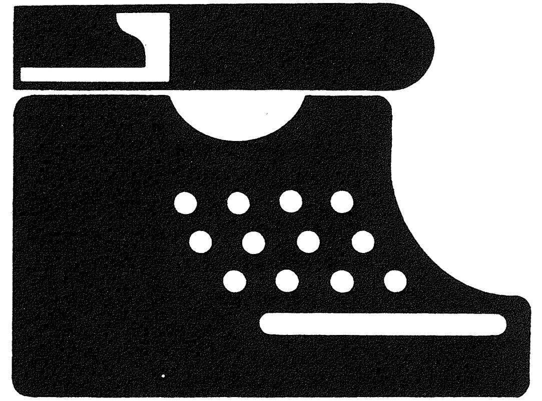
Teachers
& Writers



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Learning Language by Invention

by Peter Sears

AS WE ENGLISH TEACHERS MOVE FROM RELAtive pronouns to the business letter to the topic sentence, we can't help but wish for our students a bold, far-reaching view of language. Since they, from their standpoint, already *have* their language, any such new approach should be interesting to them. A good way for students to see language as an instrument invented for the purpose of social discourse is for them to actually *create language*. Here is a program which I have used at the tenth-grade level for improving language competence by involving students in the making of language.

The starting point for making language is something students like and can make: codes. The first exercise for each student is to invent a code, send a message to someone who understands the code, receive and decipher a message from this person, and, lastly, try to deciper a coded message in an unknown code, namely, a message between two other people. Here's a message to decipher: 8-5-12-12-15/6-18-9-5-14-4. Since the highest number is less than 26, the student checks to see if the numbers directly parallel letters. They do. The message is "Hello friend." Here's a reply: 13-1-11-5/1/8-1-18-4-5-18/3-15-4-5/6-18-9-5-14-4.

Cracking a code is translating a secret language into a public language—in our case, English. How this public language works is what English teachers try to convey. Can working with codes help English teachers? Yes. English is based on conventions; altering these conventions is a way to create a code; therefore, codes can be used to teach the conventions of English.

Before showing you such a code for students to crack, let me specify what I mean by conventions. The conventions of a language are the culturally agreed upon practices for writing. They are the "given" of the language, the starting point preceding even grammar, the rules of which are also conventions.

The alphabet is the first convention of written English. Second is word formation: letters are combined to make words and the beginning and ending of a word in sequence is signaled by a space. The third convention is direction: English "reads" from left to right and top to bottom. Fourth is syntax: meaning is determined by a word's location within a series of words, as well as by its literal meaning. The fifth convention is the signaling devices of punctuation and capitalization, which further qualify meaning.

Now for a code for students to crack. I gave my tenth graders a message in a code based on two alterations of English conventions: reverse direction, drop the signaling device of punctuation, and use only capital letters. The message THE MAN GIVES THE WOMAN THE TREASURE MAP BUT DOESN'T TELL HER THE CODE becomes EDOC EHT REH LLET TNSEOD TUB PAM ERUSAERT EHT NAMOW EHT SEVIG NAM EHT. Fairly easy? Had I reversed the direction of the letters too, it would have been a breeze; and it would have been harder with the altering of a third convention: for word formation, the last letter of each word moves to begin the next word,

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except for the last word. EDOCE HTR EHL LETT NSEODT UBP AME RUSAERTE HTN AMOWE HTS EVIGN AME HT. The newly encoded message is harder. Yet once students crack the code—the repetition of "the" helps—the teacher is in a position to introduce the idea of language conventions. A student's saying "All you did was write it backwards and move the last letter of each word over to the next" allows the teacher to ask, "What if I had written the message from top to bottom instead?" Student discussion of what makes a good code provides teachers with the opportunity to ask, "Are there other conventions, besides direction and word formation? Let's made a list so that you can experiment further in your code invention."

The logical conclusion of this work with conventions through code making is for students to invent their own language. If this idea sounds like courting chaos, take heart, it's manageable and it's the most interesting to them and to you. Still, at least one more step is advisable.

Students like the idea that rules of language are conventions. So the timing is good to introduce the notion that conventions are needed to assure that a meaning can be reliably conveyed. I tried to demonstrate this principle by showing them lousy writing and asking them to decipher it.

> It is obvious from the difference in elevation with relation to the short depth of the property that the contour is such as to preclude any reasonable developmental potential for active recreation.

Students enjoy criticizing "adult" writing, and they may notice such phrases as "It is obvious from," "with relation to," and "is such as to." As they struggle with this overwriting, they may give up on working word to word and go directly for the meaning. As Stuart Chase says in his helpful "Gobbledygook" essay, "Seems the plot was too steep." Another essay loaded with examples students delight in translating is George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." The examples allow the teacher to ask, "Is the passage hard because it is profound or because it is badly written?" Once a student translates a bloated, syntactically flabby passage into a terse, lucid statement, the student can better avoid such flaws in his or her writing. The student begins to appreciate, from first-hand experience, that conventions—rules if you wish—are for the purpose of clarity.

Another stage I added, which is an optional project, is to look at other languages before trying to invent one's own. Does Spanish, for example, have the same conventions as English? A line of Spanish full of cognates with the translation beneath it may surprise a student who assumes that all other languages are indecipherable. On the other hand, what about Hebrew or Arabic?

היא ישבה ליד החלון

to the window next sat she

In relation to English, this line of Hebrew is indecipherable, but with a translation, students see that the line is to be read from right to left, a shock to some students, who may ask, "How do people decipher languages they don't know?" "Just as they decipher a code." (Cryptography, the study of codes, is a fascinating subject to students.) "But a code," says an unsatisfied tenth grader, "is based on a language and a language is based on its conventions, so how do you translate a passage without knowing the conventions of the language?" "Good question." Wonderful question! As complex as it is, the question is a direct route to the Rosetta Stone, to archeology, and to ancient languages. "You mean there are languages that no one can read?!" "Yes." This fact sent my students scurrying to the library. Your students might like to try their hand at ancient Aztec—and someone will come upon the question, "How did language begin?"

I believe that students' coming to this question themselves is essential to the success of this program and, ideally, should precede their inventing of their own languages. Before telling them the usual theory for the invention of writing, the keeping of records—"How boring!" they say—and showing them, for instance, "word signs" (as the writing from Uruk of 3000 B.C. is called), I asked them to come up with their own theory for the beginning of writing and for an example which they make up. If they invent, for a beginning language, a series of units each of which has a meaning and the meaning is visually represented, they are on their way to inventing Chinese, not English; for they are inventing a pictorial as opposed to an alphabetical language. This difference is important. It raises the question, "Is there a way to make a language other than by means of an alphabet?"

