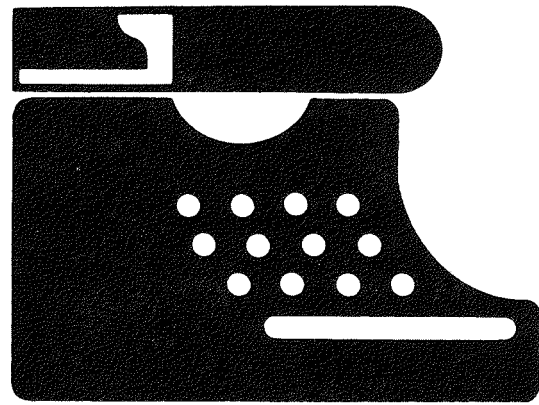


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EVALUATING The Poetry Children Write

by Jack Collom

GENERALLY SPEAKING, ACQUAINTANCE WITH children's poetry in America is restricted to some poets and some educators. Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* and other books have spread delight and elucidation in the business, but not much beyond. In some ways children's poems are the least specialized things made of words, but they too tend to fall within the thick-walled cubicles of an age of specialization. The popular media "explosion" blows a diversity of things to the general attention but, unlike real explosions, it's selectively expansive. Poetry, it is feared, might bore the average audience and therefore never reaches it.

One can understand that "high culture" remains off to the side, despite almost universal literacy and the media's proliferation. The audience at large is spoiled by the abundance of immediacy. Anything containing such barriers as complexity, esoteric reference, or the styles of a different era will automatically reduce the audience by the effort required. I propose that there are no significant barriers in or around the poems of children, that the best of them could charm almost anyone, were they only brought to almost anyone's attention.

As it is, for the kids themselves there's no continuing exposure to poetry in any exciting sense, nor to an atmosphere wherein poetry is considered a vital thing to do, much less a powerful force in society. The term "children's poetry" conjures up a blah sense, in general, of "I love the little flowers,/ They smell so very nice" or some such. That

JACK COLLOM's *Moving Windows: Evaluating the Poetry Children Write* has just been published by T&W. His article is based on excerpts from that book.

false image is the only barrier, but, unfortunately, an effective one today.

There have been cultures in which poetry has been something current, alive, available to do, for a people in general. I do think it's possible that poetry be as common in people's lives, in *our* society, with a little luck, as, say, dancing is, perhaps even more so as people grow older.

A lot of people one meets in America, in every pocket of society, will say that they used to write poetry, when they were kids, and they'll feel either defensive or apologetic about it—not at ease. What they've written usually is descriptions of emotion (young love) or nature philosophy, often rhymed, cast in a fluttery syntax and a wooden-legged meter. These are still too often the reductions of poetry commonly available to young people as personal creative models. People outgrow such limits, since their idea of poetry doesn't keep pace with personal development. Poetry has not, as taught, been made real to the individual. Thus it's dropped. (Happily, exceptions grow like grass through old sidewalks.)

But the qualities of poetry are by no means so restricted as that attitude makes them. If one's personal education (in and out of school) holds open a space for such qualities in

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writing as are shown, for example, in the poems given below, poetic activity will, when it's appropriate, energize that space, and people will sometimes write poems, as they might garden, rollerskate, or sing a song. They may write journals, prose ruminations, letters, stories, experiments, verse—it's all the same in its potential value. And a certain part or angle of human awareness that is hard to keep alive in the face of life's pressures might be, for many people, kept alive.

●

Nothing is more beautiful than a
Universe.
Mama, Mama, give me a
Ball.
East is the way.
Rounding is the sound.
Sound is my number.

This acrostic poem was written by a fourth-grade girl, Griselle Gelp, in a school in a part of the South Bronx no one would deny is in many ways devastated. The author is Hispanic and, due to environment, her English language skills are not outstanding, though she's obviously bright.

I once wrote the following short poem:

what I take for drama
thru the windows the brightness
in the blowing snow

is just
natural numbers

and thought well enough of it to include it in a book of my poems, alone on a page. I still like it, as a reminder of a nice attitude. But Griselle's poem clearly outdoes mine. My poem creates perhaps a thoughtful image, "the brightness/ in the blowing snow," to link in one's mind with the fact of the atomic composition ("natural numbers") of everything. Nevertheless, compared to Griselle's poem, which expresses a similar idea, my lower-case, no-punctuation "moves" show up as mannerisms. My idea is pushed too hard grammatically. In her poem the idea arises more naturally, through a dance-like series of gestures that seem inevitable, just right, but that remain surprises. That is, the predictability of mere logic (which is too rigid in my poem) could not in Griselle's poem have led from lines 1 and 2 to lines 3 and 4.

Her first two lines are a beautiful, simple statement, at first a huge, Leibniz-like affirmation. The breadth is breath-taking, beyond the scope an adult poet might find "cool." The statement is also deliciously ironic; one "pictures," due to the idea of comparison expressed, a universe laid out, on a table perhaps, with other things so one can examine them and judge the relative beauty. There's also the alternate meaning, that "nothing," that is, a literal absence of things, may be more beautiful than a universe, which is the presence of things. Griselle continues immediately with "Mama, Mama, give me a/ Ball." Meaning-wise, this has to be an appeal to the creative powers for an Earth to live on; intellectually it fits the previous statement perfectly, but what a jump it is! The tone of the language is over at the other end of the spectrum. Then, with impeccable brevity and a good ear, she brings the sense of the poem down through direction

("East," perhaps for sunrise or mysticism) and planet-shape ("Rounding") to the last statement, "Sound is my number," which seems to say she finds exactitude, measure, in the music of the world about her. The change from "the" to "my" helps this focusing-in process. The fact that the last line uses the singular "number" in an acrostic whose spine word is the plural ("numbers") seems to show us, modestly, that this is one "number" among many possible numbers.

Compared with all this, which seems sheer inspiration to me, my poem appears calculated. The way the last four words are set off and the line-break after "just" (to let trickle out the other meaning of "just") are too portentous. It feels like a false concision, whereas her remarks have natural economy. Her words have the air that "primitive" art has, at best, an absence of self-image or intentionality, just a natural expression like a wild animal or waterfall.

