



Whatever Happened to CHILDREN'S POETRY?

Good question. I'll try to answer it too, but along the way I'll address some recent comments I've heard about poetry for children, plus add a few

observations of my own that I've made whilst working as a roving poet for the last five years.

Firstly, Children Like Poetry. Oh yes they do!

But let's start with some figures. Every year, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education receives a copy of nearly every children's poetry book published in readiness for its annual CLPE Poetry Award. Since it began in 2003 the number of titles submitted by publishers have been

- 2003 – 50 books
- 2004 – 38 books
- 2005 – 28 books

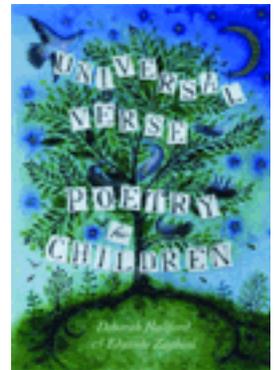
This demonstrates the dramatic decrease in books published. What my fellow poets are keen for me to stress is that the sharpest reduction is in single poet collections.

Why the decline? It is odd, because beyond publishing, poetry is really happening. There are more poets working in schools throughout the year. Poetry is becoming a very popular performance medium. Literary festivals are springing up everywhere, and most feature children's poetry events. We have many talented poets now so even if the *quantity* of publishing isn't happening at the moment, the *quality* certainly is.

On a daily basis I hear primary teachers praising poetry and declaring it a fine tool for literacy work though what I fear is that – however imaginatively poetry is taught (which it frequently is) – poetry is too often synonymous with literacy work. Poetry is rightly celebrated in schools, but it needs to go beyond the classroom. Let's take poetry into the community. If you're looking for ways to brighten up a walk, a museum visit, a train trip – why not invite a poet?

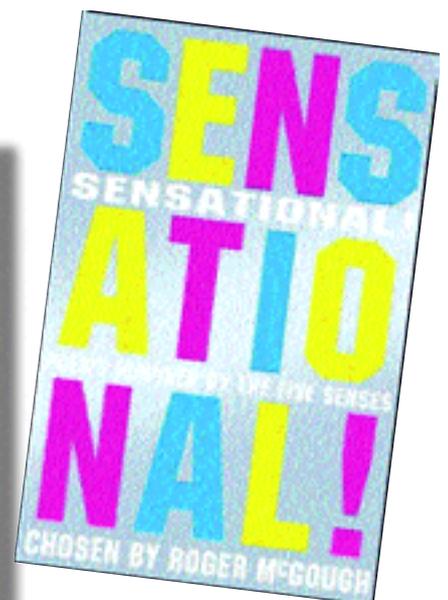
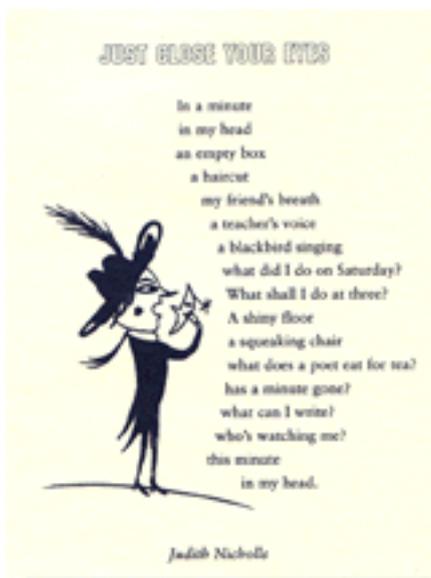
Poetry doesn't sell! How many times have I heard that from publishers recently? But why? And why wasn't this the case five or six years ago when we were publishing many poetry collections and anthologies? Were there *too* many? No – thousands of novels are published every year, and the figure is growing annually. However, I would argue there is a more finite readership for poetry.

It's a standing joke with us poets – although we are not laughing – that the children's poetry section in a bookshop is always the hardest to find. It's often unlabelled; frequently at floor level; and criminally understocked. Plus, in many cases, the few titles shops do stock are shoved in between sticker and joke books. Novels don't suffer this treatment. Customers don't need assistance to find the works of J.K.



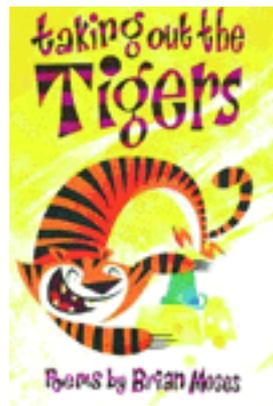
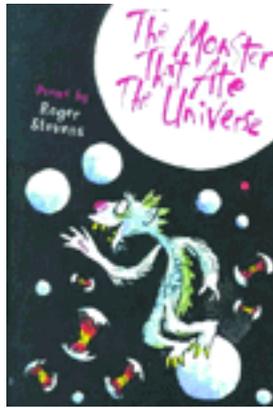
Rowling, do they? Check out the superb *Universal Verse: Poetry for Children* to see the number of quality children's poetry books that are currently available and compare this with the measly selection bookshops hold. What's more, those titles you do track down are a few best-selling anthologies plus a couple by really big names – Rosen, Patten and McGough. One interesting theory I heard to explain the decline is that these big names are not producing so much poetry now, but when they do it creates a healthier market for children's poetry in general. Mmmm...

