Celebrate the Magic of Poetry

Terrell A. Young
Washington State University

Barbara A. Ward
Madison Middle School, Tallulah, LA

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Terrell A. Young, Ed.D. & Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D.

“Poetry should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects.”

Lillian Moore (cited in Cullinan & Wooten, 2010)

Most poetry is meant to be read aloud, celebrating the word play created by its authors, and bringing smiles to our faces. Children often develop oral language by reciting nursery rhymes, repeating favorite words, and learning song lyrics. If the adults in their lives can refrain from overanalyzing the poetry they encounter in later years, those children who come to love the words they are learning may develop into young adults with a flair for language and the taste for poetry.

Similar to fiction and nonfiction, poetry books are published in many different formats including some that typically are not classified as poetry (Hadaway & Young, 2010). In this article, we highlight some of our favorite books of poetry in the following formats: Anthologies, Single Topic Collections, Single Author Collections, Single Topic Collections with the Work of One Poet (a combination of Single Author & Single Topic Collections), Poetry Picture Books, and Verse Novels—all “ready to explode with unpredictable effects” in your classrooms.

Anthologies

Once extremely popular, poetry anthologies are becoming less common. The following anthologies contain poems with multiple themes or topics by multiple poets.


Grades 2-6. For this anthology, the well-known singer and her daughter Emma Walton Hamilton selected 150 poems, some playful, some serious. Readers are certain to find more than a few familiar lines in the pair’s choices as well
as encounter new poems that they may add to their favorites list. A treat for the eye and the ear with its treasury of memorable lines and lovely watercolor illustrations, the collection contains poems, songs, or lullabies by as diverse a group as stalwarts Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson alongside songwriters Rodgers and Hammerstein. Each of the nine themed sections is introduced by text by Andrews who describes her lifelong love for words and tells revealing anecdotes about her youth. As a bonus, Andrews and Hamilton have also included original poems they wrote. Adding to the auditory delight is an accompanying CD which features mother and daughter reading 21 of the poems.


Grades 3-6. Over 4,000 students heard, read, and ranked poems written by the 15 winners of the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. The anthology contains five poems each from David McCord, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, Myra Cohn Livingston, Eve Merriam, John Ciardi, Lilian Moore, Arnold Adolph, Valerie Worth, Barbara Juster Esbensen, Eloise Greenfield, X. J. Kennedy, Mary Ann Hoberman, Nikki Grimes, and Lee Bennett Hopkins. Teachers looking for poems sure to please their students will consider this anthology a must-have.

Grades K-3. Anyone who appreciates words and word play even the tiniest bit will want to add this essential anthology to their collection. Containing almost 200 poems of all types, this massive tome is grouped according to themes, and is especially appealing to young children who may recognize some of the lines from books read aloud to them by parents, friends, or teachers. Most of the poems have been collected in earlier anthologies, but it is nice to have them collected here, all within finger’s reach. In a take-off on the famous potato chip commercial that once taunted viewers, we dare you to read just one of these memorable poems.


Grades 6-10. This dynamic anthology contains over 100 poems guaranteed to appeal to teens because of their formats and themes. Topics range from the ubiquitous baseball to the first kiss, changing bodies to fickle friends, and from anger to love. The poems reflect the ever-changing volatility of youth as the poets share their anger, fears, hopes, and loves as well as recollections of jubilant and poignant experiences as they navigate their way through life. An added bonus to the book is the CD that includes 44 poems read by 33 poets, many reading their own work and sometimes providing background behind the lines.


Grades PK-2. Readers are certain to find some familiar lines as well as encounter new poems in this fun-filled anthology of over 60 child-centered poems for the younger set. The poems are arranged in four child-friendly categories: “Me, Myself, and I,” “Who Lives in My House?,” “I Go Outside,” and “Time for Bed.” Caregivers looking for an interesting way to introduce the joys of poetry to children will find this a volume they will turn to again and again. Using a wide range of mediums and techniques in creating the delightful illustrations to accompany the poems, Dunbar celebrates the joys of oral expression.
Collections

If poetry anthologies have waned in popularity, poetry collections, on the other hand, have had a surge. There are several excellent ones that have been published recently.

