

# Chapter 1

## Reflections on Being Children's Laureate – and Beyond

*Michael Rosen*

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter, Michael Rosen reviews his two-year tenure as Children's Laureate. He describes the worst aspects of the poetry teaching he encountered during his visits to schools and the projects he initiated to try to combat these. He then puts forward his contribution to a manifesto which he feels is needed to argue for the important place of poetry in schools. He concludes his contribution with some detailed practical suggestions for how to approach poetry in the classroom.

### What Did I Find?

I'll begin with the worst: I'm going round a school popping into classrooms before doing my show in the hall. The teacher welcomes me in, shows me the class at work and says, 'The Quicks are doing poems and the Slows are doing rhyming words'. For a moment, I'm stunned. I say nothing and move on to the next class, but I'm left wondering how did we get to a situation where it became OK to say in front of a group of children, 'You're the Slows'? And even if there are Slows (which I don't accept), who's to say that these supposed Slows are so slow at poetry that they can't do whole poems? Or that the Quicks are so quick

they're ideally suited to do whole poems? Everything I work for in the matter of poetry in schools is underpinned by the idea that it's for everyone – in whatever shape or size, at whatever speed it comes; and whether it's a matter of reading, writing or talking about poems, we shouldn't ever be putting children in a position of being wrong, incompetent, or weak. Doing poetry should be a matter of being right in different ways.

Then, in other schools, over and over again I met National Literacy Strategy Disease. When it came to poetry, this meant, slavishly following when, where and how the NLS suggested schools tackle poetry. The consequence of this was that schools were doing haikus when haikus appeared in its particular slot at the given prescribed week in the prescribed term in the prescribed year on the NLS matrix, and only then; same again for narrative poetry, performance poetry and so on through the strange, intermittent, formulaic routine laid down in the Strategy. I saw schools where poetry was ignored for a term and then, in the last week, there was a sudden burst of 'metaphors and similes', unrelated to anything that came before or after, or indeed unrelated to anything very much at all. Over and over again, acrostics seemed to be the standard fall-back position when 'quick 'n easy' results were needed for a display or for a seemingly poetic response to a topic. Meanwhile, there were many classrooms without a poetry corner, with no regular input of the sound of poems, whether that was from recordings or live performances. Many schools seemed to be without any clear sense of what the point of poetry is, what the point of doing it in schools is, or how to do it. I suspect that in the onward rush to score highly in Year 6 SATs, many schools took up the position that the best way to get a Year 6 class doing well in 'Writing' was to drill them in mock SATs papers and worksheets with their dull, pointless extracts, followed by questions about facts, chronology and logic. Poetry in this climate came to be seen as some kind of incidental froth, like end-of-the-day quizzes, or, even worse, a chore done to satisfy the matrix.

I spent a good deal of my time during the Laureateship – and since – trying to figure out how we can break out of this cycle. One area I looked at was the many 'how to do poetry' books that are aimed at teachers. At first glance, these are all very teacher- and child-friendly; full of 'good ideas' and neat, easy, proven ways to get children writing poems. But the more I looked at them (and I'm not going to name names) I saw that there's a common thread running through them: poetry in most of these books is a matter of techniques, systems, tricks and forms. Hardly any of them, take as a starting point, feelings, thoughts, ideas, observations and dreams. Again, I ask myself, how did we get to this? If we look at the world of poetry and at when it works for us as readers and listeners, it will to a great extent be because it arouses feelings in us, gets us thinking, engages with ideas, gets us to look closely (or look afresh) at something, somebody or a relationship, offers us possibilities, takes us into a dream world ... Why then should we think that the best way to excite and interest children in writing poetry should be to start with techniques and tricks? What's the matter with feelings, ideas, looking closely, looking afresh, and dream worlds? And yet, in the same

classroom that might be using one of these poetry-technique books, they might also stop off once a week to do 'Circle Time'. Here, in a fine, democratic way, children and teachers talk about feelings, issues and problems. This time is seen as important for every child. It's considered vital that no child is belittled, or silenced, that the children and adults grow to appreciate one another's weaknesses and strengths, that the matter in hand doesn't necessarily have to have a neat measurable outcome: things may sometimes peter out, at other times they may develop, but if the principles are adhered to, there will be a long-term benefit for everyone. In other words, the ideal environment for poetry! Now, I'm not asking that poetry has to take over Circle Time – though a slot for it wouldn't be out of place. Perhaps what I'm hoping for is that something of Circle Time should be allowed to invade poetry ... but more of that later.

