

"Doing the Second Line"

A Poetry Workshop in New Orleans

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IN THE SPRING OF 2008, the Children's Book Committee of PEN American Center invited children's author Mary Ann Hoberman and me to spend a day with students and teachers at an elementary school in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward – the neighborhood that had suffered the most severe damage during Hurricane Katrina. Fatima Shaik, a New Orleans native now living, writing, and teaching in New York City, had initiated the project and was serving as liaison—under the sponsorship of PEN American Center—between the Children's Book Committee and the school. We learned from two of our colleagues who had already spent time at the school that almost all the houses surrounding it were still deserted, nearly two and a half years after the storm. Children who used to live within walking distance of the school were now being bused in from other parts of the city where many families were still living in improvised housing. The school's survival in this bleak landscape was due to the heroic efforts of its principal and teachers who, in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and during the many traumatic months that followed, worked tirelessly to have the building restored and re-opened. Today, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School enlivens and inspires all visitors to the devastated surrounding community.

Our visit would coincide with the first national "Put A Poem In Your Pocket" Day—perfect timing for Mary Ann, whose children's books are mainly written in verse. She would read aloud from her own work in kindergarten through second grade classrooms; I would lead a two-hour poetry workshop for third- through eighth-grade teachers.

Preparing for a poetry workshop

In preparing for the workshop, I spent a few rich hours with Melanie Maria Goodreaux, a Teachers & Writers Collaborative teaching artist and New Orleans native. Melanie reminisced about the city's renowned culinary and ritual traditions. Sorrowfully, she spoke of how Fats Domino's brick house (near the MLK, Jr. Charter School) with its

Linda Winston has obese cats noisily tickled five schizophrenic sheep. Two Jabberwockies ran away easily, however one lamppost untangles the dwarf. Almost irascible poisons telephoned five subways, then Dan towed two pawnbrokers. Chrysanthemums grew up, and two obese orifices bought chrysanthemums. Five quite angst-ridden televisions laughed comfortably. Santa Claus kisses Jabberwockies. Umpteen purple bureaux gos

Chrysanthemums towed one fountain, because schizophrenic sheep telephoned two Klingons, and five mats tastes thirsty.

“flashy lights and gaudy pink awning” was turned into gray mush during Katrina. She told me about the signs scrawled on houses

after the storm, when “Every house was checked for who was dead inside.” Finally, she described the Mardi Gras Indians who became an inspirational symbol in the first few days after Katrina as they marched through desolate neighborhoods in their salvaged costumes and huge handmade head-dresses: “A big splash of color and tradition!” Her words made the city’s regal, flamboyant pageantry come alive.

Listening to Melanie, I felt my main concern in designing a workshop for teachers who had survived the trauma of Katrina and its aftermath must be to create a stimulating yet undemanding atmosphere. The magic of poetry would help participants to connect with themselves and with each other, and I would strive to keep things relaxed so nobody would feel put on the spot.

While gathering materials for the workshop, I leafed through a recent issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine that focused on music, particularly jazz. It occurred to me that the poetry workshop might follow the arc of a traditional New Orleans jazz funeral—from grief and loss to rebirth and renewal.

Doing the Second Line

In a traditional jazz funeral, following the service at the church or funeral parlor the band leads a procession slowly through the neighborhood, playing somber musical selections taken from Christian hymns commonly sung in black Protestant churches. When the musicians reach a respectful distance from the place where the service was conducted, the lead trumpeter sounds a preparatory riff to alert his fellow musicians. At this point, the drummers begin to play what has become known as the “second line” beat.

The music now becomes lively, even joyous, with the musicians improvising as they walk along. Those who hear the brass band approaching, and are willing and able, fall in behind the band, next to the band, between the band members, and begin a dance, a strut, a “booty bounce”. This is referred to as “Doing the Second Line”. It is a recognition that music and dancing are not only a cathartic release for the mourners but also a celebration of a life well-lived.

How could I adapt the Second Line tradition to a workshop that would give participants an opportunity not only to grieve for what they had lost, but to experience the joy and playfulness that poetry can inspire as well? Christian McEwen, poet, teacher, and longstanding T&W member had shown me a possible way to begin. Composing a group poem with city children at a school in central Scotland, she had asked, “What do you want to save?”