I was glad that my students grappled with this question before trying to invent their own languages. My tenth graders came up with "pictures," then "picture ideas, like symbols." I showed them symbolic drawings of the Hopi Indians and the three stages of Egyptian writing, and finally Chinese. Then I asked them if they wanted to try to invent a pictorial language. Many fast starts but many fades. Inventing a pictorial language is hard to do. Yet some students particularly enjoyed the effort. They became so involved in creating elaborate systems of pictorial symbols that they regarded the English alphabet as boring. They realized eventually, nonetheless, what a remarkable invention the alphabet is, once they learned how many Chinese characters they would have to learn to gain a tenth-grade knowledge of Chinese.

Now we went for the primary goal, to invent a language, either pictorial or alphabetical. The effort was the most demanding, the most exciting for the students, and the most helpful in developing their language skills. Language making consists of first deciding on the conventions, the five fundamental ones listed earlier, and then deciding on further conventions, which students know of as the rules of grammar. My students invented tense and personal pronouns before they invented nouns and verbs! There is no way, I suppose, of anticipating how they are going to go about this creating. Yet there is a simple way to show them what they have accomplished. Give them a simple sentence to translate into *their* languages. Whoever cannot do it needs only to *invent* a rule whereby he or she *can* do it. This method frustrated some of my students, but it makes the process manageable for the teacher.

The farther they go in their language making, the better they come to understand English, for it is against English that they are testing their creations. And the more involved they become in inventing and testing and refining, the more intimately they will perceive a primary purpose of language as the conveying of meaning clearly and reliably.

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Having gone as far as they can in inventing their own written language, can students read English better? I'm convinced they can. Here is the method: students read a passage as coded information and try to decipher it. For this second part of this language program, I chose passages that looked hard. I said, "These passages are hard. Try to crack them." My students liked the challenge. They were not intimidated by "difficult literature." Nor were they put off by it. Instead, they saw the writing as just something to decode. Still, when they were successful—which was frequently—they liked saying that "advanced writing" wasn't so hard to understand. Some students even became interested in the literature itself.

I begin by writing these lines on the board:

> Whan that April with his showres soote
> The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veine in swich licour,
> of which vertu engendered is the flowr;

I wait until the expressions of bewilderment are out in the open and then ask, "Does this passage follow the conventions of English: alphabet, word formation, direction, syntax, and signaling devices?" "Well, yes, I guess so." "Then can you decipher it? Can you decode the basic meaning? Think of conventions as the code of the language."

The class works as a group on the passage line by line; I write the suggested translation possibilities. The syntax is straightforward and the new words fairly easy to guess. After we do the four lines, I give them copies of these four and the next ten and ask them to translate the lines on their own. Despite the snags they encounter, they are likely to believe, with good reason, that they have "translated" the basic meaning of the fourteen lines.

That these lines are the opening of Chaucer's *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* doesn't interest them. What may, though, is that there is such a thing as Middle English. "Is there a Beginning English or Early English?" "Yes, it's called Old English." "What does it look like?" "You could go find it, but why don't you invent it, or invent it first, or invent your own Middle English? Then we will look at it. And consider inventing your own pronunciation."

Whether or not the students become interested in inventing earlier "Englishes," I ask them next to write an imitation of Chaucer. Some students may see the request as silly and write something careless, but the point is that by writing an imitation of each passage they decipher, students extend their sensibility to language.

The next passage is lines 33 through 84 of Book I of *Paradise Lost*. Heavy going? To a literature class, perhaps. To code-breakers, not necessarily. The English is "easier, more modern" than the Chaucer, students may say. Yet the passage is harder. "It's not the words that are hard," my students said, "it's the sentences." To prevent bogging down, we first took on not the first sentence, which is truly difficult, but the second.

> . . . Him the Almighty Power
> Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
> With hideous ruin and combustion down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
> In adamantine chains and penal fire,
> Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arm.

The main problem for my tenth graders was the last line. Where do you put it? They solved the problem by moving the line up between "Him" and "the Almighty Power." Tying the lines together like this was harder than paraphrasing them. So they learned firsthand the syntactical complexity of Milton's poetry. Yet they liked Milton's poetry. I was surprised. I feared they would find Milton pretentious rather than glorious. Their pleasure in reading him was evident in the imitations they wrote, which were good on the whole. They picked up on the rhythm, the rich cadence.

A Shakespearean sonnet is next. Some students tried to retain the rhyme and "translate" at the same time. This proved hard. We lost momentum. Rather than going to a Donne poem or an elaborate descriptive passage from a Victorian novel, I went directly to the final part of this reading (and writing) challenge. It sounds much harder: Do you think you can decipher a passage that *breaks* from the conventions of English, if it does so systematically, like the codes you invented? While they are thinking about the question, figuring there must be a hitch, I give them a copy of the final lines of James Joyce's *Ulysses* beginning:

> they might as well stop the sun from rising tomorrow the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth Head in the gray tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes I first handed him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth

Does this passage follow the conventions of English? If not, which one or ones are broken? Does the break make for so radical a change that the reader is confused? Students enjoy these questions; they like the break with the convention of signaling devices. They like the passage, and they like writing an imitation. Amidst all the jumbled writing you receive may be some lovely prose. As with Milton, it's a matter of rhythm, I believe.

The next material is two Cummings poems.

Beautiful

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Students enjoy deciphering these ideogrammatic poems by re-assembling the words, and they enjoy saying why the poems are better *not* re-assembled. They contend that the word play of the last two lines of the first poem is impossible to render aloud. They are right. In this word play they may see the idea play too: besides "snow" being broken into "s" and "now," the word "everywhere," broken across four lines, produces "here." So the last two lines of "here" and "now"echo, in a way students like, an idea of the poem, the

immediacy central to the poem's intent. Cummings manages a similar joining of form and meaning in the second poem. The central idea or image of oneness occurs eight times in nine lines if one counts the "a" of line one and the word "loneliness."

It is worthwhile to talk about these poems before taking on the question of how Cummings breaks from the conventions of English. He retains the alphabet and the direction from left to right and top to bottom. A student of mine quibbled, saying that these poems read dramatically from top to bottom and only slightly from left to right. A valid distinction. What creates this vertical effect is Cummings' breaking with conventional word formation. With some prodding, a student may see the connection between the poet's handling of syntax and his handling of punctuation. Cummings suspends our expectation of the completion of a thought by extensive phrasing within parentheses. This suspending adds to the visual impression of falling. So do the parentheses. Thus, Cummings breaks, at least in part, with all five conventions other than the alphabet. I ask "Doesn't this departure make the poem awfully hard to read?" "No, not really." "Why not?" We discuss this question before I ask the students to write an imitation of Cummings.

The final example is just for fun, because the passage is not *meant* to be comprehended. It is nonsense verse, it cannot be deciphered.

