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For the Love of Literature: The Limitless Power of Poetry

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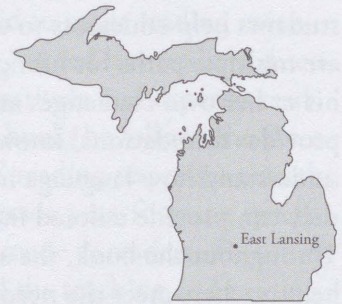
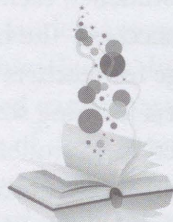
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For the Love of Literature: The Limitless Power of Poetry

by Laura Apol,
Michigan State University

*“Poetry is the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution,
and the raising of consciousness.”*

—Alice Walker



It's easy to think of poetry as cute, or funny, or, at the very least, marginal when it comes to the elementary language arts curriculum. And from there, it's easy to think of poetry as unintelligible, complicated, and *still* marginal when it comes to secondary English classrooms.

Mostly, it's easy to plan a poetry “unit” that looks at a few examples of poetic forms (haiku and diamante in elementary classrooms, sonnets and villanelles in secondary); identifies a few poetic elements (common things like alliteration, metaphors and similes, and, if it's an AP class, voltas, anaphoras, and iambic pentameter); tries to ferret out teacher and/or critic-approved hidden meanings, and then—with a sigh of relief—moves on.

It's also easy to avoid poetry altogether. After all, it's rarely on the test.

Our stance toward poetry is that it *can* be a source of fun (though we'd probably say “pleasure.”) It *can* be clever. It *can* be complicated. It has a specialized vocabulary that accompanies much of it, and, done well, it uses a range of tools to convey a message, both in content and in form. It rewards careful reading and literary analysis, and provides opportunities to expand skill sets across the English language arts.

But these are only some of the potentials of poetry. Limiting poetry to fun or to analysis, and confining poetry to a one-week (or even a one-month) unit misses much of what poetry has to offer.

Alice Walker says “Poetry is the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution, and the raising of consciousness”—and perhaps that is the thing students in 2017 need most from poems. Poetry—poems that are read, and poems that are written—provides perspective and creates possibilities.

Poetry asks us to pay attention. Whether as readers we're encountering something in a new way, or as writers we're observing and putting into words a thought or idea we've never before entertained or passed on, a poem asks us to watch carefully, to listen hard, and to notice or choose the just-right word or image or line. Through poems, we learn to see the world.

In its best and fullest iteration, poetry is action. It is activism. Poetry can make a difference, can prompt the reader and the writer to make change. Poetry both creates and opens doors.

Ultimately, poetry is about power—the power of language and the power of voice. When we disempower poetry from the start, when we forget that the “stuff” of poems can be beautiful and transformative and

emotion-filled and inspiring (along with sometimes being funny and clever), then we lose out on much of what poetry can provide. It doesn't all need to be serious. But it doesn't all need to be analyzed for a "deeper" understanding, either. We can fall in love with a poem without slogging through lists of poetic elements, without answering questions and writing essays. From the start, poems can become part of an evolving sense of the potential of words, the possibilities of expression, the limitless power of voice.

In this column, we look at a range of poetry for a range of readers in a range of contexts. Of course, this is just the start. The world of poetry is vast.

And it should be at the center, not the margins, of the ways we work with words.



Lisa Domke, Ashley Johnson, Laura Apol, Jeanne Loh, Tracy Weippert,
(Not pictured: Jackie Kerr)

This column is created by Dr. Laura Apol of Michigan State University, in collaboration with a team of faculty and graduate students who teach children's and adolescent literature in the teacher preparation program, who research issues relevant to the area of children's and adolescent literature, and who have been or are themselves teachers in preK-12 settings.