We can learn matters of great value from works like this—all manner of returns to the basic, unsullied poetic shot-in-the-dark. However, there are many turns of phrase, image, and thought that we could not "get away with" in our own work, simply because they would seem false to the relative sophistication anyone must assume is part of our mental makeup as educated adults. The only way to get around this would be to build up a life's body of work as a naif, to, in other words, validate for oneself, over a period of time, a childlike stance toward reality. In a way, poets have always done this, but there is a certain license, knowing these poems are by children, that is a part of our appreciation of them. We grant them the innocence from which their words can shine. It is hard for adults, when we write, to keep from qualifying the quick lights that may appear.

If an adult wrote the following lune (three words/five words/three words is the rule)

My dog bites
and I answer the door.
I am happy.

how would it be perceived, in the poetry world now? It would depend heavily on context. Do individual poems always depend on context? Do short poems? Does a typical fragility in children's poetry show up in a need for context—that is, are their successes often in the cloudy realm of ambiguity? If so, is this poetic or unsubstantial? How *should* this small poem be perceived?

One response I've received to this lune is that "bites" is a mistake for "barks." If this is the case, the poem takes on a different power from the one that I, in my literalness, get. "Barks" gives it the charm of extreme plainness; natural simplicity leaves room for the opening of the door to stand out. As the piece is, with "bites," the effect is more surrealistic; the opening stands out by means of surprise juxtaposition. In either case, the simplicity of utterance acts as a transparency to the vision, doesn't get in the way. The vision concentrates itself in the opening of the door ("answer" is the word, as if the door had spoken; simplicity helps us notice the oddities of our own idiom). To me, there's something about the "I am happy" that goes beyond any expectable joy. I think of a passage in Jack London's *White Fang*, read in childhood, in which a wolf cub comes for the first time out to the cave entrance and its world is suddenly expanded via the sight in a very heady way, through ridge after ridge, rocks and blue haze, to a representation of the fears and potentialities the larger world

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COLLUM

On Evaluating Collaborations

I'VE FOUND THE CLUSTER OF FORMS KNOWN AS collaborations to be extremely fruitful, especially as training. Due to the continual trade-offs in the compositional method, the burden of intentionality is lifted. Writing together, we tend to concentrate on finding a common language to speak rather than on making a point. The absence of purpose tends to fill with association and response. Fragmentation of story and sense encourages a focus on syntax as play—a big attitudinal step toward mastery.

I have often made collaborative poems with my own children, using any number of simple methods. For the following piece my daughter Sierra (age nine) and I wrote alternating lines and I end-rhymed my lines to hers.

Once when I was a little squirt
& everything was wonderful & everything hurt,
I went over to the big brown chair
to sit me down in its comfortable air.
While I was sitting I saw a paw
creep in the door, so brown & raw.
It had no body, it had no bones,
behind it oozed some ghostly moans.
It was the year of 2001,
a strange new age had just begun.
When the paw came closer
I screamed, "No sir!
You can't do that
like some vampire bat!"
I took out the TV plug
& threw it at this spooky lug.
Suddenly it exploded—
apparently it was loaded.
Those ghostly moans
rose to human tones.
Apparently it was my father,
so why bother?
I got so mad
at that Halloween dad
that suddenly I went aboard
his shoulders with a silver sword.
I killed that daddy of mine
because he was way too fine.

Although an immediate draw here is the "cleverness" of the rhymes, it can be seen by running down the poem alternately that the poetic feeling resides in her lines. I've found, collaborating with kids, that it's best to act modestly, just clean up a little and be poetic straight-man.

The following acrostic was made by me and my son Franz, then fourteen.

Shampoo

She washed her
Hair
And
Made it look
Pretty as
Orange blossoms
Of the East.

The tradeoff was done line by line and fell in place with the neatness of a unilateral piece.

I wrote the following piece with Franz (fourteen) in New York City, alternating lines.

The lines of Charlie's painting are waving around on
blood-red skies
with a touch of blue.
As I think, I sniff wandering air
and the night dims over the crusty city.
Points of light open their arms
in the dark sky.
Charlie trips on a broken sidewalk,
lands on his you-know-what
and catches a new line of thought.
— Four shots we thought firecrackers
and a man lies dead on Ludlow.
We rush to the window.

Out of a feeling for documentary authenticity, I've left these collaborations with my children thoroughly unedited. Certain phrases cry out for revision, in a sense, but to apply anything like normal verse standards would, I think, tend to cut out the life's blood of the poems. Their energy depends on the shucking away of standard conventions and, as in Whitman and in fact even in John Donne, the charm or genius is inextricably mingled with what seem to be inexcusable excesses.

This next piece was done with Sierra Collom (at ten), in alternating words. Such a format seems to lead to prose, albeit a totally goofy prose, rather than the rhythms of poetry.

What is green with long legs? asked Mr. Glasses. I said nothing. I didn't like this question, it's too personal, I have no good hopes for this green-legged study. Can a doggy. Shucks! I bought a ticket to Asia. Why did I do something far like that? If I had enough doggies for canning, I would stay in Alabama, but no doggies showed up. So I jumped off my refrigerator & didn't look down my sleeve at supertime. Asia! What a doggy place! Uh-oh, though, I forgot my cash. Time healed fast & nobody cared whatsoever. Work is hard & soft if you don't know what to do. Gosh, I lived in Asia ten months before I lived smoothly. Ah, then I just doggied along, tongue to the wind, eating the canned shadows of Asia. Oops was here, my long friend. Speaking Asian, I'd express something half-sideways. Something brown didn't matter, because it's only reflection, doggy shine. Oh! Suddenly I lost my Oops, you see. No sunlight isn't much here in Alabama—hey, what is green with long legs? What? A person like this Oops said, "A doggy, especially a green thing, long-legged with smiles on its arm."

Such a piece is loaded to the gills with whimsy. In removing the compositional reliance on the phrase, in forcing a singular consideration of each word, and from the semi-alien stance of just having received a word from one's partner, this form discharges the molecular humors of syntax. My favorite approach is to try to be modest and sensible; due to the tight trade-offs, it's impossible to avoid sounding crazy. When participants continually use their turns to say the most colorful thing possible, the enterprise degenerates into a mere list of convolutions. The fun is in the tension between sense and departure from sense. ●

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may be for us. I'm not at all saying that this poem refers to this passage, even unconsciously, merely that there's a touch of unspecified magic in the way the opening of the door is left a bit mysterious. Our attention is drawn to "opening" in a general way.