## What Did I Do?

So what did I do (and still try to do) to counter some of this? During my time as Laureate, I set up the following projects.

### 1. Poetry-friendly classroom page at *Booktrust*.

This is a page on *Booktrust*'s website aimed directly at teachers (<http://www.booktrust.org.uk/Resources-for-schools/Poetry-Friendly-Classroom>). On the page, both in video and in print, I've made suggestions as to how to create a poetry-friendly classroom. I've also put a shortened version of this on my own website (<http://www.michaelrosen.co.uk>). On the page I've asked that, first and foremost, we need to give poetry a home in classrooms and schools, without worrying too much about how to teach it. Our main concern as teachers, educators or poets in schools should be to help children feel comfortable browsing around poems, to not feel threatened by strange or unusual poetry; to help children build up a 'repertoire' of poems that they know. This means coming up with many varied ways of presenting poetry, of encouraging children to read it, hear it, view it and make it their own. What I've offered on this webpage is not meant as a blueprint, simply suggestions that teachers can adapt, change and make their own. There's a forum on the page for teachers to talk about their own experiences of teaching poetry.

When it comes to teaching poetry in some kind of formal way, I make the plea that if you're going to ask children questions about poems, then we should all think of ways of shaping these into the kinds of questions that we don't know the answers to. Questions like:

- Does anything in this poem remind you of anything that has ever happened to you, or happened to anyone you've ever heard of? Why or how is that?

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- Does anything in this poem remind you of anything you've ever read before, or seen on TV, at the cinema, on the internet? Why or how is that?
- If you could ask anyone or anything in the poem a question, what would you ask?
- If you could ask the author or publisher of the poem any questions, what would you ask?

As a class or in pairs or groups, the children can have a go at answering those questions, perhaps 'in role'.

I think if these kinds of questions are discussed in an open, humane way, involving everyone, taking everything that everyone says seriously (Circle Time ethics, if you like), then the class will get to make deep contact with the poem and will discover that poetry can matter.

When it comes to 'technique', I've expressed the view that in education, we fetishise this. We kid ourselves that if we have children spotting metaphors and alliteration, then something 'real' or 'rigorous' is being taught. But it is only kidding. What's more, I think that there is something pointless about disconnecting 'technique' from what poetic technique (prosody) exists for in the first place. So how should we tackle this? Poetry is a highly specific example of 'cohesion' – that's to say, a way (or really, many ways) of making language 'stick together'. All language sticks words together. If it didn't, it would be gobbledegook. If you look at this paragraph you're reading, you can see several ways in which words and phrases are linked to each other with what is in essence a kind of invisible grammar. In the first sentence of this paragraph, I end on the word 'this'. That 'refers' back (i.e. links back) to something earlier. Also, in that sentence, I use the word 'we'. This stands in for a group of people who aren't visible but it's one way for this passage to reach out to (link with) language beyond this page. The fourth sentence begins with the phrase 'what's more' – which, through the use of the word 'more' links what's coming next to what's just been. It alerts us to the fact that something similar is going to be introduced.

Poetry uses this secret grammar but has other invisible ways of linking words and phrases together. It's quite possible to tell children what some of these are (e.g. rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, repeated images, framing devices, verse structures and patterns and so on), and then ask them to spot these. However, I'm not sure of the educational value of such a process. It involves very little original investigation, discovery or invention. Instead of this process, we can say to children that poetry has 'secret strings' (or something like that), strings that run between words, phrases and letters. We can be 'poem detectives' and hunt for the secret strings. Of course, as a teacher you can make suggestions, but the objective should be to get the maximum amount of investigation, discovery and invention going on.

Then, when, let's say, photocopied poems have been scribbled on, with lines linking all sorts of sounds, words and images, we can ask, what shall we call these lines? Some of them do have names – alliteration and the like – but others don't. Why not encourage the class to make up their own names?

