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Poetry for Everyone

Sandra Imdieke

No matter their gender, ethnicity or culture, all children benefit when they can see themselves reflected through words and illustrations in the literature they read. This opportunity to see oneself in literature is particularly apparent in several new collections and editions of poetry. These collections include works by and about ethnic groups typically under-represented in literature for children. Whether a single poem in a story format, a thematic collection of poems by different authors, or a collection of a single author's works, the poetry collections reviewed in this article have the potential to speak to each of us.

An example of a single poem in a picture book format, *Bein' With You This Way*, is the story of a little girl and her friends who discover the similarities between people in spite of physical differences. Through the addictive rhythm and the realistic and vibrant watercolor illustrations, the reader can hear the playground giggles and laughter as the pages are turned. A cumulative method of describing physical differences combines with a rap like refrain: "Now isn't it beautiful, simply unusual, bein' with you this way!" Listeners to this story poem will ask to hear it again and again. Another story poem about people, *I Got a Family*, describes the ways in which family members express their love to each another. For example:

"I got a Brother, loves me hard
Roughhousin' in our fenced-in yard"

and

"I got a Daddy, loves me high,
Swings me in circles in the sky"

The strongly patterned language and repetition can be used as a model for stanzas children might compose about the individual members of their own families.

Jane Yolen shares with readers another family's way of expressing feelings about each other in *Grandad Bill's Song*. The grandson asks the family members, "What did you do on the day Grandad died?" Their responses help the grandson express his own emotions. Family members share their memories in words which are enhanced by illustrations of photographs brought to life on subsequent pages with soft, joyful watercolors. Within the few pages of the story, the reader is drawn into the life of the grandfather through the memories of the family members.

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Spirit Walker, by Nancy Wood, also has a timeless quality. The author has lived among the Taos Pueblo Indians for many years and through poetry expresses what is eternal, ancient, and sacred. Several poems such as "The Wisdom of My Grandmothers" and "Women, You Must Learn to be Warriors" express the focus on the traditional role of women. With spidery, delicate, and unique paintings, artist Frank Howell enhances the poetry using intense colors to portray the Native American subjects. In two collections of poetry from the Caribbean, the focus is on the people and their way of life. *A Caribbean Dozen* contains poems from a variety of Caribbean poets. A brief biographical sketch of each poet precedes the poetry which is rich in dialect and rich in the smells, sounds, and colors of the islands. The subjects are varied: boats and hurricanes, spiders and magic, school and family life. From *Steel Band Jump Up*:

"Music deep, rhythm sweet,
I'm dancing tracking the beat;
Like a seashell's ringing song." (21)
And from River:
"... don't go where river meets sea
there's a fight going on." (62)

In *Not a Copper Penny in Me House*, another collection of Caribbean poetry, Monica Gunning has composed poetry which captures the setting and experiences from the point of view of one Caribbean child. Festivals, school, market days, and trips to the beach are vividly described and illustrated.

Just as the poetry in *Spirit Walker* insisted we look at who we are and take pride in our traditions, so does *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*.

Walter Dean Myers, known best for his novels for children, has collected unforgettable turn of the century photographs of African American children. The sepia photos in *Brown Angels* and

the expressions of the children are mesmerizing. One wonders who the children were and what kinds of lives they lived. Myers' poetry enhances the images, but the photos have the strongest impact. Teachers will find several classroom connections which are generated by this book. For example, children with family albums containing photos of relatives from the turn of the century may be motivated to reexamine their own family albums. Poetry about their relatives could be written in a style similar to the poems in this collection. Just as the poetry in *Spirit Walker* insisted we look at who we are and take pride in our traditions, so does *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*. This collection by Joyce Carol Thomas is presented in a picture book format with the theme of family and one's identity. The realistic watercolors and the poetry's topics raise tough questions. Issues are not romanticized, and the theme of our place in the world is timeless.

"Be careful what you
ponder," Granny smiles,
"Over a cup of steaming leaves
for it will surely come to pass."

Joyce Carol Thomas

Two other strong collections focus on African American families and their values, experiences, and traditions. *Pass It On* reflects experiences of children, both happy and sad. The intent, as indicated in the title of the collection, is to keep the traditions alive through the selections by poets such as Eloise Greenfield and Gwendolyn Brooks. *Families* contains poetry by many of the same writers as the first collection, but the individual selections are not duplicated.

Three collections of Langston Hughes' poetry for children have been published within the last year. *Black Misery*, Hughes' last published book, has been reissued. The poetry forces one to wonder if times and attitudes have changed since the book was first published. With a knowledge of the political events of the time in which this poetry was written, readers can gain insights into the feelings and emotions of African Americans who lived in the 1960s. Another collection by Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper*, has been presented

in a new edition with fresh illustrations by Brian Pinkney. The scratchboarding technique used by Pinkney enhances the mood and message in the poetry. The format is not a picture book but rather an illustrated collection.

Children will also treasure Langston Hughes' wonderful, previously unpublished *Sweet and Sour Animal Book*. Humorous and delightful rhymes are accompanied by vibrant artwork created by students from the Harlem School of the Arts. The camel who thought his humps were "wisdom bumps" corresponds to the letter C, and for the letter G the reader learns that "if a goose can't quackle, she's out of whack." The book is well designed. The animals of the alphabet are portrayed through artistic mediums such as paper mache', sculpture, and clay models, and all are vibrantly painted. This is indeed "serious fun," as an afterword describes the book, with the emphasis on fun. Photographs of the children who created the art are included.

The theme of human struggle and survival is central to two collections of poetry for older readers. Robert Hull's selections for *Breaking Free* force readers to see the struggle for human rights as timeless and personally relevant. Humankind's courage and invincible search for freedom are portrayed through poetry by authors of all nations, all ages, and from many periods of history. Photographs of concentration camp prisoners and of the homeless intensify the emotions evoked by the poetry.

Poems in *Cool Salsa* capture the struggle of Latinos growing up in the United States. These are poems that may make the reader squirm. Interspersed with dialect and followed by translations for readers unfamiliar with Spanish, the reader can not miss the dichotomy of the joy and the hardship facing Latino teenagers today. From *Learning English*:

"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."(16)

Poems by Gary Soto, Sandra Cisneros, and others are included in this collection.

A study of poetry is made richer when one understands the point of view or life experiences of the writer. An outstanding classroom resource by Kathleen Krull, entitled *Lives of the Writers*, takes a humorous and provocative look at renowned writers. Although most of the nineteen sketches contained in this volume are about novelists, several poets such as Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, and Carl Sandburg are included. One learns that Emily Dickinson enjoyed fudge parties and that Langston Hughes' favorite song was by Billie Holiday. The sketches are short, containing interesting detail which would be perfect for reading aloud to a class enjoying the poetry or writings of any of these authors.

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Pride, courage, hope, and a search for identity are themes which run through these selections. The universal nature of these themes presented in a poetic form may help both child and adult readers better understand themselves and others.

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