Single Author Collection


*Grades 2-5.* Teachers will find this collection perfect for read aloud time as students will delight in the quirky word choice and humor found in over 120 poems about fairytales, family, friends, and school. Who can go wrong with poems about bad hair days, onomatopoeia, picking your nose, yellow snow, and magic homework wands? “Alligator Purse” shows Wilson’s quirky sense of humor. “Oh, dahling, don’t you love my purse? / It’s genuine alligator.” / She said that just this morning, / but then a little later / she reached inside for something / and it ate her.” Blitt’s energetic line drawings enhance this volume.

Single Topic Collections


*Grades 3-6.* Proving that almost any topic can be inspiration for poetry, this collection of 32 list poems from 24 poets explores frogs, pencils, the seasons, and school. Aware that almost everyone makes lists, Heard introduces list poems and then encourages readers to create their own. Choosing a favorite from this collection is difficult since each one has its own appeal. The poems range from saying hello in Avis Harley’s “Ways to Greet a Friend,” with its greetings in 12 different languages to saying farewell in Eileen Spinelli’s “Good-byes,” a list of things that are difficult to leave behind. All sorts of list poems are featured here, some with unexpected endings.

**Grades 2-5.** With classic quotations and 48 poems, 12 for each of the four seasons, readers can celebrate the wonders and activities each season brings. In addition to the poems by great masters such as Karla Kuskin and Carl Sandburg, twenty-nine new poems were commissioned by contemporary poets such as Rebecca Kai Dotlich, Joan Bransfield Graham, J. Patrick Lewis, and Marilyn Singer. Without overwhelming the poets’ words, David Diaz’s stunning mixed media illustrations add to the meaning and feeling of each poem. Teachers will find this collection an ideal source for seasonal read-alouds and choral readings. Hopkins’ own introductory poems for each section describe the ubiquitous spring showers, sugary snow cones, mounds of leaves needing to be raked, and lost mittens, harbingers of a particular time of year.


**Grades 2-9.** Another essential must-have for any library, this anthology is particularly appealing to the eyes and ears. As he did in *A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms* (Candlewick, 2005), Janeczko teams with artist Chris Raschka to celebrate poetry and introduce poems, some classic, some hilarious. Intended to be performed with vigor, the 37 titles in this collection will have readers on their feet. Divided into poems for one voice, two voices, three voices, and a group, this collection contains lines guaranteed to tangle the tongue. List poems that might serve as patterns for budding poets are served up alongside poems by William Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll. Raschka’s distinctive ink and torn paper illustrations are eye-catching and entice the reader onto the pages of poetry.
Single Topic Collections with the Work of One Poet


**Grades 6-9.** The poet assumes the identities of three important women, all born in 1867, and their daughters. The poignancy of the relationships between these famous women and their equally talented daughters fills the pages as Atkins explores the lives of author Laura Ingalls Wilder, businesswoman Madame C. J. Walker, and scientist Marie Curie. Not only will readers learn a history lesson, but they will discover something important about relationships and self-identity as well.


**Grades K-3.** Creatures with distinctive markings such as stripes, rings, and especially spots, are celebrated in this eye-popping collection of four-line poems. Some of the poems are amusing while others seek to inform as Ehlert pays homage to 50 unique living things that are not typically the subject of poetry: eels, iguanas, and pheasants. Her beautiful artwork consists of collage layered over handmade and painted papers using inks and crayons.


**Grades 2-5.** Drawing on the interest young readers have in dinosaurs, this themed collection is built around these ever-intriguing creatures. Florian manages to blend interesting facts about dinosaurs inside his clever poems and creative artwork. A pronunciation guide accompanies each dinosaur, providing information about the meaning of its name. Interested readers will find a Glossarysaurus with additional information on dinosaurs in the back of the book as well as a bibliography and a listing of fossil sites and museums dedicated to dinosaurs.
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**Grades 3-6.** This witty and whimsical collection celebrates the wonder of trees and promises that readers will love it “tree-mendously!” as Florian plays tribute to trees through clever word play and the color-drenched paintings splashed across the pages. In addition to the 18 poems, Florian also includes a “glossatree,” which provides information about subjects of the poems. “The Monkey Puzzle Tree” is just one of the book’s delights. “It’s said that/ a monkey could climb/ Up this tree in the/ Quickest of time. / But climbing back down / Without cracking / Its crown / Is a puzzle so hard, /It’s a crime”(p. 24). Florian’s trademark zany mixed-media artwork in gouache, watercolor, colored pencil, rubber stamps, oil pastels, and collage on brown paper bags accompany each poem on a two-page vertical spread.


