Whispering in the Wind Endorsements

This book is a master class in poetry, teaching writing, and joy. *Whispering in the Wind* provides compelling evidence of what is within reach for all writers. It is a vision you simply cannot walk away from: this book will change you. It is not just the commitment to sketching and watercolor and the beauty of language that her students demonstrate—it is how their essays and reflections show scholarship, curiosity, and wonder. Linda Rief suggests that Heart Books make use of the transitions throughout the school year—all of those brief moments when we are between. Every page in this book sheds light on what is possible in that space.

Penny Kittle, author of *Book Love*, *Write Beside Them*, and *180 Days*

Linda has been a trusted mentor to me for years. Her respect for teachers is her defining characteristic. In this time of book banning and misinformation, we need poetry more than ever. Her respectful vision for how we can use poems is an essential balm. This book is a blueprint for guiding students in their relationships with poetry forevermore. This feels less like an educator book and more like a companion that shepherds teachers to consider and incorporate the textured versatility of poetry in the classroom and in their lives. We are so lucky to have Linda's words.

Nawal Qarooni, educator and author

***Whispering in the Wind* is an excellent resource to help lead your students to discover the joy and beauty of poetry. Through the creation of Heart Books and other engaging strategies, Linda Rief taps into student creativity to ignite their authentic interest in both reading and writing poetry. I love this book. Rief's ideas are fresh, creative, and serve to transform students' negative attitudes about poetry into a lifelong appreciation for the art of verse.**

Kelly Gallagher, author of *4 Essential Studies* and *180 Days*

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I've been sharing accessible poems at the beginning of every class meeting for more than thirty years. My students get a good taste of poetry in these daily poetic appetizers. In *Whispering in the Wind*, Linda Rief shows you how to prepare a poetic feast for students. Her ideas, strategies, and recommendations will enhance the literate culture of your classroom.

Tom Romano, author of *Write What Matters*

Linda Rief's *Whispering in the Wind* feels like an exquisite poem. As I read the beautiful words of Linda and her students, and gaze at their gorgeous Heart Books, I am inspired to expand my own Heart Map. Her book is the antidote to how poetry is often taught in middle school—put through the wringer as we question, scrutinize, and demand answers from poems. Instead, through the process of creating Heart Books, Linda creates space for students to fall in love with poems that reflect the truth of their feelings and the feelings of others. This is a must-have book for all of us who want to engage students in a powerful and authentic reading and writing experience.

Georgia Heard, author of *Heart Maps* and *Awakening the Heart*

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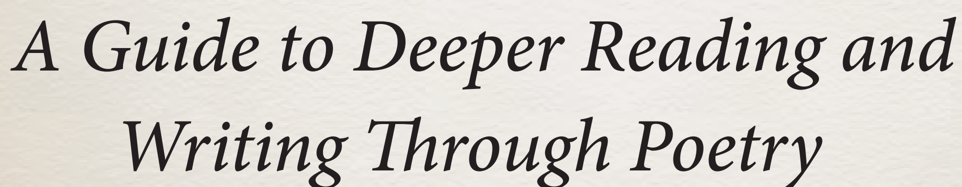
Whispering in the Wind

LINDA RIEF



A Guide to Deeper Reading and Writing Through Poetry

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Excerpts from blog entry "No more apologies" by Amy Clark, posted August 30, 2017 on *Sometimes You Just Need a Poem*: https://sometimesyoujustneedapoem.blog/2017/08/30/no-more-apologies/. Used by permission of the author.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022936020
ISBN: 978-0-325-13417-8

Editor: Louisa Irele
Production: Patty Adams
Cover design: Suzanne Heiser and Vita Lane
Typesetter and interior design: Gina Poirier Design
Manufacturing: Val Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
1 2 3 4 5 VP 26 25 24 23 22 PO# 34007

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SECTION ONE

Why Poetry?

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As teachers, we might have the wrong idea about what it means to "teach" poetry. . . . So many of us see poetry only as a means to teach figurative language and analytical skills to students, . . . and as a means for students to read the poems that *we* love or that *we* were taught . . . In "schoolifying" poetry, and in only presenting it in this way, we deprive our kids of the opportunity to find themselves in the poems. We deprive them of the opportunity to linger in "the mist" that "becomes central to [their] existence" [Herrera 2008]. And we discount a genre that in its brevity and intentionality is perhaps one of the best writing teachers out there.