At this point I should speak of "reading into" kids' poems what may not be intended. Yes, of course I do this. I believe all poetry is, in part, a field for reading-into. The process of poetry is not just the conveyance to the reader of an intended thought; if it were, an essay would be more direct. We think of words as being merely pragmatic sound-units, invented to carry denotative information. "Pass the salt." "Mr. Peabody has only two fingers on his left hand." But language is organic; as it grows, psychological expressivity and practicality are intertwined. Not only do we utilize tones and connotations, rhythm, and other musical effects, to make our points with speech, we also *reveal* ourselves constantly in many complex ways, even when we try not to. Poetry capitalizes on these qualities of revelation. At best, mastery and subconscious revelation work, almost paradoxically, together to mingle the known and the unknown. All this, of course, does not absolve one from "reading-into" excesses. But it may give us a basis for respecting the validity of a poem's *expansiveness*.

The revelatory qualities of poetry stand out more conspicuously in children's poetry, by and large, than in the poems of adults. The conscious mind stands less in the way. This is both a glory and a frailty. Of course Griselle Gelp did not have the metaphysics of her "Sound is my number" poem intellectualized and articulated. In a way, it was perhaps a lucky hit, that is, she might not be able to write a body of poetry consistent with that startling vision. But who would? Even an adult's education, which does inculcate a certain consistency, leaves artists at the eventual mercy of inspired occasions for their really memorable works. Kids, without the glue of education, even more so.

I do believe that the connections I see in Griselle's poem are valid, that she had a series of feelings that were triggered by choosing the word "numbers" for an acrostic poem, and that once she'd had the inspiration of starting with "nothing" and then coming up with "universe" she was involved in a happy conflict that didn't become too mentally "set" for her. Such is the fine flexibility of youth. In the magic moments, good words do pop up for us, out of the blue. We can't explain them, perhaps, but they refer to something genuine inside us. We all know such moments, even in an everyday sense, in talk or thought. The unbidden nature of insight formed in words is familiar, not esoteric.

The adult can help nurture the creative spirit in children by finding her or his way to different standards—in evoking, handling, judging kids' poetry—than those applied to most other areas in education. There may be precise evaluations that do not really fall under the term "standards"—less codifiable values but values nonetheless, full of both suggestiveness and accuracy. The main fallacy in judging poetry has been that these two qualities are not seen as partners.

Poetic "Moves"

The plural noun "moves" (as in "she's got a lot of moves in her line" or "good move!") is used by many contemporary poets to designate a supple use of language in poems. It is more a matter of sophistication than the natural

candor common to children; there is a sense of the deliberate play of ideas and of the flavors and impacts of words, the dance of language, the image and idea counterpoint of sheer rhythm. I'm not referring here to the extremes of surrealist play but to a writing situation wherein some kind of logical thread is evident but is not pushed to an all-consuming conclusion; rather the perceptions of the poet dance around it, play with meaning, create slants and surprises. In large part this simply amounts to a concentration on language and a love of language without letting it be dragged along by meaning, in a subservient role.

I believe the largest chasm of understanding between audience and poet is centered around differing attitudes toward "meaning" in poetry. Readers seem to feel that a poem should wind up with a clear meaning, even that it should be paraphraseable with no loss in thought. This feeling is rooted in part in a natural resistance to the psychological revolution of the last 100 years, which has exposed the arbitrariness of much conscious proclamation and has led to a greater interest and faith in the role of the subconscious in producing the elements of art. Even people who accept, or love, the distortions of Picasso and the abstractions of music may want their poetry made of noble ideas decoratively expressed. Such a double standard stems chiefly from the many other uses of language, mostly dominated by its use as an intellectualized mode of communication. It is hard for us to view language as a medium for art, since it's not so obviously visceral as sound or color.

But poetry is an art and must be allowed the same exactness in examining and then proportioning meaning and the same exploratory freedom that the other arts have. And of course a new precision must be brought to bear on the words, since feelings are, in fact, as exact as anything.

So in this century the play, the music-like graph as it were, of ideas, has assumed a greater importance vis-à-vis ideas themselves, though a strong case could be made that, as far as the essentials go, "it was ever thus" in poetry, that is, that the key poetic qualities in, say, Shakespeare, the "lights" that raise his writings above others, and have made them for so long a time delightful, are the humors, the almost indefinable touches and turns, the inevitable surprises, of his instant-to-instant language (depending, of course, for their very life on the solid framework of his dramatic and character sense), and not his ideas, which are all derivative, at the service of his art, rather than presented as any kind of gospel.

The problems and the glory of modern art lie in the credit it gives to the flux of life rather than to the eternal verities. Each artist, indeed each twentieth-century person, tries to find his proper accommodation among the pulls of freedom and of discipline. And these pulls are not simply opposed to each other, one finds; the "psychic geometry" is much more complex.

Kids rarely think like all this. Nevertheless, they absorb, fully and delicately, the attitudes and struggles of their times, and when they write poetry it includes, often with stunning clarity, concrete evidence of the most current as well as the most timeless human thought.

"Psychic geometry." By this I mean the way ideas arise for us, when reading a poem, and form a succession of shapes that interrelate. An example is third grader Anthony Pandazzo's lunc:

The sky has
many clouds, birds, and pictures.
My thoughts circle.

From “sky,” “clouds,” and “birds” we have a vast dome containing nebulous shapes and small, particular shapes. “Pictures” is then a different order of noun and can apply in a variety of ways: the suggestive shapes of clouds, portions of the skyscape, and, since “pictures” is in a list with clouds and birds, not mentioned in a way to include them, we may think of subtle variations in the sky itself or of visions we project onto the sky. “Pictures” implies a contemplating eye and mind, and thus leads to “thoughts.” The thoughts circle, which suggests the shape of the sky, choices between objects themselves and representations of them (pictures), the “many” things to look at, the movements in the sky, and the endlessness involved. The dome of the head becomes an analogue for the sky. The mind, circling, brings a scattered expanse of phenomena to a form (as the lune does). Such ideas have room to arise when the elements in the poem, however simple, are, first, chosen sensitively and then not forced into loaded contexts, but left free to manifest their own roles in the poem.

Many children do have subtle qualities in their writings, abundantly, which traditional education has been slow to acknowledge. Since kids cannot usually maintain an equally subtle intellectual argument, their felt insights, as flashed in poems, are sometimes dismissed as incorrect, merely weird, or at best accidental.

Come
And see a
Rose.
Oh it's
Like
I
Now know
Enough.

