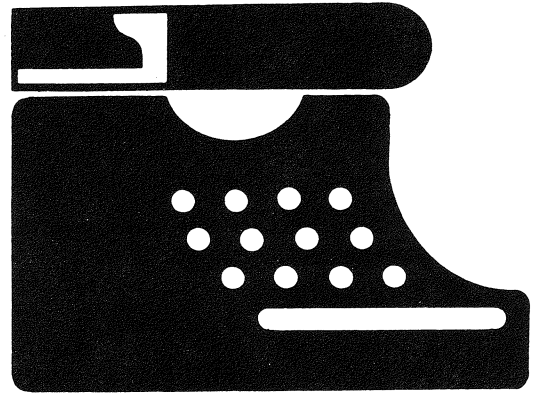


# Teachers & Writers



Bi-Monthly • May-June 1985

Vol. 16, No. 5

## Special Issue!

This issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine is not about how to get students started writing, but about what happens once writing is in progress or finished. Three of the writers look at how they respond to completed pieces. Peter Sears addresses head-on the question of what you do next when a student hands you a terrible poem, Aishe Eshe talks about what she learns from what her students write, and Rochelle Ratner deals with the special circumstances of responding to work by older adults. Two other articles are about writing-in-progress and how the teacher can intervene usefully. Kathleen Collins sees her students' writing as fragments that suggest future directions for deeper explorations and Anne Martin writes about what is happening in her kindergarten classroom, where play and writing and talking and learning form a single creative continuum.

—Meredith Sue Willis, Guest Editor

## WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT A TERRIBLE POEM?

by Peter Sears

How sad it is  
how suddenly  
It wakes you up  
reality

Just drifting off  
without a care  
Then suddenly  
it's always there

Dragging you back  
no reason why  
Ending your dreams  
not letting you fly

Taking your freedom  
of sailing in air  
Leaving you wounded  
not wishing to dare

Clipping your wings  
making you low  
Bringing you down  
not letting you go

It wakes you up  
it makes you see  
Sad isn't it  
reality

**T**O THE STUDENT WHO WROTE THIS POEM IS THE teacher to say, "This poem is vague and corny"? No. Is the teacher to say, "The repeated use of 'it' is weak writing"? No. Besides, the student would take the comment as gram-

matical fanaticism and insensitivity to the clever ploy of revealing the subject in the last line. Is the teacher to say, "I prefer reality sometimes to the dreams I have"? No. Yet all these criticisms are valid. The poem is terrible.

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PETER SEARS is the author of three books of poems and an introductory poetry text. He has taught high school English as well as college creative writing and graduate classes in education. He is currently writing a book for *Teachers & Writers* and one for Scholastic.

So what? The intent is not valid criticism: the intent is teaching. Not theoretical teaching. That's easy. This is hard teaching. This is more fun. The challenge is clear: if you can not be honest and sensible without alienating the student, what are you to do? Nothing is more ticklish in English teaching than teaching poetry writing. One line of thinking begs off: "Just encourage them; kids are so imaginative you know." Encouragement of such a poem as this one only leads to more of the same. English teachers are buried in such slop every year. Poetry writing exercises produce, as far as I can tell, the worst writing an English teacher sees. (Fiction writing exercises, on the other hand, don't seem to cause the same problem.)

Why? There is something about poetry that youngsters detest, or say they do, probably because they are afraid, which is part of the problem; and when they write a poem, they usually drop every principle of good writing, from precision to punctuation. The common view of poetry is that it is elitist and obscure, translatable only by teachers. The students believe, therefore, that they are trying to create something unclear. But this common misconception about poetry is less crucial to teaching poetry writing than what students think about their own writing.

Take the poem at the beginning of this article. The student probably likes it, likes the idea of how sad it is that reality "wakes you up" from your dreaming, and likes the rhyme. So is the teacher supposed to make the student see the poem as tripe so he or she will go on to write a decent poem? No, absolutely not. To encourage this student to write in any fashion other than this maudlin generalizing requires going into his or her thoughts about poetry. And this effort requires not only patience but respect for the ideas.

Why students write poetry is, I think, the most important point to teaching poetry writing. High School students write to express themselves, not to learn something about the genre. They want to hear themselves think, see themselves feel. They like this opportunity even though they may still contend that they hate poetry. If what they have written is unclear to others, they don't care. They know what they are saying. As for re-working a poem, why bother? "You write when you feel like it, and the way it comes out is the way it is. Once you have written it, it's done."

There is nothing wrong with one-shot self-expression if the teacher wants each student just to get something on paper. But teaching poetry writing is another enterprise altogether, one that requires taking on more formidable obstacles than "But I hate poetry" or "Do we really have to?" This is not to say that there aren't wonderful student poems blooming each year and that there aren't wonderful exercises that propel students into visiting their imaginations on paper. However, these are the exceptions. High school students are more conventional and cautious about their expression than they were when they were younger and will be when they are college age. Peer pressure is powerful to the point of being oppressive. Most high school poetry is terrible, and the students aren't interested in making it any better. Students don't want to write poems; they want to philosophize. They want to use poetry to pontificate about life, to carry on about what they like, to spout abstractions, to complain, and to wallow in tragic sadness.

That's what comes natural to them. Using poetry to indulge themselves is the way they are going to come to a poetry writing exercise. Not all students all the time, but

enough to depress teachers to the point where they want to say, "You are not writing poetry, you are writing philosophy." "Huh?" may be the response, yet the statement is not necessarily going to put students off. They might even like it. Philosophy sounds good, probably better than poetry. So go for it: "Philosophy is general and declarative; poetry is specific and evocative."

If the student asks what "evocative" means, you have yourself an opening. If the student contends, "But it rhymes, it's a poem," you needn't backtrack: "Rhyme is a possibility of poetry, a property of sound. You write rhyming philosophy." At which point the student may become dismayed and wander off. Yet your point may stick: "Poetry and philosophy are two ways of writing, of expressing yourself." And if you get a chance, ask, "Which do you prefer?" The answer "I don't know" can be followed by "You appear to prefer philosophy," which may provoke a question about the difference.

If the student lingers or comes back, you might suggest, rather than going into an abstract explanation, "What about writing the same idea in two different forms: philosophy and poetry?" A quizzical look allows you to pick up on one detail in the supposed poem and say with gusto, "Like this, see this detail—clear, concise—I really can see what you mean. And the words are good, very exact." If the student brightens up a bit, add, "Try fooling around with the other words to get ones you really like. Take some chances if you feel like it."

Suppose this encouragement falls as flat as a stack of essays on Sunday evening, and the student replies, "I don't know what you mean. I tried to do what you told us. You don't like mine, do you?" Then go for subject matter. Ask questions: "What were you thinking of when you wrote the poem? Did the writing set off other ideas? Did you end up going where you had planned to?" Talk process and subject. Get the student talking.