—Amy Clark, 2017

Growing up I never liked poetry. I shuddered each time I heard the word in school. *Poetry* meant finding the hidden meanings the poet had worked so meticulously to hide from his reader. Every word was a symbol for something deep and mysterious, and our task was to unravel all the tricky nuances. I was not good at that. I rejected the entire notion of poetry with the same distaste I had for canned peas or raw oysters. I left the reading and understanding of it to the intellectuals of the world. The smart kids. I was not clever enough to understand it, nor did I like it. Poetry made me feel stupid, and that is not a good feeling. Best to simply avoid it.

Then, years later, I heard William Stafford share his poetry aloud at a reading at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. I went to the reading reluctantly, only because a former student invited me. Stafford didn't read his poems—he spoke them. He delivered his poetry, simple but eloquent words, riding on his voice and cupped in his hands as if saying, *Here, peek in, look what I noticed that I want you to notice. Feel what I felt at that moment. Taste these words in your mouth and feel how they slip right through to your heart.*

I don't remember a single poem—I just remember his voice, his words, hanging in the air, waiting for me to grab them, to make them mine.

I was astonished. The hour and a half slid away and I was left sitting in the row of chairs emptying as other listeners left. What had just happened? That was

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poetry? I not only understood his words, I loved his words. I loved his voice. He made me feel like his words were mine. He *gave* them to me. His voice said, *Here, take these words. Make them yours.* And I did.

I bought several of Stafford's poetry collections. I began reading poems to myself—the way he read them—as if he was just sharing his thinking with anyone who would listen. I asked my good friend Maureen Barbieri if she knew of any other poets I might like. Did she ever: Mary Oliver, Linda Pastan, Ted Kooser, Nikki Giovanni, Pablo Neruda, Jane Kenyon, Billy Collins, Langston Hughes, Georgia Heard, Naomi Shihab Nye, Galway Kinnell, Richard Wilbur, and on and on. For any occasion at which we exchanged gifts, Maureen's gift to me was always a poetry collection. My shelves are filled with contemporary and classic poets, at home and at school.

I asked my students if they had any favorite poets. Their reaction was my reaction forty years earlier. They cringed at the word *poetry*. Their faces actually changed—eyes widened, shoulders folded, and they pulled into themselves as if protecting their bodies from something horrible.

"No, no," I said. "I heard a poet last night and it was wonderful. I could have listened to him for hours."

They were not convinced. Furthermore, they convinced me why they hated it. Quizzes and tests. Count the syllables. Name the kind of poem it is. Identify the rhyme scheme. Define meter. Write a sonnet. Search for the symbolism. Memorize and present a Robert Frost poem. What's the meaning of the last line . . . the first line . . . every line . . . in his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"?

I was beginning to hate poetry again just listening to these eighth graders. "Please, please, we're not going to do a *poetry unit*, are we? Say no!" they begged.

And I didn't—do a poetry unit. And I haven't—done a poetry unit.

The irony is, I share lots of poetry with my students as mentor texts from which I ask them to do a quickwrite. My approach to using poetry in this way is deliberate and intentional: share poems on a daily basis in a natural way that allows and encourages a personal response, not an analysis. Students know these mentor texts are often poems, but they are willing to go with me, perhaps because of the trust and rapport I continually try to build with them by inviting them to "write from this poem, anything it brings to mind for you, or borrow any line and write off that line—follow that line, wherever it leads you."

Even when we go back to the poem to look at line breaks or wording or repetition or the use of metaphor or titles, or beginning lines or ending lines, *they seldom make the connection that this is poetry the way they are used to it*—poetry units, quizzes, tests, and hidden meanings. And that's good. They don't reject this poetry, yet . . .

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Yet, few of the students, if any, sought out poetry to read on their own. I filled the room with poetry books. I set up a bench with shelves and crates—overflowing with the poetry of both classic and contemporary poets. I tossed in a few poetry anthologies as I book-talked novels. I set the poetry bench up right inside the door to the classroom, so kids had to pass by these books both on their way in and on their way out. Every time a student told me they had forgotten to bring the book they were currently reading for the ten minutes of reading at the beginning of class (Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday), I handed them a book of poetry. And here is the *yet* again: nothing I was doing sent them to this bench on their own for poetry.