— *Caroline Baez, 4th*

After “Rose,” the poem leaps to a mental geometry in which the last two lines are like petals. Examine the vowels from “Oh” to “Enough” and the *n* alliteration at the end. Very pretty music, dovetailing neatly with the ideas.

Open your mind to the
Universe, and
Run back home and get your lunch.
— *Juan Lugo, 7th*

A hollowness in very large thoughts is exposed by the humorous mundanity of line 3. This deflation is “our” lot in life, he seems to say. It may also mean, more straightforwardly, that it will take a while to study the universe.

By the way hair comes out in the morning, it describes the experience you could have had during the night.
— *Priscila Leon, 8th*

“Come out” is the perfect verb form, with its dual meanings of emerge and result, and “could have had” seems to hint at dream, without denying the chance of “real” adventure.

The sun is like a rose
People said a rose could never be the sun
And I said yes! yes! yes!
And I kept saying yes!
— *Kaisha White, 5th*

Breathtaking lyric moves, especially in the simple affirmative shout. Here the large thing is “like” the small and the small is shouted into being the large, not just being like it. Oddness of imagining “people” saying what she says they said.

Connections: Metaphor and Surrealistic Language

You have to be truly inspired to teach the uses of metaphor. All too often it (and its cousin, simile) is overemphasized in classroom approaches to poetry, and becomes too cut and dried as a device, too mechanical a mode of comparison. “A cloud is like (blank). Ans.: a ball of cotton.” Such excessive, predetermined neatness boxes in inspiration without air to breathe. Such reliance on formulae for the movement of images and thought (as opposed to, say, the acrostic, which pretty much leaves content open) leads to the one-on-one symbolism (“The white spider in Frost’s poem stands for divine purity”) that tends to reduce the educated understanding of poetry.

But in its broader sense metaphor is what connects one thing to another for us in poems. Unifying our scattered perceptions is *very* basic to poetry, which is why we shouldn’t allow metaphor to be arbitrary or formulaic. Children, when using metaphor without a prescription, tend either to use it so blatantly as to cast it into a humorous perspective or to let it crop up naturally in their writings.

(Continued on following page)

Poem

by Steve Levine

Now stop that
sort of
stilted talk

Get more serious
minded
about your work

And let your words
make trees
walk like giant

capital T’s
straight
out of the forest

STEVE LEVINE is a poet who has conducted writing workshops for children at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project in New York City. His most recent books of poems are *A Blue Tongue* and *Pure Notations*, both published by Toothpaste Press.

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As metaphor connects things outside the mind, surreal language connects the mind to the world outside it, in addition to the ways that common logic does. What I call surreal here could be termed “mixed.” There’s nothing new under the sun, but there are new combinations. The shocks of dream and the originalities of imagination are always based on new combinations of old things. For example, limpness by itself is ordinary; a watch is ordinary. But when Salvador Dali began including limp watches in his imaginary landscapes he provided an all-too-clear token for what the surreal is. A tiny blue giraffe, with shaving-cream eyes, dancing the black bottom is a tossup of simple elements, easy really—just rack your brains for visual things that don’t match, stick ’em together. Many kids fall into the trap of stopping there, pastiching up a surface goofiness, but the surreal draws its power from the logic of wildness, the combinations that are felt, not just thought up, that come, however unprecedented, from truly subconscious juxtapositions.



Children can sometimes find themselves in touch with genuine insights particular to the subsurface but equally real self. We may tend to dismiss expressions that lack the trappings of nobility (or even niceness), intellect, and grammar, according to our education, but it would benefit the nurture of the whole human balance of any kid to let the oddest expressive qualities have play, to let poems be unique, like fingerprints, wherever the whorls whirl. The coexistence of such qualities with the standards of good writing is not only possible but healthy and needed, in everyone.

When I played chess with my big brother, I felt that I could win. Then we started to play. We had 1½ hours playing. I looked at the chessboard and the squares. The players were him and me, alone in the living-room. I still felt I could win. The squares looked like cages where there were lots of dogs inside telling me where to move in the game. I won my brother, but I felt I cheated, so next time I will play with my mind, not with imagination.

—Rafael Torres, 7th

A sober drama, of the sort wherein the hero stubbornly passes up the Star of India despite the most obvious pressures. And maybe he’s right to.

I went to visit my cousin who lived in the twelfth floor that had white windows like the shining hot sun. I went in the elevator. It had small square rainbow colorful plates on the floor. In the red and white colorful walls it seemed that it held the air that will lift you up. The white lights up in the ceiling that looked like white birds shined the walls like the heavy sun that is near the earth.

—Richard De La Rosa, 5th

No doubt about it, though the innocence (or ignorance) of correct language would eventually merely limit this poet, right now it helps him avoid certain traps (such as glibness) and achieve a quick touch of heaven.

Adulthood

In various ways, the poems of children will sometimes be notably affected by adult or adult-like thought and feeling. Sustainable skill with words, with verse forms and the structuring of free verse, and with consistency of ideas, all help us write well. What one often sees in schoolchildren, though, is a decrease in poetic impact as these skills are assimilated. The very word “skill” seems to connote a mechanical response.

It’s true that some kids are able to mix a retained child-sensibility with their increased expressive skills, but most aren’t. It’s a process in which they have no guides, usually, and usually lack the philosophic fineness to juggle successfully their growing perspective and their energy. Good adult poetry is often unavailable to them—either it just plain doesn’t come into their ken or its language refinements and sophisticated points of reference make it unrecognizable to them. The culture at large—wherein poetry is seen, unfortunately, as highly specialized—gives the child little with which to combat such influences.

It is difficult to know how poetry may survive personally for even a very receptive child. Some combination of care and criticism tempered with honoring the kid’s own vision, however “wrong” it may seem—benign neglect perhaps—can help keep the spark alive, through the heavens and confusions of growing up. Simply presenting inclined kids with good poetry and letting them ride it as they will may be best for some; assignments may work well for others. Reading aloud, concentrating on the visceral, leaving one’s “philosophy” out of it, is likely to let the magic flourish and stick.



Wedding in the skies
Ending overnight.
Dreams are just dreams.
Doing this job in fright.
In the morning skies
Nothing will be happening.
Going, going, gone.

—Maria Camargo, 5th

Beautiful poem, heart-breaking sophistication. The first two lines expand and deflate the wedding quickly. Next, the dream is cut to basics. Next, zilch. And in the last line the disappearance is snappily recapitulated. Good use of a cliché.

The old man’s
heart was just not what
I had expected.