If the student becomes willing to go back to the original imagining and to write again, then emphasize trying to convey the idea or feeling through real things, specific examples. And suggest that he write it as *prose*. Really. This way he won't be thinking about writing a poem. "I am now writing a poem" is the worst thing to be thinking when writing a poem. Not only does it distract you, but it also makes you careful. Even people who write long, hard, and well succumb to this danger at times. Prose lines, on the other hand, roll out easily and tend to clutter themselves nicely with all sorts of real items, details you can see; and these specifics you, the teacher, can bring out more by fooling around with line endings, making deletions, combining lines.

Fooling around. Yes. Writing poetry is serious fooling around. Like tinkering with a car. You tinker for fun and with purpose, to make the car run better. Like experimenting with a recipe: maybe add this and take this out. You are not sure what it's going to taste like, but you're curious. You will taste it, you invented it. You tinker with a poem for the fun of it and for the possibility of making it better.

If the student does a prose rendition of the grand philosophical statement he calls a poem, copy it and, right in front of him, tinker with it. You needn't change much. Just stare at it and hold your pencil over a particular part. Then cross something out and ask him, "Do you like the line better this way?" If he does, keep it. If he doesn't, put it back. The key

words here are "like" and "better." Your tinkering will come across as suggestions, as possibilities. He will see that it interests you, that you are doing it first for the fun of it, and, most important, that the choices are *his*. You are not correcting, you are exploring. You are fooling around.

If the student isn't there with you, write all over it. Not in red pen. Mark the good stuff first. "KEEP!" capitalized. "YES" capitalized. Underline, circle. "DON'T CHANGE" is a comment students really like. Then put less emphatic marks by the weaker parts. Perhaps a question mark or a wiggly line in the margin or the word "fuzzy" or "I'm not sure what you mean" or "I can't see this clearly." Maybe try an arrow to indicate a possible jump to create more interesting connections by obliterating explanatory connectives. Perhaps suggest that he take out all modifiers, especially articles, and then put back the ones he really needs and wants. Take the first three or four lines of prose and re-line them in a couple of different ways, not changing a word, and ask him which he prefers. Or ask him to do it. And if you get a chance to talk with him, don't belabor it. Don't explain or theorize. Just say, "You've got something good here. I liked working with it. Now decide for yourself. Forget everything I've said and have some fun with it. If you want to show it to me again, fine. If you don't, fine too. Oh, and, if you feel like it, write some more."

Any interest on the student's part is a success that you don't need realized on paper, much less in the school literary magazine, because what you have managed—by magic and force of character, of course—is a deft circumventing of the stubborn, common, student defense for one-shot writing. Just entertaining the possibility of changing one word to make the poem *better* undermines the prevalent teenage theory of what I call "spontaneous expression," the idea that the best way to say it is how it comes out first. Even students who see this "sincere feeling" notion as mush-minded may voice it because they are hesitant about actually saying what they mean or they don't really have anything to say. Poetry is to high school students a good guise; it's obscure.

But if the theory comes up, take it seriously, respect it, and dismantle it. There is a vast difference between the impression of spontaneity and literal spontaneity. The appearance of effortless writing takes work. If your students don't buy this idea, use sports or dancing as an analogy. Don't let go of this point, it's critical.

The idea of spontaneous expression is important not only because many students entertain it—they want all things to be simple, to have answers—but it is also important, more important, because the notion is rooted in a fundamental issue of writing: whom are you writing for? The issue is audience. Poetry may appear to be a public art and students certainly know it that way; they read poems in books, on greeting cards, as graffiti, but they are interested in it more as a private art. Poetry allows them to express themselves—and it offers a wonderful advantage over other forms. You can hide in a poem behind fancy words, fragmented syntax, and obscure allusions. Writing poetry may be a lot more fun than reading poetry, but why hide? "I am not hiding. I write for myself. If I show it to some people and they like it, that's nice, but that isn't what matters." This is writing as personal expression. The audience is one. Maybe a few others, "if I feel like it."

The audience of one, of the self, is fundamental to high school students. It is an assertion of their independence. The

importance is not to be underestimated. No wonder they are ill at ease with "analyzing poetry," morally ill at ease. They have even less sympathy with the idea of revising a poem. Showing them a famous poet's draft or your own isn't necessarily going to change their minds. Logic has no place here. To be willing to change one's poem is to sacrifice personal integrity for public approval, and adult approval at that. Re-working a poem must be presented as only a *personal* possibility, a way to make what you like better to *you*, not the collective "they." Re-writing is a *personal choice*.

Even the adamant student can be reached if he has more than one poem. "Which poem do you like better? Why? I like this one better for this reason. . . . What I like about the other one is. . . ." Be specific. Point. Say what it is you can't understand or see clearly. If the poem is about an incident, ask about it. Maybe jot some notes from what he says. Give him the notes, saying, "Here, these notes are interesting. I didn't realize how much was involved in the incident. This poem could be better, I think, if this important personal experience were made clearer. But that's up to you."

Maybe, just maybe, the student goes off grazed by the writing muse. That is, the re-writing muse. Not the sweet, generous, well-known one that drops a nice line in your ear, but the prodder, the picador, the provoker of "Let's-see-if-I-can-get-this-just-right." The one called work. But the harder the work, the more fun. And if the student gets smitten by the strange places his fooling around with words takes him, then tell him straight: "Look out, this apparently harmless activity called writing isn't harmless at all. It can be addictive. You can lose time, sleep, money, and the patience of your friends; and what are you left with? Words—words and your screwball, screwloose curiosity!" This idea can penetrate the hardest of teenage craniums. Fair warning acts as a prod, not a deterrent. ●

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# TEACHING FICTION WRITING THROUGH ANTICIPATORY AFFIRMATION

by Kathleen Collins

WRITING IS PROCESS. WE SAY THAT AND READ that and believe that. We teach that way. Yet we see students writing piece by piece, and the necessity to respond (grade, comment, react) to one piece of writing tempts us to treat that piece as a final product, defined in achievement by its own limits. Our understanding of process is in jeopardy at that moment. We may respond to the content of a fragment as if it were a whole. We might think “story” or “essay” instead of fragment. We might ask students to rework, rewrite, rethink. We then hold them captive to that piece as though once words have been committed to paper and shared, those words have achieved some final wholeness that must be evaluated as it stands. We forget in that moment that writing is process and that most of the writing that we see is a fragment, a section of a continuum.

In teaching writing workshops for all age levels, in and out of school settings, I have found a way to respond that emphasizes process. I am like a metal detector picking up clues as to direction. I respond intuitively, associatively, with affirmation. To predict riches to come is the opposite of evaluating weaknesses or omissions that exist. The assumption that the writer knows first what to write, and then writes it, is not my notion. Mine is that the writer goes in search of the material; the writing is the means of searching as well as the achieved search. Only in the end, when the fragments are assembled, is it clear to writer and reader alike what has been found. I read each piece to find out where the writer might be headed. Then I try to point in that direction by suggesting techniques and/or content.