## 2. *Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat! 250 Years of Poetry for Children*

This was the name of the exhibition that Morag Styles and I curated at the British Library in 2009. It told and demonstrated the history of children's poetry in Britain. The Faculty of Education, Cambridge, produced a DVD of the exhibition so that there is a permanent record of it. In tandem with this, Morag Styles and The Faculty of Education organised a conference on 'Poetry and Childhood' at the British Library (<http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/events/conferences/poetrychildhood>), and all the major contributions at the conference appear in a book with the same title (Styles et al., 2010).

It did occur to me that it's possible for colleges, libraries, schools and even single classes to do versions of this. So, if a class has become interested and enthusiastic about poetry, it would be possible to do a poetry project, trying to get some sense of what kind of poems were written across time and across cultures. Poetry for children has a history and it's a history that could easily find a home in classrooms and libraries.

## 3. *Perform-a-Poem*

As I was thinking of projects to work on in the Laureateship, my son Joe, who is a film-maker, suggested that it would be a good idea for children to have a kind of poetry *YouTube*. In the end, it wasn't possible to create a nationwide site, but with the enthusiastic participation of the London Grid for Learning, we have got an e-safe children's poetry website up and running (<http://performapoem.lgfl.org.uk>). At the moment, it's only fully available to schools in the London Grid, but there's a limited version available for others to view. In essence, it's a site where schools can upload children's poetry performances, or poetry films, animations and videos.

## 4. The Philippa Pearce Lecture, the British Library Conference Lecture and the Laureate Lecture

During the Laureateship, it was my job to engage in polemic around poetry and these three lectures provided a context for that. All can be accessed online. The Philippa Pearce Lecture is in *Write4Children*. (volume 1, issue 2), the Winchester University online journal (<http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Pages/Write4Children.aspx>); the British Library lecture appears in the 'Poetry and Childhood' conference book mentioned above (Styles et al., 2010); and the Laureate lecture 'What is a bong-tree?' is on my website ([www.michaelrosen.co.uk](http://www.michaelrosen.co.uk)).

## 5. Live performances

Throughout the Laureateship I carried on doing live poetry performances in schools, theatres, literature festivals and libraries. I try to do about two or three of these a week over the school year. One important way of discovering and enjoying poetry is to hear it and to see poets reading or performing it. This makes for an experience that is a heightened form of what all face-to-face experiences are: a live moment where exchanges of feelings, sensations, ideas and personalities take place. A live show can be a place where questions can be asked, where an audience can feel how they are shaping what's being said by the performer, and something of the thinking and writing processes of a poet can be laid out before them. I've always thought that my job is to both write and perform poetry and that the one isn't more important than the other. I'm pretty sure that over the years, I've reached more children through the live performances than I have with the books. I also hope that these performances encourage schools to set up time and space for children's own poetry performances.

## 6. Course at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

I helped run a year-long poetry course for teachers at the CLPE. The first of these became the book, *A Year with Poetry*, that I co-edited with Myra Barrs in 1997. The idea behind the course is that teachers come in to the Centre and experiment then and there with writing poems and coming up with teaching ideas. They share them and then try things out in the classroom over the year and finish with a presentation for each other and for their headteachers and/or their Literacy Postholders at the end of the year. It's a process that could be replicated in teachers' centres and professional development centres everywhere.

## 7. *Can I Have a Word?*

I continued this project that started in 2004 at the Barbican Centre, London. Local Year 5 children come in to the Centre and work with several poets on projects which either involve exhibits at the Centre (e.g. art exhibitions) or special activities which are set up (e.g. film shows, concerts). The form of the work for the schools involves one day in the autumn term, one day in the spring and some kind of concert in the summer term. The days are a balance between working as a single class with a poet on the exhibit or activity, sharing work with the other five or so schools attending, and listening to the poets' own specially commissioned poems they've written in response to the exhibition or

activity. The overall result is a rich and fertile year, with introductions to art, photography, installations, films or music, with poetry acting as a partner and interpreter of these other art forms. It has served as a reminder that poetry is an excellent partner to the other arts. Several thousand London children have had this experience so far. I would hope that other arts centres, museums, galleries, heritage sites and the like could imitate what the Barbican Centre has done here.