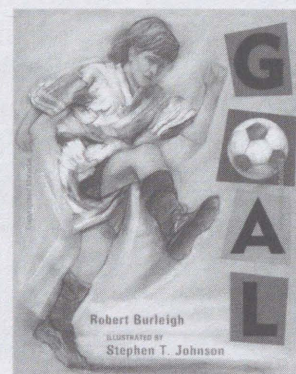
Children's Literature:

Immersion in Illustrations

—Lisa Domke and Tracy Weippert

Often at the elementary level, poetry seems to be limited to funny rhymes or form poems such as acrostics, diamantes, or haikus. However, poetry is so much more than this. It does not have to rhyme. It just has to make the reader think or feel, and it often does this through sensory description and/or word play.

Not only can young children enjoy free verse poetry, but they are also capable of writing it...and writing it well. For example, when students read either Robert Burleigh's *Goal* (2001) or *Hoops* (1997), they can retell their own stories of soccer or basketball in the form of poems, using Burleigh's

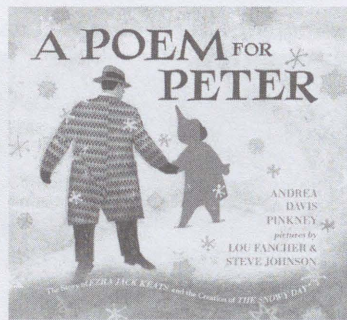


and other poets' works as mentor texts—looking at how poets helped their readers feel they were at the game (showing instead of telling), and how the poets used sensory description and played with language.

In this article, we share poets and their works to highlight a few of poetry's many possibilities.

New Poems and Old Favorites

A lovely new poetry book is *A Poem for Peter*, by Andrea Davis Pinkney (2016), which tells the story of how Ezra Jack Keats created his famous book, *The Snowy Day*. *A Poem*

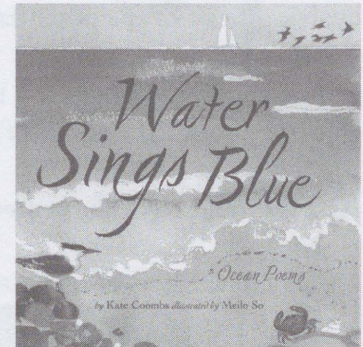


for Peter tells about Keats's birth, childhood, and his path to becoming an artist. As he began illustrating other people's books, Keats realized that "All the heroes in all the comics were always white as a winter sky." He wondered why there were no black or brown characters in any of the literature being published. This realization and the discrimination he faced because of his Jewish heritage led to the creation of the character of Peter, one of the earliest African American characters to be featured in a children's picturebook: "Yes, yes, brown-sugar boy, / you were on your way. / Ready to run outside and play. / ...Peter, / forging your path in knee-deep wonder. / Peter, / welcoming us into your play. / Peter, / marching out in a whole new way."

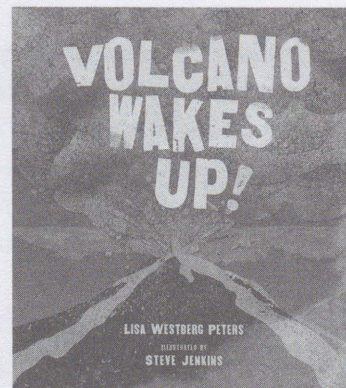
One of the reasons this book is highly recommended is because it is a unique take on a biography for children. Many classrooms include Keats's work in author studies, and this text provides students insights into his life in a way that is as fresh and playful as the stories Keats wrote. Also, Lou Fancher and Steve Johnson's artwork is reminiscent of Keats's illustrations for *The Snowy Day*

(1962), *Whistle for Willie* (1964), *A Letter to Amy* (1968/1998), and *Hi, Cat!* (1970), all of which feature Peter.

Moving from snowy weather in *A Poem for Peter* to warmer locales in *Water Sings Blue: Ocean Poems*, Kate Coombs (2012) brings readers to the ocean's shore, into the waves and under the water.