Any writing begins with the act of selecting. This initial selecting takes courage. The blank sheet of paper is intimidating. To choose from one’s own experience or thoughts something “worth” putting down requires courage. Writers hesitate, falter, fear failure, fear that what they write will be partial, inadequate, greeted with ridicule, trivialized, or damned with faint praise. I must respond to that initial effort in a positive way, but I must not lie. How? If I perceive that first bit of writing to be a fragment, I can honestly praise it. It is a beginning. It points in some direction. As a teacher I can sense the direction, encourage the writer to continue with another fragment that is associated with the first. The two fragments then act as pointers toward the territory to be explored. I encourage the writer to search further. Eventually this collection of fragments becomes a complete set. The

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writer will know that he or she has written all there is to write, at this time, in this area. This story will be a collage, a mobile, a cluster of rock crystals held together by a central crystal that acts like a magnet. The fragments function together in an interdependent way: the process has created form.

To approach short story or novel writing\* in this way allows me to respond affirmatively and to help the writer recognize direction. By writing fragment after fragment, my students work toward an emerging understanding of their experiences and the way these inform the emerging story. Writing, as a search for an accurate representation of a person’s own experience, is exciting and alive and never passive.

Almost all the lead-ins that I use depend on content to provoke the writers to begin to write. Any passage from literature with a highly charged moment in it, any concentrated scene that is focused on some event that they can understand, will work. The writers jump from another’s experience to an experience of their own that they can write about. I have found two methods of writing to be extremely useful in expanding the writers’ means of searching for authentic material and apprehending it with clarity and strength. These two methods are stream of consciousness and flashback. I spend a session on each of these before the writers need them; these methods take the writers into new terrain.

They need to know the difference between a memory and a flashback, to recognize that remembering is a controlled action of the mind and not particularly interesting to the reader: “I remember that we used to picnic by the lake and go swimming afterwards.” Instead they learn to have a present experience trigger a flashback: “I start to climb the tower. Abruptly I am standing with the water just above my knees; I hear my father’s voice, ‘The drop-off is not far out—watch out!’” To have the reader know that the fear of climbing connects with the scene in the water strengthens writing. To know about flashbacks and to explore what triggers them both strengthens my students’ ability as writers and increases their associative skill as they search for experiences to explore in writing.

To teach stream of consciousness, I ask them to examine the ways in which they are experiencing life. I cover the blackboard with their responses: the five senses—in time present, past, future; language—written and spoken; internal dialogues and monologues; memories; planning; thinking;

\*Also see Kathleen Kranidas’ “A Fragment Approach to Short Story Writing,” *Teachers & Writers* magazine, Vol. 11, No. 1, and “Novel Writing in High School,” *Teachers & Writers* magazine, Vol. 11, No. 3.

analysis; daydreams; rerunning the past—censoring and/or rewriting it; coloring experience via mood filters; feelings, etc. When the board is covered with a myriad of ways of taking in experience, I suggest that they try to tap all of them when writing, not only the thinking or academic mode. I ask them to be at a great control panel where they can light up this or that mode of experiencing any time they want, for variety, for intensity, for accuracy. I ask them to write for an extended period of time without sorting, without formulating, in phrases and words, rather than in sentences.

Later I suggest that stream of consciousness is particularly well suited to scenes of intense emotion because at such moments we do not order experience logically; we experience life in a fragmented way when we are in shock or ecstasy and should write accordingly. I also suggest that this technique is particularly appropriate for scenes in which we experience sensory disorientation due to anaesthesia, liquor, laughing gas, swimming underwater, dreams, etc. I ask them to write a scene in which they have experienced sensory disorientation, using stream of consciousness. Of course, if students have trouble finding material, this technique is a good way to get started. They can write several pages and then note a subject, event, or person, that is surfacing and write a scene evoked by that passing, perhaps barely articulated reference. This technique widens their proficiency as writers both in terms of discovery of material and of transcribing what they are discovering.

Thus, rather than noting errors committed, I teach in advance techniques that will be needed to increase the richness of their material. As a teacher I try to be alert for references to events that have emotional content for the writer. "Write that," I say, and sometimes I suggest that stream of consciousness might work best. I talk about rewriting only with more advanced writers. It requires sophistication and self-confidence to rewrite. The beginning writer has neither and is likely to make new errors faster than the old are eradicated. To interrupt a steeplechase runner to work on perfecting the hurdle may produce a competent hurdler, but it will be a hurdler who has dropped out of the race.

Grading is at best a distraction and at worst a road block. Even pointing out a well-done passage invites self-imitation and self-intimidation. Writers should not be looking back to see what has been accomplished or what was not accomplished but ahead to see where they need to go. The writing they have done should always give thrust to the writing that lies ahead. Comments concerning content, such as "That was an exciting moment," or "That was a hard experience to have so young" help, and best of all, elicit more writing: "You may want to write more about that sometime," "You may want to write the scene in which you found out. . .," "You might want to write a flashback here," or "Did you ever have a dream connected with this?" To respond is not to evaluate but to predict what might be yet to come. Students give us clues, often unrecognized by them, or minimally disguised in rhetoric or polite language, or understated, or deliberately hidden. The perceptive teacher picks up on the clues and encourages the writer to proceed. It needs to be reiterated that it is all right to write anything, that any experience of consequence to the writer may be written about and that language appropriate to the experience is appropriate to the piece. There can be no such thing as "inappropriate" in a serious writing group.

Recently an adult in an evening group of mine wrote a

powerful scene in which she was waiting in her home while her husband went to the precinct to deal with a painful event involving one of their children. The writer asked if she could change point of view in her story and invent a scene in which the husband and the police are talking at the precinct. I said of course she *could*, but I would urge her to stay with the woman's story, which was powerful and moving, and perhaps try using stream of consciousness for a scene in which the woman, alone, is reacting to the event. She then told us she had already written several fantasies that she hadn't intended to share with us in the workshop because she hadn't seen any connection between the fantasies and her story. She then read to us the most powerful piece she'd ever written: the mother's fantasies concerning the future of that same child. This writer was so used to a surface line in stories and so unsure of her own authority as writer that she didn't see how this writing was part of her story! I was again reassured that suggesting a technique and/or a direction based on the writer's own clues *is* the way to respond. Usually the writer goes away to write the next fragment; in this case she had known as writer what to do but needed the "teacher's" affirmation to give it validity.



collage by George Schneeman

Readers come to writing in chunks: a story, a novel, an essay. But people *write* as a flow, a process, not as machines that emit chunks of completed writing. We write the way water flows, underground, aboveground, in waterfalls, and in trickles. Teachers are there to let the students know that all of it is fine, and any trickle is in and of itself good because it's going somewhere. Like the mountain spring, this writing is a marvel because it appears from somewhere deep and dark and out of sight, and it flows toward the light. ●

# CRITIQUING THE WRITING OF OLDER ADULTS

by Rochelle Ratner

IF MY AIM IN SENIOR CENTERS WERE ONLY TO teach adults how to write better, I would fail every time. I'm there to give of myself and not merely of my knowledge of writing. If their writing improves along the way, that's even better. But what I'm aiming for is to awaken their interest in the writing itself, in the hope that they'll find something they can continue after the workshops stop. Since the need to free a dormant creative impulse drew them to these workshops in the first place, the sessions will ideally become a catalyst for creativity that can continue under its own momentum. This can be achieved only through my own enthusiasm for writing in general, and a sincere interest in what they have to say.

