Celebrating Our 25th Year

TEACHERS & WRITERS

March–April 1992 Bi-Monthly • Vol. 23, No. 4

POETRY POKER
Misfit Improvisations on Language

by Dave Morice

The turning upside-down in play—the misfit improvisations—are both self-congratulatory symbols of a child's achievement and means of reinforcing what he has learnt about actuality.
—James Britton, *Language and Learning*

POKER CARDS IN THE CLASSROOM? POKER WITH poetry? The very thought of it catches the attention of the class. It's easy to do, it's quick, and it's fun. For those (and other) reasons, I've used it in almost every class I've taught since 1975. More than 5,000 students from nine to ninety-six have played the game and won—a poem.

One objective of Poetry Poker is to explode any preconceived notions that students may have about poetry, such as "Poetry has to rhyme" or "Poetry is boring to read and hard to write" or even "Poetry has to make sense." By going to the outer limits of process, to an unfamiliar landscape where topic, sense, and form grow out of surrealistic wordplay, students are able to enjoy language in a different light.

DAVE MORICE is a poet, artist, and teacher. He is the author of *Poetry Comics* (Simon & Schuster) and *How to Make Poetry Comics* (Teachers & Writers).

The Beginning

In 1975, I began to teach the "Poetry Class for People over 60" at the Iowa City congregate meals site. For the first month or so, the students wrote poems on various topics in styles that they chose. One day when I walked into the room, two of the students were talking about playing bridge later that afternoon. "We ought to play cards here," one of them joked.

IN THIS ISSUE

Students in the "Poetry Class for People over 60" playing Poetry Poker

Next meeting, I brought in a deck of playing cards with phrases typed on each card, and announced in a W.C. Fields voice, "Today we'll play Poetry Poker!" They laughed, and I shuffled. The results were completely different from anything else they'd written, and they wanted to do it again next time.

In the Schools

Soon after that, I tried Poetry Poker with children. As I'd hoped, they responded with mirthful enthusiasm, and their poems, like the older people's, were playful and imaginative. During the next five years, I visited approximately 40 schools throughout Iowa to conduct poetry classes with students in grades K–12. (More recently, I've taught other workshops at local schools.) Most of the time I've worked with 25–35 students in grades 4–8.

Since I use nontraditional as well as traditional techniques, my sponsor, the Iowa Arts Council, came to think of me as "the avant-garde teacher" and told schools that I would present poetry in ways they might not be familiar with. That introduction (or warning, in some cases) usually helped to place me in schools that were open to alternative techniques. Many of the teachers prepared their students for my visit by announcing it as a special event, or by having them write poetry in advance, or both. Some, however, simply told the students that a poet would be coming to class for a week.

My main goal has always been to leave a positive memory that will stay with the students for a long time. Although I've usually been in each school for just a week, I've hoped that writing in strange new ways would provide students with a buffer against staid concepts of academic seriousness they might bump into later on. This desire grew out of my own first experiences in poetry, an alien topic in the early 1960s in the Midwest. One day my high school English teacher, Mr. Duggan, a square-jawed Irishman with a booming voice, read Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Margaret" so powerfully that I never forgot the experience. It turned on a poetic light for me that has never dimmed. In my own school visits, I've hoped that one day in the future a student bored by literature class might look back on the week, introduced by Poetry Poker, and think, "Hey, wait a minute. Poetry doesn't *have* to be dull."

