Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 11

Issue 1 *Focus: Poetry, Tough to Teach or a Treat for Students?*

Article 6

1995

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Dr. Miriam Bat-Ami

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Recommended Citation

Bat-Ami, Dr. Miriam (1995) "It Doesn't Always Have To Rhyme," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1549>

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It Doesn't Always Have To Rhyme

Dr. Miriam Bat-Ami

I am standing in front of my English 282, Children's Literature class. Before me are thirty-five students, the majority of whom, hopefully, will soon be teachers themselves. We are about to begin a poetry unit. I ask a question which I have asked many times before this, and so a part of me thinks I shouldn't proceed in this same way. What will be gained? But I have a missionary zeal when it comes to the reading and writing of poetry, and so I forge ahead.

"What is children's poetry?" I ask. I stand poised at the blackboard.

The hands shoot up. "Children's poetry rhymes," answers the first student. Half the hands go down. Around me there is a murmur of communal assent.

Dutifully, I write this line on the board. Then I pause and shake my head. "Wait," I say, "let's look in our book." We all open *The Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature*. We glance through the material in the poetry unit. Most of the poems do rhyme, but there are some that don't like Valerie Worth's "Marbles" and Myra Cohn Livingston's "74th Street," and, of course, e.e. cummings' "in Just-spring."

I erase the line "Children's poetry rhymes" from the board and write, "Many children's poems rhyme, but some poems are unrhymed."

"Children's poems are funny and make you laugh," says another student.

Someone else then reads Nikki Giovanni's "A Poem for Carol." None of us laugh. We all feel sad somehow, sad and full of wonder. "Some children's poems are funny," I write. "They make you laugh. And some children's poems are sad and make you cry, and some fill you with wonder or terror or joy or all of them."

Another student waves her hand back and forth. "Poems have poetic devices in them," she says. "They are filled with alliteration and metaphors and similes."

"And assonance," says another student, "and repetition."

"And, you know," says another, "when a word sounds like what it means like 'buzz.'"

"Onomatopoeia," yells the poetic term cheering section.

I wrinkle my brow. I can never spell 'onomatopoeia' right. "You will not be required to spell this term accurately," I say, laughing.

No one else laughs, for unwittingly I have pushed us into the realm of quizzes and tests and right and wrong answers.

"In high school," says another student, sensing the mood of foreboding that has seized the class, "we got tested. And the teacher always knew what a poem meant which wasn't what I thought it meant. We had to figure out what the teacher wanted because poetry is what the teacher says it is, at least if you want a good grade."

Everyone laughs, a bitter, angry kind of laugh. The room is rocking on waves of anger. Everyone wishes the waves would wash over me. My students think they will be tested on poetry, and I have the answers. Therefore, they have to figure out what my answers are, so I shouldn't be fooling around on the board. I should tell them what each and every poem means.

"What is poetry?" someone yells in the back of the room. "Do we have to analyze it? And how many points will it be worth on the exam?"

The storm peaks. My students don't bother to raise hands. They plunge inside the depths. They talk about "dissecting" as if a poem were a cadaver. They talk about how they never felt safe with poetry; how their answers were always wrong; how teachers had the right answers which they were to figure out; how poetry is hard and confusing; and they never did well with it, and so I should teach this unit fast and get on with interesting things like picture books and folktales and realistic fiction. Let the English majors study poetry. "How many of you like to read poetry," I ask, quietly.

Four or five hands are raised. Four or five people blush defensively.

"How many of you like to write poetry?" I ask. The same four or five hands.

"What kinds of poems did you write when you were in grade school?"

My class responds as many classes have responded before this. They mention acrostic poetry. When they were young, they wrote the names of fellow students on the board or on a sheet of paper shaped like a body, and filled out all the positive qualities beginning with the letters of a student's name. Or students learned cinquains. Sometimes this type of form poetry was combined with a science unit: pig, fat pig . . . And then there is the haiku. Few seem to care for the haiku. By and large students talk of predictable patterned verse taught by teachers who themselves wanted to get on to more enjoyable things or who just felt insecure.