All the same, some criteria have to be established. With school-age students, a writer/teacher who contends there is no right or wrong way frees creativity. The situation here is reversed: older adults expect criticism so that they can feel they've learned something, but, at least for the first few sessions, what most of them really want is praise and support. It's up to the writing teacher to find the proper balance between the two. For example, a woman who complained about how the previous teacher never gave any constructive criticism was the first to balk at suggestions for revision.

Especially for the first session or two, I try to sit back and let the workshop members carry the discussion, leading them toward comments about the work without interjecting my own opinions. I ask other people what they think of the piece a student has just read, and then ask them what they think of specific images. If they had to choose a single emotion to describe this piece, what would they choose? I ask the writer to explain what her intentions were in this piece, then ask others how well they think she accomplished those goals. This is a way for me to discover their understanding of the craft. It also establishes an atmosphere of criticism so that, in later workshops, I can begin to offer my critique of the work, and perhaps some suggestions for how it might have been expressed differently. I have to keep in mind that I'm the outsider here.

As the weeks go by, it's also useful to keep in mind their previous work, especially the themes. Whenever possible I relate the writing this week back to the theme of something they wrote before, lead them toward seeing a larger picture in what they are doing. This also helps establish the sense that I remember them, which is very important here.

One of my most interesting students in terms of thematic development was Genevieve, a patient at Burke Rehabilitation Center in White Plains, N.Y. Due to her cautious movements, I assumed she was in her sixties, but later realized she was probably not more than fifty. She had been used to

living alone and being self-sufficient, and now was reliant on relatives to make major decisions for her, which also caused endless frustration, since they seemed to have never understood her lifestyle. Genevieve was not really new to writing, and I teased her that she'd had the quintessential writer's accident: she used to write and illustrate children's books (though without success at getting them published); having just finished one, she was taking it into work to xerox, when a truck hit her. As a result, she had a brain injury, and found it extremely hard to concentrate, though she was anxious to get back to writing now. As the workshops progressed, her writing seemed better focused—I'm not sure if that was due to her physical improvement or the workshops, but I like to think it was a little of both.

At the first session, we were writing about names—usually our own names. Despite the fact that, in discussion before we began writing, she talked for quite a while about being called "Viva" as a child, Genevieve wrote instead about how her cat Cyclops got his name. This piece was almost an essay, and the workshop didn't allow time for one person to go on so long, so I stressed the need for brevity, for capturing much in a single image. Her later prose pieces became much more concise. At the second session, writing about becoming an object or an animal, she continued the focus on her cat:

## To My Cat

Remembering that you are my beast  
Disturbs me in the very least.  
Because, describing you by name,  
disguises: we are the same.  
Disquieting though it may be  
I share your personality.

"Describing you by name,/disguises" obviously picked up the theme from the first "name" assignment. Though I immediately reacted to the astuteness of these lines, it took me quite a while to realize the full implication of "we are the same." In going on and on about the cat's name, she was actually writing about her own name more acutely than the other students were.

At a later workshop, using food as a starting point, Genevieve compared her own weight gain to her overfed cat, whose subsequent death caused her to lose the weight she'd gained.

After studying my part, among past mistakes, while young, and at the time recently divorced, I had come to the conclusion that one advantage in my favor could have been that I might have been a perfect housewife, along with having other, more delightful traits.

I arrived at a conclusion that there might be some delicious moments in my future life if I could cook in every language. Right away I launched upon the project, adding such delights as imported olives, wine, and warm rolls from the oven.

In no time, my weight zoomed from 98 to 115 lbs. It was astonishing to discover that the people who worked with me no longer likened me to Brigitte Bardot, and were suddenly naming me Marilyn Monroe.

ROCHELLE RATNER's latest books are *Trying to Understand What It Means to Be a Feminist: Essays on Women Writers* (Contact/II Publications, 1984) and *Practicing to Be a Woman: New & Selected Poems* (Scarecrow Press, 1982).

Then my overfed cat died. After a week of grief, I lost all extra pounds, and was suddenly looking like a young witch, with pointed toes. (The style of shoe was pointed that year.) One of the shippers made a little grave stone for my cat. Cat and gravestone were driven to Massachusetts.

My aunt in Massachusetts, even today, after years, fearing the burial laws, explains to newcomers on her property, that BABY BLANCHE DUBOIS, age 12, was a feline and not a human.

This piece also touched on fashion (“The style of shoe was pointed that year”) and there was a brief discussion about conforming to fashion vs. how we like to dress. It reminded me of an old assignment that I hadn’t used the past few years: writing about clothes. Since the subject had already been broached, I picked up on its applicability and resurrected it. Genevieve’s next piece took a turn in theme, away from the cat but recalling the fashion element from the previous piece. From the casual way in which she now dressed—simple sweater and skirt chosen because they were clean rather than coordinated—I would never have guessed that fashion once played such an important part in her life.

#### W.W.D.

Years ago, when I worked for a fashion newspaper, the suggestion given to me by my boss turned out to be a command. “If you hope that I will continue to send you into the garment district to pick up the sketches, you must plan to wear the latest style, the latest color and the latest fabric.”

I rejoiced at my new freedom to be fashionable. Wearing the “latest” purchased by my salary meant ending my account at Sears, after searching through the more elegant stores. Then, out came the scissors and the sewing machine. As I proudly marched through the garment district, wearing the “latest,” I soon became aware that I was wearing a uniform.

The day came when I happily left the garment district, fashion papers, and stores, placing my employed circumstances where I could enjoy the parade of nurse’s uniforms gliding by.

My office clothing filled my heart with the pleasure of living with color, as I bought every color available to me. In time, that tendency faded among other uniforms. I’m happy with my present freedom from fashion.

In Genevieve’s work, what I stressed was the thematic progression, the content as it evolved and enlarged. Since form is somewhat alien to students who usually attend these workshops—people who have led long and interesting lives and are anxious, first of all, to tell about them—I find it useful to stress content rather than form. The easiest way to learn, of course, is through the examples of other writers. This is tricky: the people in situations such as one finds at most senior centers are often self-involved; they want to talk about their own work, they don’t really care how someone else has done it. It’s up to me to make that connection for them, through content, by choosing examples that they can relate to immediately: food, clothes, a house or apartment they lived in, plants, or talking to a part of the body (particularly applicable at Burke, where all the students are recovering from injury or illness). It’s a question of point of view and perspective. If students can explore alternative viewpoints, they can learn to come out of themselves and their prejudices. They learn to go where the writing leads. They relate to content, but if the lesson is presented carefully, they are at the same time learning form. It’s hard to know what will be appropriate at a particular moment, and for this

reason my teaching notebook is crammed with examples that I can call on as needed.