I couldn't find the words to explain how I knew or felt that poetry did something that other writing didn't do in the same way. It bothered me that these kids were missing something important because I hadn't found a way to make them seek it out. But I was determined not to further kill their interest in already preconceived notions of poetry by doing a poetry *unit*.

And then, as often happens on the internet, I was searching for something that may or may not have been related to poetry and ended up in that rabbit hole of connections. I stumbled on Mark Doty's lecture on a poetry site about why poetry matters. I read page after page. It was his two last paragraphs that said to me, *Isn't this what you've been looking for?*

> **Poetry's work is to make people real to us through the agency of the voice. "Poetry is the human voice," I tell them, "and we are of interest to one another. Are we not?" When people are real to you, you can't fly a plane into the office building where they work, you can't bulldoze the refugee camp where they live, you can't cluster-bomb their homes and streets. We only do those things when we understand people as part of a category: infidel, insurgent, enemy. Meanwhile, poetry does what it does, inscribing individual presence, making a system of words and sounds to mark the place where one human being stood, bound in time, reporting on what it is to be one. In the age of the collective of mass culture and mass market, there's hope in that. . . .**
>
> **May poetry indeed be a language for a new century. A way to place value on the dignity, specificity, and beauty of individual lives. A way to resist the streamlining diminishment of categories and generalizations. A way to speak, a way to be heard. (Doty 2010)**

Indeed, that was what I was looking for. Poetry has the power to make us see and hear each other—one human being at a time. "Poetry is the human voice." I wanted my kids to hear those voices and know each other.

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Paper Heart Quilt assembled from Heart Map.

And then—as I approached my classroom from the hallway one day and really looked at the Heart Maps (Heard 1999) the students had created as a means for finding ideas for writing—I stopped and stared. I had organized their Heart Maps into a paper quilt (with twenty maps on each quilt) on the wall outside my door. The intent of posting all of their maps was meant to help students get to know each other and perhaps find writing ideas in other students' Heart Maps, as well as their own. Those things that matter to each of us: people, experiences, songs, books, issues, places—our stories—reside in our hearts.

By crafting the Heart Maps, I wasn't asking kids to write poetry. I was asking them to find the topics that mattered to them for any kind of writing, knowing that if the topic or issue is important to them, the students work hard to make the writing compelling and meaningful to others. Some of them were choosing to write poetry but *few of them were reading poetry*.

As I stood there I thought, *Why have I used these Heart Maps only to inspire writing? What if we used these to inspire reading—the reading of poetry?* Ever since

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hearing William Stafford "read" his poetry and hearing Ted Kooser (1985) say that "you must read 200 poems before you even begin to write them," I had been trying to figure out a way to get my students to read even more poetry beyond the quickwrites, without doing a *poetry unit*. I wanted them to know poets—William Stafford, Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye, Andrea Davis Pinkney, Pablo Neruda, Kwame Alexander, Sarah Kay, Nikki Grimes, Jacqueline Woodson, Ralph Fletcher, Ted Kooser—the same way they know musical groups or athletes so well that their names roll off their tongue.

But there was another reason. Much of my desire to get students to read more poetry rested with Savitri, a student from India, whose whole being continued to live in my heart, even years after having her in eighth grade. When I handed her the book *This Same Sky* (Nye 1992), I hoped she would find a poem she liked, a poem that would speak directly to her. What she found was far more than a poem. "Home" by Nasima Aziz, an Indian poet, spoke so personally to Savitri that when she chose to read the poem aloud, a bridge was not only built between the writer and his reader, but also built between this young woman and her classmates. Two bridges that told her she was not alone in her longing.

A year earlier, Savitri was severely injured in an auto accident in India that left her with double vision, an uncontrollable tremor in one hand, a right foot that dragged heavily behind her as she walked, and limited short-term memory. Savitri longed to be "normal." When she read aloud the poem, every fourteen-year-old in that room knew it wasn't only India she was longing for—it was her whole being, who she was (before the accident she was a talented runner) and who she knew she would never be again. In the silence, Rachel asked, "Would you read that again?"

With the voice, the timing, and the confidence of a poet, Savitri breathed life into Aziz's words. In the spontaneous burst of applause that followed her reading, she smiled. In their lives, those students may never hear a more beautiful, passionate, or powerful reading of a poem. The breathtaking words of a poet from India, translated scrupulously in a collection by Naomi Shihab Nye, published by a perceptive editor in a skyscraper in New York, touched a child's life. An entire classroom of peers understood in that moment a bit of what her life was like and how painful her longing was.