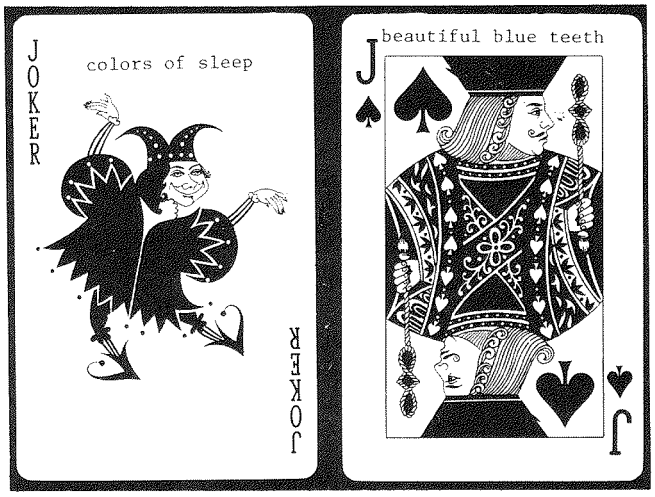
How to Play Poetry Poker

To introduce Poetry Poker, I ask students for their ideas on poetry, beginning with the basic question, "What is a poem?" After a few kids give their answers, I try broadening the scope by suggesting alternatives. For example, if a student says, "Poems have rhyme," I reply, "If you want them to. But many people would rather write poems that don't rhyme. The choice is up to the writer. I like to write both kinds." We also talk about sense and nonsense, fantasy and reality, lyric and narrative, or poetry, prose, and prose poetry. We sometimes discuss why people write poetry, and where, and how.

Here is a thumbnail sketch of the two steps involved in Poetry Poker:

1. *The Deal:* The teacher deals five cards to each student and explains how to play the "game."

2. *The Game:* The students write poems or prose poems using the phrases typed on the poker cards and as many of their own words as they want in order to connect those phrases. They can change the verb tenses, pluralize nouns, etc., but they should try to include all the words. They move the cards around their desks and put them in an order that seems to "click." Important: invariably a few will think that the goal of Poetry Poker is simply to rearrange the cards. The teacher should emphasize that they need to add many more of their own words to complete the poems. During the actual writing, the teacher should be available to answer questions, respond to ideas, and replace discards.



Making the Cards

Poker cards (as opposed to plain white cards) encourage a playful atmosphere. Each card in the Poetry Poker deck has a phrase typed (or taped) on it. While the phrase may be handwritten, the typewriter gives the cards a more official look. The selection of phrases is important, since those phrases suggest what to write.

The phrases I make up are of three general types, and each deck has roughly the same amount of each type:

1. *Complete phrases:* "to the store," "eating fish." These phrases are flexible, insofar as they can be dropped anywhere into a sentence—beginning, middle, or end.

2. *Incomplete phrases:* "without a new," "jumped off the." These phrases are a little more demanding. They need words at the beginning or the end to complete them.

3. *Unusual phrases:* "magic hamburgers," "with toenails flashing." These phrases nudge the poem into a fanciful, surrealistic context.

Here is a list of such phrases, divided into the three types:

Complete Phrases
to the store
eating fish
stale piece of cake
a pretty face
I promise
all the flags
red paint
the spaceships
old train
a stereo
I would like
the roof leaked
banana split
going crazy
the pickle jar
a balloon pops
my stomach
no sunlight

Incomplete Phrases
without the new
jumped off the
gold as the dome of
it was going
smashed between
in this tired
knowing who
the house as another
oh, no, I
don't chase my
cheese and
up the puzzle
the flags to
without her nice old
wherever the goat
spins the wheel
almost got hit
saw a hotdog

Unusual Phrases
magic hamburgers
with toenails flashing
a dinosaur or two
1,000 streets
beautiful blue teeth
asking faces
mouthful of cheese
the evil factory
how to growl
apples as gray as
sloppy hippopotamuses
stop the table
laugh slowly
round eggs
phony ant
zoo monster
colors of sleep
snoring a song

A Sample Session

To demonstrate how the game is played, here is a composite session based on my experiences. Twenty-five sixth grade students are about to play. The teacher (T) is giving directions, and the students (S) are asking questions. The dialogue begins after a brief warm-up discussion of poetry.

T: "And now you'll have a chance to write a poem."

S: "Right now? I can't write something off the top of my head."

T: "Oh, but this is a different kind of writing. It's called Poetry Poker. I'd like all of you to take out a sheet of paper and a pencil, and write your name at the top."

Saying this, the teacher holds up one or more decks of prepared cards—three decks for a class of 25 students so that each student can receive five cards. On seeing the cards, the students' responses change dramatically.

S: "Wow! Poker! We're going to play poker *in school.*"

T: "That's right, Poetry Poker. You'll use these cards to write your poems."

S: "Do we write on the cards?"

T: "No, they're specially marked cards. Each has a phrase typed on it, and all the phrases are different. Some are pretty normal, like 'to the store,' and others are weird, like 'magic hamburgers.'"