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabes;
> All mimsy were the borogoves
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

Students *know* this to be nonsense, but at the same time they see that it does follow the conventions of English. One student said that the conventions make it "pretty easy." Other students agreed. "It's not hard to make up a meaning for invented words." "'Slithy,'" a student offered, "sounds like 'slimy.' And 'wabes' is close to 'waves.'" I ask "Do these meanings make sense in context?" "Yes, that's where we got the ideas." The point is not to translate for meaning but rather to demonstrate that meanings suggested by context show that nonsense verse has some sense, not no sense. Abstract appreciation of this structural basis for the appeal of nonsense verse is not something students can state. Yet my students proved their understanding by demonstrating the syntatical possibilities of the complicated fourth line. They anticipated much of the interesting discussion of these lines in Nelson Francis' essay "Revolution in Grammar." I read their imitations of Lewis Carroll with particular interest.

The purpose of scrutinizing these "Jabberwocky" lines is not to translate the "untranslatable" but to allow students to establish a general meaning in their own way. They experiment with different words and phrases and then integrate these pieces to come up with their general meaning. This effort is an exploring of the syntactical structure of English. Such fundamental language work proves conclusively to them that no passage following the conventions of the language can be entirely devoid of meaning. Grasping this fact allows them to realize how deeply ingrained in us is the habit of reading for meaning. They see clearly that a primary purpose of language is the conveying of meaning.

In this reading part of the language program, students read for basic meaning with each deciphering challenge. These "difficult" passages from literature they *can* translate. This success, coupled with writing an imitation, engages them in the language. They may find that language is more interesting than they thought and that they are "better at it" than they thought. Their new ideas may excite them. Certainly, inventing their own language provokes their imagination and challenges their capacity to develop a system; and if they become intrigued by language as code, they may find themselves delving into computer languages, Chinese calligraphy, cryptography, or the genetic code. ●

FOR FURTHER READING

How to Survive in Your Native Land by Frank Herndon (Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 26. The author describes his excitement as a teacher when he joins his students in making up a pictorial language and sending messages to other classes.

"Wisdom of Ancient Egypt comes to Life as Limericks", *New York Times*, August 25, 1981, pp. C1 and C4. The first evidence of the genre of limericks, with examples from Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"Creating a Language for Primitive Man" by Anthony Burgess, *New York Times Magazine*, November 15, 1981, pp. 102-109. The author of *A Clockwork Orange* tells how he "invented" a language for primitive European man in the movie *Quest for Fire*.

Book of the Hopi by Frank Waters (Penguin Books, 1977). Within this book about the fascinating Hopi Indians are explanations of the meaning of their drawings or "picture writings" (pp. 61 and 78, for example).

A Book of Puzzlements by Herbert Kohl (Schocken Books, 1982). Contains an entire section on pictographic writing and codes.

Chinese Writing: An Introduction by Dianne Wolff (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

A Study of Writing by I.J. Gelb (Phoenix Books, 1963).

Ancestral Voices: Decoding Ancient Languages by Norman James (School Book Service, 1975).

Secret Writing: The Craft of the Cryptographer by James Wolfe (McGraw-Hill, 1970).

Codes and Cyphers: Secret Writing Through the Ages by John Laffin (Abelard, 1964).

The Code Breakers: A Story of Secret Writing by David Kahn (MacMillan, 1967).

Decipherment of Linear B by John Chadwick (Cambridge, 1970).

Secret Writing: An Introduction to Cryptograms, Cyphers, and Codes by Henry Lysing (Dover, 1974).

Secret Warfare: The Battle of Codes and Cyphers by Bruce Norman (Acropolis, 1974).

"Communing With Chaco Canyon's 'Ancient Ones'", *New York Times*, October 26, 1980, Section 10, pp. 1, 12, and 13. This article about our oldest major primitive settlement includes a picture of a petroglyph (p. 13).

"Genetic Gibberish in the Code of Life", *Science 81*, November, pp. 50-55. Genetic "messages" are written out here as sentences in this article about the new wrinkles in the effort to crack the genetic code.

Exposition and the English Language edited by James Sanderson and Walter Gordon (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969). This fine collection of essays includes those mentioned in the article: "Gobbledygook" by Stuart Chase, "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell, and "Revolution in Grammar" by W. Nelson Francis.

The Gift of Tongues by Margaret Schlauch (Modern Age Books, 1942). Still an excellent survey of writing systems and languages.

Indian Picture Writing by Robert Hofsinde (William Morrow, 1959).

South Bronx Reverie

by Dale Worsley

NOW THREE-FOURTHS OF THE WAY THROUGH the school year I have a splinter group of five eighth graders for this period. We have broken away from the larger class to enable a few to concentrate harder on their work. We sit at a table in an otherwise empty room, the sun shining in, motes of dust drifting in the air and a basketball thumping at a great distance. I watch the kids as they work. Their pens swim over their tablets like quick little oars. Zamora, in my class for the first time, picks up her paper and lipreads. She seems satisfied with her work. Nancy, also a first-timer, has just asked me, ten minutes after my instructions and a paragraph into her story, if she can write "about anything I want to?"

"Sure. Anything."

"Anything?"

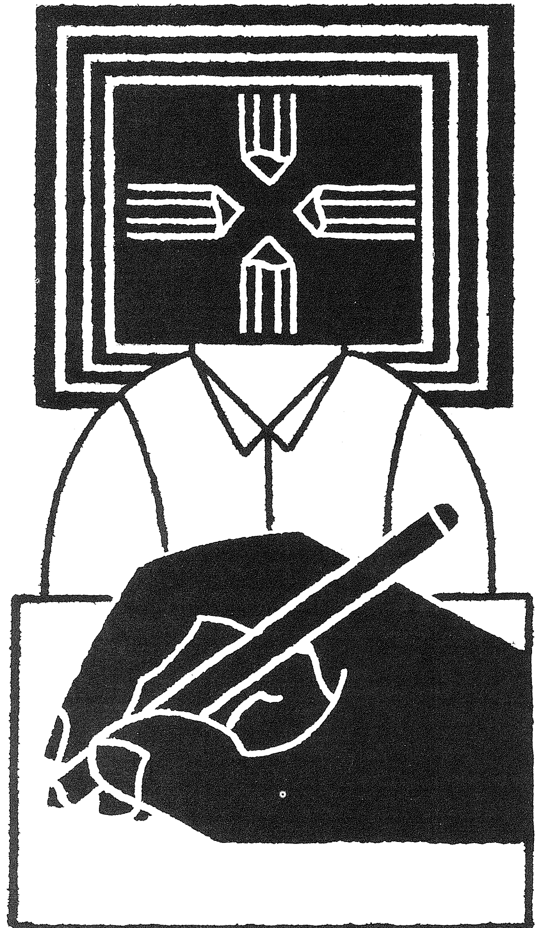
"Yes. Anything you want."'