"Sand's Story" describes how water and weathering turn cliffs into sand, as she writes, "We used to be rocks, / we used to be stone / We stood proud as castles, / altars, and thrones... Now we grind and we grumble / humbled and grave, / at the touch of our breaker / and maker, the wave." Other poems such as "What the Waves Say" and "Tideline" provide aural and visual imagery of the ocean's sounds and the tide's actions. Meilo So illustrates the collection with watercolors in cool tones reminiscent of New England shorelines, but also uses vibrant colors to depict the coral reefs.



Volcano Wakes Up!, by Lisa Westberg Peters (2010), is a collection of poems about a fictional volcano in the Hawaiian Island chain. The poems tell the story of a day in the life of the volcano and the plants, insects,

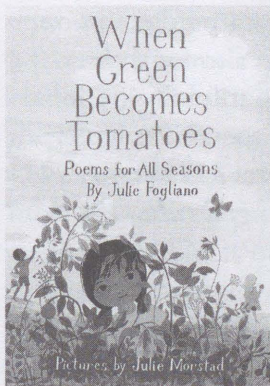
and surrounding area. As the volcano begins to erupt, a fern native to Hawaii tells its thoughts: "Fire-maker's awake! / She's about to / make / this caldera / a lake of fire and / lava." The Lava Flow Cricket also shares his story through poems written as text messages to his cave-mate. Other voices include the sun and moon and a lava road that

communicates through messages on road signs. The book also features a double-page spread of facts about volcanos, ferns, and Lava Crickets, as well as the Hawaiian Islands. Steve Jenkins's illustrations are sparse, cool, and dark, with the exception of vivid red lava flows as the volcano erupts, allowing the poetry, rather than the artwork, to take center stage.

Just as various forms of nature are the speaker in *Volcano Wakes Up!*, Diane Siebert employs a similar technique in her books *Mojave* (1988), *Sierra*



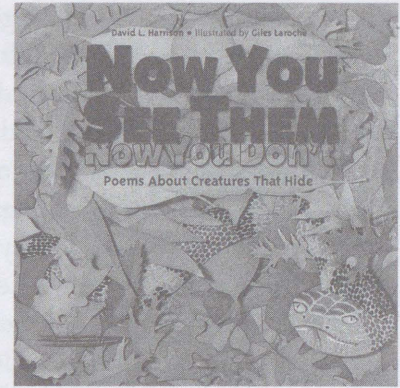
(1991), and *Heartland* (1989). For example, in *Heartland* she writes, "I am the land where wheat fields grow / In golden waves that ebb and flow; / Where cornfields stretched across the plains / Lie green between the country lanes." Siebert's gently rocking meter and evocative description transport readers—as do Wendell Minor's beautiful, realistic paintings.



The focus on nature continues in the following two new poetry collections. *When Green Becomes Tomatoes: Poems for All Seasons* focuses on the ways in which people, plants, and animals react to the changing seasons. The book, by Julie Fogliano (2016), is written in diary form with

a date titling each poem. For example, the poem "Spring, June 15" describes "you can taste the sunshine / and the buzzing / and the breeze / while eating berries off the bush / on berry hands / and berry knees."

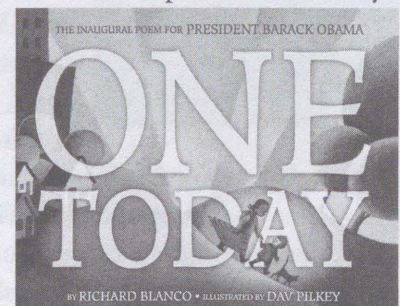
Now You See Them Now You Don't: Poems about Creatures that Hide, by David L. Harrison (2016), is divided into categories such as Sea Life, Reptiles & Amphibians, and Mammals. Each poem is titled with an animal's name and describes its physical and behavioral characteristics. Giles Laroche's renderings of these animals are beautifully done, both showing how the animal blends into its surroundings and giving a clear representation of the animal itself. For young readers, the exotic nature of most of the animals featured is sure to be a draw.