—Kyle Owens, 5th

Strangely focused on the impossibility of knowing another’s heart. Expectations frankly adult. Sense of ambivalence between the physical and emotional meanings of “heart.”

My life is a poem. I love my little poems, tiny words shattered in a sort of system in my heart, in a sort of little voice, could be to me. A poem is like little suns in my face when I shatter the words that appear in mind that I put in a sort of dangerous associated system I love.

&

Poems should be positive and strong, raising and raising. When words appear in a system it could be positive or an accident or nature sorting it to life, if you put it that way.

—Melissa Kawecky, 3rd

Where this came from God only knows. Maybe, in part, something as “mundane” as the dictionary as far as sheer vocabulary (“dangerous associated system”) is concerned. She may have just learned “shatter” and “system,” and “a sort” of beginner’s luck has perhaps attended her use of them, but there it is. “Tiny words shattered in a sort of system in my heart, in a sort of little voice” would honor Keats, or anyone speaking of poetry.

Evaluation

Recently I received a letter from fellow-poet Ron Padgett, which included the following:

“At the risk of pontificating, let me say that it is good for teachers to know that taste in art does exist, that it is variable, that it does change through history, that it is never final, that art is not good without it, that it is maddeningly elusive, that no one has *the* answer but that we can never stop looking for one. It is good for them to know that a sense of what’s good and beautiful and true in art can be acquired, or at least more of it can be acquired, by experiencing art, both as a passive observer and as a participant, to know that complacency and immodesty have no place in a person trying to find out what’s best about the best in art, and conversely, that one should not be insecure or apologetic about what one does not yet know. In other words, it’s ‘You go on your nerve’ (Frank O’Hara) in evaluating art, but only while giving your nerve a more informed body of information to work with. Ultimately, teachers should know that they must *never* grade their students’ poetry, but that they must form value judgments about that poetry, for otherwise they will never be able to give more than generic encouragement, which does wear thin. Finally, teachers should know that they can and should guide their students’ aesthetic sense and values, because peer criticism among students is good only so far as it goes, which in most cases isn’t very far.”

I agree. One needs to have a delicate line in mind between such modes of statement as “This is a valid poetic doctrine” and “Here’s what I feel.” And of course that delicate line is, in another sense, a large and varied continent. Evaluation is always tricky. It always verges on the arbitrary, and one should never lose track of one’s humility in the face of that. History teaches us that the most exciting works and styles have been misjudged again and again. The length of their misjudgment is virtually a criterion of their worth. We may look back at the condemnation of Donne or Beethoven for being too “rough” and smile, thinking we are now, late twentieth century, beyond such misjudgment, but the critical capacity of any individual or, indeed, any period is *always* limited. Nevertheless, we must evaluate; a proportion of evaluation would seem necessary in the whole atmosphere around art, as a device, or presence, against self-indulgence.

In prior ages of English-language verse, stricter ideas of pattern dominated. Most poets felt they must master and work within given forms. Refinement of discipline was looked upon by many as poetry’s highest formal aim. In retrospect, we find now that the greatest artists were those of *innovative* mastery. Such artists were often, in their own times, considered unpolished. The pendulum swings (or at least the spiral whirls), and nowadays the emphasis is, more than then, on individualized expression.

One great advantage in the stiff requirements of former times was the minute attention forced by the formal demands. In constructing one’s thought according to rhyme and meter, or the triply alliterative line, one became of necessity intimate with the atoms, the nuts and bolts, of the work. One thing a system provides is tension. Poets such as Alexander Pope developed exquisite skills at keeping to the form and at the same time constantly playing with it, violating its dead-average thrust—bottling up their repugnance to boom-de-boom boredom till it was ready to blow up, in the reader’s brain. But the possibilities for tension are endless in poetry, in or out of a given structure.

Nevertheless, resistance is still strong to what seem in modern poetry to be violations of tradition. This is also true in the other arts, and in fact in every aspect of modern life. In fact, it has always been true. Resistance toward change is always strong. Nor is this to be automatically deplored. Resistance and movement work together, against each other, to make change tolerable. But in poetry change is of the essence.

Writing poetry involves a combination of the ability to talk and the knowledge needed to compose consciously, strengthened by the experience of application, lit up by a “feel” for doing it. In other words, poetic success grows from a shifting complex of qualities ranging from exactitude to a “blind” gift for it. Part solid, part liquid. Reality fantasy. Relaxed concentration. Universal novelty. Immeasurable precision. We tend to barge into this nest of paradoxes, if we barge at all, armed with standards or attitudes and thereby scant one side or another of the total poetry.

An appreciator (which must include “evaluator”) of poetry should ideally bring the same intensity to the work as the artist did in making it. Thus we can never relax with a final body of knowledge. Nor can we rely solely on the favorable glow of our emotional response, which can degenerate into judgment based on how well the piece confirms our philosophy of life, or doesn’t upset us, or seems healthy, or reminds us of beautiful thoughts we’ve had. Of course the reverse can become sentimental too.

The sense of art as emotional salve—for convention *or* rebellion—is a lazy approach, especially dangerous in poetry due to the confusing variety of language’s uses. This is not to imply that the language of poetry is special, has nothing to do with those of exposition, chit-chat, propaganda, and grocery lists. On the contrary, poetry has a deep connection with all language uses. The precision of exposition, the feeling and rhythm of chit-chat, the expressivity of propaganda, and the musical realism of a grocery list are all prime poetic ingredients.

The difference is in purpose. In a sense, poetry *lacks* purpose, so that one is not distracted from taking in all the elements—the musicality, the surprises, the passion, the disguises, the sensitivities to word and world. One gets via the best poets, in detail, a feeling of the closeness of one person to humanity at large *and* a feeling of the breathtaking uniqueness of each. Subjectively this is purpose, but purpose that has been held back from coalescing as such till we are further than usual along the expansion that occurs from every statement, as from every pebble dropped in water.

Objectively, we are delighted and edified by good poetry, but the edification may be what we couldn't have predicted and the delight outside our run of habits.

So we approach a kid's poem, at best, with the power to gobble up Shakespeare, on one hand, and a readiness to cast away all the power of our knowledge, on the other. No one can do this. It just means that the scope of possible appreciation and evaluation is virtually infinite.

