

Gaby Morgan:

A Passion for Poetry



Gaby Morgan has been compiling poetry throughout her working life. She is currently the Editorial Director of the Macmillan's Children's Books poetry list with approximately thirty collections to her name, including such best sellers as *Read Me and Laugh*, *In My Sky at Twilight* and the recent *Poems from the First World War* published in association with Imperial War Museums. Being able to immerse yourself in poetry and getting to pick out your favourites, strikes me as a pretty cool way to earn a living. A meeting with Gaby provided an opportunity to learn something of her role as an anthologist and how she views the current situation of publishing children's poetry.

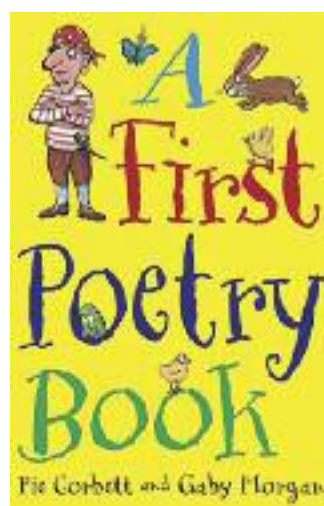
Gaby recalls falling in love with poetry at sixteen, when she first encountered Wilfred Owen and the War poets. This was closely followed by *Love Poems* by Brian Patten, a book that "now falls to bits when I open it because I loved it so much." She joined Macmillan straight from University after a



French degree, and considers herself fortunate in working for a team who had decided poetry was worth investing in. One of the earliest anthologies she worked on was a book of football poems at a time when publishing a mass market poetry collection was a new venture. "The feedback was extraordinary. Teachers and librarians were saying the boys don't realise this is poetry, but a short book of bits about football. It's being taken out every night. We began by publishing two collections a year, and by the late 90s this had increased to thirty!"

Gaby began editing in 1998 with a collection of new poems for World Book Day called *Larks with Sharks*, The World Book Day anthologies became a welcome tradition which continued over the next few years. Amongst her earliest challenges was to put together a comprehensive poetry book for everyday of the year as part of the National Year of Reading. This became the first title in the *Read Me First* series "It was quite daunting but one of the most exciting challenges I have faced. One thing I learnt from reading a lot of anthologies is that you can hear the anthologist's voice coming through – Anne Harvey has a distinctive voice, similarly Naomi Lewis and Fiona Waters. I also realised that when you're reading a volume of poetry, you can see the 'story' of a poem. You discover where it first appears and where it is included in other anthologies. Then it becomes an anthologised poem. With our collections we've published new poems, and I enjoy watching their journeys."

Many of the collections Gaby has compiled are themed anthologies, often associated with events and celebrations through the year. The initial idea for an anthology comes from



Gaby and sometimes the poets she works closely with. Often she will approach a poet to write something. "When the Pirates of the Caribbean films were released I contacted David Harmer who came up with an amazing variety of pirate poems." Gaby worked on early collections with Brian Moses, Paul Cookson and Pie Corbett, mostly based on strong themes such as school and family. She

explained the method of working on the *Read Me First* collection with Pie. "After posting requests for poetry on some twenty themes, we received an avalanche of poems. Taking ten themes each, we put together a shortlist of three poems for each theme by spending a whole day reading poems to each other." A list of any missing subjects was compiled which revealed an absence of hamsters and mice poems for the pet theme! Undaunted, Gaby was able to resort to her trusty list of writers, "There are some poets who whenever I have an anthology with a gap, I know I can rely on them."

Over the years, Gaby has built up a bank of poets from which have emerged some names who now have their own collections. "Something I noticed twenty years ago and is still true today is people look to the same poets - like McGough and Rosen. One of the things I try to do is bring some other names in." She is full of praise for the poets she works with who are generous and supportive of each other, often suggesting other poets to consider. Gaby has a clear view on the issue of getting a balance between established and new poets in an anthology. "I believe *we* give importance to poems. I don't think there is such thing as a 'proper' poem. I love the fact that in *Read Me* there is Shakespeare next to something very silly. My criterion on a first read through is do I get it? Does it appeal to me? I base my judgement on the poems rather than our impressions of the poets."