The other three are boys I've had all year. David, a dopey, quiet kid with mutilated gums has written virtually nothing in the larger class. Now he's got something hot going. He leans over and asks Felix how to spell "abandoned." Felix writes it on a piece of paper for him.

Felix is a bright kid with cheekbones like wheat muffins, a smart-aleck, socially mature but lacking confidence in his work, as if he's suffered. Climbing the steps to the school one day I heard someone saying to me *sotto voce*, I'm gonna kill you. Turning around, I saw Felix grinning in a clot of teenagers. The first day of class Felix had invited me to meet him after school to fight. Of course Felix was just "snappin' " on me for the most part, but I'd seen a glint of threat in his eyes on occasions when his friends put him up to it.

In the larger class, Felix sits beside an utter wastrel who constantly keeps Felix from working. One day this fellow brought me a note that read, in part, "I hate white people and would like to dump a bowl of *bleep* on your head." I assumed Felix had written it, so I sauntered over to him, scratching my chin, and told him he should put the same strong emotion into a story and have the story deal with the issue of prejudice, which is one of our country's greatest problems. My lecture to him was a noble and moving one, exceeding, I'm sure, Spencer Tracy's in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and Felix paid rapt attention. Later I found out someone else had written the note. It wouldn't have surprised me at all to discover that Felix was prejudiced against *blancos* after that. But now he's writing away, having written the incident off to the mysterious foolishness of adults. He's working on a moving story about a visit to the run-down house of an ostracized friend. In contrast to the exterior, the house is palatial inside, full of the playthings of the rich. It is Xanadu as an emotional metaphor.

Beside Felix sits Earl. Earl's pen stops working. His hand strikes out like a snake and steals Felix's even as he writes. Earl picks up where he left off, hardly missing a beat. Felix shrugs. I ask Zamora if she's got an extra pen for Felix and she does. Felix goes back to work. The entire time in the larger class Earl wrote only one thing involving any effort, a wonderfully comic, self-pitying jeremiad about none of the girls ever liking "poor Earl." That initial spoof has now turned into a long three-part story covering the lifetime of his hero.



I am struck with wonder as I watch these kids pour out their stories. Amid their sighs, sniffs and twitches, an ancient ritual is being re-enacted. Vision finds its way to language on the pencil's chew marks. And this time I have the time to participate. My pen is now sailing across the page. Like them, without being conscious of the terms, I too am worrying about detail, about depth of character, about conflict, about the plot, and about finding the perfect ending.

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Intervening in the Writing Process

by Alan Ziegler

ONE OF THE NICEST MOMENTS IN TEACHING writing is when you say just the right thing to a student, and he/she thinks for a moment, smiles, and dives back into the paper, writing energetically. This knack of saying the right thing to a student derives in part from knowing how to proceed with your own writing. I cannot overstress the importance of teachers having their own writing experiences, from doing some of their own assignments, keeping a notebook, forming a writing workshop with colleagues, or just sitting down occasionally to write. There are no great secrets to writing that cannot be uncovered in the doing.

Sometimes the most effective feedback to give students who are trying to get their minds unclogged is a sense of commiseration: "I know, I *know*, the same thing happened to me last night. It's really frustrating. What I did to get going again was to. . . " Before you go any further, though, you should check to see if the student is ready to resume writing. Once, I got carried away with my own story while the student was writing up a storm, probably thinking, "Yeah, it can be tough, but let me get some work done."

The following three sections explore techniques you can use to help students advance their writing by intervening in the writing process. We have to remember that there is a fine line between intervening on the student's behalf and interfering with his/her writing. Make sure the student *wants* your help. Also, it would be interfering to intervene constantly; students should have experiences fending for themselves, so they can make their own discoveries. The purpose of intervention is not to help students turn out better products, but to give them insights into the writing process, which they can internalize and use eventually on their own. *Therefore, the extent to which you intervene should gradually diminish as the term progresses.*

Finding the Handle. Sometimes students have a hard time shaping their material. They know what they want to write about but they don't know how to go about it. I can sympathize with this problem; I, too, often carry potential material around with me for days or weeks before I find the handle that enables me to structure the material into a poem or story. After a particularly frustrating session, a high school student handed in the following explanation:

> The reason why I'm not writing is that some people just can't put their ideas into words. I'm one of those people. I have a good idea that I can't write about. The idea is that there is a relationship between two people and the relationship is very strong and then one of the people has to move away. This leaves the other person very sad and depressed. The person that didn't move away still wants the relationship to go on but the other person is too far away.

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The job seems overwhelming to this student, but he can be shown that he has the material and the strong feelings with which to do meaningful writing. Sometimes a person has all the ingredients but doesn't know how to cook with them. The following recipe can make the task manageable.

1. Write a section about the moment of saying goodbye: include details, conversation, and a description of the car driving away (or the plane taking off), perhaps adding a simile to the description.
2. Flashback to the time the two people met, again with details.
3. Jump ahead to sketches of the relationship growing, including at least one rough spot to show these people are "real."
4. Write about the moment when the news was told that one of the friends was moving, including the setting; perhaps there could be some contrast if, for example, this occurred at the circus.
5. Jump ahead to the moment *after* the friend leaves (picking up the story from the opening section).

This is the vignette approach, which consists of a series of related sketches rather than a continuous narrative.

If a recipe is too ambitious, I can offer a more limited alternative. I always encourage students to deviate from my "recipe" if they evolve alternatives in the writing.

When students are not writing, you can ask them to write *about* the subject they would like to be writing about, to help them in case they are having trouble finding the handle. Here is another example of a student having difficulty moving from conception to implementation:

> Once there was a very bad feeling I had about someone. I probed my mind for days trying to put it into words. It was like this person cared but didn't care. We would talk but no interest was added. It was like a cold feeling. A song explained it perfectly. It was a feeling that was cold as ice.

Even though the image "cold as ice" is a cliché, at least the student has begun to express the situation in imagistic terms. The next step would be for the student to try to reproduce the conversation in which "no interest was added." It hadn't occurred to him to use the actual experience, to present it so that the reader would reach the same conclusion ("bad feelings" that are "cold as ice") that he had, perhaps amplifying the experience with other similes. Since one of the skills of the writer is to convey experience more rapidly than it would take to occur, it would probably be necessary to distill, and perhaps alter, the conversation.

Students can try to find the handle by writing out the material at random; sometimes an appropriate form will "declare itself." In one instance, the lack of form became the

form. A fifth-grader was struggling with an empty page, and I asked him if he were having trouble deciding what to write. He replied that his head was full of ideas, but he couldn't figure out "how to organize them into a poem."

"Get it down," I told him, "in notes, fragments, whatever, and then deal with organization. Make a list of what you want to incorporate into the poem." As it turned out, he liked the way his list of fragments turned out and, with a little refinement, let the poem stay in that form. When it was read out loud, another student admired the structure.