The Poetry Workshop

The teachers and I meet in the school library. We gather around a table where an easel with a white board propped against it is standing at one end. I tell the group I’ve recently seen a documentary film in which a young woman returns to her devastated home after Katrina and, incredibly, finds a photograph of her mother still hanging on the wall.

She takes it down and clasps it to herself as if it were a living being.

"We save our precious memories in pictures," I say, "and we can also save them in words." Then I write SAVE in capital letters on the white board. "Take a minute to reflect on what you most want to save, then jot down your thoughts in a line or two."

As soon as I hear the words coming out of my mouth, I panic. Who am I to make such a reckless suggestion to a group of people I've only just met, to say nothing of this particular group? But everyone is already writing and the atmosphere seems calm. After a minute or two, I ask: "Who would like to read aloud what you've written?"

Silence.

"Okay, that's perfectly fine. Why not give me your notes and I'll read them to all of us."

"Never mind," says one of the women. "I'll start."

I want to save the conversations I had with my mother that came
much too late in her lifetime.

Taking a deep breath, I write her words on the white board. One by one, the others read their words aloud. As fast as possible, I write them down for all to read.

I want to save the daughter I never had. I will save Shulla.

The love letters that meant so much to me.

The smile on my dad's face at his 75th birthday.

My grandfather's beautiful antique furniture.

The pecan trees that gave me so much shade.

I want to save myself from myself. I am scared to fail so I don't try.

I want to save innocence for the world reveals too much.

Save innocence for the child in each of us—less internet, rap music
and such.

As we reach the end of the exercise, a hush comes over the group. These veteran teachers seem to be taken by surprise at the depth of feelings expressed in a few hastily composed lines. Now it's time to sound the preparatory notes that announce a shift from mourning into celebration.

In the second part of the workshop I want to focus not just on the personal, but more broadly on what poetry has to offer the teachers themselves, without regard to their students. My intention is to give these teachers poetic exercises and ideas they might enjoy during the time we spend together, whether or not they choose to adapt any for use in their own classrooms. In this spirit, I start by distributing a "poetic license" to each person in the group and explain that it allows us to "take some liberties with language" for the purpose of effective expression of our ideas and feelings.

Next, I mention that schools all over the country are celebrating the first national Put A Poem In Your Pocket Day. I pass out copies of some of my favorite

poems and ask the teachers to put them in their pockets without reading them. We'll share them later, I tell them, and talk about how to prepare children to take part in a year-round celebration of poetry.

For the rest of the session, I draw on my previous work with teachers as well as on the work of Jane McVeigh-Schultz and Mary Lynn Ellis (Heinemann 1997), poets and teachers who inspire their students to choose poetry as a vessel for their deepest feelings.

I pass around a laminated copy of *Munich Olympic Games*, Jacob Lawrence's painting of five African-American relay racers, prompting the group to talk a little about the artist's life and how he used his experiences in his work. Then we discuss this particular painting. First, I ask what the teachers notice. What is the atmosphere of the painting like? Does it feel real? What surprising things do they see? Everyone sees something: "The vivid colors and lightning speed of the runners." "The thin white tape across the finish line." "The curving track."

"How does it make you feel?" I ask next.

"I'm wondering who will win," someone answers.

Next, I suggest that the teachers imagine putting themselves into the painting to report on how it feels from the inside. Would they choose to be one of the racers, one of the judges, or one of the spectators?

"I'd be a sneaker on the foot of one of the racers," a teacher replies. "A sneaker running hard, getting out of breath."

Finally, I read aloud a poem by Anna Swir, a Polish poet:

When I run
I laugh with my legs.

When I run
I swallow the world with my legs.

When I run
I have ten legs.

All my legs
Shout.

I exist
Only when running.

We agree that writing a poem that reflects the spirit of a painting may be more important than finding one—and there many—addressed to a particular work of art. Scattering picture postcards with reproductions of various paintings over the table, I invite everyone to reach for those they find most appealing.

Turning point

As the teachers are selecting postcards, I realize we have reached a decisive moment, a turning point where the workshop can take more than one direction. I could suggest, for instance, that we use the postcards as catalysts for writing poems ourselves; or I could move on and present different forms of poetry that have prompted children to write their own poems.