I want kids to develop an understanding of others' feelings, a compassion that says *I know you. I know what you are feeling.* That's what I want all students to find in poetry—the truth of their feelings and the feelings of others. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) clarifies this when she says that books act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.

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> **Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (ix)**

Students not only find connections to themselves in poetry, but an understanding of others. When I set up the Heart Books, I originally thought kids would find predominantly the poetry that connected personally to them. What they showed me is that they found poetry that let them see people and places outside of their own experiences. Poets showed them their lives, their beliefs, their feelings—that my students may never have experienced. Poetry opened *their* world but led them through the door to *the world of others*.

Touched by the Heart Map idea of Georgia Heard, inspired by the writing and speaking of William Stafford and Mark Doty, believing the words of Ted Kooser, and humbled by the voice and courage of Savitri, I embarked on the idea of Heart Books to inspire and deepen the reading—and ultimately the love—of poetry.

Heart Maps as Inspiration for Reading Poetry

The Heart Maps would become the covers of blank books, and the impetus for finding poems connected to all those things that mattered the most to the students. I wanted them to do more than simply collect poems. I wanted them to spend time with them: read them (maybe several times), think about them, write, draw, or sketch a response to them. Jot down why they chose the poem. What they noticed or thought about it. What in the poem made them think that? What did they notice about the way it was written? How did the way it was written deepen or change the way it was read? What did the poet have to say about writing, about reading, about poetry?

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I wanted my students to feel what I felt listening to William Stafford—to feel something in a way that makes them hold their breath. Stop time. See, hear, and feel ordinary things in extraordinary ways. Recognize how words and formats are used in refreshing, surprising ways. See the world and their lives poetically. Live in the words of poets that touched their hearts. Find classic and contemporary poets to love and emulate. Use their artistic strengths and imaginations to illustrate the poems that spoke to them. Get their creative juices flowing. Learn how poets use reading and writing in their own lives. Sit beside a poem long enough to experience the richness of its words, the intensity of its feeling; sit beside a poem long enough to wonder, *How'd the poet do that?*, especially in a way that would help them become stronger writers. What do they notice about the way the poem is written? What craft moves does the poet make, and how do those moves affect the poem and affect the reader?

In the book *Leading from Within* (Intrator and Scribner 2007, 222), the editors suggest asking specific questions that invite engagement with a poem that are precisely the ways I would like my students to engage with their choices of poems:

- What do you notice in this poem?
- Where does this poem intersect with your life?
- What initially attracted you to this poem?
- What is happening in this poem and to whom?
- What do you find elusive or opaque?
    - With my students I might rephrase this to:

      What confuses you?

      What do you find problematic about this poem?
- What do you sense the poem is trying to tell you?
- What images, words, or phrases seem to linger in your mind?
- Who would you give this poem to and why?

Some students might need the specificity of the questions as they approach their reading of poetry in this open-ended way. All the questions are only meant to guide them in their ability to enter deeply into their reading and thinking.

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Poetry as Inspiration for Robust Reading and Heightened Quality of Writing

Ultimately, I want the students to notice the poetry in anything they read—novels, editorials, informational pieces, articles—anything. I want the students to realize that sitting beside clear, beautiful language, steeped in strong feelings, could enrich and elevate their own writing in any genre.

In the author's notes at the end of *Pachinko*, Min Jin Lee (2017) describes how reading poetry and recognizing the verse in prose became a pivotal part of her writing process. She began to see the "music in sentences and paragraphs," and she wondered how the author took her into new worlds and made her feel things so strongly. She also "read every fine novel and short story I could find, and I studied the ones that were truly exceptional. If I saw a beautifully wrought paragraph, say from Julia Glass's *Three Junes*, I would transcribe it in a marble notebook. Then, I would sit and read her elegant sentences, seemingly pinned to my flimsy notebook like a rare butterfly on cheap muslin. Craft strengthened the feelings and thoughts of the writer." (Lee 2017, 508)

It is this crafting of phrases and sentences that I want my students to notice in any of their reading. I began to think that it might be in the reading of poetry that they might first notice that tight, purposeful writing that would lead them to see the poetry in all kinds of prose. When I did book talks of recommended books, I used passages such as the following to not only give the students a sense of the style of the writing but also to notice the poetry in the prose.