Another aspect of finding the handle is to determine what literary "angle" to use for the subject matter. Using the situation of a close friend leaving town as an example, here are two alternatives to dealing directly with all or part of the situation.

Allegorical Approach: Write about something that, on the surface, is unrelated, but acts as a metaphor for the situation, such as birds migrating.

Surrealistic Approach: The rules of reality are suspended in surrealism. For this situation, a miniature train could pull up at the breakfast table and take the person away while a faint voice yelled "All aboard!" as the person shrank into the train.

Questions. The novelist Davis Grubb (*Night of the Hunter*) would sometimes stop by his neighbor's apartment late at night, agitated after a flurry of writing, and say, "I don't know what happens next."

The question implicit each time a writer pauses is "What happens next?" The writer can zero in on the answer by making the question more specific: "What can happen to bring the father and son closer together (or push them further apart)?" "Should the phone ring with some bad (good) news?" "What association does this last line evoke?"

Writing is at the best of times a natural process, with the author constantly answering such questions without actually formulating them. But sometimes, when I am stuck, I read over what I have written to see what questions are suggested by the material. The more one writes, the more one can recognize the possibilities—where one can "go" with a certain piece of writing. Student writers may not have the experience to recognize the potentials suggested by their material, and providing them with stimulating questions can be a valuable form of feedback.

When a student asks me to look at a piece of writing, saying, "I'm having trouble" or giving me a premature "I'm finished," I read the piece and, rather than telling the student what to write next, ask out loud some of the questions I might ask myself if I were the author. These can be questions for *advancing* the text (plot and character development; association and movement of language) or questions regarding the focus and depth of what has already been written (is anything missing or underdeveloped?). I am constantly on the lookout for unexplored possibilities. Sometimes students will leave an opening you could drive a typewriter through, but they don't even recognize their own invitation.

A sixth-grader wrote a short piece using the persona of a man alone on a beach late at night. The man makes a fire and says, "I stare into the fire with wild eyes and I get a tingle down my back and suddenly I feel. . . like I am wasting my life away." This extraordinary realization was not followed up in the piece, so I pointed it out to the author and asked, "How did this realization affect his life?" The student resumed writing, adding that the man goes for a run on the beach, sells his house, and starts to live on the beach.

A high school student was writing a lackluster piece about a football game. There was no focus, so I asked, "Is this a sandlot game or a formal team? What does it feel like to have your face pushed in the dirt? What's the weather like? Is the field muddy?" For depth I asked, "Is there someone special watching the game, like the quarterback's father, whom he hasn't seen in five years, or his ex-girlfriend, sitting with the sports editor of the newspaper? Does he have an injury he's been covering up? What did he dream the night before?"

Another student was writing a "bum in the gutter" poem. To help him avoid being superficial I asked, "Who is this bum? Does he have a family? Was he always a bum? What is his life really like? What were the last three meals he ate? Where did he sleep last night? What does he think about himself and the people passing by who pause to scorn or pity him or write poems about him?"

A fifth-grader had written in a poem, "I am a genius. I can answer any question." Mischievously I asked her, "What was the most difficult question you've been asked. . . and how did you answer?" The look on her face was not one of gratitude; I had complicated her life for the few remaining minutes in the period. But sometimes a writing teacher must sacrifice popularity for art.

Questions can help students develop imagery. A student wrote, "Excitement spreads from person to person." Question: "Spreads like what?" If the answer is "like peanut butter," you might want to find out on what kind of bread; it does make a difference for how easily it spreads. If a student writes: "It was a nice house," ask how it was nice. If he/she answers, "because it had soft carpets," the reader can experience more tangibly some of this "niceness." You might want to go one step further and ask, "How would it feel to walk on those carpets?"

This kind of "pushing" should not go too far, lest it get discouraging. Also, emphasize that students need not answer all of your questions, but that you want them to become familiar with the process of developing their material until it becomes a natural part of their writing and they themselves sense how to recognize and capitalize on the potentials inherent in what they write. I often read a few papers out loud to the class, asking after each one a number of questions the author could consider in revising or expanding the piece.

As they internalize the questioning process, some students can almost lip sync the questions with me, an indication that they are needing me not quite as much as they used to. For a writing teacher, it's a wonderful feeling not to be needed. Until that happens, the students get used to my constant "cross-examination." When one fifth-grader came up me and said, "Here, it's done," I responded typically by asking her a few questions suggested by the piece. She walked off in a mock huff, saying, "I knew it—he always wants *more*." The next time, to see how she would react, I read her poem and said, "Looks done to me." She was disappointed: "Don't you like it?"

•

A fifth-grader named Patty wrote the following poem:

Dogs are soft and shaggy
look like Lassie
And look so sassy
Pat them on the head
then go to bed

The poem has no authenticity; if Patty knew anything about dogs, she certainly wasn't sharing it with the reader. Rhyming made it even more difficult for her to really say anything. When I asked her if she knew any collies, she said no. Did she know *any* dogs? Yes, her grandmother had one. I suggested that instead of writing about "dogs," she write about a specific dog—her grandmother's—whom she knows.

Patty utilized one of the privileges entitled her by poetic license and wrote as if the dog were her own:

> Some dogs are shaggy,
> My dog is a chihuahua
> And he eats my cat's food,
> Instead of dog food.
> His body is white with a brown stripe.
> He has a face like a baby.
> Legs like pens,
> And a body like a peanut.

The first line was derived from the original draft; it served the function of getting the second version started and could be disposed of during subsequent revision. This is by no means an outstanding poem, but it is a big improvement, including details and similes. More important, Patty realized she could draw on her own knowledge and experience, making alterations to serve her literary interests.

Students usually know a lot more than they let on in their writing and should share the wealth of their knowledge. If a student says that he/she really doesn't know any more than what's on the paper—and it's not enough—then I say: Be a "con artist" and try to convince me anyway. Speculate; perhaps do a little research. Mentally project yourself into the situation and go by your instincts as to what it would be like. Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics to "April in Paris" without ever having been there (nor, as he pointed out, had he ever been "Over the Rainbow," a song he also wrote).

Turns and Twists. When a student is stuck, it may be possible to pinpoint the turn of language that put the piece in a blind alley. One student was writing a poem about nighttime, with several good darkness images. Just as the piece was picking up momentum, the "sun rose." "Slow down time," I suggested. "Let the night last a little longer."

In other cases, the poem or story needs a "twist" of some sort, and you may be able to point out where a monkey wrench could be thrown into the works to make a more interesting situation. In fiction, especially, roadblocks and detours can make a story more interesting than just having the characters ride along smoothly. One student was writing a story about a poor child and his aunt living in an underdeveloped country. They were starving and got arrested for stealing bread. It was a typical story about oppression and hunger leading to an understandable crime, leading to a typical ending: the two were sentenced to twenty years in jail. I suggested that the best challenge to these characters (and the author) would be not to have the judge sentence them to twenty years in jail (which is what they expected and where they would get fed) but to have him say in a whimsical mood, "I'm bored with these cases; sentence suspended, you're free to go." This ironically sadistic sentence would put the characters right back on the streets with the same problems. How would they react? What would they do to turn their lives around? A story that had been over would now be just getting interesting.