Evaluation and its expression, criticism, have the burden, more thoroughly than creativity does, of forcing insight into the conscious mind. A verbal gesture is less apt to suffice in criticism than in a poem. On the other hand, evaluation has the ease of working on something already given. You don't have to give birth to a perfect egg of soul when you make a critical statement. Grammatical corrections (when they don't harm the piece's spirit) and such remarks as "The extra syllable here makes the rhythm awkward" or "Can you think of something more original here?" or "See how the thought falls apart in the fourth line?" or "Here the rhyme takes over and there's nothing else there" may be just fine. It's difficult for criticism to get beyond such details and not risk seeming to criticize the writer's soul, yet the very young writer feels the lack when no mention is made of the spirit of the piece. One can safely praise any original sense of larger feeling "behind" a young poet's piece. The word "original" is the key; students should be made to realize that they can't just ride the coattails of a generalized emotive word. They must build room and justification for such senses out of the details of their own perceptions.

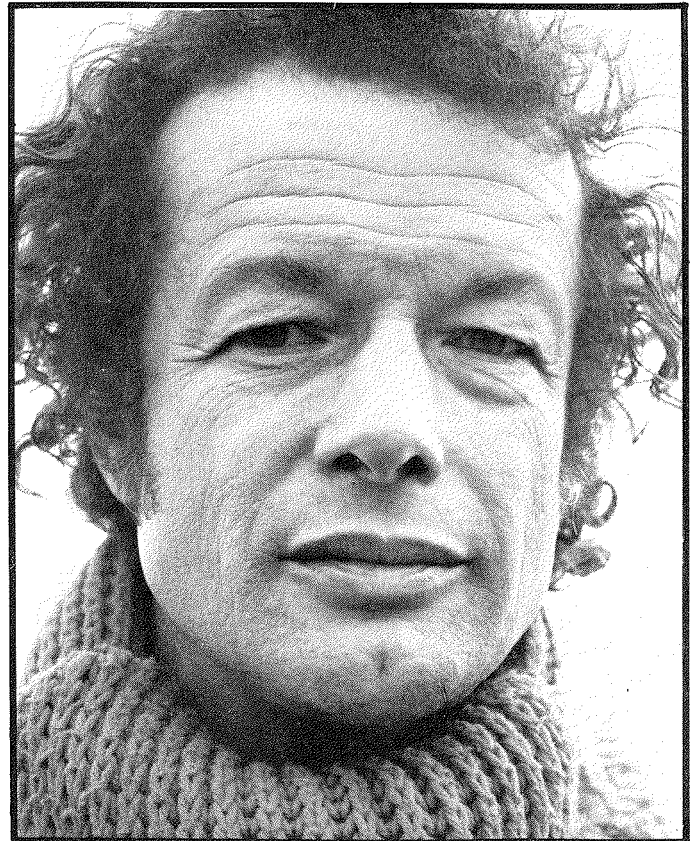
Evaluation in and around the classroom has two faces: what you tell the kid and what you really think (or how you select). These two should be *as closely as possible* the same face. The only difference should be—partly because one doesn't ultimately know for sure and partly as a spur—that what you tell the kid should include encouragement. Often there's no problem: it's "Wow" and why (the latter within prudent limits so the students don't feel they have a prescription to fill and refill). Often you can gently pick out "hits" within an otherwise mediocre poem and draw attention to them. The lack of praise for the unmentioned elements will usually serve as sufficient criticism in these circumstances. If the poem seems inept throughout, there is almost always a way to speak of the spirit of the student's attempt that may encourage the student and yet not compromise your sense of what's good in poetry. Depending on the kid, you can (surprisingly often, especially the more "technical" the criticism is) say harsh things ("This line doesn't work at all") when you can balance them with sincere praise of something else about the child's work. Keep in mind that for "sensitive" children ten seconds of criticism has the force of ten minutes of praise.



I stress and approve of originality. I find it basic to poetic worth even in the most traditional forms. Kids tend to have a strong talent for original expression but a low confidence in its value. They will generally approach writing with already enough or too much respect for tradition, often so unquestioning as to be no respect at all, but rather the amiability of pleasing authority. But just beneath the surface of their institutional habits of speech will lie founts of linguistic initiative, human in general and young in

particular. This is the first thing to be encouraged. If the spirit doesn't come first, very little will come at all.

But the tricky thing is that originality and precision are one; that is, they meet in their very substance, like the sides of a coin. Student writers and others may be seduced by semblances of these two qualities that are really evidences of stopping too soon in the search of them. E.g., "I chopped off the million green heads of the drooling giant woodchuck with my sword of light" is not originally imaginative, nor is "The beautiful flowers spring/ In Spring and quietly sing" profoundly precise. Each one makes too easy a bargain with the common image of the quality involved. The word that looms is "cliché."



Poet Jack Collom

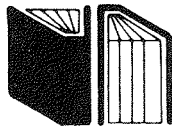
(Photo: Nat Collom)

But even here we cannot operate solely on principle. Clichés may be, in perspective, wonderful in poetry. Children perceive clichés very keenly but in a different light than educated adults. At best, children use them more boldly than we do, yet manage to throw them into contexts they've never had before. In which case they're no longer clichés.

In evaluating children's work, there is a certain superior ease we can fall into which may become too routine. Many pieces are so clearly faulty, and the faults so unambiguously simple, that we can respond with a confident red slash, at a glance. We needn't fear overmuch that we are rejecting a Shakespeare-like body of work. But in the process we may be rejecting instances of tiny Shakespearesque explosions, sometimes buried in material that does not work, sometimes hidden in a style so unpretentious as to lull our perceptions.



BOOKS



The Child As Poet: Myth or Reality?
by Myra Cohn Livingston
(The Horn Book Company, 1984)
\$24.95 cloth, 354 pp.

by Maggie Anderson

THE CURRENTLY FASHIONABLE POLITICAL position on education is to bemoan the lack of standards in classrooms, to champion a return to “the classics” or to “basics,” and to exhort educators, parents, and children to “honor tradition.” This position tries to find a panacea for the very real problems that exist in schools today in a reactionary discarding of what we have learned about educating children in the last thirty years.