Read the following passage from *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (2018) and marvel at the poetry of this excerpt:

> **A great blue heron is the color of gray mist reflecting in blue water. And like mist, she can fade into the backdrop, all of her disappearing except the concentric circles of her lock-and-load eyes. She is a patient, solitary hunter, standing alone as long as it takes to snatch her prey. Or, eyeing her catch, she will stride forward one slow step at a time, like a predacious bridesmaid. And yet, on rare occasions she hunts on the wing, darting and diving sharply, swordlike beak in the lead. (88)**

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As I read this novel and copied so much of the metaphorical language into my notebook, I realized her extended metaphors offered the reader deeper connections into all we learned about the main character, Kya. She is the great blue heron.

Or consider this passage from *The Astonishing Color of After* by Emily X. R. Pan (2018):

> **When he finally got the words out, his voice crawled through an ocean to get to me. It was a cold cerulean sound, far away and garbled. . . Where I was that day: on the old tweed couch in Axel's basement, brushing against his shoulder, trying to ignore the orange wall of electricity between us.**
> **If I pressed my mouth to his, what would happen?**
> **Would it shock me like a dog collar? (2)**

Falling in love but not wanting to believe it. What's it like? An "orange wall of electricity," shocking, "like a dog collar." The metaphors heighten the intensity, and we shake our heads, yes, that's what it was like.

Or this passage from Jason Reynolds' (2016) *Ghost*:

> **I squatted down, pushed my feet back against the blocks, stretched out my thumbs and index fingers and placed them on the edge of the white starting line. Rested my weight on my arms. Closed my eyes. Thought of us running to the door. Running for our lives.**
>
> **"Get set!" said the starter. Butts in the air. The sound of the gun cocking. The sound of the door unlocking. Heart pounding. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Silence. This. Is. It.**
>
> **And then . . . *BOOM!* (180)**

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These books are novels. But this is poetry. Poetry. The just-right words, their intentional placement, the feeling that comes over me as the pace, the rhythms roll off my tongue—the slow silence of the "patient, solitary hunter, standing alone as long as it takes" or hearing "his voice—a cold, cerulean sound—crawl through an ocean to get to me" or the feeling of my heart pounding, beating louder, faster, like the "gun cocking, the door unlocking, breathe, breathe, breathe." Poetry. This is poetry. The chosen words and their arrangements force me to slow down, to "pay attention, be astonished," says Mary Oliver (2008), as she invites us to really *see* the world.

Read the lead to Michael Christie's (2015) article "All Parents Are Cowards" and marvel at the poetry of his writing.

Read Naomi Shihab Nye's (2008) "Gate A-4" and ask yourself and your students: Anecdote? Personal narrative? Editorial? All of these, and yet, poetry. Poetry.

Owens, Pan, Reynolds, Christie, and Nye make us feel something. They put us in the experience with them. We look up from the page of writing we have just read—and most likely have reread—and think, *That is poetry*. I want to write like that. I want my students to write like that.

Immersed in the reading of all genres, especially poetry, our students may begin to see and understand that the best writing, the strongest writing, is poetry. My greatest hope is that they begin to recognize the strength of poetic language in the crafting of their own writing. Reading as writers. Seamless *transitions* from reading to writing.

Yes, finding ways to get students to read more poetry, to recognize the poetry in any writing, and to believe they, too, could write like this, is definitely worth doing.