Intervening—Postscript

When I was writing for a newspaper, I found out that sometimes it's helpful to intervene by recommending that someone *stop* the writing process. I was working on a feature, and it kept growing and changing; whenever I thought it was done, I realized there were still unexplored possibilities. The deadline arrived, and I said, "I need more time." A week later, my editor came over to my desk and said, "Look, eventually you just have to stop, and go on to something else." From time to time, as I refuse to let go of a piece of writing, I hear that editor's voice. Sometimes, when I am working with a student, I hear myself saying it, too. ●

The First Poem I Ever Wrote

by Peter Schjeldahl

IT WAS THE LAST DAY OF FIFTH GRADE, 1953. IN the afternoon we went with our teacher to the town athletic field for a picnic and games. At some point I lay on the grass and looked at the sky. There was a hawk soaring around up there. This wasn't unusual, but it gave me a strange feeling. I sat up and started writing.

It was a poem in stanzas, and I knew it was a poem because it looked like one. All I remember of it is a one-line chorus that repeated after every stanza:

Winged avenger from the skies!

When the poem was finished I felt dazed. I took it to the teacher. She read it and said something like: "That's nice, Peter, but what is this about a 'winged avenger from the skies'? That's very unpleasant. What does it mean? What does the avenger want to avenge?"

I should have answered, "It wants to rip your throat out." It was five or six years before I wrote my second poem. ●

---

from *The Brute* (Little Caesar Press, Los Angeles, 1981)

Teachers & Writers Magazine would love to hear from readers about the first poem they wrote, the first story, the first word, the first love letter, the first epic, the first anything.

PETER SCHJELDAHL's most recent collection is *New and Selected Poems* (Sun Press). He is senior art critic for *The Village Voice*.

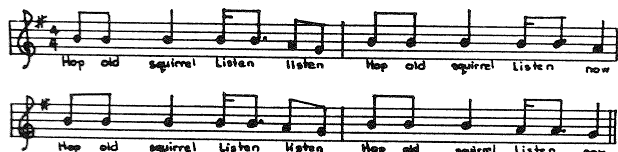
Singing a Story

by Ray Levi

THE FARMER IN THE DELL. LONDON BRIDGE. Skip to my Lou. These are familiar games of our childhood which our own children enjoy. They are also an invaluable resource to me as a primary teacher searching for an approach to writing that would enable six-year-olds to become immediately involved with language manipulation, would foster successful independent writing as soon as possible, would permit beginning readers to consistently read their own work, and would stimulate students at different achievement levels. The search for a structure that enables beginning writers to articulate their ideas and express them on paper is a monumental one. For the past eight years my lab in this endeavor has been an ''open classroom'' of first and second graders in Oberlin, Ohio.

Much of my initial impetus for using music with writing came from Mary Helen Richards and the teachers who work with her Education Through Music program. Mrs. Richards has focused on the richness of children's song-experience games—the language, the social activities contained within them, the variety of movements, and the musical elements. Children, of course, don't think about everything that is contained within a song. They simply have a good time playing a game, whistling the song as they walk down the street. As teachers, we facilitate children's discoveries about language, musical elements, and their interrelationship through activities which highlight particular elements. In working with songs in the classroom, I have focused on the language. My excitement grows when I see the variety of ways in which the simple activity of writing new verses can be handled by a class.

We start by playing a game such as this version of Hop Old Squirrel:*



In this case, playing the game involves dramatizing the text while singing. We begin to manipulate language in a simple way, by finding other animals that might hop or finding additional actions for the animals. This is obviously a very basic encounter with language. But it is a valuable experience for the children, who are able to see how their changes in text alter the game. The group activity also provides a reservoir of ideas for children to draw on when they go off to write alone. ''I don't know what to write'' has never been a problem.

The framework of the song is comfortable, and the familiar tune and language patterns make reading and sharing the verse with friends quite easy. The beginning writer *may* only change a word or two:

> Swim old salmon. Listen! Listen!
> Swim old salmon. Listen now!
>
> —Peter, grade 1

> Chase old cat. Meow! Meow!
>
> Chase old cat. Meow now!
>
> —Ginny, grade 1

The more adventurous student will think of such possibilities as these:

> Ride old horse to the fence.
> Ride old horse to the gate.
> Ride old horse to the post.
> Ride old horse to the fence.
>
> —Rodney, grade 2

> Run old horse to your phillies.
> Jump old rabbit into the woods.
> Swim old fish to your rock.
> Fly old bird to your nest.
>
> —Kendra, grade 2

As the children have more experience with the games, they focus more closely on the interrelationship between the song's rhythm and the language stress of the words they choose.

Is this poetry of great quality? In most cases, probably not. But it can provide a comfortable starting point in writing and reading which is rooted in the children's experiences. It is also an activity they can expand upon during a free moment.

From this inauspicious beginning emerge numerous possibilities. In my classroom, our next experience with music and language is original operas. We dramatize favorite folktales and nursery rhymes by setting words to a familiar tune (usually echo-form songs such as ''London Bridge,'' which allow students the option of repeating three lines and changing the last line). There are many challenges for the children as they embellish each verse with repeated performances. All ideas are expressed through dialogue: not only must the children work cooperatively in small groups, they must re-tell a tale coherently. Again, many variations are possible for both primary and older students. We have sometimes dramatized experiences shared by class members. Historic events can be re-told. And students with some musical education can use more than one tune or compose their own melodies.

Children have been performing their own versions of ''The Three Pigs'' in elementary schools for generations, and simple writing projects have been attempted by many primary teachers. What, then, is different about the ideas I'm presenting? The answer, I believe, is the music. The use of song provides some immediate benefits to the teacher: shy children who are hesitant to speak before the group seem more willing to sing, and the structure of the familiar song offers security to the most tentative writer. But more significantly, the range of possibilities within the structure of the song provides a challenge to children which may enable them to grow. Experience with songs leads to a sensitivity to the interrelationship between language and musical rhythms. Singing a story enables a beginning writer to do much independent writing and promotes the literacy many language experience exercises do not provide. ●

* Richards, Mary Helen, *The Music Language: Part One*. Portola Valley, California: Richards Institute of Music Education and Research, 1973.

RAY LEVI teaches first and second grades at the Eastwood School in Oberlin, Ohio. He also conducts teacher workshops in music education.