The teacher removes the cards from one deck, holds up a few, and points to the phrases.

T: "I'll shuffle the deck and deal five cards to each of you. To play the game, you write a poem using all the words on the cards *and as many of your own as you want.* I would prefer that you not try to rhyme, and don't be surprised if what you come up with doesn't make sense. With Poetry Poker, it probably won't—at least not in the regular way. Your poem can be as weird and crazy as you want, but it still will probably make a different kind of sense."

S: "But what do I write about? I don't have any ideas."

T: "Whatever comes to your mind. Don't worry about that. When you get the cards, spread them face up in front of you, read the words on them, slide them around, and see what ideas you get. You don't have to concentrate on correct spelling, punctuation, or capitalization. You can change those things later, when you're rewriting. If you have any questions, just raise your hand, and I'll come over to your desk. See what you can do in ten minutes."

S: "How long does it have to be?"

T: "Not that long. Say, somewhere between six lines and a page. If you want, you can write it like a story. Or a poem."

The teacher deals the cards.

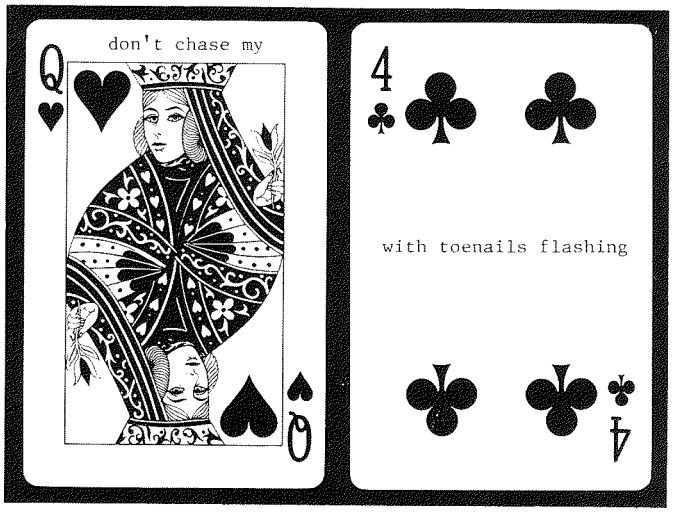
S: "I don't like this card. Could I have another one?"

T: "Sure."

The student is satisfied with his new card, smiles, and comments that it works much better. But another student is not happy with her cards.

S: "Do I have to use them all? I can't fit this one in."

T: "Here, pick another card and see how it works. If you can't fit it in, then write something using the other four cards."



After the students draft their poems (about ten minutes), the teacher asks who wants to read their poems aloud. In some cases, the class wants the teacher to read them. In others, the students read their own. Most of the poems are strange and humorous; some are lyrical, imagistic, and serious. During the reading, some students show surprise that what they wrote with the phrases actually sounds good.

Surrealism and the Students

To give the students a context for the writing, the teacher can introduce the concept of surrealism as it relates to fantasy and dreaming. One way is to describe a school desk from two different points of view: "A realistic way of describing this desk would be to say that the top part and the seat are made of wood, and the legs are made of metal. But surrealism is different. You can talk about the way things *don't* appear, except in your imagination. A surrealistic way of describing a desk might be to say the top is made of bats' wings, the seat is made of storm clouds, and the legs are giraffes' necks. But you could describe the desk in many other ways. Does anyone want to add to the description?"

Not being familiar with surrealism, students find this explanation intriguing. They carry the description farther out, chuckling at their additions. A fifth grade girl once said, "The bats' wings have eyes in them, and when they blink, the wings flap and carry the desk away."

Some educators feel that technical terms can turn students off, but I think such terms can intrigue them. Introduced in an entertaining way, "surrealism" becomes a word many can identify with. In fact, one fourth grade teacher told me recently that her class adopted the word *surreal* in their own slang to indicate when someone is behaving wildly: "Patty's acting surreal today."

The teacher should make certain points clear about this writing activity. First, it is not the usual way that people write. Second, it's OK if the results don't make complete sense. Third, the images from the resulting poem can lead to ideas for writing poems in more usual ways. Fourth, the poems needn't rhyme. And fifth, they can be written in lines and stanzas or in paragraphs.

