons learned in science class, and even winning the "Susie Spineless Award" at the drama party. In a poem entitled "Debut," the young writer shares her feelings when her first poem is published:

Mr. Barton
reads it to the class
slowly, letting each line
linger.

Mr. Barton
reads it to the class
and I am
soaring—

over all the buildings
over all the people
I am a winged word
flying. (p. [118])

Imaginative and unusual illustrations complement each poem, and the author's afterword provides useful information for young people who want to get their own writings published.

On February 27, Mr. Chippendale, an English teacher at Tower High School for more than 20 years, is shot dead on the running track before school starts. In the book for older readers, *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?: A Mystery in Poems*, Glenn (1996) tells Mr. Chippendale's story through the many voices of the people who knew him, both as colleague and teacher, along with others such as a police detective, a press reporter, and other community members. Each free-verse poem is told by one of the people

whose life touched Mr. Chippendale's—some who loved and respected him and mourn his death and the loss of a friend and mentor, and others who could not care less and are glad he is dead. Clues to the killer's identity are hidden in the accounts and one must read carefully to find them. The device of the many characters works well and young adults will keep on reading to solve the mystery.

Exploring Things to Do

Music and sports are generally high on the list of things to do with friends and as a means of self-expression. In *My Own Song: And Other Poems to Groove To*, Strickland (1997) has selected 51 poems bursting with the joy of song, dance, and music by poets such as Jane Yolen, James Weldon Johnson, and Sara Holbrook. Some of the poems cite the humor and frustrations of having to practice the violin, or standing next to someone in choir who cannot carry a tune. But Eloise Greenfield in "Way Down in the Music" captures the beat:

I get down in the music
Down inside the music
I let it wake me
take me
Spin me around and shake me
I get down, down
I get down (p. 43)

In the anthology, *Opening Days: Sports Poems*, Hopkins (1996) has selected poems that celebrate the growth and passion of young athletes as they pursue individual sports such as tennis and karate, and a host of team sports. Jane Yolen's "Karate Kid" feels the power and the responsibility of his skills:

I rise, I fall.
I am crane
In lofty flight,
Training that
I need not fight. (p. 1)

The thrill of accomplishment shines in "The Spearthrower" by Lillian Morrison:

She walks alone
to the edge of the park
and throws into
the bullying dark
her javelin
of light....
as the great crowds cry
to their heroines
Come on! (p. 3)

To explore interests in the natural world there are many choices of poetry books, each with its own unique vision and style. In Janezcko's (2000) *Stone Bench in an Empty Park*, views of the city are reflected through the haiku lens using delightful vignettes by contemporary poets, a few of the Japanese masters of the 15th century, and the evocative black-and-white photography of Silverman. Wintz cites a familiar city scene:

from a tar papered
tenement roof, pigeons
hot-foot it into flight. (p. [22])

The natural world is explored in Moore's (1997) environmentally sensitive collection, *Poems Have Roots: New Poems*. Moore's book closes with the author's notes about the setting of each poem and its environmental problems. Imagine the vision and viewpoint "If Deer Dreamed," or the song of the shell in "Sea Song":

for all who live
in the waters
of the
world,
I sing of their longing,
"Unpoison the sea!" (p. 4)

Broader Perspective and Other Voices

It may be a revelation to some middle school youngsters to discover that individuals from other environments, cultures, and perspectives also seek self-identity; experience loves and losses; and have families, fun, and frustrations. The common theme of seeking and understanding one's heritage is illuminated through courageous outpourings; poignant vignettes, sometimes swaggering and angry; and sometimes in haunting refrains in the revised edition of *I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by African Americans*. Editor Adoff (1997b) has selected poems by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Countee Cullen, and many other African American poets. Some poems are centered in the past through tributes to heroes and leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the grandmothers who led their children from slavery.

Lorde (Adoff, 1997b) captures this search for heritage in "For Each of You":

Be who you are and will be ...
Do not let your head deny
your hands
any memory of what passes through them
nor your eyes
nor your heart ... (p. 153)

In *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems*, Wong (1996) brings her Korean-Chinese-American heritage to her thoughtful and often humorous poems about family, friends, food, and enjoying life. Wong concludes that: "Our family / is a quilt / of odd remnants / patched together...." (p. 42). In "Face It," Wong cites her characteristics inherited from her Chinese and French ancestors, but concludes that: "....my mouth, my big-talking mouth, belongs / to me, alone." (p. 32)

Carlson's (1994) anthology, *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States*, explores this nation's fastest growing minority through 36 poems by Latino poets including Gary Soto, Pat Mora, and Sandra Cisneros. This accessible and dynamic collection emphasizes family and friends through sections about school, home and homeland, memories, hard times, celebrations, and a promising future.