Another book with captivating illustrations to complement powerful poetry is *Amazing Faces*, an anthology of poems collected by Lee Bennett Hopkins (2010). The poems

portray the diversity of the American experience, places, people, hopes, dreams, and pastimes. Chris Soentpiet's vibrant, detailed watercolor paintings bring each poem to life, illustrating the "heart-breaking boyish grin" of the character in Prince Redcloud's "A Young Soldier" or the "lacework of courage" on Abuela's face in the poem "Abuela" by J. Patrick Lewis.

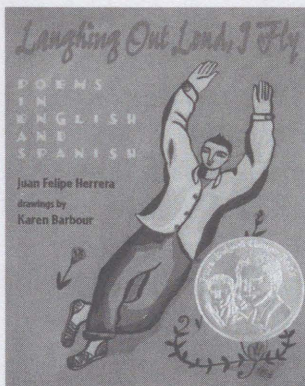
One Today, the poem Richard Blanco (2015) wrote for President Barack Obama's second



inauguration, echoes the messages in *Amazing Faces*. The poem ties together all the citizenry of the United States from “the Smokies” to the “Great Lakes” to the “Great Plains” and the “Rockies.” It pays tribute to the young people of the country with lines about learning “the same lessons for the day; / equations to solve, history to question, or atoms imagined, / the ‘I have a dream’ we keep dreaming, / or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won’t explain / the empty desks of twenty children marked absent / today, and forever.” It also embraces Americans’ differences, including native languages, with lines such as “Hear: squeaky playground swings, trains whistling, / or whispers across café tables. Hear: the doors we open / for each other all day, saying: hello / shalom / buon giorno / howdy / namaste / or buenos días.”

Reaching a Wider Audience with Dual-Language Poetry

Dual-language books are published in many languages, and given that Spanish is the most frequently spoken language in the United States after English (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013), Spanish-English books tend to be most prevalent dual-language books in the U.S. Spanish-English dual-language poetry books may either reflect students’ linguistic resources or broaden their horizons.



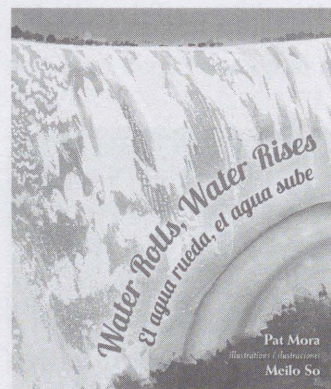
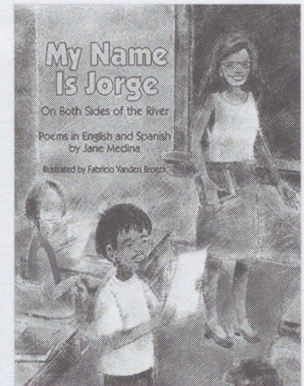
The current U.S. Poet Laureate is Juan Felipe Herrera, whose background as the son of migrant farmworkers influences his poems and his bilingual writing style. His collection of poems *Laughing Out Loud, I Fly: Poems in English and Spanish*

(1998) demonstrates the ways he plays with language and images, such as “In Mamá’s Mexican clay bowl, an onion is born / a cilantro skyscraper & a tiny sardine eye” / “En el caldero mexicano de

Mamá, una cebolla nace / un edificio de cilantro y un ojito de sardina.”

My Name Is Jorge on Both Sides of the River: Poems in English and Spanish, by Jane Medina

(1999), is another dual-language book that also deals with language. In this case, the poems focus on Jorge’s struggles and triumphs as a U.S. immigrant who does not yet know English. Medina’s poems detail Jorge’s frustrations when teachers try to Anglicize his name and when he cannot earn the high grades he earned in Mexico because he does not know English, the language of content instruction. Through the poems, Jorge describes his successes in beginning to learn English and making new friends. These poems paint verbal pictures of what many students face and feel in U.S. classrooms.