When I ask for names of good poets, I get the same name: Shel Silverstein. Occasionally, a student also mentions Jack Prelutsky, but the list generally stops here. They all remember nonsense poetry: funny, rhymed verse.

I stand in front of my students, and, as in past terms, I suddenly feel overwhelmingly depressed, both as a teacher and a children's writer. I think about when my soon-to-be teachers teach their students. Again the Silverstein. Again the light and ridiculous. And when their children come to write they will take safe, predictable routes. They will make cinquains on white snowflakes and hang them from the ceiling. Perhaps they will be bold and daring and write list poems where they don't rhyme. They won't be bad list poems, just safe, within the boundaries of clear descriptive reality. Or worse, these soon-to-be teachers will have their students create holiday poetry books which will be taken home to parents: Happiness is . . . Sharing is . . . Christmas or Chanukah is . . . Assessment will be a kind of bone-picking devoid of any juicy marrow. To show they know metaphors, their students will go on metaphor searches. They will rifle through poetry books while they mutter to themselves, "A metaphor is a comparison without like or as." Or on the bus to and from school they will scrawl out answers to basalized worksheets. The poem so-and-so uses which of the following senses? The poem so-and-so has what simile?

I think about the children's poetry books on the market. Aside from the above-mentioned poets, there are others being published: Marilyn Singer, Eloise Greenfield, Myra Cohn Livingston, Byrd Baylor, Paul Fleischman, Arnold Adoff, Cynthia Rylant, Nikki Giovanni, and Barbara Esbensen. And most of these poets do write in unrhymed verse as well as rhymed verse, but oftentimes students tend to forget their works. Most particularly they shy away from unrhymed verse.

"I don't know how to do it," a student tells me.

"It doesn't feel like poetry," another says.

"How do you teach poetry?" I asked a friend of mine who happens to be an excellent teacher and poet herself.

"Poorly," she said, jokingly, for even she admitted that she was unsure if what she did was good.

I'm not sure my approach is right, but it does make my students feel closer to the creative process. First, I dispel some myths. Poetry is not all rhymed. In fact, I caution students who wish

to write about love or death to avoid rhymed poetry. I think to write good rhymed poetry is very hard; and to write good rhymed poetry of a serious nature is nearly impossible. "Form," I tell my students, "should arise out of content. First you have the content and form shapes itself around it: the wine bottle around wine; the can around soda. One shouldn't pre-determine form unless one is certain that nonsense is what one wants. Nonsense is quite often rhymed verse."

"Poets," I tell my students, "do not go image searching. I don't look at a poem like a cake I'm baking. In order for it to taste good I'll need three large cups of images; two tablespoons of similes in particular, a teaspoon of metaphors, and a pinch of onomatopoeia to add spice. Imagery comes with being inside what one is writing about—with re-feeling it. Imagery fits like a good shoe. It wraps around your foot and is warm. It gives meaning to walking."

My class and I read poets. With each poem, we look at different styles and elements. I take Eloise Greenfield's *Nathaniel Talking*, a picture book composed of poems supposedly written by a boy called Nathaniel B. Free. Here voice is so important. Nathaniel must sound, as the dust cover says, like "the child we see everywhere, except that we rarely see him in literature. / The Black child thinking." That means dialect. If a child is talking, and he's talking directly to me, he might well say, "my teacher don't like it / my grandma don't like it / my daddy don't like it" and that is fine. Voice is real. So, too, is the voice real in Hughes' poem "Mother to Son" when the Mother says, "Well, son, I'll tell you: / Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

We talk about use of concrete images. Children's poetry must be full of the concrete. A children's poet doesn't say, "Now I'll use sound. Now I'll use touch." The senses are important, but one must think of the subject and which senses vividly portray that subject. Eve Merriam, in her poetry book after which this essay is named, *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme*, writes a poem called "How to Eat a Poem." Of course, here, we know we're depending upon taste, and so we delight when the poet explores the joy of con-

sumption: "Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice / that may run down your chin."

I tell my students that they must pretend they are poets. At first, my students balk at the suggestion. I coax them by reading aloud a poem, telling them all along that poetry needs to be read aloud: it needs to be felt by the lips, tasted by the tongue, enjoyed by the palate. When I finish reading or rather "saying" my poem, I talk about decisions using the "I" pronoun. I decided to use one stanza because this is a continuous poem. My speaker is rushing through, not wanting to stop. She is excited, so I did the verse all in one vertical line down.

My students get the idea. Sometimes they laugh when they begin with "I" and then shift to "he" or "she." The exercise feels like an odd game. But this "I" usage gives my students control: they can talk about what they, the pretend poets, consciously did; and no one can question them. This is good, for the most important thing is to give my students confidence. I want them to believe they can talk intelligently and with sensitivity about poetry. When they believe this, then they begin to like poems, too.

Because my students need guidelines in their discussion, I do ask them to consider some things: spacing, rhythm, form, punctuation, oddities in grammar or in the written form (words in italics, words all written in capital letters). Always they are talking about why they made a decision. Device searching is replaced by reasoning. This metaphor was chosen because it makes me feel the object, and I, the poet wanted my reader to feel in the way I'm feeling.

My students read aloud poetry in chorus. We choose narrative poetry that is easy to divide into voices: poetry like *The Highwayman* and *Paul Revere's Ride* and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. Those who do not want main parts read lines which I have assigned to "all," or they become the rhythm makers, clapping or stamping out rhythm with their hands or feet. *The Highwayman* is particularly good for foot tapping. I show them how one can divide voices in Paul Fleischman's book *Joyful Noises*. I have to teach my students. Pause at the end of a poetic line. If words are run together, run them together as you speak. If a

word is alone on a line, let it feel alone on your tongue. Give it space.

We explore rhythm. How do I, as a poet, create rhythm. I don't choose to write in a "smooth" rhythm that "flows." My students love to talk about flowing rhythm as if poetry were a stream of words. They like to say how rhythm is not "choppy." I tell them that rhythm depends upon subject. It can be choppy. If the persona in a poem is angry, then he or she might use very choppy words or words might be isolated in short choppy bits for emphasis. We look at Eve Merriam's "How to Eat a Poem" together:

For there is no core
or stem
or rind
or pit
or seed
or skin
to throw away.

When my students tire of talking or chorally reciting poems, we stand up and feel rhythm with our whole bodies. Sometimes we are girls just learning to skate. I read Livingston's "74th Street." My students do another action each line, and the lines begin to make sense: yes they are connected to the action of skating. There is no rhyme in this verse. But the rhythm and the line spacing match content. Form wraps itself around content.

Acting out poetry, particularly acting out unrhymed verse allows students to make sense of how the poem means. My students stand in a circle. They close their eyes and open their hands. "I am giving you marbles," I say. "What do they feel like? What do they sound like? Imagine what they look like." Then I read Valerie Worth's poem "Marbles":

Marbles picked up
Heavy by the handful
And held, weighed,
Hard, glossy,
Glassy, cold,
Then poured clicking,
Water-smooth, back
To their bag, seem
Treasure: round jewels,
Slithering gold.

We are readers together. We are actors. We are the creators and writers. One day, to show the whole miraculous nature of poetry creation, I ask my students to look at an empty board. "What rules," I say, "did you learn in order to write."

Some of the rules we discuss are: capitalization for beginning a new sentence; period for the end of a sentence. We discuss how we learned to write from left to right on horizontal not vertical lines. We talk about how, as young children, we wrote like poets: the page was a sheet upon which we created our artful letters: some big, some small. We were unconscious poets. But now we're conscious. Still we have to come to the paper as if we were about to play. Writing is playing for the young child and the poet. We forget horizontal logic. We move back to the word. This is hard for students to see, and so I concretize this.

"Give me a line," I say.

A student says, "I'm going home."

I ask students to come to the board and explore how many ways this can be written:

There is: I'm going home.

There is:

I'm
going
home.

Or:

I'm going
home.

Or:

i'mgoinghome.

i'm goinghome

I'M GOING HOME.

I'm GOING home.

What happens with the changes? We talk about the little letters and big ones. We talk about what happens when a poet capitalizes a whole word or puts it in italics. We talk about how words at the beginning of a poetic line and at the end assume importance. As poets we have full option to write any way, but the way we choose must make sense. As a poet, I can write a line clear across the page. I can write a line of one word. I can start a line in the middle of the page. How do I choose?

My class and I become visual thinkers. What does an empty space do for the reader? What does a poem written all in one vertical stanza do? When there are no stops, how does the mind respond? And what happens to the mind when there is a stanza break. "Note," I say, "how the reader's mind breaks away, relaxes, pauses, and begins to think again. Space gives the mind time to re-organize for new thoughts, but if, as the speaker, I'm hurried, excited, angry, just bursting to tell everything to my reader, then maybe I won't stop.

We talk about punctuation. Again, we are children. Punctuation isn't merely what you do to follow a rule: a period after a statement, a question mark after a question. It orchestrates the poem. The poet, reading to himself or herself—and we do that—uses punctuation for pauses, or stops. These pauses change the musical tempo of a poem. I pretend I am someone like Langston Hughes, and I read aloud "Mother to Son" and when I come to the word "Bare" all alone on a line, suddenly I am filled with such a sense of desolation. I pause. The mind contemplates this whole space around "bare." It is a terribly empty space. But then the "I" of this poem keeps going. And, in the going, in the doing, this "I" begins to feel more and more hopeful until hope is replaced by a kind of triumph, a feeling of strength and endurance that this "I" or mother must share with her son: "Don't you fall now—/For I'se still going, honey,/I'se still climbin'."

My students and I explore the emotions of poetry—that raw grain inside an oyster which created the pearl of a poem. And we give respect to ourselves as poetry readers and writers. We give respect to our children whose needs are various. We learn that there is a place for light verse, for rhymed verse, and for unrhymed verse. There is a place for humor and for sadness; for joy and for fear. We learn that we are all capable of talking about poetry. And when it comes to final project time, some of my students do write poetry. The four or five who always loved poetry write it; and four or five who always feared it, write it. I cherish their words, their willingness to become poets.

Below is a poem a student of mine wrote that reveals such a play with space. The student cut out pictures from a wildlife magazine, and then wrote poems to accompany these pictures. The poems were as visually exciting as the pictures themselves:

WHAT A FROG LIKES

A frog likes green, mucky places, where he
can
splash
through
the mud.

He likes to hide in the green weeds,
and reeds
and watch things through his wide, bulging
eyes.

A frog likes the coolness of the swamp which
keeps
his skin
slimy

and wet.

He likes to swim through cool waters and
through holes
in the banks
of green
pools.

A frog likes to sing in the dampness of a misty
night
and his voice is
loud

and scratchy
and deep.

He creaks all night listening to his friends.

A frog likes to hop
and hop,
using his powerful legs like a springboard, to
take him to places where there is no water to
swim.

A frog likes the sticky feeling of bright, green
duckweed,
as it clings to his damp back,
blending him with
the colors around
making him feel like a part of the swamp.

A frog likes to be a frog.

by Kirsten Wildfong

Another student of mine, Mondrea Mitchell, indicated in the poetry analysis of her own poems

that she was “very interested in African-American dialect.” She wanted to write a group of poems around “African-American moral folklore.” As for the composition she stated: “Half the poems were written from a thought in my head that sounded similar to something mama would actually say. The other half of the poems were based upon actual sayings. I sat with friends and we reminisced about mothers’ land—some of the sayings that we heard frequently in our childhoods.”

The following is a poem from her manuscript *Mama Say* and shows realness in voice and a wonderful sense of the way Mama teaches morality to her children:

“SHOPPIN’ LESSON”

we went shopping
just the gals, as mama and aunt janice say
I like shoppin’ wit’ mama
she lets me pick out my own stuff
not like aunt janice
she picks stasi’s stuff
sometimes when we in the car drivin’ home
stasi cries
cuz she don’t like the things her mama picked
out for her
i get so mad i feel like crying
usually
last time i felt so proud of my new tennis shoes
the designer brand like the big girls
i didn’t care if stasi cried
i bragged
I bragged about havin’ the best shoes
i bragged until mama gave me a look
and i knew mama had somethin’ to say
later as i climbed into bed, still grinnin’
mama said
“don’t compare yourself to others
you’ll either become vain or bitter”
before she kissed me goodnight and turned
out the light

Finally, following is one of my poems and how I speak of the poem when I first have students consider themselves authors of the written:

THE ICE LADIES

It was an awesome beauty The morning of
the ice storm
spring buds, about to BURST forth,
were captured and held
inside clear glass bottles I touched
the ice with my hands

and licked the drops. The afternoon of the ice storm
the sky was a leaky faucet. Water drip drip dripped
on the elbow-high, ice gloved branches of trees
while the air grew warmer still and then suddenly cold. The evening of the ice storm the sky kept spitting out small ice pellets sheer white-slip pellets that clung to the ice-lady, glass-lady, clear white glove-lady trees
gleaming frozen bright by the streetlights. Oh, it was an awesome terrible beauty
The night of the ice storm there were no sounds of cars
or trucks or dogs or birds or people anywhere at all. Outside our house the world was another kind of place, of tree voices instead of people voices. We huddled close together in the large living room that listened while the world

crackled

everywhere.

We sucked in our breaths while bark snapped, making sharp popcorn popping sounds like RHEE—EEH! POP! RHEE—EEEH!

Sounds like ...

like things I never heard before...like a million bandages RIPPING AND TEARING off of all that tree flesh PULLING IT APART like ... the kind of moving, living moaning only trees create when they’re torn apart limb by limb.

It was awesome and terrible and beautiful and dreadful all at the same time. That night we all stood on the porch.

“It’s like we’re on the moon,” I said. My voice echoed in my ears. White ice sparkled on the grass like hard crystal diamonds so bright they hurt my eyes. And the air felt still and awful and awesome and silent...

Me (speaking): When I wrote this poem, I didn’t have a title. Titles often come for me during drafting. I had this image of the trees, of the way I saw them the morning of the ice storm. They were so beautiful in such an odd way. That’s my first line—“awesome”—I couldn’t comprehend it. I spaced after “beauty” because I wanted that line to have two parts. I wanted them separate but not on separate lines. I wanted the reader to be able to read “The morning of the ice storm” with line

one and line two. "Clear glass bottles" — I suppose that's a metaphor. I was thinking about milk bottles, the way they used to shine when the milkman put them on our stoop. When I was a kid, we had milk delivered in glass bottles. I'd pick them up off the porch and sometimes run my fingers across the glass that felt wet. This same kind of sensual feeling was what I wanted to capture with "I touched." I also love licking ice. When I was a kid, I'd eat icicles hanging from our porch. The "drip drip dripped" was repeated for emphasis of the continual action. I'm not sure I like that. The "elbow-high" — I had trouble with that. When I began describing the trees, I started thinking of Cinderella's ball. The trees were like dancing ladies, ones with long white gloves. Very elegant. But it's a very fragile beauty, too, and holds a lot of terror in it. So I move to "awesome terrible beauty." I think ice storms are like that. At first it's so gorgeous. Everything gleams so crystal white. The trees look absolutely beautiful weighted down by this ice. But then the branches can't hold it all. Perhaps I should have expressed weight, too—the heaviness of it.

This inner monologue is what I do with my class. When I'm speaking about my poetry, I'm also showing that, as a poet, I'm not always satisfied. Sometimes I'm unsure of images that I've used or feel I have to work more. I do feel that way, and it's good for students to hear my doubts. That gives them courage. They know I need to keep drafting. They need to keep drafting, too. They need to feel that we are all readers and

writers together. We are here to share what we know and to learn from each other.

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