One editor who has nearly single-handedly kept the good ship poetry afloat, and deserves all the awards going, is Gaby Morgan at Macmillan Children's Books. As poet Pie Corbett recently commented "Gaby is children's poetry publishing." Indeed, Gaby's verve, passion and commitment has led to the innovative *Read Me* and *Works* series, as well as a great many single author collections and anthologies – including the previous CLPE winner, Roger McGough's *Sensational*.



A page from *Sensational*

Over the last few years I've heard many teachers/librarians/ editors complain that much of contemporary children's poetry is oral poetry – that doesn't work so effectively on the page. It's a gross generalisation, but there's some truth in it. For instance, I'm a big fan of both the sublimely witty John Hegley and the awesome Benjamin Zephaniah – but when I want to reacquaint myself with their work I listen to one of their CDs. Why? Because I feel their work is more 'stage' than 'page' poetry. For me their work has to be performed – and by them – to be fully appreciated. I do read their work, and very much admire it, but most of all I will listen to it. And this is what some say is the case with much of modern children's poetry – that it needs to be experienced live, and that the poems are like scripts waiting to be brought to life in performance. Why should this be? Well ... a great number of poets make their livelihoods from working in schools, libraries and book festivals. All this performing will no doubt exert an influence on their writing. Poetry thirty years ago was all poetry for the page – but also worked well when read aloud. Because the likes of Walter de la Mare, A.A. Milne *et al* were not walking the boards of their local primary schools and libraries, their initial audience were readers – so these poets focused their skills on the page.



of the wide range of forms and exciting subject matter contained within the covers. I would urge everyone to “grab ‘em with the funnies, and then switch ‘em on to the deeper stuff.”

Children get so much out of watching a poetry performance, as well as reading and writing their own poems. They enjoy the playfulness, the musicality, the rhyme and rhythm of the words. They can appreciate the moods and emotions generated by the language. They can be both soothed and stimulated. And this is reflected in their own writing – at whatever level of their development. Poetry can motivate children's imaginations and lead them to explore and express their own experiences and emotions. I admit that children, given the choice between a novel or a book of poems, the majority will go for the novel. They will want a read that will sustain them, take them to another world maybe. But I also see many youngsters relishing the variety of tones, voices and themes that a book of poems can offer – plus the 'dip-in-and-out' quality unique to our books.

So who prevents children from getting hold of poetry? We do. What can we do about it? First, let's keep poetry books. Let's keep publishing more of them, but let's spread our wings and do other stuff as well. Let's shake up poetry presentation. Repackage; re-market; transfer to different media – DVDs, CD-ROMS, CDs, even books with CDs, and maybe mix it up with its sister, prose.

What's happened to children's poetry? Nothing – or not enough? It's still around at the start of 2007 – but is it here to stay? Let us know.

James Carter

As poet Roger Stevens pointed out to me, “It's children's parents that have a problem with poetry.” How true. At the end of a day in school a visiting poet will sit in the hall to sell their books and talk individually with the children. I've watched parents pick up my book, turn to their child and say “You don't want this, do you? A book of poems!” Where does this attitude come from? And why do so many adults have a problem with poetry? And why is poetry so often glued to the word 'boring'? I point the finger at secondary education – **not** teachers – but the secondary system. Many adults have told me how much they loved poetry at primary level, only to be switched off at secondary level by an approach that favours critical analysis. I enjoy a little deconstruction, but too much “Can anyone spot the example of hyperbole in stanza four?” is a turn-off. We must **never** lose sight of the creativity, playfulness and sheer pleasure that poetry can offer.

So Children DO Like Poetry – and what's more,
Not Just Funny Poetry.

What pleases me immensely is that two of my poems children have spontaneously applauded are both quiet, reflective poems. One is a shape poem that likens a poem to a teardrop; the other states that we all feel insecure at times. The criticism is that there is too much 'funny' poetry around; too many anthologies with humorous stuff and not enough range in tone and subject matter. Again, there is some truth in this. Yet, more often than not, publishers will give a collection or anthology a quirky fun cover to attract young readers but with no indication of the wealth inside. Take two wonderful collections: Roger Stevens' *The Monster That Ate The Universe* and Brian Moses' *Taking Out The Tigers*. Both books have zappy, inviting covers with no hint

To find out more about children's poetry visit these wonderful web sites:-

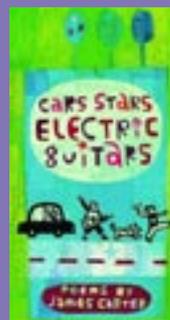
poetryarchive.org
poetryzone.co.uk
poetrysociety.org.uk
children'spoetrybookshelf.co.uk

Sensational Roger McGough Macmillan £4.99 ISBN: 0330413449

Universal Verse: Poetry for Children Barn Owl Books
£7.99 ISBN: 1903015618

The Monster That Ate The Universe Roger Stevens
Macmillan £4.99 ISBN: 0330415239

Taking Out The Tigers Brian Moses
Macmillan £3.99 ISBN: 0330417975



James Carter is a lively poetry performer. His latest titles include:-

Car Stars Electric Guitars
Walker Books £4.99 ISBN: 0744586356

Travelling Underpants
Published by Macmillan to come in the
Summer 2007