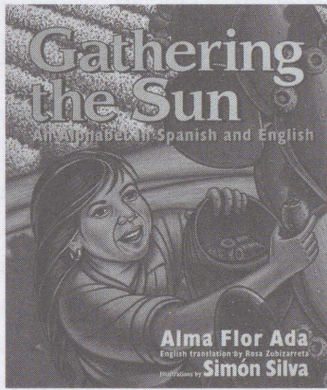


The next two dual-language books are notable not only for their evocative description, but also for their beautiful illustrations. *Water Rolls, Water Rises / El agua rueda, el agua sube* (2014), by Pat Mora, describes how water evaporates,

creates clouds, blankets the land as fog, comes down as precipitation, and rushes around globe through rivers and streams. The beautiful water-color illustrations of Meilo So (who also illustrated *Water Sings Blue*) take readers on a world tour of water’s activity on the planet. On a related topic, *Hello Ocean / Hola Mar* (2003), by Pam Muñoz Ryan, uses a girl’s five senses to tell about her day at the beach. Between the description and Mark Astrella’s realistic, vibrant illustrations, readers feel

as if they can taste the salt in the air and squish the sand between their toes.

Two final dual-language poetry books give information about topics as they move through the letters of the Spanish alphabet. *Gathering the*



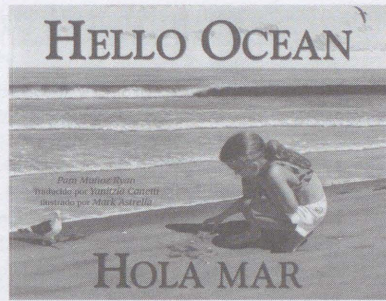
Sun: An Alphabet in Spanish and English, by Alma Flor Ada (1997), has poems about farmworkers, their feelings, the plants they harvest, and the places they live and work. In *¡Olinguito, de la A a la Z!: Descubriendo*

el bosque nublado / Olinguito, from A to Z!: Unveiling the Cloud Forest, Lulu Delacre (2016) uses lyrical, alliterative text to describe the elusive olinguito, a recently discovered species, in the Washington, D.C. zoo and the other plants and animals that live in its cloud forest habitat.



Canonical Poets and Poems

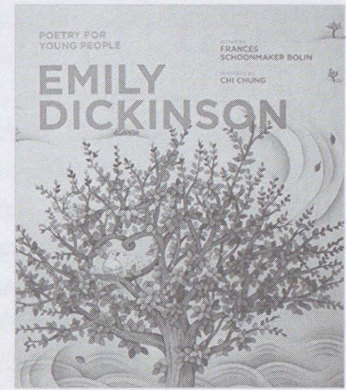
Because many poems are written specifically for children, people often think the canonical adult poets are too complex for elementary students. But that is not true. The key is careful selection. To that end, *Poetry for Young People* is a series of picturebooks focused on the poems of canonical



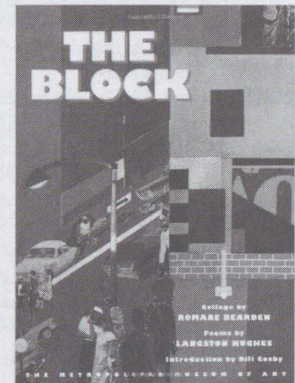
poets typically thought to be reserved for older readers. These books make complex poetry accessible to young readers and also begin with a short introduction to the poet.

Emily Dickinson's (2008) collection features poems such

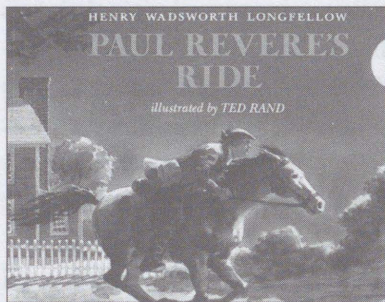
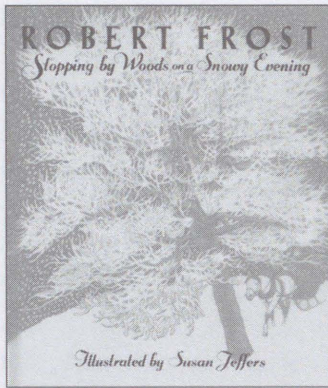
as "I started early, took my dog, / and visited the sea; / the mermaids in the basement / came out to look at me." Dickinson never titled her poems, but instead gave each poem a number. The lines above come from #520, but collections such as this one use the poem's first line as the title. Other collections in the *Poetry for Young People* series include *Carl Sandburg's* (2008) poems such as "Fog," "October Paint," "Buffalo Dust," and "From the Shore." *Edgar Allan Poe's* (2008) collection includes arguably his two most famous poems, "The Raven" and "Annabelle Lee," as well as excerpts from some of his other works such as "The Tell-Tale Heart."