One of the over-used but still useful examples, which I almost always read in the workshops where I’ll have them write about food, is William Carlos Williams’ “This Is Just To Say.” A nice contrast with this is “Prevailing Foods at Times” from Diane Di Prima’s *Dinners & Nightmares*. The section I usually read contains seven paragraphs, but three from the middle will suffice:

fall 1953—kraft cheese spreads on pepperidge farm bread for lunch, this while at work doing latin, i was reading vergil i think, i worked in the credit department of a large sugar company.

february 1954—lunch tongues, liver spread, caviar, vienna sausages, anything that came in small enough jars. we lived off what we could steal from the a & p, sue had a navy coat with big stiff sleeves, i had a trenchcoat with nice deep pockets and jeri would slip a steak under his jacket cross his arms over his breast and swish out, rolling his eyes at the boys at the counter. we always bought bread.

spring 1955—a lot of scrambled eggs, at other people’s pads. lived nowhere, had keys to a lot of places, and it seems whatever people are out of they always have a couple of eggs left. hate eggs.

We don’t have to enter into a long discussion about form to talk about the simplicity of these two pieces, and the differences in the way the two writers approach food. Even an untuned ear can hear the differences in breath, and notice the way in which Williams contracts the subject while Di Prima expands it. To give an example in which food becomes symbolic of more than itself, I often use Adrienne Rich’s “Peeling Onion,” part of which follows:

Crying was labor, once  
when I’d good cause.  
Walking, I felt my eyes like wounds  
raw in my head,  
so postal-clerks, I thought, must stare.  
A dog’s look, a cat’s, burnt to my brain—  
yet all that stayed  
stuffed in my lungs like song.

These old tears in the chopping-bowl.

Still supposedly dealing with content, we can discuss how the onions become symbolic for Rich, and go back to relate it to the poem by Di Prima in which she writes about how those foods are symbolic of times in her life. An advanced group can sometimes talk about Williams’ plums as somewhat symbolic. They are learning (without realizing it) first how to form an image, then how the image becomes a symbol. As we read and discuss the pieces they write, we can then apply some of the same principles. Most will write fairly directly, but there was a definite symbolism, even clearer than in Rich’s work, in Genevieve’s early work, where she used the real yet metaphoric cat to describe aspects of herself that would be difficult to approach directly. Slowly it can be pointed out that other students are not merely writing about the same subjects covered in the examples I read, but following through with the formal and technical aspects as well.

Look at the different formal applications that Genevieve’s work has incorporated. The first piece was an essay, then the short poem “To My Cat.” In writing about food, she seemed somewhat influenced by the short, concise paragraphs used

in Di Prima's piece I'd read as an example, and felt comfortable enough with that style to use it again in writing about fashion. But even in groups where no one student is quickly picking up on the style of the examples, there will always be a variety of styles within the group itself. After a few sessions, I can often teach voice by getting them to be aware of, and sometimes imitate, each other's style.

As these workshops progress, there is almost always some visible technical progression, but more often than not students will not be aware of it. I point it out but do not dwell on it. They will hear when ready, or as much as they are prepared to accept. I've learned to expect resistance to change, fear of anything that's new. The dropping of rhyme is a perfect example. Week after week, I told a certain woman to remember, she didn't have to rhyme, but I wasn't insistent about it. Reinforced by the examples I read in class, as well as the work of other students, she was finally able to write in a looser style. It must have taken ten weeks before she began to write without rhyme, but after that it was a great freedom for her; always prolific, her output tripled.

But the point was, she refused to admit the need to change until she felt herself capable of that change.

Ultimately, the students have to be the final judges of what is good or bad in their work. If the workshop includes publishing a booklet, for example, I can spend one or two sessions discussing what to include, leading them toward the selections I feel show their writing at its best, or toward certain revisions, but in the end I have to respect their wishes.

What strikes me is how much of what I'm saying I learned from students. It was Genevieve who first got the group interested in talking about clothes. I had no idea that students would react so naturally to metaphor until I saw it demonstrated in her work, and even then I nearly overlooked it. Who is learning from whom here? It's true, once I realize these concepts, I can apply them myself in future workshops and with other groups, but it's important to recall where they originated. Especially if I want to continue learning.

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## THE SELF IN THE WORLD

by Aishe Eshe

**D**URING MY RESIDENCY AT P.S. 46 IN HARLEM, I encouraged the students to focus on the "self" (real or imaginary) and how this "self" relates to the world. In other words, how we as human beings relate to various facets of life such as love, hate, family, home, homelessness, drugs, racism, nature, and dreams. The creative expression of the feelings that reside within the "self" can be the music of poetry that turns the wheels of our minds and spins the axis of our universe.

Nicole Wilson (fifth grade) extended her vision of the world onto the beauty of nature as seen in a wave.

### The Wave

The waves splashing against the rocks  
The water as white as foam  
Rumbling Rumbling  
it goes back in and pulls the sand with her  
Then it comes out over the rocks  
The waves as thick as a fog  
The waves are a beautiful sight to see  
if you were there to see it with me

Nicole's use of the similes, "water as white as foam" and "waves as thick as fog," paints a clear picture of her vision of a wave, and one can hear the music of the wave as it plays within the rocks. After she completes the picture, and the music is silent, Nicole adds to her view of the importance of human life, the importance of self: "if you were there to see it with me."

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As the students at P.S. 46 looked at the "self" that lives within them, they also looked at life and its effects on the "self." Natasha Johnson (sixth grade) tells us in her poem "Life" about some of the harsh realities of life outside of the dream.

Many things  
happen in life  
such as jobs, fights  
and crime.

Life can be hard  
at times,  
Especially for children  
when they are abused

Drug dealers  
are starting crime  
around many schools  
having children act like fools

Racism is hard  
to accept in life  
especially in places  
down south

Some people are  
really lucky to have  
love and family  
to care for them through life

Natasha expressed her feelings about some elements that come in conflict with the "self": crime, abuse, drugs, and racism can confuse or even destroy the self, but as she points out, "love and family" can heal some of the adverse effects of these conflicts.

The students at P.S. 46 expressed themselves in various ways. Some used simile or metaphor. Some went inside themselves to the dream or imaginary self. The students at P.S. 46 looked into the mirror at themselves, and the reflection seemed, at least for that moment, real.



# STORYTELLING IN KINDERGARTEN

by Anne Martin

“WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TYPEWRITER in your room?” a parent asked me last year during Parents’ Night in my kindergarten. I was surprised at the question, having taken for granted the presence of my old beat-up manual machine, purchased at a yard sale for fifteen dollars. As my handwriting tends to be nearly illegible, a typewriter is a necessity of life to me at home (where I haven’t quite graduated to a word processor yet), and I had unthinkingly extended this dependency to school. So I replied with a few lame sentences about the importance of the written word for me, my hopes of encouraging the children’s literacy, and let it go at that. However, as I thought more about it, I realized that perhaps it is not self-evident that a classroom for five-year-olds should have a typewriter. Kindergarten is not generally considered a grade in which writing takes precedence (unless you define as “writing” the endless workbook exercises that seem to have proliferated in the wake of the back-to-basics movements, even in kindergarten programs).

As it happens, however, many kinds of writing are actually going on in my kindergarten all the time. There are group charts, some contributed by the teacher (such as poems or notes to the class), and others dictated by the children and read back together. These might include class news, plans for the day, descriptions of objects, nature observations, or anything else worth recording for everyone. Then there are individual drawing/writing books (blank stapled drawing paper), in which the children work every morning when they come in. After drawing, the children dictate a sentence or so for every page, and gradually many of them write their own words and sentences in “invented” spelling. There are also signs to put up in the block area (“Danger,” “Do not break,” “Airport,” etc.), which the children generally write themselves, copying from a list or making up their own spelling. And there are cards or notes to people, phone numbers to exchange, names to write (their own and those of friends), spur-of-the-moment stapled books, captions, and titles—a whole range of uses for writing that don’t differ that much from adult daily jottings, except as they are limited by the children’s rudimentary writing capabilities.

The typewriter, however, does have a special use in our classroom. It enables me to record children’s stories in a form that looks professional to them, and instantly gives me a copy by virtue of a carbon sheet. (The first time Timmy saw me remove the carbon copy as I gave him his story, his eyes widened in amazement. When he understood what it was, he was jubilant. “You copied me! You copied me!” he said enthusiastically, and proceeded to tell all the other children that I was going to copy them too. More blasé now, he still comments every time before we start, “You’re gonna

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copy me, right?” and asks to see my copy afterwards.) The procedure for dictation is very simple. If I don’t happen to get a request directly, all I have to do is ask a child or two if they have a story to tell me, and immediately I have a whole bunch of eager children clamoring to have their turns. The first storyteller pulls up a chair by the typewriter, and the others write their names on a sign-up sheet for whenever I can turn over the rest of the class to a student teacher or volunteer. Fortunately, the children learn early on in the classroom to be self-sufficient during their activity periods so I can be dispensed with at least some of the time.

Sitting alone with one child in the midst of the surging life of the classroom, taking down thoughts and words as they are spoken, is a particularly intimate and satisfying experience. Sometimes a second child will join us as listener or even as participant if the storyteller consents. Though I say very little, only occasionally asking a question to resume the flow of the narrative if it has been interrupted, my job as scribe is not a passive one. I become aware and sensitized to each child’s way of expressing himself: the way the thoughts come out, sometimes easily, sometimes with visible effort, often with the mood of the story carried by the inflection of the voice. Because there are no technical barriers in the children’s way, as there would be if they wrote for themselves, the dictations reflect a freedom of subject, a willingness to experiment, a spontaneity that permits a surprisingly wide range of expression, style, language, and structure. Much of this dictation is akin to the drawing, painting, block building, and dramatic play in which the children are engaged most of the day. Indeed, the stories are sometimes directly sparked by those activities and translated into narrative. Here are some descriptions children gave of their paintings:

Somebody went outside into the yard and saw a rainbow. And he thought it was raining but it wasn’t raining. Only the sprinkler was on and that made the rainbow.

This is a bathtub with a shower coming out. And a dirty person’s in it. And he looks like a monster. And he is a baby monster taking a shower. And there’s a puddle of mud in the bathtub because he’s so dirty.

Those are windows. And a giant is getting a boy and putting him in there to get all the people out and eat them.

These stories are like outlines that don’t need to be fleshed out because the paintings themselves carry the real meaning. Many children prefer not to connect their paintings to narrative at all, and generally we look at children’s art work for its own sake—the use of color, line, design, detail—rather than in terms of a story. But the underlying themes of the paintings are often developed another time in stories or in dramatic play.

For Linda, all stories revolve around family themes, just as her pictures tend to be of people, no matter what medium she uses (even Cuisenaire Rods). Linda is a quiet girl who loves to look at books. Although her facial expressions don’t reveal much, Linda has an amazingly rich world of drama going on inside her all the time, a multitude of characters speaking to each other. During activity time, she takes the doll family and moves them through the doll house, softly

carrying on the conversation for all of them, completely absorbed in her play. She doesn't seem to mind when I step close to listen, and sometimes she even seems happy to tell me what is happening in her world, but I do get the feeling that she would just as soon not have the distraction of a bystander. There has recently been a new baby in Linda's family, an event that has stirred up deep feelings in her and an urgent need to play out many possibilities of family relationships. Recently, Linda was engaged in such an exciting drama with the blocks and doll family that I couldn't help asking her whether she would tell me story "for the type-writer." She looked hesitant a moment, but agreed when I said she could hold the dolls as she talked. Her story came out fluently, almost faster than I could type:

Once upon a time the family decided that the Daddy should live by himself. And so he did. So the Daddy at once picked up his suitcase and went to the truck. When he was there, the children boated over there. And the baby couldn't get out, but the kids helped him. And so it went. They took a long time to get there. And by the time they got there, his Daddy was back home again to see the Mommy and the kids. And the kids were already there. And so they decided that the kids should stay overnight there. And so they did. They got all their suitcases and went into the boat. When they got to the Motel, the Daddy came and said "Hello" to the Motel person. "I'd like to see three kids who came on a boat. Have you seen them?" "Yessir! They're right on the top floor. Now climb twenty steps and you'll be there. And they'll probably be doing dancing. La teedo loo loo. Can you hear them?" "Yessir."

The kids said, "I wish Mother and Daddy would come because the baby is hungry." "Hello, kids!" "Can we go on the boat back home so Mommy could feed Jerry?" "Well, I'll have to think about it, if I could find a chair." So they made a circle, all the kids. In the meantime, Daddy was thinking. And Mother was wondering, "Where are all the kids? Where is Father?" La teedah dey dey la tata.

Linda's story, a somewhat abbreviated version of her dramatic play, seemed to me remarkable in several ways, most notably in its deliberate ambiguity. The conclusion with the music (which she sang with great gusto) as an echo of the dance of the children earlier in the story is a sophisticated device for indicating unresolved tensions and action. The role of the father is a complex one, with many contradictory expectations. (This clearly struck a chord in the other children in the class. When we acted out this story, the children freely contributed lots of reasons for the father to leave the family—"We don't like you anymore," "You could find another job," "We want a new father," etc.) As often happens, a story that starts out in an impersonal voice becomes closely identified with the narrator further on: the baby's name at the end is that of Linda's brother. Evidently Linda is doing a great deal of thinking about her own family.

While the children's stories do point to their concerns, it would be a mistake to interpret them too literally. Previously Linda had dictated these two stories:

I hope my baby doesn't get a cold. I love my baby. I love holding it. He cries a little because he might want to be fed or something. He has a lot of hair. He's tiny. He has long fingers and he holds on to our fingers. He sleeps sometimes with us and sometimes in his own bed. He cries a lot when he is changed. My Daddy mostly doesn't hold him. And he's cute.

•  
I had a little heart. My mother and father were mad at me because I kept swinging it around in their faces. And so once when I came home from school one day, I found it in the trash. And I took it in the house and said, "Get out!" to my father and mother.

It would be easy to construct a psychological explanation of Linda's typically ambivalent feelings about the new baby, and her anger at her parents for displacing her. I think that would be only partially true, and an oversimplification. The image of a heart flaunted in people's faces and then reclaimed from rejection is in itself worth pondering, and too striking to be dismissed in a few standard phrases about jealousy and anger. What Linda is showing us is her acute sensitivity to relationships as they are expressed by what we say, and particularly what we *don't* say; what is between—and underneath—the lines. Though she is only five years old, Linda, has grasped something of the complexity of feelings between people, the rapid and subtle shifts in relationships. We would be reducing her perceptions if we gave a glib interpretation of her feelings. Her stories tell me that while on the surface Linda is a self-contained child, at times seemingly unresponsive, she is actually absorbing her surroundings intensively, reworking them with exceptional richness of imagination and admirable strength in tolerating (and exploring) ambiguity. Through her dramatic play and stories, Linda's insights may continue to be revealed to me in small glimpses as the year goes by.

While Linda's dictations have to be caught on the run, as it were (she tends to freeze up when asked to dictate a story without preliminary play), other children delight in the role of storyteller. "Once upon a time . . ." Peter begins in a solemn sing-song. He breaks off, glances up at me and explains in his ordinary voice, "I always start my stories that way," and then continues with his dictation. It is almost as though the minute a child begins to dictate, he or she takes on a conscious relationship to an audience, which is different from casual conversation. For a teacher transcribing these stories and reading them afterwards, it is clear that these young storytellers have a sure sense of form and literary atmosphere, that they know the conventions of the written language.

Children are constantly drawing on their literary heritage to remake their own world. I was amazed to see how frequently the children wove their tales out of the imagery, patterns, characters, and settings of fairy tales, and this at a time when I thought fairy tales were out of fashion. Here, for instance, is Tally's version of Cinderella:

There was once a beautiful princess who was called Cinderella. And they had a beautiful garden with flowers. And the mean stepsisters plucked one every day. Soon there was none for Cinderella. So she feeled sad. Then the door opened when the stepsisters was in the room, and so the fairy Godmother said, "Don't cry, Cinderella, I'm your fairy Godmother. I'll give you some flowers but you promise to stop plucking them before midnight. And make sure the stepsisters don't come in the garden. Tell them you are taking weeds out of the garden."

So then she was plucking so merrily that she forgot all about what the fairy Godmother said. It was almost midnight. She was plucking so merrily that she didn't even know it was twelve o'clock at night. So when the stroke of midnight came, all the flowers disappeared and once more the weeds came. So then the fairy Godmother appeared and said, "Cinderella, you forgot all about what

I said.” “Oh, I’m sorry I forgot.” “Well there’s nothing I can do about that. That’s the only potion I had for the flowers to come.” “Well I was picking so merrily.” “Well you should have put a clock outside so you know it’s twelve o’clock. Oh, I just forgot, I made some more potion. But this time don’t forget that you better put a clock outside so you know when it’s twelve o’clock.” “Thank you, fairy Godmother, you made some more.” So once more Cinderella was happy again. And the fairy Godmother disappeared.

For Tally, the drama of daily life resides in closely reasoned conversation. All her stories are in the form of lively dialogue, whether it’s a mother mouse inviting Santa to dinner over the phone, a fairy Godmother arguing with the queen because she wants a return for her gift (“Well, the *baby* has to give me something. It’s not your problem. Don’t you know when you get something you have to give something back to the person who gave it to you?”), or a pregnant wife insisting to her husband that she can do without his help (“I *said*, husband, I’m going to the doctor myself. Now look what you made me do. You were talking to me so much that now it’s dinner time”). Tally’s Cinderella is not interested in a prince, but she does care about flowers, an important subject for Tally who spends much time drawing flowers and talking about them. Until quite recently, Tally was treated in her family as a cute baby sister who had no ideas of her own. Through her stories and pictures this year, Tally is asserting herself as a competent child with talents quite as evident as the intellectual prowess of her brother. Moreover, she has evidently made careful observations of the tone of adult conversation, and is reproducing it with verve and wit, to the pleasure of her parents who didn’t know she could do that. (She did complain though that her family found one of her stories “more funny than good” and that she would prefer them to find it more good than funny.)

It would seem that children who are exposed to good literature from early on, who are regularly read to by their parents, are more likely to develop their storytelling powers at a young age. But that is not necessarily the decisive factor. All children have been exposed to stories their whole lives: overheard conversations, talk with adults and other children, TV dramas, movies, magazines, books, songs, pictures, ads, photos, landscape settings, etc. Everything around a child is potential food for story-making. In my classroom this year perhaps the most skilled storyteller is Timmy, who has hardly been read to at home, who has not been to nursery school (as most of the others have), who has not had a background of stimulation and privilege. But Timmy is an observer, a listener, a questioner who has somehow picked up story devices, fairy tale phrases, conversation forms, and a wonderful sense of drama. His stories, with their compelling plots and dialogues, have influenced other children in the class to try variations on his themes. After Timmy told a dramatic story about “water demons” that pulled a child under a creek, “barbecued” him in a “water stove that burned” and “threw him out with the bones all over him,” we had a whole rash of water demon stories for a while. Here is one of Timmy’s typical stories:

Once upon a time there was a building, and inside the building there was people, and they were dancing. And when they were dancing, they saw children. They were eating cake. When they were done they went to bed. And the people saw the children sleeping in their bed. So the people they moved without the children. So one child woke up and saw everybody gone. And she

saw the refrigerator gone, and she saw the carpet gone. So she woke up the other kid, and when she saw it she woke up the other one. Then the one that got up, she told all of them to wake up. They said, “They are gone! They are gone!” They got on their bikes and they said, “Maybe we have to find them and make them come home.” So they got on their bikes and they went.