Myra Cohn Livingston’s *The Child As Poet: Myth or Reality?* applies this currently fashionable stance to the teaching of poetry. Much of her book is concerned with placing blame for plummeting test scores, dwindling support for the liberal arts in colleges, withdrawal of state and federal support for the arts, and, in fact, some of the ills of contemporary society—on the “poet-teachers” (Livingston’s term) who work with children through poets-in-the-schools programs and Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Livingston contends that children are *not* really poets, as these poet-teachers have claimed, and that calling them poets is based on the Romantic “myth” that exalts children as “natural poets.” To substantiate the existence of this myth and its destructive power Livingston collapses her own idiosyncratic definition of “real poetry” into a smattering of educational psychology (mainly from Piaget) and some pedagogical imperatives about what’s appropriate in a classroom. She makes much of the allegedly harmful consequences of this Romantic myth, but she passes too quickly over her own definition of poetry upon which an acceptance of the prevalence of this myth depends.

Livingston’s contention is that a poem must “discard the *image* and present a *symbol*; it must shed its *subjectivity* and give *objectivity*.” She insists that real poetry is made of “universal symbols” and, since children’s syncretic imaginations cannot generate these, children cannot be “real poets.” Children may, she allows, be capable of “perceiving comparisons,” of making up a wild simile or two, but these

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are, finally, just “fancies of the autonomous imagination,” not real poetry.

The logic of Livingston’s argument about the Romantic myth of children as poets falls apart, finally, because it is based on her wrong-headed definition of poetry. Whatever “Ode on a Grecian Urn” says about mortality, truth, and beauty, Keats began it by looking at a jar. All “universal symbols” are built upon concrete images. Livingston’s failure to understand this and her insistence that poems work the other way around lead her to a vastly inflated definition of poetry.

Too often, Livingston equates what *she* does not understand or finds perplexing in poetry with what is unintelligible. Her poetic preferences are for academic poetry, rhymed and metered poetry, and for the poetry that, she says, “has traditionally always been understood to be art.” She offers Tennyson’s “The Eagle” as an example of this poetry.

Livingston wants a poetry that is reassuringly familiar. Since clearly perceived images and startlingly compared ones are more disturbing, and require more hard work on the part of the reader than “universal symbols,” she prefers the symbols. But even Tennyson started from the image of an eagle on a craggy rock, and it was the quality of his subjective observation that produced the poem. *The Child As Poet: Myth or Reality?* is a book that overvalues Poetry and greatly undervalues individual poets. Perhaps more importantly, it underestimates children.

Livingston develops her argument through a discussion of child-poets who have published in their youth, and through a critique of the poet-teachers who have worked in poets-in-the-schools programs. The discussion of Hilda Conkling, a child-poet who stopped writing as an adult, does ask some serious and legitimate questions about the conditions necessary to creative work in children and in adults. Livingston asks, “What is to be inferred from the inability of a child with an IQ of 186, with a gift for words and rhythms, observation, perception, and a photographic memory, who begins as a poet and whose mature work is never fully realized?” Although this is the right question to ask of Hilda Conkling, Livingston’s speculative answers are somewhat spurious. For one thing, Livingston seems more troubled by Hilda Conkling’s not writing as an adult than is Conkling herself. All of us have a right to abandon interests we had as children and there seems some simple disinterest in Hilda Conkling’s own remarks about her poetic silence as an adult. More importantly, Livingston offers us no analysis of social, economic, or gender-based factors that almost certainly would have had some bearing on Conkling’s (or any artist’s) later choices in life. Bright, talented young girls who do not, as grown women, realize their early promise are, unfortunately, not at all rare. Livingston chooses, however, to center her discussion of Hilda Conkling’s poetry on a psychoanalytical reading of young Hilda’s relationship with her mother, Grace Conkling, also a poet. Not only does this analysis presume too many things we cannot know about Hilda and her mother, but it also attempts to generalize an ideal environment for the nurturing of creativity based on one young poet’s home life.

More unfortunately, Livingston uses the example of Hilda Conkling as the basis for her critique of poet-teachers

in schools. Too many poet-teachers, she believes, teach from the mistaken belief that children are natural poets. Livingston contends that the mature work of these children will not be realized, as Conkling's was not, because of the poet-teachers who have bought the Romantic myth that the "celestial abode" gets lost in adulthood and is "irretrievable." The poems that children write, according to Livingston, are merely "tricks," and they are "substituted for a synthesis, a finished product." Furthermore, she contends, when they realize as adults that they have been duped by the adults who have praised them, they will stop writing.



By far the largest part of *The Child As Poet: Myth or Reality?* is Livingston's critique of those who teach poetry to children in the schools. Certainly, such critiques are needed and can be extremely valuable. But too much of Livingston's analysis amounts to cavils with individual poet-teachers whose work and teaching styles she does not approve. Although she raises some good questions about appropriate models for children's poetry writing, about the dubious value of writing from prescription, and about an emphasis on product rather than on process in writing classes, most of her arguments are waged *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*), and her tone is often that of a teaching supervisor correcting "flaws" in student teachers' lesson plans rather than of another poet and teacher addressing pedagogical differences with colleagues.

Livingston is quick to identify the poets she admires as teachers and those she does not. For example, she devotes a whole chapter to Langston Hughes's work as poet-in-residence at the University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1949. Livingston's reactionary stance is clear, however, when she seems to suggest that we take his work as a contemporary model, ignoring the differences in children, in adults, and in schools since 1949. Although Hughes undoubtedly did estimable work as a poet-in-residence, he also did so before television, computers, and the Vietnam War. Livingston conveniently ignores all discussion of external influences on teaching.

In her search for models from the past, Livingston seems even more extreme when she holds up as exemplary the writing standards of the St. Nicholas League for Young Contributors from 1924. Her admiration for the League seems to lie, primarily, in its insistence on "rules" (which she equates with discipline). "All contributions had to be neatly written on one side of the paper," Livingston is pleased to tell us. And she adds, "Discipline, then was seen as a form of personal development, a way in which the child should have to come to terms with the reality of his world." Poetry, then, becomes something like etiquette, an instrument of social grace. But one wonders how much cachet the "verse-writing" (Livingston's term) standards of the St. Nicholas League would offer a young writer today. Or, how much of such social currency is, or should be, the aim of poetry.

Among contemporary poet-teachers, Livingston admires Phillip Lopate, Karen Swenson, and June Jordan. She views more critically the work of Kenneth Koch, Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup, Alan Ziegler, Bill Zavatsky, and Ardis Kimzey; such poet-teachers, she feels, place too much emphasis on the revelations of the unconscious in poetry;

they overemphasize the improbability or craziness of poetry; and (here seems to be the real rub) they "inveigh against rhyme and meter." As a teaching supervisor, Livingston is difficult to please. She criticizes Koch, Padgett, Gallup, and other New York poets for their preference for what she might call frivolity in the classroom. Yet, within the next two pages, she faults Ardis Kimzey for hyper-seriousness because Kimzey has admitted to a reluctance to choose humorous poems as models for her students.