Langston Hughes is another poet included in the *Poetry for Young People* series. In addition, his work is combined with Romare Bearden's collages from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in *The Block* (1995). Not only does *The Block* include Hughes's famous "Theme for English B," but it also shares other Hughes poems about Harlem and the hopes and dreams of its inhabitants.



Finally, there are poems such as Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, illustrated by Susan Jeffers (2001), which have been translated into stand-alone, full-length



picturebooks. Similarly, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *Paul Revere's Ride*, illustrated by Ted Rand (1990) has been translated into a picturebook that features engaging drawings in muted tones on pages made to look like

yellowing parchment paper.

Books such as these create a space for young readers to interact with canonical poets in ways that

are both accessible and engaging, thereby providing a means for students to enter the wider world of poetry that can speak to readers of all ages.

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From Delight to Wisdom: Making Poetry More Than Palatable

—Jackie Kerr, Jeanne Loh,
Ashley Johnson

Former Poet Laureate Billy Collins said, “...children love the ingredients of poetry. And then they go into this tunnel that we call adolescence, and when they come out of it, they hate poetry.” Searching for self, young people speak the language of poets. Yet when it might have the most to say to them, they tend to resist poetry the most. This paradox presents a conundrum for English classrooms. For many people, poetry is the road less traveled, and although it provides a path of rewarding resistance, even English teachers tend to avoid it, settling for the token two-week unit to check off a genre list. Despite its potential, secondary English teachers often spend as little time as possible teaching and exploring the genre, and secondary students are missing out.

Poetry can be difficult to define. Published poets offer the following rather poetic “definitions”:

- “Poetry: the best words in the best order.” (Samuel Coleridge)
- “Poetry should begin in delight and end in wisdom.” (Robert Frost)
- “Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance.” (Carl Sandburg)
- “As far as I’m concerned, poetry is a statement concerning the human condition, composed in verse.” (N. Scott Momaday)
- “Poetry is life distilled.” (Gwendolyn Brooks)
- “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry.” (Emily Dickinson)

Perhaps these delightful yet ambiguous definitions help highlight why poetry is often avoided by teachers and students alike: the amorphous nature of poetry is daunting; in contemporary classroom contexts, mystique and ambiguity complicate

meaning-making. Standardized testing has led to the idea that there should always be one right answer, but all literature, and particularly poetry, insists that there are many. Unfortunately, in classrooms and in society, concrete facts tend to trump abstract, interpretive ideas. Yet poetry demands that readers and writers play with words, read creatively, and arrive at multiple interpretations of literary expression—skills that are elusive, but imperative, to a robust English curriculum.

Analyzing poetry can be both interesting and intellectually challenging. Yet, when we stop with analysis, poetry begins to feel distant—more like solving a puzzle than delighting in the possibilities of language. Instead, when students are provided opportunities to immerse themselves in the language and images of poetry, they are able to:

- practice the language arts, including reading, writing, listening, speaking, and performing;
- discover and understand self, others, and the world around them;
- foster a love and appreciation for language;
- push back, question, and think critically;
- connect across cultures and languages;
- learn across content areas; and
- make sense of their lived experiences.