**Grades 3-6.** Just like the felines they celebrate, these poems move across the pages in cat-like fashion. The brilliant, quirky illustrations feature felines that perform acrobatics, curling, leaping, twisting, prancing, and bristling to poems that look precisely like the cats they celebrate. The 32 poems feature cats at their best, yes, purring and snuggling on laps, but mostly at their irrepressible worst, pouncing, bouncing, clawing, snarling, and even curling up on newly folded laundry. The poet’s years of experience living alongside felines are evident in her imaginative poems and their titles. For instance, “Pascal’s Tongue” describes the rough feline tongue needed to smooth a cat’s fur. Few friends of felines have failed to note the “catty” editing of an article or poem left on the computer screen. Cat lovers will agree that this one is sheer purrfection.

**Grades 5-9.** School provides the inspiration for these poems that focus on the zany doings of everyday school life. From the universal experience of begging for a few minutes more to sleep to risking their lives riding on the yellow school bus that rollicks through city streets in roller coaster-fashion, the poems will prompt smiles from readers. The mini lessons on poetry writing will surely inspire poets to try their hands at a rhyme or two. And the zombies from the title? They are the fixation of one teacher who is sure she can detect their signals through her hair.


**Grades 1-3.** With 18 poems celebrating the urban life, *City I Love* vividly describes the sights, sounds, people, places, and life typical of metropolitan areas. Brimming with all sorts of activities, the poems describe subways filled with people who are always on the move, going, coming, never stopping. The watercolor and ink illustrations help readers travel to cities all over the world.


**Grades 3-6.** J. Patrick Lewis presents readers with 48 clever, uproarious poems about adult occupations. Kids will enjoy both the quirky humor of the text and the digital collages as in one poem, the exterminator explains, “I come to de-bug / What’s under de rug.” Meanwhile, a bibliophile shares the joys of reading and good books in the first stanza of “Librarian,” “No one has more fun than I! / I’ve met Harriet the Spy / Ferdinand the Bull, and Pooh. / (Eyeore says, “How do you do?”) Finally, the title poem explains, “You wear them briefly / And in short, / I sell them chiefly / For support.” This book will fly off the shelves as kids chortle with joy while learning about a variety of jobs.
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Peters, Lisa Estberg. (2010). *Volcano wakes up!*

**Grades 2-4.** *Volcano Wakes Up!* follows the day in the life of a young, Hawaiian volcano through a series of poems told in five voices and points of view: the young volcano, ferns, lava flow crickets, small black road, and the sun. The volcano’s voice is always in concrete poems while the sun’s messages to the moon are in acrostic poems, the hip-hop lava flow crickets utilize texting language and abbreviations, the too-cool ferns, always ready to party, share their voices through curling, vertical poems, and the small black road’s cautionary poems are written on road warning signs. Here’s a sampling from this exquisite book.

**VOLCANO**

*Hey! It’s a little quiet around here.*

*It’s time to kick up a lot of dust and ash, time to shake the ground and make a big stink. Watch this, everybody!*

Steve Jenkins creates the perfect scene and backdrop for each opening with his gorgeous cut-paper collages—some of them literally erupt off the pages. The book’s back matter provides factual information that adds to the science facts presented through poetry.

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**Grades 2-6.** In an author’s note, Sidman explains that 99% of all species are now extinct. She then begins with Earth’s formation 4.6 billion years ago, paying poetic tribute to some 14 unlikely survivors ranging from bacteria to Homo sapiens. The book is a visual and intellectual feast, a reminder of humankind’s short time on this planet. Sidman’s *The Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night* (Houghton Mifflin, 2010) is another must have for nature and poetry fans as it features lyrical poems about nocturnal creatures in the forest.

**Grades 2-6.** This book is a unique handling of fairy tales as the poems are written in pairs, one of which is to be read up, and one to be read down. These poems, which the author calls reversos, utilize the exact same words and only change in capitalization and punctuation to create a second poem written from a different point of view. The Hansel and Gretel Reverso begins “Fatten up, boy! / Don’t you / like prime rib? / Then your hostess, she will roast you / goose.” The accompanying poem ends with, “Goose! / Then your hostess, she will roast you / like prime rib. / Don’t you / fatten up, boy!” Masse’s clever acrylic artwork has split images hinting at the subject of each reverso.