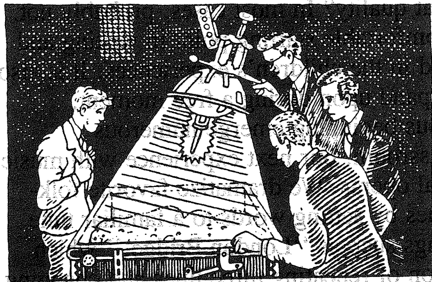
BOOKS

The Impending Gleam by Glen Baxter
(Alfred A. Knopf, 1982)
$6.95 cloth, 114 pp.

The Works by Glen Baxter
(Wyrd Press, 1979)
Out of print

Review/Article by Ron Padgett

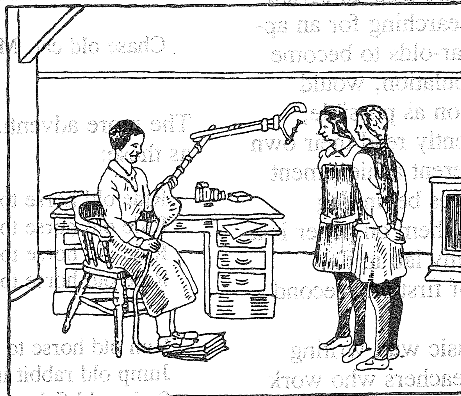
FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS Glen Baxter's reputation as writer, artist, and cartoonist has been steadily growing underground in this country, but recently, with the publication of *The Impending Gleam*, that reputation has blossomed aboveground. Both *The Impending Gleam* and *The Works* are thoroughly funny and delightful voyages through the bizarre but attractive mind of this young British eccentric.



IT WAS A DEVICE FOR TURNING SCHOOL MEALS BACK INTO FOOD

The Works is a now out of print collection of Baxter's earlier short writings and cartoons: "Fruits of the World in Danger," "The Handy Guide to Amazing People," and "The Agnes Bolt Bedside Companion," among others. Many of the cartoons are take-offs of Ripley's "Believe It or Not" and other popular sources. The short prose writings, which defy easy classification, resemble slices from novels one could read only in a dream.

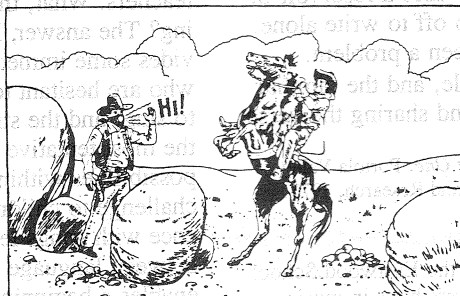
More recent, *The Impending Gleam* is all cartoons. The Ripley's style has given way to one inspired by the wonderfully naive illustrations in British adventure and cowboy stories of the 1940s and '50s, but the result is no less amusing. One series of cartoons centers on the ultra-strange goings-on at a fictitious British girls' school ("The Trouble at St. Mildred's"). Anyone with a taste for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* will not fail to be entertained by these oddly beautiful cartoons.



MISS PROBISHER MADE A POINT OF THREATENING NEW ARRIVALS WITH "THE NOSE TWEAKER"

Teachers at all levels might consider the possibilities of using these cartoons in the classroom as instructional devices. For instance, the cartoons could be xeroxed without their captions, and then handed out to students who would supply their own captions. Once students get the hang of this, the inverse could prove interesting: supply the caption and have students create the illustration to go with it. The third step might be to have the students go it entirely on their own, creating both caption and illustration.

Baxter's illustrations almost always have some highly incongruous or mysterious detail, such as cowboys looking at abstract paintings, a nurse carrying a tray with a dog bone on it, a boy sitting on a beach with his hair in flames, or an omelette exploding in midair. It would be challenging to ask students to spot the incongruous element and then invent a plausible explanation for it.



IT WAS THE HALITOSIS KID.....

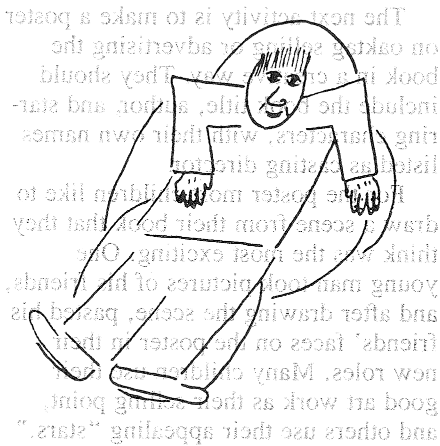
The captions are generally either understated—Baxter is a master of the art of understatement—or overstated, two rhetorical modes difficult to explain to students but easy to teach by example.* By learning these extremes, students can then more easily locate the midpoint between them, the down-the-middle direct statement that says what it means and means what it says, the basic necessity of good, clear expository writing. ●

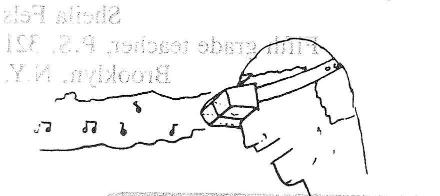
*Aware that my 15 year-old son automatically resists doing anything I urge him to do, I have left examples of Baxter's work around the house for the past several years, hoping he would become interested in it by himself. It worked. Recently he presented me with a sheaf of his own cartoons à la Baxter which show that he caught on to Baxter's use of understatement.

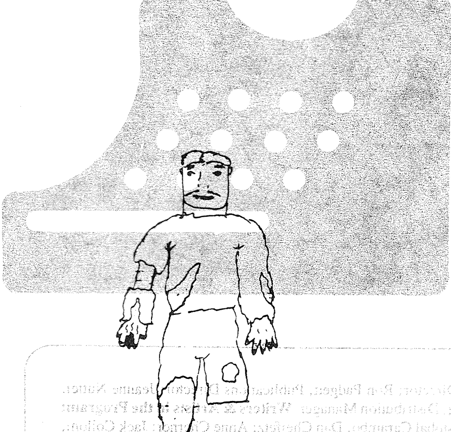
WILD BILL WAS KNOWN TO GO TO EXTRAORDINARY LENGTHS TO CATCH "THE LUCY SHOW" REPEATS ON CHANNEL SIX

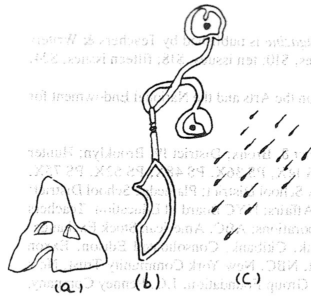
HOW HE HATED SATURDAY MORNING SHOPPING

RON PADGETT is director of publications at T&W. With Bill Zavatsky he edited *The Whole Word Catalogue 2* (T&W/McGraw-Hill).









Cartoons by Wayne Padgett

Sleeping on the Wing by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell
(Random House, 1981 and Vintage Books, 1982)
$14.95 cloth, $3.95 paper, 334 pp.