This column reviews three novels written in verse. It also includes suggested online and print resources that will help teachers think about and plan ways to integrate more poetry into their current practice and to move toward engaging with poetry in secondary classrooms all the time, not just as test prep or during a brief isolated genre unit or creative writing exercise. *Bronx Masquerade* (reviewed below), Nikki Grimes’ novel in verse, illustrates how making poetry a regular and recurring participatory activity in English class will reap benefits beyond academic progress. Using poetry in the secondary classroom can bring students together, build community, transform readers and writers, and even affect change within and beyond the school. Poetry is powerful and we

need to mobilize its potential, particularly in the current political climate, for “poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change...” (Audre Lorde).

Book Reviews

“YOU’RE EXPLODING... I LOVE THE CROSSOVER EVERYTHING WILL...” —HEIDI COOPERMAN



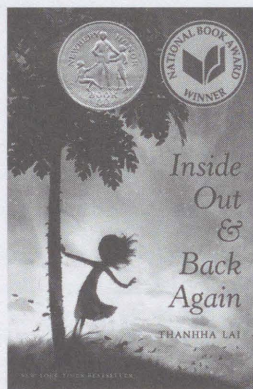
Crossover by Kwame Alexander

Winner of the 2015 Newbery award, *Crossover*, by Kwame Alexander, is told from the perspective of Josh Bell, a twelve-year-old basketball star. His twin brother Jordan is his equally talented teammate; his father is a former profes-

sional ball player with a killer crossover and insurmountable athletic expectations; and his mother is their school’s assistant principal who holds high academic expectations for her sons. Both boys live for basketball and practice tirelessly in order to satisfy their father’s desire to maximize their athletic potential, but they are also puzzled by the cause of their father’s fall from basketball fame. Even as their father pushes his sons to aim high, he neglects his own health. In addition to worrying about his dad’s health, Josh is impacted by the introduction of Jordan’s new love interest to their family. She disrupts the twins’ close bond, and Josh feels increasingly alone without his brother as companion. Despite his unwavering devotion to basketball, Josh is forced to grow up amid these internal and external tensions.

The poems in *Crossover* vary from free verse to rhyme, and occasionally there are chapters where Josh breaks into a thorough definition of a phrase or word, accompanied by a few examples that apply to his life. Some poems are a joy to read aloud; they expand and shrink in font size and move over the page in diagonals and line breaks. Some lines are full of capitalized letters, and others

appear in italics. The end product is an active text set to a rhythmic pace that makes this book hard to put down. At the heart of the story is a young boy’s love for basketball, his desire to excel and live up to his parents’ expectations, and his loyalty to his brother, who grows up and away from him.



Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai

While world powers debate the plight of refugees from Syria and journalists chronicle the devastation and horror of civil war, those who follow these narratives often fail to consider the personal stories of those who leave their homes for the “safety” of the United States. In her novel *Inside Out and Back Again* (winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature), Thanhha Lai offers a semi-autobiographical account of leaving the Vietnam of her birth, crossing the ocean, and settling in rural Alabama.

In simple, clear images, Lai captures the memories of her life in Saigon: the sweet papaya growing in her yard, her mother’s altar to her father who disappeared during a navy mission, her brother watching over a hen’s egg hoping it will hatch. While Lai never ignores her child-view of the horrors of the Vietnam War, her stories highlight the beauty of her life before the war. These memories of Part I of the book serve as a stark contrast to the Vietnam her teacher in Alabama shares with the class when she introduces Thanhha: images of a burned, naked girl running down a dirt road; people desperate to flee Saigon by helicopter; and skeletal refugees on a fishing boat. Lai’s 10-year-old voice challenges these familiar images. She writes, “She should have shown/ something about /papayas and Tét./ No one would believe me/ but at times/ I would choose wartime in Saigon/ over/ peacetime in Alabama” (p. 288). In this way, Lai challenges the single story of war and fear too