More importantly, the students are free to alter the rules to fit their own words.

Evaluation

To me, the best form of evaluation has been to watch students while they play Poetry Poker: clearly they enjoy it. Sometimes students finish early and ask for a new set of cards to make a new poem. Other students suggest playing it again the next day. Teachers also respond with gusto. Many have said they'd never seen the students so excited about poetry. Some have copied my phrases to make Poetry Poker decks, and I suggest they make up some with their own phrases too. School librarians have reported a big jump in the number of students checking out poetry books.

Student Examples

Below is a selection of poems written in Iowa City by three different groups—elementary school students, college students, and senior citizens. In most cases, the poems are not titled. None have been rewritten.

The first group includes fourth, fifth, and sixth graders who wrote their poems in 1976. The second group, graduate students in elementary education, wrote theirs in 1991 during the "Introduction to Literature" class that I teach at the University of Iowa. The third group, members of the "Poetry Class for People over 60," composed the first Poetry Poker poems in 1975, and their poems, reprinted below, come from the original session.

Poems by 4th-6th Graders (ages 9–11)

I ate a stale piece of cake.
My teeth have turned a beautiful blue.
You have a pretty face too.
I promise I won't tell.
—*Anonymous*

I opened a door and this cat
comes and says Hi. Welcome
to the cat castle. We love
to have company. Come and I
will show you my talking house.
I said, "Oh, no house can talk."
But I was wrong. Even the stove
says What's cookin'? The washer
says, No wash today, no detergent
to spit around. It's kind of
spooky really. But I survived
that whole month without getting
roared half to death.
—*Debbie Svobodny*

Once upon a time I saw it fly loudly
the zebras. I love the loudly of
the zebras. One day I heard my mom
say Take it a good one. I love the
way it flies. It flies loudly
like the zebras. I love it when
you make a good one. One day me
and my friend went to the loudly
zebras. It flies and it makes
me feel like a good one. It
makes me feel good.
—*Tammy Burr*

Behind the Comet

Behind the comet
that was behind
the evil factory
there was a
sleek silver ship
Then out came
that woman, who
didn't know what
to do
All of a sudden
a balloon pops.
—*Susie Pardoe*

I certainly do want to say whose hair was on the side of the hill. If you do not tell me I will make you swallow a pill 20 times and then barf it up 365 times.
—*Karen Budensiek*

Have you ever dreamed of love zipped up
Yeah the roof just fell over somebody
Just laughed slowly
—*Tammy Gjere*

My Bike

You with your
Jumbled-up puzzle
Head toward
My bike.
—*Anonymous*

My bike like a knife.
My kite like a knife.
That woman who I like.
Tomorrow like a butterfly.
Behind the comet I like.
—*Jeannie Starks*

If I have a dinosaur or two,
    I hope they don't chase my rabbits.
If they do my mouth yap yap yap.
Everybody needs a mouth,
    even a stereo.
—*Betty H.*

College Graduate Students (ages 20–22)

You destroy asking faces
Comfort them with peaces now
Hear keys clicking from the dog's chain
Comfort them with peaches now
Peaches bright and juicy
Questions fade away
Peaches cool and sweet
Fears put in the shade
—*Kristine Weidel*

I love the time I spend with you.
Yes, *you*, dark!
Riding your motorcycle.
The stupid stunts you try to entertain me with.
Sure, you almost killed me, but I grabbed on tighter.
And, yes, I loved every minute of it.
—*Anonymous*

In the Land of Enchanted Animals, Where

The Wild horses are off snoring a song. Along comes the fairy floating over the wild horses. She hears them snoring. Her mission to stop the snoring so the other animals can sleep.

She wakes the Wild horses from the beautiful colors of sound sleep and grants them three wishes only if they stop snoring a song every time they drift asleep.

Three wishes are granted and the fairy floats on her merry way. The Wild horses return to their colors of sound and peaceful sleep.

Suddenly a tune is heard, where is it coming from? The Wild horse that was sleeping behind the tree who was never woken from his colors of sleep and never granted his three wishes from the floating fairy.