Review by Karen R. Randlev

IN 1970 WHEN KENNETH KOCH'S first book about teaching came out, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* quietly launched a new movement: poets-in-the-schools (PITS). This wonderful program, generally funded through the state arts councils in the fifty states, today brings poets-as-teachers in contact with their potential public. And in this day of budget cuts and reduced curriculum offerings, having art in as many forms as possible in the classroom becomes doubly important.

But Koch's first book did more than bring the evocative and often touching poems of his students at PS 61 in New York City to the public. It changed the role of the arts in the school curriculum drastically, by positing the idea that art was not to be taught but done, using the disciplines discovered and developed by the practicing artist. This was not a method of distilling art, music, dance, and letters so that teachers who were not usually artists themselves could present programs of appreciation to their students. The kids were to become artists themselves, drawing on their own experiences and the idiosyncracies of their own personal expression.

It is not clear whether *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and the resulting PITS programs have created a new generation of writers. More and more young people are writing, trying to get published, and hoping for careers as writers; but fewer people than ever are reading the resulting poems or subscribing to the little magazines that have traditionally supported the writers. What has come about is a generation of writers, but nonreaders. Enter Koch again.

The best aspect of *Sleeping on the Wing* is the service it performs for the nonreader of poetry—if poetry is to be written, it must also be heard. The book is divided into twenty-two chapters. Each chapter presents important poems by one poet, ranging from Walt Whitman to Kenneth Koch, with suggestions for interpretation and ideas for using the poet as a springboard into writing poetry. There is also an introduction on how to read and think about a poem and how to write poetry, followed by a note to teachers with short bibliographies of the poets. Koch's interpretations are bright, brief, and enlightening, even for the experienced reader. And the ideas he presents as beginnings for student poems are good enough that I found myself taking *Sleeping on the Wing* to a PITS residency before I had even finished the book.

But the book is not without flaws. Compiled from essays that appeared originally in *Scholastic Magazine*, the book suffers from an overly simplistic, sometimes plodding style that often reads more like a junior high language arts workbook than a lexicon of the nuances of twentieth-century poetry. However, in an age when education is increasingly becoming a matter of the mastery of fundamental skills and the application of literal language, a book which supports the metaphysical world of words is significant. Too often in the rush back to basics, teachers and parents forget that language is primal, emotional, physical, expressive, and not always precise. *Sleeping on the Wing* is a wonderful reassurance to the faint-hearted that poetry, with all its inexactness and imagination, is OK. It is also important that only two women (both of them deceased) are represented in the book and that Koch and Farrell chose to include Koch himself as one of the poets. This is confusing to me since his poetic reputation is overshadowed by his expertise as a poet-in-the-school and chronicler of that experience. How annoying this choice is, considering the female poets omitted. Where is May Swenson or Josephine Jacobson or Anne Sexton? Why wasn't there room for Carolyn Forché or Maxine Kumin or Tess Gallagher?

If there were a larger body of reading material addressing Koch's and Farrell's subject, or if we truly read poetry in school and at home as our grandparents did, these criticisms would not stand out so much in the vaster weave of the fabric. But Koch essentially stands alone (although other excellent books do exist) as poets-in-

KAREN RANDLEV is a graduate of the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. Her writing is included in two anthologies: *Finding the Boundaries* and *Women of the Arctic* (to be published this summer). She teaches composition at California Maritime Academy in Vallejo.

the-schools spokesman to the general public.

Criticisms aside, Koch and Farrell have given the student and the teacher, the poet and the public, an opportunity for rapprochement, a climate in which an understanding and appreciation of the poetic process can flourish. ●

PLUGS

Before sending your students (or yourselves) out into the world to become artists, you might want to peruse *Artist Employment and Unemployment 1971-1980*, a report compiled by the National Endowment for the Arts. The report shows that although the percentage increase in artists exceeded the increase in professional workers during that period, the unemployment rate among artists was also greater. Other interesting figures: writers increased 115%, designers 87%, painters/sculptors 53%. Artists now account for 1% of our national labor force. Copies of the 44-page report may be obtained for $3 each from the Publishing Center for Cultural Resources, 625 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012 (212/260-2010).

The *Masterworks of Spanish Literature* catalogue describes bilingual films, filmstrips, and videotapes on Spanish classics (Cervantes, Calderon, etc.) and on an enlightened selection of moderns (Neruda, Borges, Lorca, Márquez, etc.) as well as on the history of South American and modern Spanish writing in the U.S. *Masterworks of Spanish Literature* is available from Films for the Humanities, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, N.J. 08540 (800/257-5126, in N.J. 609/452-1128).

Flower Films is a catalogue of documentary works by award-winning filmmaker Les Blank and his various co-workers. These films focus on Chicano culture, great Texas blues musicians, Cajun culture, the Mardi Gras, Dizzy Gillespie, country cooking, and others, with heavy emphasis on music, all of which could be integrated into a curriculum dealing with American studies, folklore, music, minorities, and bilingual Spanish and French programs. *Flower Films* is available from Les Blank at 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530 (415/525-0942). ●

LETTER

Dear T&W,

I thought you might like to share the following ideas with your readers.

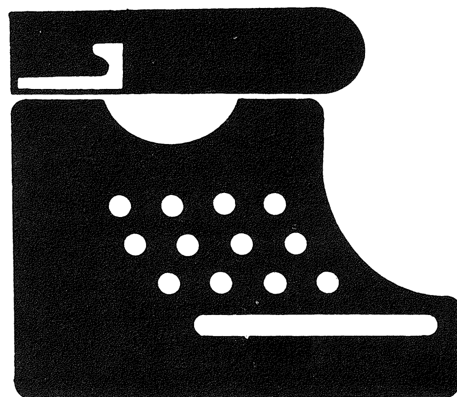
Book reports can be fun and imaginative. One successful form I've used is to let children be casting directors. This can be used with any grade level. The instructions are (1) to read a book, (2) write a short summary of it, and then (3) list the characters in the book and give out the parts to friends, family, classmates or famous people—telling why, of course. An example of casting for *The Wizard of Oz* was: "Dorothy—I think Amanda would be good because they are both kind and don't like to see people hurting others. Scarecrow—I'd pick Scooby Doo because they are both always scared."

The next activity is to make a poster on oaktag selling or advertising the book in a creative way. They should include the book title, author, and starring characters, with their own names listed as casting director.

For the poster most children like to draw a scene from their book that they think was the most exciting. One young man took pictures of his friends, and after drawing the scene, pasted his friends' faces on the poster in their new roles. Many children use their good art work as their selling point, and others use their appealing "stars."

The final results are always interesting and it's nice to see how many children are looking forward to reading many of the books.

Sheila Fels
Fifth grade teacher, P.S. 321
Brooklyn, N.Y.



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