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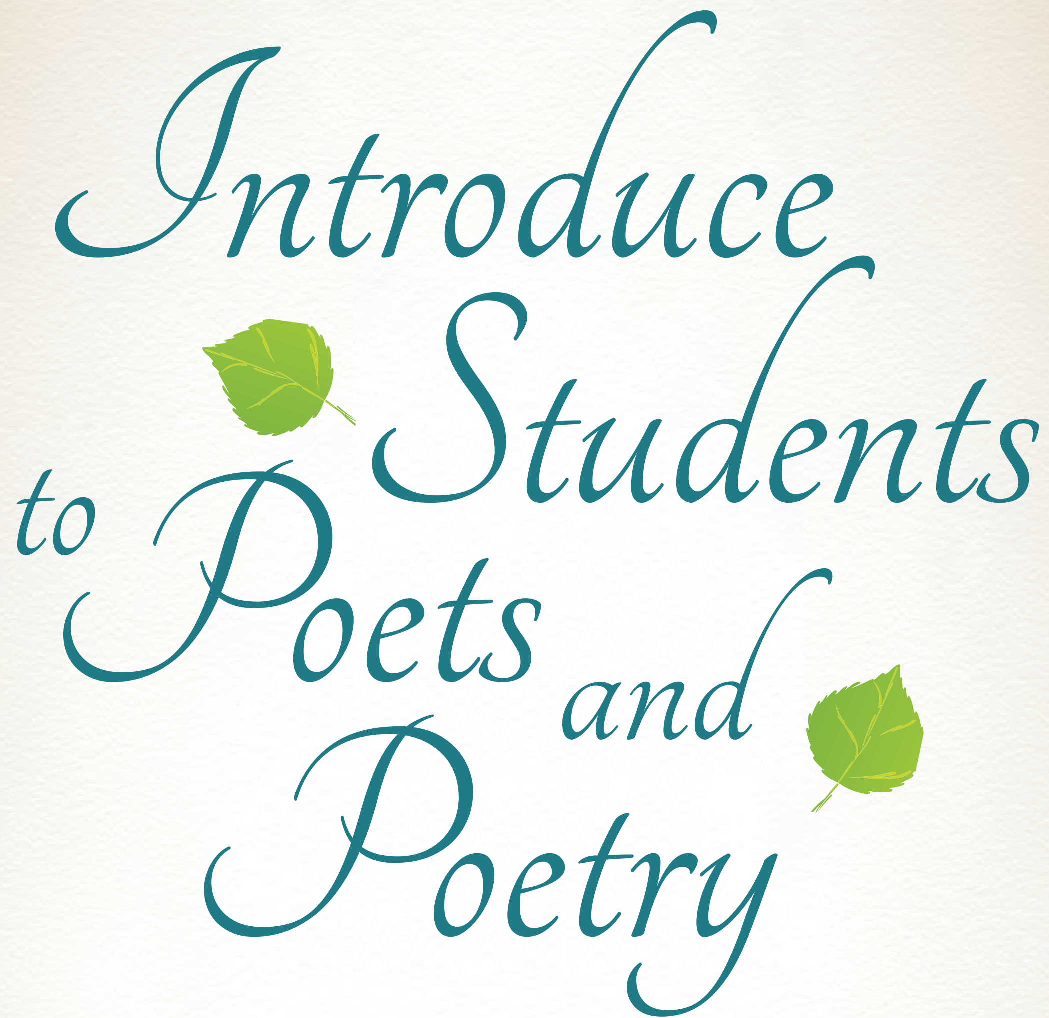
SECTION THREE



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"By the time we get to high school, we expect kids to be able to make the leap from having loved Shel Silverstein in third grade to being able to appreciate Shakespeare's Sonnet 73," says Kwame Alexander. "The world doesn't work like that. You've got to have bridges to help kids get from there to here, to cross over, so to speak, so they can appreciate Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Langston Hughes."

—Boothbay Literacy Retreat June 2016

Choosing Poets and Poems

The poems we choose to put in front of our students, to read to students, to recommend to students, to make available to students, are the bridges that help them navigate the road from Silverstein to Shakespeare. What we choose to share often determines whether they will step onto that bridge or refuse the invitation.

Share Micah Bournés reading Ntozake Shange's poem "My Father Is a Retired Magician" (micahbournes.bandcamp.com "Echoes of the Foremothers"). It will render them speechless and asking, no begging, to hear more poetry.

Few of us have the powerful voice of Bournés, but we can practice reading a poem aloud *before* we read it to the students. We want to show the students we care enough about the poem and them to *know* it: the pronunciation, the punctuation, the pace, and the feeling. It is important for the students to see and hear these poems. I don't remember which poet said, "We should always give a poem twice," but I often give a poem three times, or more.

The first reading is to let the kids hear it and follow along on the text.

During the second reading, I ask the kids to underline any phrases or lines that resonate with them or write the line in their writer's-reader's notebooks if I am showing them the poem from the whiteboard or computer. We then choose one of those lines and do a quickwrite: write for two to three minutes, either anything the poem brings to mind, *or* borrow one of the lines, letting the line lead their thinking.