A lesson learnt from twenty years of working on poetry collections is you have to get the cover right. "It's especially important with poetry. Sometimes people will say to me, 'This cover doesn't match the content.' I will say, 'I need children to pick this book up!' I want children to read poetry." The extraordinary cover for the *Poems from the First World War* anthology amply demonstrates her point.

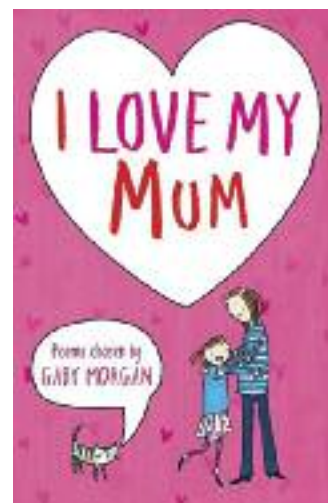
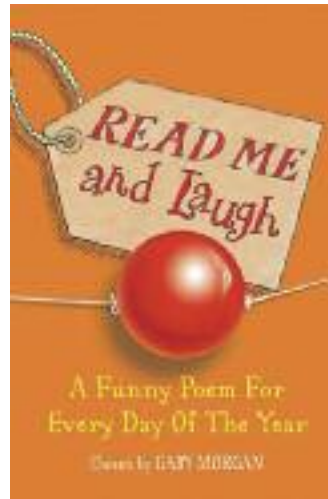
Despite the apparent dearth of newly published children's poetry, Gaby believes it's an improving

picture. She cites Janetta Otter-Barry at Frances Lincoln whose children's list includes a new poet each year. "Although few publishers have poetry lists, many do publish poetry within the mix of their children's lists. Walker and A&C Black publish a lot of poetry, and there are collections coming through from new publishers. There was a time when many lists sprung up quickly and vanished suddenly. A list needs time to become established."

The Children's Poetry Summit, which Gaby set up jointly with Chris Holifield and Jonathan Douglas in 2008, is also helping to make a difference. The Summit meets two or three times a year, providing an opportunity for interested individuals from the Arts, education and publishing to come together to explore the issues surrounding the publishing and promotion of children's poetry. The Summit has highlighted areas which require some input and fresh thinking, "We know that there is very little training for teachers in poetry and they find it quite daunting. There is a view that poetry is difficult and scary which has scarred a generation somehow. One of the Summit's achievements has been to work with trainee teachers getting poets to show how they use poems and providing stimulating ideas to take into schools." The Summit has also turned its attention to the role of bookshops. "It doesn't occur to them to recommend poetry. It's often assumed that people won't want to buy poetry books as much, so it's usually on a bottom shelf headed 'jokes and poems'." However, Gaby acknowledges that recent collections by well known names such as Jacqueline Wilson and Carol Ann Duffy are helping to raise poetry from the bottom shelf.

A final point we discuss is the under representation of poetry in children's book awards, with the CLPE Poetry Award, the only one entirely dedicated to poetry. Several other major awards provide the opportunity to submit poetry, but the challenge is getting poetry included in the publishers' lists of submissions. It's one of several hurdles she's keen to tackle. That and "to get some more new poets into the mix." Gaby's passion for poetry is infectious along with her determination for children to be able to discover this passion for themselves.

Elaine Chant



Selected Bibliography of all titles published by Macmillan

Poems from the First World War £5.99 ISBN: 978-1447248644

A First Poetry Book with Pie Corbett £6.99 ISBN: 978-0330543743

Read Me and Laugh £7.99 ISBN: 978-0330435574

In My Sky at Twilight: Poems of Eternal Love £6.99 ISBN: 978-0230745865

I Love My Mum £4.99 ISBN: 978-1447280446