## 8. *Literacy Evolve*

I've acted as a consultant on the *Literacy Evolve* project by Pearson Education (Lockwood, 2009a,b,c,d) to put whole books back at the heart of classrooms. My contribution on the poetry front was to suggest that their collections of poems could take the form of poetry selections presented by the poets themselves. So the poetry selections are not anthologies of several poets, but the selected poems of single poets who 'talk' to the reader in speech bubbles and commentaries. This is an attempt to connect poets to their poems. This technique could be imitated in the way that schools reproduce the children's poems.

Through these eight initiatives, most of which are still up and running, I've tried to counter and challenge the dreary, mechanistic approach to poetry that the NLS imposed on schools.

## What More Needs Doing?

It seems to me that we need a manifesto to campaign for the recognition of the importance of poetry in schools, but there's little point in doing this if it is to repeat the mistakes of the National Literacy Strategy. Here's my contribution to such a manifesto:

1. Poetry has a great role to play in education for many reasons:
  - (a) It tackles matters of great importance to our emotional lives and it does this in exciting, intriguing and accessible ways.
  - (b) It expresses who we are, what we've been and what we might be, and education should in part be about helping pupils do this too.
  - (c) It expresses at different times or at the same time: highly individual experiences, culturally specific experiences and common shared experiences, and in so doing can affirm and broaden readers' lives.
  - (d) It frequently asks questions, suggests thoughts, offers possibilities and tackles ideas. It often does this without closing off the matter in hand, or wrapping things up with neat conclusions. As a consequence, poetry leaves gaps for readers' thinking and opens up many areas for thought and discussion.

- (e) Through its more musical forms it gives children a way of grasping and learning the sound of written language, and it can easily imitate the sound and shape of speech, so making it a perfect bridge between the oral and the written codes.
  - (f) Because poetry comes in a wide range of forms, many of which are experimental, it shows children that language is flexible, changeable and malleable.
  - (g) Reading poetry often seems to stimulate people of all ages to want to write it.
2. For such benefits to be available for all children, then poetry teaching has to be itself flexible. There has to be an emphasis on open-ended browsing, reading, listening, viewing, writing, performing and publishing. Tying poems down to right and wrong answers, or prescribing right and wrong ways of reading, performing, listening and writing is counter-productive.

### SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

It seems to me that many people (probably not those who are reading this book) are anxious about poetry. One of the reasons for this is that the poetry lessons we had at school may have focused on what we didn't know or understand. The teacher, or someone cleverer than us, appeared to know more and understand more. So we ended up sitting in front of a poem, our minds filled with a sense of mild humiliation. Given that this was linked to the exam system, for many of us it turned poetry into a source of anxiety. If, then, we are required to teach poetry, there can easily be a sad, knock-on effect whereby we do the same thing to the children we teach. When I look at the NLS documents, I see and hear that same anxiety: a felt obligation that there are some 'basics' or 'essentials' about poetry that have to be taught and that these can be laid down chronologically as a course; that there are right ways to read poems and these mostly consist of spotting poetic techniques and explaining why they are 'effective'. If we are to make any advances in poetry teaching, where poetry works for a majority of our pupils, we have to break this cycle.

### SOMETHING TO READ

*Red, Cherry Red* (2007), Jackie Kay's fourth poetry collection for children, which comes in the form of an attractively illustrated book, complete with a CD of her introducing and reading the poems. This little book gives readers of all ages access to an engaging and original poetic voice.