—*Amy Rea*

When the sun sleeps she opened
the envelope & pulled out
a wolf who taught her how
to growl and said, "When the balloon
pops you tiptoe across my heart's
beat."
—*Heather Schmida*

STUDENTS IN THE "POETRY CLASS FOR PEOPLE OVER 60" (AGES 60–82)

Ideas

What were you saying?
Yes they will buy it.
Your ideas are loose ends floating.
Yes, you.
Your ideas are against the Silver Ship.
—*Louis Taber*

Car

Push the stalled car
For twelve long days.
It's like
Playing baseball
With ice for a ball.

With soap on the sponge
In the post office
Look through the boxes
And make them shine.
—*Alice Gratke*

Magic

Such magic in the house
Such magic in the telephone booth
Don't listen to the glasses & cups
Don't listen in the house
I've found it: such magic!
—*Pearl Minor*

Gold

I'm here
We're searching for gold
At the end of the rainbow
Mysterious clue
Planets aren't stars
I hear accordion music
Whatever you like
Is that my clue?
—*Julia Kondora*

From *Salmon Diary*

by Sheryl Noethe

THE SECOND GRADERS SHOW UP AT SCHOOL IN the morning as if they had spent the night in a den or a nest. Their hair explodes off their heads in wild sprays, their glasses crooked, shoes untied, mysterious substances around their mouths and on their fingers. When they sit at their desks things fall off of them and out of their desks. The things have patches of fur and bubble gum on them. They have curious, inexplicable smells. They are at the stage between baby animal and law-abiding human being. Suspecting they know something I don't, I assign the old "My Soul" poetry topic to write about. They take minute pencils in hand and laboriously sketch out things like:

My soul is a chicken dancing with a rug
My soul is a chicken dancing with my cells
My soul is a snowman dancing with the end of the world

and I grab the child and ask him, "What does the chicken mean? How do you mean, 'end of the world'? Who is the snowman?" and he looks back up at me with crayon breath and bottle-thick glasses and shrugs. Grins impishly. Elaborates with, "Dno."

Poet SHERYL NOETHE recently completed a four-year T&W teaching residency in Salmon, Idaho.

Teaching Writing in Middle School

Using Meredith Sue Willis's *Blazing Pencils* and *Personal Fiction Writing*

by Dean Schneider

"MR. SCHNEIDER, I'M BECOMING A NERD, A REAL geek. I actually wrote on the airplane this weekend and I didn't have to. I even bought a notebook for my writing." Vadie Turner, an excitable eighth grade girl, has become an inspired writer. Meredith Sue Willis's *Blazing Pencils* and *Personal Fiction Writing* have been at the heart of my recent experiments with teaching writing in regular English classes, and, as Vadie's reaction shows, the results have been impressive. Our work on descriptions of people and places inspired Vadie to write on her own, even during a flight back from a holiday weekend.

Blazing Pencils is for middle school and junior high students, and *Personal Fiction Writing* is for teachers, writers, and older students. I use these books, as well as any other good ideas I come across. My students keep all their writing in file folders, which Meredith Sue Willis calls "idea journals." By the end of the year, these journals are a record of the students' writing for that year, full of descriptions, memories, narratives, stories, essays, plays, poems, and various freewritings.

I used *Blazing Pencils* in all three of my regular English classes this year, in grades six, seven, and eight. The early work we did on description proved essential to good writing in later fiction and nonfiction writing assignments. The crucial first project was to describe a place by closing your eyes and imagining it in such detail that you can write about what you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste there. Neely Coble, a sixth grader, wrote the piece below. I like it for its local color and simplicity.

The Swamp

There is a cool breeze rattling the cypress trees in the lowland swamp. The swamp is covered with gross green algae. There is a musty odor coming from the swamp floor made of decaying plants and animals. As I look farther into the gloom I can see and hear the fluttering and quacking of wood ducks. I see turtles on the rotting logs in the water. Quickly, the rumble of five deer passes behind me. Then once again everything is calm and gloomy.