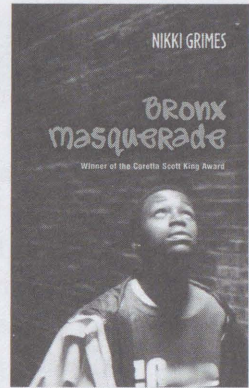
many Americans hold about refugees to who come to the United States, and captures the challenges and possibilities of immigration. Lai builds her story of learning English, dodging bullies, and finding friends through a series of poems—some of which are heartbreakingly sad, while others are surprisingly funny. For example, when her older brother Quang teaches her the rules for plural nouns in English, Thanhha spends all day practicing “squeezing hisses/through my teeth” suggesting that “Whoever invented/ English/ must have/ loved snakes” (p. 188). Indeed, throughout Part III of the novel, Thanhha updates readers on her improved hissing as she learns to make the “s” sound in English words. Lai uses her struggles with the English language to point to the challenges of building a life when everyone around her notices what she lacks. At the same time, the humor and defiance with which she faces her mother—who never acknowledges the difficulties of their new life—reminds us that she is not just a victim and that she is intelligent, courageous, and even a little difficult, as any 10-year-old has a right to be.

The story is a valuable testament to the refugee experience in the United States, and the beautiful simplicity of Lai’s prose poems should be celebrated. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Lai suggested that she never thought of herself as a poet. Instead she said, “Ten-year-olds, especially Vietnamese, think in tight images, I cut out every word I didn’t need” (Roback, 2011). The result of attending to those images, then, is a series of poems that build her impressions into a flowing story of her experience as a child refugee, crafting a narrative of love, loss, hope, and family.

***Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes**

In *Bronx Masquerade*, Nikki Grimes presents eighteen characters, composing a back-story and at least one original poem for each in just 167 pages. The relatively short length of this novel in verse makes the book accessible for a variety of readers and also allows for a more focused exploration

of the book in a high school classroom setting. It is not necessarily a difficult book to read—it is appropriate for young readers grades 7-12 – but its complex content and format are best explored at a more advanced level of discussion and analysis. Grimes uses a combination of poetry and prose—character sketches/vignettes, poems, and transitional narrative sections from emcee Tyrone—to communicate the story of a year in Mr. Ward’s English class in a Bronx high school. Eighteen diverse teenage voices and stories require an ensemble format, with each character taking a turn at center stage. Pedagogical elements come into play as well: readers have a front row seat from which to observe what is happening with poetry in Mr. Ward’s classroom, so reading the book with students will provide opportunities to write poetry as well as to discuss it.



The poetry journey of *Bronx Masquerade* begins when one of the students, Wesley Boone, decides that writing a poem is more appropriate than the assigned essay as a means to communicate his understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. Although Wes does eventually capitulate and write an essay, his commitment to the power of poetry eventually convinces Mr. Ward and Wes’s classmates to buy into the idea of weekly Open Mike Fridays. Like a poetry slam, Open Mike Friday encourage the sharing of spoken word poetry in an open forum; students voluntarily stand up and take turns sharing their poetry with each other. Throughout the book, readers learn about each of the eighteen teenagers through autobiographical vignettes that serve as brief character sketches. Each vignette is followed by the original poem that that character shared at Open Mike Friday. Over the course of a school year, every student reads at least once, and readers come to know the unique lived experiences, struggles, gifts, and quirks of each character. The emcee, Tyrone, pulls

the chapters together by providing commentary and patter between sections, and a couple of the characters share more than one poem.

In the classroom that Grimes creates in *Bronx Masquerade*, poetry becomes a vehicle for self-discovery, and sharing becomes a way for each poet to publicly remove his/her mask and be seen and heard. As part of the audience, readers watch each student's respective journey unfold through poetry and prose, and watch the class grow and connect as a collaborative community. For high school

students, the book will entertain and inspire; for teachers, the book provides countless opportunities to push students to think deeply about poetry and perhaps even to write and eventually share their own poems.

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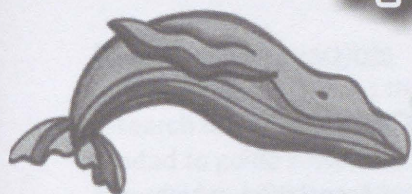
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