## SOMETHING TO DO

1. Your main resources for writing poetry are:
  - **Feelings** (what feelings feel like)
  - **Reminiscences** (memory, recall of moments in your life, the 'photo album' of your personal history)
  - **The need to say something to somebody**
  - **Dreams and day-dreams**
  - **Hopes** (expressing wishes and desires, for yourself, for others, for your area, for your 'people', for society, for the world)
  - **Word-play** (sound, nonsense, musicality of language)
  - **Other poems** (as triggers for thought and ideas about what is possible to say in poetic ways)
  - **Other forms of literature and entertainment** (fiction, films, TV, etc.)
  - **Talk** (sharing stories, thoughts and feelings)
  - **Activity** (trips, outings, classroom work, making things, doing things, playing)
  - **Reflection** (describing and thinking about something around you)
  - **Suggestion** (not saying exactly what something is, just giving a hint)
  - **Ventriloquism** (speaking in someone else's voice, or in the imagined voice of a thing – a toy, a school, someone in a story, or even in the voice of an idea or feeling like 'Love' or 'Anger')
  - **Stream of consciousness** (doing a running commentary of what is going on in your mind as you are doing something)
  - **Catch-phrases** (clichés, proverbs, idioms, axioms, repeated statements, instructions, dictums, homilies, commands, slogans, lines from songs and poems, famous sayings, quotes)
  - **Comparison** (how one thing is like another, how one thing can represent another, for example in metaphor, simile and symbol)
  - **Argument and dispute** (representing disagreement between people or ideas)
  - **Image** (looking at pictures, paintings, photos, sculptures and figuring out what people or things in the image are thinking, saying, seeing, imagining, wondering)
  - **Music** (listening to music and writing down what you're thinking)
  - **Identity** (what it means to be me)
  - **Culture** (what it means to be 'us' – however defined; what is specific to the kind of people 'we' are)

Don't think of these as separate. They overlap with each other.

2. At the heart of poetry are poets writing poems about: what they **see**, what they **hear**, what they feel, what they **touch**, what they hear people (including themselves) **saying**, what they **imagine** other people are **thinking**, what they **imagine** could or might happen.

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3. Take these ideas of seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, saying, thinking and imagining and see if you can apply them to any of the list of ‘resources’ above.

So, for example, take ‘talk’ and ‘reminiscence’:

- You set the children up in pairs to reminisce about a moment when they were scared (or any other moment in their lives that you think matters to them).
  - You might want to use a film, a poem or a story as a trigger for this talk.
  - Ask them to think about and then talk about what they could see, hear, feel and think in their moment of fear.
  - What were people (including themselves) saying and imagining?
  - Ask the children to jot these thoughts down as answers to questions such as: What could you see? What could you hear?
  - At this point you could write a class poem by making a montage of answers, taking contributions from everyone, no matter how brief.
  - Say that the children’s job is to turn their own jottings into a piece of writing that will give the person reading it the feeling that they are there with you at that moment, seeing what you saw, feeling what you felt, imagining what you imagined.
  - Say that this is not a story. They should be just trying to ‘give the impression’ or the feeling of what it was like. It doesn’t have to be whole sentences.
  - Share the writing in the class.
  - ‘Publish’ it, by putting it up on the wall or making an ‘our scary moments’ booklet or a PowerPoint display with images and recordings.
  - Get the children to find some poems by published poets that deal with fear and scary moments.
  - Share these in a ‘poetry show’, combining the children’s poems with the published poets’ poems.
4. Go back to my list of ‘resources’, and what I’ve called the ‘heart of poetry’ above, and make up other combinations, for example:
- ‘ventriloquism’ and ‘argument’: a conversation between a playground swing and a slide about who is the best
  - ‘culture’: how do my grandparents speak? What are their favourite expressions? What have they told me that they think is important?
  - ‘stream of consciousness’ and ‘dreams’: write a running commentary on a dream you’ve had. In other words, imagine you’re a radio

commentator describing yourself in the dream, as it is happening, for example: 'I walk into the room ...'

- 'catch-phrases' and 'word-play': can you collect the school's catch-phrases and play with them by swapping words over from one phrase to another, or cutting words out? (e.g. 'Don't eat the corridors'; 'Be kind to the dinner-hall'...)
5. Find poems by published poets that show similar ways of writing to the ones that the children are writing, so that the children can compare their writing with the poets' writing.
  6. Use this list flexibly; make up your own combinations. Find poems that help you do this. Use the poems the children have written to trigger new poems. Display, record and perform as much as you can. Get the children to make their own anthologies and collections of poems. Make handwritten poem posters and put them up on the wall.

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## Websites

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