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Using Mattie Stepanek's *Heartsongs* in the Classroom

Jill R. VanAntwerp

Heartsongs by Mattie J. T. Stepanek was on the *New York Times* bestseller list after its publication in 2001. Its author is a twelve-year-old boy who wrote a poem to introduce himself as the author:

About The Author

*I am Mattie J.T. Stepanek.
My body has light skin,
Red blood, blue eyes, and blond hair.
Since I have mitochondrial myopathy,
I even have a trach, a ventilator, and oxygen.
Very poetic, I am, and very smart, too.
I am always brainstorming ideas and stories.
I am a survivor, but some day, I will see
My two brothers and one sister in Heaven.
When I grow up, I plan to become
A daddy, a writer, a public speaker,
And most of all, a peacemaker.
Whoever I am, and whatever happens,
I will always love my body and mind,
Even if it has different abilities
Than other peoples' bodies and minds.
I will always be happy, because
I will always be me.* (27)

Mattie's two brothers and sister have died of the condition that he has, so he is keenly aware of his own mortality. While that is evident in his

poems, what is more evident is that they are a celebration of life. In January, Mattie's publisher, Hyperion Books, will publish another collection of Mattie's poems, *Loving Through Heartsongs*. Because of his book and his articulate conversation about his poetry, life, and everything else, Mattie has appeared on *The Diane Rhem Show* on NPR, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *Oprah*. In addition, Mattie is a spokesperson for the Muscular Dystrophy Association and serves as their 2002 National Ambassador.

Mattie has been writing his poems and short stories since he was three. While many of his poems deal with the day-to-day reality of his rare form of muscular dystrophy, others are playful and childlike. There is also a strong religious faith portrayed in many of the poems. It is clear why Mattie has been invited to speak in many public forums when one reads his biographical information. I do not think, however, that his poetry should only be recognized as the work of a child who has overcome. Mattie displays strong themes, language skill, and a strong voice in this short collection. These are reasons teachers may consider introducing his books to their students.

Our students enjoy the humor, pathos, joy, and sheer fun of poetry by their favorite poets like Baylor, Livingston, Silverstein, Frost, Florian, Heard, Prelutsky, Dr. Seuss, Greenfield and many others. But it is not a mistake to think that our

students can learn and be inspired by poets their age, even the poetry of their classmates. In her recently published book, *Children's Literature*, Diana Mitchell reminds teachers that "poems tell us that we are not alone—that others experience the same feelings of fear, sadness, jealousy, and joy" (142). Mitchell stresses that when we introduce literature to our students, that it should demonstrate quality ("children must read and hear excellent poems in many formats" 151), but she also points out that today "poetry is written by a broader array of people, including children" (155). Her criteria for selection leaves room for books like Mattie Stepanek's. She lists appeal, impact, purpose, complexity, use of poetic elements, and visual images (163). While Mattie's poetry may not be very complex and his use of poetic elements is clearly at the beginning stage, he meets the other criteria. I believe that children understand the difference and some will applaud the difference. Mitchell quotes Adrik-Dominique, a 6th grader: "Right now I'm really into writing my own poems, not reading others. Because I think mine could be better than somebody that's getting paid" (155).

Lucy McCormick Calkins urges us to encourage our students to be writers of poems. Sometimes the best encouragement can be the poems of others. Calkins describes her early feelings about poetry: ". . . all of our effort should go to ensuring that children are invited inside poetry and made to feel at home there. When I was in school, my teachers fenced me out of poetry. They taught me that poetry was too complicated for me" (377). Students who read books by the well-known poets we often feature will feel inspired, of course, but introducing books by other children like Mattie J. T. Stepanek will also show the children in our classrooms that they are part of this great tradition of writing thoughts in poetic form. In this way, Mattie's simple but heartfelt poems can show a young poet what the starting place looks like. One aspect of Mattie's poetry that teachers will love is that he sees and depicts the details of life around him:

Winter Luck

*Snowflakes . . .
They come down so slow,
And sometimes so fast,
Looking like pretty stars
Falling down, down, down
To the ground.
Little stars with little holes,
Bigger stars with bigger holes,
They are all cuddly snowflake stars.
Snowflakes of the tiny snows,
Snowstars of the bigger snows,
I will catch you on my hand
Or on my tongue
And make a wish . . .
I will make a wish on
My falling snowstar,
And then have good luck
All day, all night, all Ever. (15)*

Clearly Mattie has read and loved poetry himself. He shows he has learned the elements of good poetry. His vivid detail and the images they inspire show his promise as a poet. Whether children can relate to everything Mattie is feeling, they can enjoy his use of imagery and his unique thoughts about the world he sees around him.

There are many children in our classrooms, however, who can relate to Mattie's life. They, too, may live with a disabling condition. They may be full of grief for lost loved ones. They may wonder if their lives will be shortened when they daily read, see, and hear the media accounts of deaths due to terrorism and other afflictions that they are powerless to avoid. Some of our students have a sadness that we cannot always describe, account for, or assuage. Mattie's poetry could be included in the poems that teachers read to students when dealing with tough times. There are many ways to respond; the method may not be as important as the response. While working with a group of pre-service teachers at GVSU, Professor Jill Warren introduced them to Mattie's title poem

"Heartsongs." They reacted to the poem in writing. Sara K. wrote, "Wow, what a wonderful, heartfelt piece. Maddie's [sic] piece helped me to think about my life and what would happen if, all at once it was gone. I thought about what I could change about my life to make it better." Carrie D. also thought of her own life: "He's right, everyone does have a heartsong. I've been trying to tune into my heartsong as it has become a little faint and hard to hear. This poem was speaking to me because I know how important it is to hear the heartsong." Stacy N. responded in verse. Her opening lines of a longer poem show she heard what a young boy was saying: "Flowing ebbing/wax and wane/into my heart/straight from my brain./Rising, falling/crescent moon/thoughts drift by/I'll listen soon./Time goes by/days drift past/I'll get to those thoughts/I'll listen at last./Days turn to weeks/that melt into months/another year past/another cold front." These young women are more articulate than their elementary charges, but they show by their responses that Mattie's poems can evoke strong feelings in the listener. That is an important quality of a good poet of any age.

Bringing Mattie's poems into the classroom alongside his more skilled elders can serve many purposes. He can be an inspiration to young students who need encouragement to look past their problems, he can show the beginner it is OK to begin, he can inspire students to put their feelings on paper and thus get them out, and he can demonstrate to his readers that poetry topics are there all around them. The students that read or hear Mattie's poems may not be able to relate to his disease, but they can understand what he is telling them about getting past the problems it presents.

When My Feet Itch

*When my feet itch,
Maybe I'll think about
Riding on a dinosaur
With my mom—
And then,
I won't remember that my feet itch.
When my feet itch,
Maybe I'll think about
Spending the night at the
North Pole with Santa Claus—
And then,
It will be too cold for my feet to itch.
When my feet itch,
Maybe I'll think about
Playing with Nick and Ben
Because they're some of the
Best friends a kid could ever have—
And then,
I won't care if my feet itch or not.
Or maybe, when my feet itch,
I'll think about Angels—
Because they don't make
You itch when you touch them. (11)*

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About the Author

Jill R. VanAntwerp teaches courses in Secondary English Education at Grand Valley State University. Jill is Vice-President of MCTE and co-editor of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. She is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences.