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From the Stacks

Peter Butts

Poetry as a Subversive Literature

As an impressionable 10th grader, I experienced the strange pedagogy of a man who threw books, led the class in calisthenics when we were too quiet, and often spun a large hunting knife to select the next student for his questions. In the process, we learned a lot about the Elizabethan love poets and 17th Century metaphysical poets. We all thought we were getting away with murder talking about such stuff in class, my first lesson in the subversive power of poetry. Figuring out what the elaborate metaphors really meant became a game.

My second lesson came as a floundering first-year teacher in inner-city Cleveland. Totally disgusted with the textbook (and myself, for that matter), I put together a copyright-suspect collection of poems by Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and others for Black History Month. Subconsciously, I think I wanted to tick off the lethargic administration. I didn't succeed in getting fired, but I did get swamped with requests from kids for copies of that "ba-ad" poetry. If it's relevant, they will come. (A bit of scatological language doesn't hurt, either.)

Lesson number three came in my current incarnation as a middle school library media specialist. Intrigued by the steady, surreptitious stream of young men sitting down to quick peeks at *Teen* magazine, I decided to investigate. Sneaking my own peek over a shoulder one day, I discovered that, contrary to my hypothesis that they were reading the advice columns that frequently discussed sex, they were actually flipping to that dreadful adolescent poetry in the back. In fact, quickly scribbled notes suggested they were stealing lines for their own love notes. If it's relevant, and useful, they will come.

I've also been fortunate enough to work with some creative middle school English teachers

brave enough to let students create their own notebooks of poetry they've written themselves or that they've found browsing the library media center shelves. They've forced me to go beyond the standard anthologies and seek out books with shelf appeal for young adults. Here are a handful of recent gems too good to miss.

My budding Romeos can now do better than the pages of *Teen* magazine with a new collection by poet and educational consultant Ralph Fletcher, *I Am Wings: Poems About Love* (Bradbury, 1994). Browsing through this slim volume of short, unassuming verse can reveal humor, heartache, or tenderness—

BASKET

We walk
holding hands
our fingers
woven together
hanging between us
like a basket
soft but strong
and snugly knit
with room enough
for love to fit

Divided into two sections—"falling in" and "falling out"—my early readers have most enjoyed the fickle and tragic poems of the second half. The

author is also father of four boys, so he knows the territory.

For young adults, poetry can be found on the radio and by tuning in MTV. The most distinct new verse form they find is the hip hop meter of rap music. For a taste of rap by a young up-and-coming poet, look for Paul Beatty's *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (Penguin, 1994). Although Beatty tends toward longer verse than is commonly found in YA (young adult) anthologies, his peculiar mix of philosophical jive and in-your-face rap has proved popular.

VERBAL MUGGING

.

i end this oral tome
drenched in sweat
wiping away the crocodile tears

of happy endings
in a make believe world
where people speed listen and skim

the poet goes round
makin ends meet
by beatin muthafuckas over the head with
sound
bangin tuning forks on minds
lookin for vibrations that dont stop with time

Keeping up with contemporary poetry can be challenging; two new (inexpensive) anthologies can help. *Walk on the Wild Side: Urban American Poetry Since 1975* (Collier, 1994) brings together 60 poets, arranged alphabetically by poet, to create a rich portrait of diverse cultures and cities. Representing Detroit, Lebanese-American Lawrence Joseph writes about his parents' neighborhood market—

THERE I AM AGAIN

I see it again at dusk, half darkness in its
brown light,
large tenements with pillars on Hendrie be-
side it,

the gas station and garage on John R beside
it,
sounds of acappella from a window some-
where, pure, nearby it

pouring through the smell of fried pork to

welcome
whoever enters it to do business.

.

Every Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry By African Americans Since 1945 (Little, Brown, 1994) brings together the literary children of Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Countee Cullen. The editors, Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton, set out to explore the diversity of African American verse from classically inspired writing to the radical Black Arts Movement works that so motivated my Cleveland kids. Rather than try to crystallize African American poetry into a single definition, they've sought out the varied responses to Countee Cullen's puzzle:

Yet do I marvel at the curious thing:
To make a poet black and bid him sing.

Along with solid helpings of Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, poet laureate Rita Dove, and other expected folk, are kid-pleasers dedicated to Muhammad Ali and Rodney King. Here's a "teacher-pleaser": a bitter and stunning homage to Wallace Stevens by Raymond Patterson—

TWENTY-SIX WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKMAN

I

On the road we met a blackman,
But no one else.

.

XII

We are told that the seeds
of rainbows are not unlike
a blackman's tear.

.

XVIII

Is it harvest time in the brown fields,
Or is it a black man
Singing?

XIX

There is the sorrow of blackmen
Lost in cities. But who can conceive
Of cities lost in blackmen?