We did several descriptions of place—the classroom, a bedroom, a favorite place—and went on to applying the same skills of imagination, observation, and sensory detail to describing people: a person in a place; a classmate (the rest of the class has to guess who it is); and a person (from the top of the head to the bottom of the shoes). Students had fun with what Willis calls inside/outside portraits: describing a person on one side of the paper and writing the thoughts of that person on the other side, an experiment in both description and interior monologue. They wrote the imagined thoughts of a friend during a panic attack in math class, of a boyfriend before a date, and of various fictional characters. A favorite project was writing a profile, or word portrait. As Willis says, "A profile of a person, like one of a place, is longer than a description, and it has more kinds of information." Sarah Oliver, an eighth grader, wrote this profile of a friend:

Her long blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail, loose from all the activities she's been involved in today. She has many long curls, or "wispies" as she calls them, hanging in her face. She has blue eyes, but you can't tell what color they are when she smiles because her smile is so big that her eyes squint up. She has braces on that big smile of hers, which she desperately wants off before the Washington trip. She is wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt with the ends rolled up that says "VH1." She probably got this from someone in her father's advertising agency. Her shirt has dog paw prints on it from her beloved "Honey." She must have had a goodbye hug before she drove to school. Her white t-shirt is tucked in some stone-washed bluejeans, and she is wearing her favorite duck boots, which she very much enjoys. She has a lively personality which has helped us get into many outrageous experiences. In about second grade, when I spent a night at her house, I was scared that there were mummies under the bed. Finally I made her get up and look under both of them. There was nothing,of course, but ever since then she teases me by saying, "Boog-a-la-rum, Boog-a-la-rum, the mummies are gonna get ya!" Then when we were in the 6th grade we both liked this guy, well, mostly, her. Anyway, we had stayed after school to watch her brother play basketball in the teacher/student game and it got sort of boring so we came inside the building. We went into the bathroom and one of us decided we should write a secret admirer's letter to him and put it in his locker. On a paper towel we wrote, "Do you love me, like you really should?" and put hearts all around it, signing it "your secret admirer." We dropped it in the slots in his locker, giggling the entire time. We were so scared that someone might have seen us. Then on Monday morning he didn't find it. He didn't find it the next day either. In fact, he didn't find it for the next month. After a week we had totally forgotten it. Then one day before spring break we had to clean out our lockers and all of a sudden there was a big commotion in the hallway and everyone was laughing. I went over to see what was going on and it turned out that he had found the note! Varina and I

DEAN SCHNEIDER is chairman of the English department at The Ensworth School in Nashville, TN. His essays have appeared in *Mothering, Growing Without Schooling*, and other magazines.

were about to die! He thought that this other girl in the class had written it and they were all laughing at her. We felt so bad we couldn't tell them that it was us. We just kind of slipped into the background and didn't say much. These are the kinds of things Varina and I get into all the time.

I like projects such as word portraits because they have, as Willis says, a "natural shape." They can stand by themselves as complete, finished products. Students love writing about their memories: happy, sad, embarrassing, exciting, lonely. As Harvey Weiner advises in *Any Child Can Write*, "Use children's great knack of telling real events as the core of established writing programs." He encourages students to focus on a single moment and to flesh it out with lively sensory details. Such memories combine action with description of places and people. A student of mine wrote this true story a few years ago:

It was a Sunday morning sometime in October, when I was about eleven years old. I was about to hear the biggest shock of my life. I woke up that Sunday morning about 6:30. I heard my mother talking on the phone and the t.v. was on. I automatically knew something was wrong because my mom never got up this early on weekends. My dad never got up early either, but he was gone and in Lebanon somewhere doing who knows what for about the past two months. I sat up in bed and came to my senses. I heard that the t.v. program was the news because of the drone of the announcer. I couldn't make out what he was saying—to me it was mumble-jumble through the walls of the house. My mom was crying as she was talking on the phone. I got out of bed and stood up. The room was black and I felt a sharp pain go through my foot. I fell back on the bed and felt the floor. I realized I had just stepped on one of my G.I. Joe figures that I was messing around with just last night. I got back up and dodged the other toys on the floor and made it to the door. I opened the door and stepped out into the hall. My sister was still asleep and I heard my mom hang up the phone—still crying. I went into the t.v. room and sat down to watch t.v. The man was talking about some terrorist bomb that blew up a building. I had no idea it was in the exact building in the exact same country my dad was in. Then my mom came in, crying hard. I asked her what was wrong and she said the building my dad was in was bombed by a truck with a back-load of explosives. She did not know if dad was alive or dead, just that men were pulling pieces of other men out of the smoldering, caved-in building. I remember looking at the t.v. and watching as the cameras were viewing body-bags lying in neat rows. I don't really remember what happened after that. I just remember that they never found my dad's body and I was hoping he was out for a jog that morning. I never cried myself—I guess I was a bit sad, but things were just too busy at my house for the next three days. People I had never seen before were coming in and out of the house, and the telephone was in constant use day and night. Three days later, we received the good news that my father was alive in a Lebanon hospital. We couldn't get in touch with him, but we knew he was alive, and that eased the tension off everyone in my family.