Hesitant to risk undermining the relaxed mood we seem to be enjoying, I decide to forego requesting more writing from the teachers. Instead, I turn to examples of various haiku and letter poems that we take turns reading aloud to each other. The teachers are intrigued by a fifth grader's version of a famous Japanese haiku (McVeigh-Schultz and Ellis 1997), as translated into English by a poet whose last name—Kirkup—sounds to the youngster "like a frog sound":

Dedicated to James Kirkup

You hear the frogs

Go kirkup kirkup

You hear the pond

Ripple ripple you hear

The trees whip whip

All silence

We discuss the traditional haiku, with its emphasis on nature and seasonality and the convention of strict adherence to a seven- five- seven- syllable format. The teachers agree that in working with children, these formal rules are less important than the simplicity and directness of the expression itself.

For the next few minutes we focus on letter poems, beginning with Sharon Creech's book *Love That Dog*, in which a third-grader's letters to his teacher convey his slowly dawning recognition of how powerful it can be to express his feelings in poetry.

As we reach the last ten minutes of our time together, I suggest that we conclude by reading our pocket poems to each other. At once, everyone begins reading aloud, in pairs and small groups, until our corner of the library sounds like a pot bubbling merrily at the back of a stove. I listen happily, as the teachers do a poetry version of of the Second Line, reciting poems by Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes, Mary Ann Hoberman, Walter Dean Myers, and some English translations from the oral traditions of West Africa.

Reflections

That the teachers were skilled and willing improvisers did not surprise me. Improvisation is, after all, the heart and soul of New Orleans jazz culture. At a crucial turning point, however, my aim was to avoid putting pressure on a traumatized group by keeping the workshop as relaxed and undemanding as possible. The decision to emphasize reading aloud to each other may have short-circuited a potentially healing opportunity for the teachers to do more of their own writing but their written comments suggested that the workshop had met the major goal I had in mind at the outset

which was to provide inspiration, refreshment, and a sense of rejuvenation to the participants.

I had guessed, correctly as it turned out, that some of the poems I selected to share, while well-known to many teachers with whom I had worked in New York City, would not necessarily be familiar to the MLK Jr. teachers. Hearing the excitement in their voices as they shared the poems in their pockets with one another was, for me, as thrilling as the concert we attended with some of the teachers later that evening at one of New Orleans' premier jazz spots. And when the teachers brought this same excitement about poetry to their own classrooms, the students picked up on it as well. I'll end with a poem written by an eighth-grade girl whose teacher at the MLK Jr. school was in the poetry workshop.

I awake each day with a smile
and greet it with a laugh
The world is a treasure to me
Because of you. Every time I think of something sad
I replace the thought with you
My mind is instantly changed
And my heart is filled with gladness. Every breath I
take is meant for you. Each time I see something
beautiful
I want to take it and bring it to you
My life has so much meaning now
All because of you



Resources Consulted in Preparing the Workshop

Books

- Carroll, Colleen. 1999. *How Artists See Play*. New York and London: Abbeville Kids, A Division of Abbeville Publishing Group.
- Collom, Jack. 2000. "An Ecosystem of Writing Ideas". In, *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing*, edited by Christian McEwen and Mark Strand. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative. (This is where the SAVE exercise is described.)
- Creech, Sharon. 2001. *Love That Dog*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Giovanni, Nikki. 2007. *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Greenfield, Eloise. 1978. *Honey, I Love*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Hoberman, Mary Ann. 1973. *The Raucous Auk: A Menagerie of Poems*. New York: The Viking Press.
- McVeigh-Schultz, Jane and Mary Lynn Ellis. 1997. *With a Poet's Eye: Children Translate the World*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rose, Chris. 2007. *One Dead In Attic*. New York: Simon and Schuster

(Rose is a *Times-Picayune* columnist whose regular and frequent columns for the paper during the first year and after after Katrina are collected in this book.)

Sato, Hiroaki. 1983. *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill.

Tidwell, Mike. 2004. *Bayou Farewell*. New York: Vintage Books.

Teachers & Writers Magazine, Winter 2007, vol.38: no. 2. The Jazz Issue. (This is the issue that features Walter Dean Myers' poem about New Orleans. The teachers loved the poem and the entire issue, as well as several other issues of the magazine and a few books that I donated to their library.)

Documentary Films

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. Spike Lee. HBO, 2006.

Trouble the Water. Tia Lessin and Carl Deal. Zeitgeist Films, 2007. (This film about Katrina and its aftermath was made in collaboration with two young 9th-Ward residents who appear throughout the work.).