Ambrogio's (Carlson, 1994) "Learning English," a second language for many youngsters, raises agonizing questions:

If I speak another language
and use different words
for feelings that will always stay the same
I don't know
If I'll continue being
the same person. (p. 17)

As Nye, a Palestinian-American poet and anthologist, was growing up in America, her only contact with literature from her father's homeland was through his storytelling. In her anthology, *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*, Nye (1998) reflects her heritage as well as her personal experiences and friends in the Middle East. Through varied glimpses of Middle Eastern life, past and present, the reader has what Nye terms "An unexpected walk along the rim of a majestic city" (p. ix).

Memories and longing for home and family are told in many ways throughout this attractive volume whose bright illustrations both belie and extend the poignant poetry. Zahal (Nye, 1998) in

"Homeland," describes his feelings: "Anxious, anxious am I for a homeland, / The windows of my longing are open. / How tired I am of moving around...." (p. 81) Ben Bennani concludes his childhood reminiscences in his "Letters to My Mother" with: "I'm alone now. / My pains are birds searching for a nest." (pp. 98-99)

The young Native American poets featured in *When the Rain Sings: Poems by Young Native Americans* (1999) express their pride in their ancestors and their close association with the land. This moving collection is illustrated with photos of cultural artifacts and archival photos from the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian. These young poets who were part of the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, a nationwide project, use their unique voices to tell of their lives, homes, and hopes, as shaped by the influences of heritage, change, loss, and hope.

In his poem, "In the Rain," 16-year-old Patrick Lewis-Jose (*When the rain sings*, 1999), sums up with these words:

Some say the children will
once again bathe in the comfort
of culture and the seeds of heritage
sprout from their hearts.

Some say it will happen again,
that thing called culture and tradition.
The old ones say they can hear it
in the rain. (p. 45)

Other young poets write of universal feelings of loss of loved ones. In "Funeral," 16-year-old Colleen Francisco (*When the rain sings*, 1999) writes: "The night seems to be long, not letting / day come." (p. 56) Ten-year-old Davina Velencia mourns her loss in "Divorce":

I didn't
have a heart
to hold on to.
It sounded like
too much peace and quiet. (p. 59)

The poets featured in *Quiet Storm: Voices of Young Black Poets*, edited by Okutoro (1999), speak of their varied African American ancestries with expressions of strength and awakening self-awareness as well as frustrations. Auzenne explores her racial identity in "The Question":

**I am a daughter a fighter a writer a
singer a bringer of myself
to you and so many other things. (pp. 47-48)**

In "A Tribute," Thomas (Okutoro, 1999) acknowledges those who have helped to shape her world:

**This is for the brothas and sistas
who ain't here.
For the life givers
For the revolution makers,
The story writers,
And the rhythm shakers,
To you, I say, "Thank you." (p. 78)**

Conclusion

Consider the books in this article a basic starter list that will lead students and their teachers into the realm of reading, writing, and enjoying poetry. Two additional books will specifically provide guidance in understanding the structure and meaning of poetry as well as encourage writing poems. Poet Fletcher (2002) provides readable, practical help for these tasks in *Poetry Matters: Writing a Poem from the Inside Out*. His interviews with poets Kristine O'Connell George, Janet S. Wong and J. Patrick Lewis bring interesting insights to the readers about how poets write their poetry. Fletcher, in an encouraging and personable style, provides many examples of approaches to try, suggestions of what to write about, wordplay, and form.

Janeczko's (2001) guide, *How To Write Poetry*, uses an attractive informal style to lead the reader into many different forms of poetry: acrostic, list, narrative, free verse, and others. Examples of poems by famous poets and by children illustrate various pointers on content, vocabulary, style, and format. Janeczko encourages students to write for themselves and when they are ready, to share their poetry with others using original cards, handmade books, and submitting poems to magazines, contests, and other forms of publication.

Have a poet in your pocket? Good advice, John Adams, in your day and in ours. Through reading poetry, writing, and sharing poems, middle school students can experience poetry's warmth, wisdom, humor, imagination, courage, hope, revelation, and inspiration. Contemporary poets will reach the quicksilver minds and spirits of these youngsters who have one foot in childhood and the other seeking adulthood. Reading and writing poetry will stretch perceptions and vocabulary while opening new doors to exploration and expression.

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