

POETRY

*'To be new in the world':
verses for children*

People ask me how I got interested in poetry: Why did you begin to write? I write because I fell in love with words as a child.

I was a reader. My parents did not own many books but they took us to the bookmobile on Saturdays. That air-conditioned little wagon crammed with colored spines was my weekend carnival, my Araby.

A few years back, as I tinkered with a broken teapot, a line popped into my head:

"'Teapot broke,' said the artichoke." All at once, I was 6 years old and giddy.

The familiar rhyme made me grin, although I could not recall where the words came from. A Google search took me to an olive green-and-yellow cover I instantly recognized. The book was by Polly Cameron, a paperback I read to myself and to my younger siblings dozens of times – almost 50 years ago.

In "I Can't Said the Ant," an army of ants, a spider, utensils, cookware and various pieces of food converse in rhymes as they work together to hoist a cracked teapot back onto the kitchen counter. The story is unremarkable, but the language is beguiling and funny if you are in first grade: "'Don't be dumb!' yelled the crumb."

Often, there was nothing to watch on TV in the days of three channels. Often, the neighbor kids had to go home, leaving no more grapefruit wars for us to fight. (We lived in an aging citrus grove with plenty of hard green ammo.) Then, reading stories and funny verses to each other and imitating our favorites was an entertainment I lured my siblings into.

I remember riffing on Edward Lear's limericks.

Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat" is a story poem I love. Why? Because the lovers "went to sea/in a beautiful pea-green boat," talked a random Piggy-wig out of his nose ring and were married by a Turkey.

The newlyweds "dined on mince and slices of quince/which they ate with a runcible spoon." Runcible. What's not to like about that stupendous word?

Edward Lear's "Complete Book of Nonsense" was a childhood staple for me. I learned a nonsense alphabet, nonsense botany, nonsense songs, nonsense history. Indispensible! I played with language and reveled in its rhythms.

"The History of the Seven Young Guinea Pigs" was a particular favorite because I had guinea pigs, and Lear's guinea pig drawings were ridiculous. I loved his in-your-face absurdity.

"As a child I was somehow already aware that childhood was fleeting and that I must never forget what it felt like to be new in the world," says Mary Ann Hoberman, current U.S. Children's Poet Laureate. Hoberman, 79, has written dozens of books for children including her latest "All Kinds of Families!" (Little, Brown, 2009).

Hoberman is aware that a lifelong love of poetry can be cultivated in childhood, and so her projects target the nation's youngest readers. When I had the pleasure of meeting Hoberman in February, I asked her about her favorite poems as a child. She smiled and quoted from Edward Lear's "The Jumbles":

*"Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumbles live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve."*

Parents, take your children to sea in a Sieve tonight. Here are suggestions for the cruise, a few favorites of mine that are mostly for younger kids. For a larger list, go to www.poets.org and search "poetry for children."

- "This Land Is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie, illustrated by Kathy Jakobsen (Little, Brown, 1998); grades K-6. Great illustrations to this classic song.

- "The Owl and the Pussycat" by Edward Lear, illustrated by Jan Brett (Putnam and Grosset, 1991); grades K-6. Lear's poem with gorgeous renderings of a coral reef and its inhabitants.

- "The Disappearing Alphabet" by Richard Wilber, illustrated by David Diaz (Harcourt, Inc. (Voyager), 2001); All ages. A Pulitzer Prize-winning poet imagines what would happen if letters went AWOL.

- "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" by Simms Tabak (Viking, 1997); All ages. A classic American folk poem that accumulates from fly to horse! Ingenious illustrations with cut-outs.

- "The Cremation of Sam McGee" by Robert W. Service, paintings by Ted Harrison (Kids Can Press, 2006); grades 4 and up. This anniversary edition has riveting artwork to accompany the 1907 narrative poem about a doomed Yukon prospector – gold, grit and gallows humor.

- "If You're Not Here, Please Raise Your Hand: Poems About School" by Kalli Dakos, illustrated by G. Brian Karas (Simon & Schuster, 1990); grades 1-8. Silliness, sadness and happiness: "captures the pulse of elementary school."

- "Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young" collected by Jack Prelutsky, illustrated by Marc Brown (Knopf, 1986); toddlers-K. "More than 200 little poems (with full-color illustrations) for little people with little attention spans."

- "Yellow Elephant: A Bright Bestiary" by Julie Larios, illustrated by Julie Paschkis (Harcourt, 2006); preK-grade 3. Rhythm, sounds and quiet surprises in poems paired with vibrant folk paintings of animals.

To the left is a poem by Delaware poet Annette Opalczynski of New Castle, recipient of two fellowships in poetry from the Delaware Division of the Arts. "Explaining Rain to a Child" previously appeared in *Delmarva Quarterly*.

EXPLAINING RAIN TO A CHILD

Tell her about the rain,
say
sometimes it's a shower
a drizzle
a storm.
Tell her about the thunder,
how it is the sound of poetry
being stepped on by little girls.
When it storms
let her watch the wind part the grass
and the dandelions swoon.
In the summer
the perfume of wet grass
will make her sneeze
but let her smell it anyway.
Let warm raindrops
fall against her cheek
like fingers drawing on her face
when it's time for sleep.
Tell her the rain can be
whatever it wants
and so can she.



JOANN
BALINGIT

State Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit will write a column on poetry and First State poets each Sunday during April, which is National Poetry

Month. Her chapbook, "Your Heart and How It Works" (Spire Press, spirepress.org, \$8) has just been published. For more, go to joannbalingit.org.