—Travis Gerlach, grade 9

I introduced autobiographical essays or memoirs as simply a "collection of memories," as Willis calls them in *Blazing Pencils*. Of all the writing that I teach, the memoir is my favorite. It seems to be a form that comes naturally to students in the middle school years. They create a substantial piece of writing alive with description, action, and the authority of their own voices. Vadie, a teenage whirlwind in eighth grade, wrote the following memoir. It's a fine piece of writing, but it was even better hearing Vadie read it aloud to the class:

My Old Neighborhood as a Child

When I was quite young and not even in preschool, my parents and I lived outside of Lebanon, Tennessee. There, I began my social life with intriguing next-door neighbors. On the right of our house we had a rather large family of cows who did not have homes and managed to camp out every night, and to the left there lived the orchard family. For all you slow learners, yes, I lived on a farm. We had a big yard where I played many games. One specific time, I remember waiting all week for a cloud to fall on the lawn so I could play and sleep on it, but it never came. Down our driveway a bit, one of our workmen and his family lived. They had a boy my age and we were the best of friends and did everything together, but obviously he had no great influence on my life since I can't even remember his name. I always found myself trying to impress him since he knew so much, or so he told me. One summer morning he tried to teach me how to ride a horse. He said to climb up the horse's tail and get in the saddle. Naturally I failed at doing this because the dang animal kicked me in the tummy and I puked in the trough. What memories.

A while later he invited me for supper, which did not tickle my mother pink at all. I begged to go but she feared I would lose my properness being with a typical country family. When I returned home my mother asked what I ate for dinner and I simply replied, "Steak, taters, and beans."

Then we moved, to where we live now and where I entered the "real world" —Opryland, malls, and junk food. When I began my first day at preschool I stayed till one and brought my lunch so I could eat at noon. My mother only packed me the finest wheat bread, plums, dates, and home-grown veggies to eat, though when she came to pick me up I was in the "naughty corner" because I had stolen someone's Cheetos, and when he grabbed them back I punched him in the arm. What a nightmare. But now my mother knows better than to send me without my Cheetos. After this I got into mega-trouble so I ran away. That afternoon during my nap in my pajamas I snuck out of my room while my mom was gardening. First I went to the kitchen and got one carrot, three pickles, and a sip of milk that I carried in my mouth, then went to the creek behind our house and hit the road. I became so tired I began to wearily drag each foot, step by step. Since I have always been a smart girl I decided to nap in someone else's yard. When I awoke, their sprinklers were on full blast. Brr. I came back home, thawed, and got back into bed before it was time to get up.

After this minor school I went all the way to the big leagues, St. George's, and there I picked up a new and handy talent, cutting. One bright and sunny Sunday my father was on his weekly little snooze. He was my new victim. He was on the couch after church just purring like a little baby and I had just arrived back from Kroger with a new pair of shiny scissors. . . let's just say he still has a faint souvenir. . . . Yes, a bald spot.

My childhood was such fun, and I have so many wonderful memories, and even more to look forward to. So look for more interesting stories by Vadie.

Although the early work on description and narration can serve as the foundation for writing short stories and plays, I try to avoid seeing early writing simply as preparation for the

big projects. I love a lively portrait of a person or a place as much as a well-crafted story. Not every story has to be big and polished, or even finished, to be good. As Willis says in *Personal Fiction Writing*, "For most children, a pile of beginnings and fragments is a great wealth, something I'm delighted to see." This is what I love about idea journals and what eventually hooked me on *Blazing Pencils*: by the end of the year, students have a folder full of their writing, something to show for their school life that year. Some of these writings remain "raw," while others are "cooked" in the revision process.

Revision

People learn to write by writing and rewriting. Revision helps a creative writing program be more than random bursts of energy.

As a first step in revising, I often have my students read their work aloud. One reason analytical writing done in English class is dry and tedious is that no one reads it aloud. Reading aloud attunes beginning writers to their own voices, helping them to establish an easier, more natural voice in their writing. Vadie's writing is excellent, but not because of topic sentences and carefully constructed paragraphs, and certainly not for her spelling and punctuation. What she has in her writing is her own voice; her writing sounds like her talking, and that's not something you teach. I have specific things I want to teach, but I give students plenty of latitude within my assignments. As Willis says, "You learn wrong writing habits only if you are trying to please someone else instead of developing your own way of saying what you want to say." My projects give direction, but I can't take credit for Vadie's writing; that comes from her own experience and enthusiasm, expressed in her own voice.

I see reading aloud—to the class, friends, or even yourself—as the first step in revising a composition. The second step is teaching other students how to listen, so they can help the author. I usually give two or three specific criteria by which to judge papers, and as the year progresses, the criteria get more rigorous. Early on, I might ask peer editors to find two details they really like and two spots where more specific details would help, and to check for spelling and run-on sentences. (The "Looking Again" sections in *Blazing Pencils* offer lots of suggestions in this vein.) Later, I expect editors to find, on their own, strengths and weaknesses in a composition and to offer appropriate help.

After these early stages of editing, I roll up my sleeves and get under the hood to tinker with the nuts and bolts. As a more experienced writer, I take the initiative to help students with finer points of content and style and have students follow through with further drafts.

For every project "cooked" in the above manner, students write lots of "raw" pieces that go no further. These are like sketches in an art class, meant to teach something about the art of writing and to promote frequent writing, but done with the understanding that not every piece has to involve the teacher so closely.

The English Teacher's Juggling Act

It is certainly easier to "run" an English class the traditional way: grammar books, vocabulary workbooks, and lots of tests. Not only do many schools prescribe a set curriculum, but they train students to see tests and worksheets as the stuff of real education; if you do not come through with enough sacred busywork, such students will see you as an "easy" teacher who is not serious. Even the best students in the best schools sometimes feel adrift without assignments so cut and dried that no imagination is required. Still, I have tried to become one teacher along the way who thinks writing ought to be fun, a teacher who can teach skills in projects students enjoy.

Now that I have a school-age daughter, I think more about what kind of teacher I want for her, and I want to be that kind of teacher. I want her to love reading and writing and not just plod through a daily grind at school.

Basing my teaching on ideas such as those in *Blazing Pencils* and *Personal Fiction Writing* means juggling everything else. I set aside at least three periods each week for creative writing. I put creative writing at the heart of my work, letting literature be a parallel thread that sometimes connects to projects suggested by the writing program. I like Willis's vision of the ideal classroom: "My ideal classroom, then, would be one in which the teacher and children wrote regularly, and they talked together about writing, and they read together and separately from the whole panoply of literature."

What is so valuable about *Blazing Pencils* and similar resources that I am willing to juggle everything else in order to make it work? Partly it is to counter what John Holt called "writing in the third remove"—writing on subjects students don't know much about, don't care much about, and on which they say only what they think the teacher wants them to say. A good writing program gets students writing about things they care about, and for most young writers this means writing about their own experience.

Not only do students learn to write by writing, they learn literary terms and concepts—character, setting, plot, monologue, dialogue, conflict—by using these techniques in their own writing, which is much better than the usual plodding analyses of stories and memorization of terms. Without even realizing it, students are learning a lot about literature by writing.

John Holt, the educator and writer, inspired me to see children as natural learners if we parents and teachers don't get in their way too much. John gave me a determination to teach in school pretty much the way I would teach my own children at home. I want children to enjoy writing as they pick up skills in meaningful projects. My students write up a storm, write well, and by the end of the year don't feel they have been through a meat grinder. In fact, some of them probably feel they have gotten away with something, since they haven't done as many worksheets or taken as many vocabulary quizzes as they used to. But the ultimate indicator of a good program is when students start asking in February if they get to keep their writing folders at the end of the year.

●