Livingston insists that "teachers have come to believe that poetry writing is easy; that children must be in a state of excitement; that rhyme must be discarded." I wonder whom she is talking about: I can think of no teachers, or poets, in my nearly ten years of experience teaching poetry in schools who believe this. Sometimes, in Livingston's enthusiasm for debunking the attitudes of the sixties while yanking us back into the twenties, she fails to provide an adequate context for the comments of the poet-teachers she quotes. We've learned a lot about teaching poetry in schools in the last fifteen years. For Livingston to accuse Lewis MacAdams of being "naive" in his comments (1972) about the imaginations of children, at a time when he was doing his first work as a poet-in-the-schools, is simply unfair, and dishonest by what it neglects to point out. Livingston's research is thorough, but a brief examination of footnotes and dates reveals that, often, she has not hesitated to quote someone speaking in the context of the energetic anarchy of the early seventies and to present what they have said as a silly way to teach now.

The tone of *The Child As Poet: Myth or Reality?* must make anyone who cares about contemporary poetry and about children's poetry defensive. It makes one defensive because it is an attacking, fault-finding book that sets up false contraries between individual writers and tries to turn individual teaching styles into philosophical differences. For this, Livingston's book angers me. And it saddens me for the ways in which it asks us to see each other as political enemies in the Battle of the Standards of Poetry. But it alarms me for what it also suggests about the climate for writing in the schools today and for the pale standards Livingston chooses to uphold.

"Universal symbols," if approached prior to an excited, engaged connection to real physical imagery that (often inadvertently) spawns them, can look suspiciously like clichés. They tend to be the stuff of verse-writing, not the stuff of the poetry that William Carlos Williams called "language charged with emotion" and that made Emily Dickinson feel "physically as if the top of her head were coming off." When Livingston is capable of calling one child's image of a pussy willow compared to cotton candy "fresh and surprising" it makes me wonder what kids she has talked to recently. Any group of children I know will, if asked what anything "soft" is like, say "cotton candy." I'll take the poem by the child who wrote "the moon melted into a first base automobile and hailstormed at my feet" anytime, although Livingston faults this child (and his teacher) for "gimmicky" writing.

Livingston obviously prefers that children write safe and predictable poetry. But, when she speaks of the adult poets whose work she disapproves, a deeper point is revealed. The "real poetry" that she insists children do not write is the same "real poetry" these adult poets do not write. "What binds many of these poets together. . . is their dislike of academic poetry whose closed form, established metrics,

complexity of thought, cosmic concerns, formal diction, and reverence for classical allusions, are thought to represent restriction, insulation from experience, and, symbolically, an ivory tower.” Beneath her discussion of how we teach poetry to children is, finally, a complaint about the kind of poetry being written by adults today.

Livingston might have written a better, certainly a more interesting book if she had limited her argument to a discussion of the kind of poetry she admires, and had given practical advice on how to teach it. Instead, she has written a book that is, at its worst, mean spirited. The fustian climax of her argument states, “Yet society in the United States today persists in repeating its myths of childhood and poetry, since adulation is irresponsibly afforded hundreds of thousands of children who are praised for ‘findings’ which are neither gifts nor treasure. And it is, unfortunately, these children who will awaken one day and discover that they have been exploited.”

Henry Kissinger once said, “The reason academic politics are so bitter is that the stakes are so low.” There is something of the bitterness of low stakes in Myra Cohn Livingston’s book. The imaginations of children are seriously devalued, or utterly ignored, by most of the adult world. Too many teachers and parents still see poetry writing, poetry booklets done by kids, young authors’ days, and student readings as extra fluff—“nice things for the kids

to do”—but in no way crucial to their development as responsible and committed adults. Given this prevalent climate, it is more than a little unfortunate that Livingston, who obviously cares much more about poetry and about children than the average adult, has chosen to write a book that declares internecine war on her colleagues.

I would be interested in reading the book Myra Cohn Livingston might have written but possibly cannot write, the one hidden inside this one, in which she might have more openly (without all the trappings) acknowledged her own poetic biases and shown us good ways to teach Horace and Shakespeare and Tennyson to children, in which she might have explained how she teaches metered poetry to third graders (because, presumably, she does). The more interesting book would have shown us *her* enthusiasms, rather than what she finds wrong with everyone else’s.

Reading *The Child As Poet*, I was reminded of an essay by poet Marvin Bell called “The Impure Everytime.” Bell is optimistic about the proliferation of poets, not only among young children but in colleges and universities as well. He distinguishes clearly between that “valuable elitism which encourages quality” and that “evil elitism which attempts to forbid participation.” Livingston, through her limited and inaccurate definition of poetry, through her insistence on critiquing poets’ individual teaching styles, and through her contention approaching, at times, moral fervor about the harm done to children by the kinds of poets she doesn’t like, has placed herself on the side of the elitism that tries to forbid participation.

PLUGS



Random House recently published Kenneth Koch’s *Selected Poems: 1950-1982*. Those of you who have used his teaching books (*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams; Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?; and Sleeping on the Wing*) will be intrigued by this new book, for it will enable you to see clearly the powerful connection between the best art and the best pedagogy. Available in paperback, \$9.95.

Meredith Sue Willis, author of T&W’s *Personal Fiction Writing* and guest editor of *T&W Magazine* 16/5, has just published her third novel, *Only Great Changes* (Scribners). Willis’s teaching techniques, like Koch’s, come right out of her practice as a writer. *Only Great Changes* not only demonstrates this, it is also simply a fine work. \$15.95 cloth.

A Young Authors Guide to Publishing is a handy 18-page booklet listing 24 magazines that publish writing by young people and giving detailed information on those magazines’ guidelines for submissions. Copies are available for \$2.50 each from Dr. Nicholas A. Spennato, Delaware County Reading Council, 6th and Olive Streets, Media, PA 19063.

Poem

by Harlan Dangerfield

When I see the words
“writing-across-the-curriculum,”
for a split second
I see and hear a horse galloping
in slow motion
from left to right
down an endless road
of different-colored corrugated metal sheets,
ridden by a wavering mass of electrons
that’ll go anywhere
as long as it’s everywhere,
a faceless, smiling cowboy.

HARLAN DANGERFIELD is the author of *Furtive Days*, a novel.