They saw the white car. It was the people’s car that moved. The children got in the back seat and they hid in the car. So the people went back home and they didn’t know the children were in the back. So they said, “Now we could have peace.” So they took a nap, and the mother said, “It’s so quiet around here!” So the children got out of the car and they went under the bed. The Dad looked under the bed and saw all the children. And he told his wife to get out of here. And the wife said, “No, what’s wrong?” “The children are under the bed.” “What do you mean?” “I *mean* the children are under the bed!” “Oh, stop kidding me.” So he went back to bed and the wife thought maybe he was kidding. So the wife looked under the bed and she saw the children, so she said, “Honey, wake up. We got to get out of here!”

So they went to another house. And they said, “We want to move into a brick house.” So the owner said, “Y’all can’t move into this house because this house is dangerous for y’all.” And the owner said, “Do you have children?” And they said no. The owner said, “You may move in.” The owner was a murderer. So he put a mask on his face and he said, “Nobody will stop me.” So the children found the car and went in the house and saw the murderer, and they jumped on him. The people woke up and saw all the children jumping on the owner and they ran out and went in the car and waited for the children. And the murderer said, “You won’t get away!” So they ran in the car and went back to their old house and they lived happily ever after.

Timmy has reasons from his own experience to consider questions of abandonment and the conflict parents may feel between their desire to lead their own lives and their responsibility to their children. But these are also universal themes that strike a chord in everyone (as demonstrated by the popularity of the tale of Hansel and Gretel). Timmy has objectified his own feelings by creating a piece of literature complete with plot, detail, settings, conversation (even a dialect!), and differentiated characters. His story moves deliberately to a climactic conclusion. As he tells me a story, Timmy sometimes stops and says he has to think for a minute. Then he resumes in the direction he wants the story to go. He is an author in control of his material, and he produces work that is appreciated by the class and thus becomes a further source of story material for other children. It is always touching to me how carefully and respectfully children listen to each other’s stories. Many of the most interesting spontaneous remarks and class discussions arise out of reactions to a child’s story read aloud in class.

When I speak of dictated “stories,” I actually mean a whole range of forms: fantasy, poetry, song, accounts of events and experiences, re-telling of TV programs or storybooks, information, opinions, and feelings. However mundane the subject (or however borrowed the material), the teller usually manages to inject a personal style and viewpoint into the story, which give me more insight into the child’s way of looking at things and organizing impressions. Even “factual” pieces can be quite revealing, such as the one Pia dictated over two sessions without losing her momentum. Pia was a child who puzzled me. Always polite and friendly, she seemed remote, not really with us. Pia was happiest playing with the stuffed animals she brought from home every day, and she was dreamily evasive when I made attempts to focus her attention on what was going on in the

class. It seemed to me that Pia's attachment to her toy animals served mainly to insulate her in a fantasy world, so I was surprised by this essay:

Some horses are wild horses. In the jungle there are all different kinds of animals. In Westerns there are some of them playing donkeys, horses and cows. Cows are not wild. Bulls are always wild. Cows are normal. Lots in the jungle are always wild. Two of them are wild in the Westerns and that is a horse and a bull. Lots in the jungle are always wild. None are plain.

In the zoo there are lots of different animals. Zebras always have stripes. All snails can't swim. Some bees can swim. All fish can swim. All polar bears can swim too. Some whales are called pilot whales. Killer whales eat people. Whales need to go up for air. On top of their heads close you can see an air hole. Whales talk, like flapping their fins. Some whales go by their heads in the water. All animals in the jungle are wild. Zebras look like in the cage. They have long stripes. Some horses are wild.

Some bees can swim. All horses run faster than dogs, mostly wild horses. All squirrels eat nuts. All squirrels live in trees. All squirrels live in holes in the trees. Raccoons have stripes on their tails. All camels have one hump, but some have two. Dogs dig out flowers.

Far from shutting out experience, Pia had evidently been taking in a wealth of information, and was now trying to sort it out. The intensity she applied to this effort made me realize how important animal life was to Pia, that it was giving her a window from which to view the world. I started to think about how Pia's strong interest could lead her into more connection with the class, and what I could do to help build those bridges. I borrowed piles of animal books, and Pia often studied them along with other interested children. I also collected Pia's animal drawings and called them to the attention of the class. Making sure she had time and space for her animal play, I noticed that Pia gradually included

other children, and eventually this play turned into informal performances for the group. Pia especially enjoyed a class trip to a farm, and she impressed the rest of the class with her outstanding pictures of horses in a class mural. She also began to play number and classification games, and suddenly learned numbers and letters. By the end of the year, Pia was a participating member of the class, partially because her stories (and drawings) helped me to see what was important to her, so that I could find ways to expand her interests and encourage her to make use of them in school.

The stories dictated to me in kindergarten all help me to know more about how the children think and feel, how they make sense of the world, how they restructure their experience. Looking at any child's dictations over a longer period of time gives me an awareness of the child's themes, values, concerns, style, and temperament, so that I can make provisions in my classroom that will accurately foster each child's growth and learning. Tally's dialogue stories suggest that she could make good use of puppets and drama activities, while Timmy's action-filled plots can be extended in the block corner where he will learn building skills and make new friends.

Dictation offers the children an opportunity to articulate ideas, to practice using language effectively, to weave pleasing stories and take them home to their families. It may provide outlets for thoughts that lie below the level of consciousness, and permit children to open up themes to their classmates either directly or through metaphor. Most of all, stories create bonds between people—children and adults—and can form the basis for understanding and intimacy within the classroom. I think now that the typewriter in my kindergarten stands both symbolically and actually for the wonderful ability of all children to tell their stories, to create reality over and over again, to struggle—as all writers do—to put into words their unique vision of the world. ●

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The work of Teachers & Writers Collaborative is made possible in part by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is particularly grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: ABC, American Stock Exchange, Chemical Bank, Consolidated Edison, Equitable Life Assurance, The General Electric Foundation, Hugh Hefner Foundation, Mobil Foundation, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Morgan Stanley, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, Overseas Shipholding Group, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, Variety Club.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 5 and 6, Manhattan; Districts 7 and 8, Bronx; District 20, Brooklyn; Hunter PA, PS 87M PA, PS 75M, JHS 167M, Lincoln Academy, Manhattan; PS 36X, PS 48X, IS 52X, PS 62X, PS 69X, CS 152X, Bronx; PS 107K PA, Brooklyn; United Nations International School, Queens; Lynbrook School District; Plainedge School District; Oldfield Middle School; Abbott School; the ArtsConnection-Arts Exposure Program; the Arts Partners program of the NYC Youth Bureau, the NYC Board of Education, and the NYC Dept. of Cultural Affairs; the New York Foundation for the Arts' Artists-in-Residence Program, administered by the Foundation on behalf of the New York State Council on the Arts and in cooperation with the New York State Education Department with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Council.

Our printer is Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

Editor: Ron Padgett.  
Guest editor, this issue: Meredith Sue Willis

ISSN 0739-0084. This publication is available on microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

## Teachers & Writers Collaborative

5 Union Square West, New York, N.Y. 10003

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