**Grades 3-6.** Jane Yolen and her son Jason Stemple pay tribute to the magnificent, majestic Great Egret in poetry and striking color photographs. Most of the 15 poems are accompanied by nonfiction information that enhances the readers understanding of the verse. The poem “Measure Me” reads in part, “I am a tower / of strength, / a bird of great length. / I am tall, of much height, / a long arrow / in flight. / My wings / almost span / the full length / of man.” Stunning color design features showcase both the poetry and the dazzling accompanying photographs.
Poetry Picture Books

Poetry also comes in the form of poetry picture books in which an often previously published poem is arranged as the text for a picture book.


**Grades Preschool-4.** This book garnered the 2010 Coretta Scott King Award for its stunning photograph illustrations as Hughes’ classic poem beautifully pays tribute to his people in a mere 33 words. Smith’s stunning sepia images of African Americans capture Langston Hughes’ intent to celebrate the beauty, curiosity, intelligence, joy, and wisdom of those whose skin colors are represented in so many different tints and tones.


**Gr. K-2.** A father and son reminisce on how much each looks and acts just like the other one in this delightful romp through the family features they share. “I looked in the mirror and what did I see? / A real handsome dude just looking at me.”

Verse Novels

Teachers looking for a bridge between poetry and novels may want to choose novels in verse as this increasingly popular format allows readers to feel as though they are eavesdropping on the central character or reading portions of his/her diary. Middle grade readers first took notice of the form in Karen Hesse’s *The Music of Dolphins* (Scholastic, 1996) and *Out of the Dust* (Scholastic, 1997) while teen readers turned to just about anything written by Mel Glenn, starting with his *Class Dismissed: High School Poems* (1982, Clarion) through *Split Image* (HarperCollins, 2000). Today’s readers may find a plethora of topics explored through novels in verse.

**Grades 6-10.** Difficult choices also lie at the heart of *Crossing Stones.* The story of four teens whose daily lives on the farm are shattered by the onslaught of WWI is threaded with descriptions of rural living, the bloody conflict abroad, and the growing movement toward women’s suffrage. Readers will quickly fall in love with the Jorgenson siblings and the Norman siblings and ache at their losses. They will also respond to the romance between Emma and Ollie, damaged by the war but determined to do his part. Although all the voices are distinctive throughout the narrative, Muriel’s voice is most memorable. Questioning her teacher and pondering the wisdom of going to war to save peace, she steps bravely into a new world where women somehow manage to balance career and family responsibilities.


**Grades 6-12.** Another wonderful novel in verse that manages to inspire as well as inform the reader is *The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba.* This elegant book features the story of Cuba told through four voices: Fredrika, an early Swedish advocate for equal rights for women; Elena, the daughter of a wealthy planter with many slaves; Cecilia, a pregnant young slave who longs for freedom for her child; and Beni, Cecilia’s husband. The real life Fredrika’s letters
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and diaries describe the beauties of Cuba are juxtaposed against the horrors of slavery, and her visit to the country inspires hope and change in Elena and Cecilia. The way in which Elena thwarts her mother’s own intentions through the use of her Hope chest will delight teen readers. Poets will appreciate Engle’s sure-handed use of fireflies as a metaphor throughout the book’s pages.


Grades 7-12. Hubris and carelessness lead to the failure of an earthen dam in the Allegheny Mountains, and lives are lost. In May 1889 after days of hard rain, the three rivers leading to the dam are overflowing, causing enormous pressure on the dam itself causing the dam to break and sending 20 million tons of water on the helpless citizens living below the lake. The forbidden romance between Celestia, the daughter of a wealthy man who visits the area only for vacations, and Peter, who lives and works in the area, is played out against the historical backdrop of a tragic event that occurred because of neglect. This novel in verse features multiple narrators and showcases the compassion of the townspeople for one another. Readers will draw inspiration by recognizing that ordinary individuals rise to greatness during extraordinary times and that humans are capable of change.

References


About the Authors
Terry Young and Barbara Ward are on the faculty at Washington State University, and both serve on the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children Committee.