.

Growing up Latino in America means speaking two languages; Lori Carlson's *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States* (Holt, 1994) explores the rhythms,

sounds, and experiences of that double life. Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, Luis Rodriguez, Oscar Hijuelos, and others contribute growing-up experiences written in both English and Spanish. Each poem includes a translation, but many, such as Abelardo B. Delgado's "Día de los muertos," are in the mix of languages our kids use everyday.

.

Here in the U.S.
 los muertos
 are personas non gratas.
 Here we do not wish
 to hold dialogue
 with los muertos.
 They remind us
 we too
 will eventually join them.
 Here there is no luto
 and there are no novenas
 or puños de tierra.
 Here in the U.S.
 the idea is to hide,
 to ignore the dead
 and to even avoid death
 in our conversations.

.

Poetry anthologies for children typically combine verse and art; recently this practice has taken some exciting and sophisticated turns. Last year, Tom Feelings won both Caldecott Honors and a Coretta Scott King Medal for *Soul Looks Back in Wonder* (Dial, 1993). This gorgeous album of colorful paintings and poetic celebrations is just too good not to share with older readers. The same can be said of the simple, defiant affirmation of Maya Angelou's *Life Doesn't Frighten Me at All* (Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 1993) illustrated with the dramatic graffiti paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat. My tough middle schoolers get an interesting look on their faces as they read the tragic bio in the back of the book concluding with Basquiat's death due to a drug overdose.

A prominent proponent of the paintings and poetry marriage is Charles Sullivan, who together with the art publisher, Harry N. Abrams, has produced a stunning collection of books you're as likely to find shelved with the art books as with the poetry. This past year they teamed up to

produce *Here Is My Kingdom: Hispanic-American Literature and Art for Young People* (Abrams, 1994).

The most intriguing twist on this theme comes from the ever prolific Cynthia Rylant who has penned a series of haunting, wistful, and earthy lyrics to accompany the Depression-Era photography of Walker Evans entitled *Something Permanent* (Harcourt, Brace, 1994).

Of course just reading poetry is as ludicrous as studying music merely by listening to records without attempting to sing; appreciation of poetry also comes from writing poetry. Both poetry fans and poetry-phobes will enjoy these wonderful new guides. Mary Oliver may just have become the E. B. White of verse with *A Poetry Handbook* (Harcourt, Brace, 1994). Sound, meter, diction, imagery, a generous helping of common sense, and a dash of wit are served up in a small volume appropriate for both student reading and classroom preparation. As an added treat, Oliver skillfully illustrates her points with some of the finest examples of American poetry. Writing a poem, says Oliver, "is a kind of love affair between something like the heart and the learned skills of the conscious mind. They make appointments with one another and keep them, and something begins to happen" (7).

Designed with a younger audience in mind, Paul Janeczko's *Poetry From A to Z: A Guide for Young Writers* (Bradbury Press, 1994) is a smorgasbord, combining seventy-two fun poems arranged alphabetically by subject (because, writes Janeczko, "you can write a poem about almost anything" (4), fourteen poetic exercises, and thoughts and advice from the poets. *Poetry From A to Z* is a wonderful antidote for students (and teachers) who've had the "Anastasia Krupnik experience" with a rigid teacher who insists on following "the rules."

I saved Janeczko's latest volume of his own work for last because it contains a poem that perfectly captures the joy of reading good poetry. All fall I've had requests for stuff about Woodstock from young hippie wannabes; *Stardust otel* (Orchard, 1993) shares the joy and the sadness of that era. The hotel is home to an unusual collection of characters, seen through the eyes of Leary (named of course for LSD's most famous sales-

man), the son of the ex-hippie innkeepers. The "H" fell the day Leary was born when his dad, Nick, swung jubilantly from the sign. Nick decided to leave off the "H" as a reminder of that joy.

PHOTOS

.

When the time was right,
Nick carried the Family Shoe Box
to the kitchen table,
poured half a glass of
his homemade wine,
as dark as an eggplant's hide,
and slid back the lid.

He didn't say much
as we thumbed through a tangle of the past:

Jimi Hendrix
prancing onstage
"Woodstock"

Grandpa
red faced
carving a bulging turkey
"Pop's last Christmas"

Lucy
wearing cap and softball jersey
for Friendly Ford
"the real Babe"

Dennis Swan
Nick's college roommate
smiling in his army uniform
"Never came back"

Nick
grinning, holding
me, howling in a blue blanket
"Three days old"

When Lucy suggested order,
Nick, gathering the pictures, scoffed,
"You don't want memories in order.
Half the fun is the surprise,

not knowing what comes next."

I wish you all fun and surprises on your next
adventure through the 800s!

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