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After the third reading, I ask students: "What do you notice about the poem, either the content or the way it is written?"

I start with Micah Bournés or with Tupac Shakur's "In the Depths of Solitude." I don't tell them it belongs to Tupac just yet. His book *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* is worth buying, but this poem is easily found online at http://allpoetry.com/In-The-Depths-Of-Solitude. I use his handwritten version to show them—you can put copies on their tables or display on a screen. I want to engage the students immediately and take them beyond flowers and stars and rhyming. I want them to see poets beyond Shel Silverstein and Robert Frost.

Not surprisingly, many students recognize Tupac's writing. When I ask of this piece "What do you notice?" they say: "It doesn't rhyme, it doesn't have punctuation, sometimes it uses numbers and letters in place of words, sometimes it uses caps, other times it doesn't . . . that's a poem?! Are you allowed to do that? Is that legal? I like it."

Another poem to begin with is Kwame Alexander's "Awkward Poems" from *Crush ♥ Love Poems* (2007, 33–34):

Awkward Poems

Sometimes i wish we weren't friends
then i could gaze into your bold eyes
and find answers to questions i'm afraid to ask
but for now, i'll stick to quick glances
and other friendly gestures

Sometimes i wish we weren't friends
then i could hold your hands in ways
that made your palms moist from suggestion
but for now, i'll stick to high fives
and other friendly gestures

Sometimes i wish we weren't friends
then i could hijack your bronze lips,
take them hostage and steal their suppleness
but for now, i'll stick to light pecks
and other friendly gestures

Continues

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Continued

What i am trying to say is
i love
glancing
lingering
flirting
and being your friend

but one day
one day real soon
i'm gonna put away those
big
soft
dark
friendly gestures
and get close
get real close to you

but for now, i'll stick to awkward poems
and other friendly gestures

What do students notice about this poem? It doesn't rhyme; it repeats several phrases, usually three times each; there is only punctuation inside the poem; it uses the lowercase *i* several times; sometimes there is only one word in a line.

Later, when we are talking about craft moves in relation to any writing we are working on, we will go back to these two poems and several others and try to figure out what each of those craft moves does for the poem and for the reader. For instance, what does the lowercase *i* do in Alexander's poem and/or make you think as a reader? Students surmise: he feels small or unimportant around this girl, he has little confidence in himself, he accepts the relationship of just being a "friend," nothing bigger. The *lowercase i* reinforces all of those feelings.

Noticing a craft move is a big step, but being able to articulate what that technique does to the writing and/or the reader shows students how to use craft moves in their own writing. These poems that I use for introductions to poetry for the Heart Books reinforce the value of noticing, naming, and using the craft moves purposefully and intentionally.

We don't need to be the one to find all the poems to share with students. We can, and should, be receptive to their suggestions as it shows we trust them as readers and value their choices. I share a poem from *Light Filters In* by Caroline Kaufman, which was recommended to me by several students.

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mercury:

my mood changes
too fast for my brain
to keep up with.

sometimes, I am okay.
I really am.
talking,
working,
laughing.

then suddenly,
day trades places with night
and my neurons freeze.
I stop talking.
I stop working.
I stop laughing.

all I can do
is pray the frostbite
doesn't reach my heart
before the sun rises again.

In my planning of what poems I share with students, in addition to the several I mentioned already, I frequently show and read:

- Kobie Bryant's "Dear Basketball"
- Naomi Shihab Nye's "Boy and Mom at the Nutcracker Ballet" (1998) from Nye's *Fuel*
- Edwin A. Hoey's "Foul Shot" (1966) from *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* [Dunning, Lueders, and Smith 1966]
- Marilyn Nelson's "Cafeteria Food" (2001) from *Carver: A Life in Poems*
- Pablo Neruda's "The Father" or "Shyness" (2010) from Ryan's *The Dreamer*
- Elizabeth Acevedo's "Unhide-able" (2018) from *The Poet X*.

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These are nontraditional pieces that hook the kids right away and that, I believe, they are likely to relate to.

My students also love spoken word poetry and video poems. Show it once, then show it again with printed copies of the words in front of them. Invite them to find a line that resonates with them or respond to the poem as a whole. Keeping this thinking in their writer's-reader's notebook lets them capture initial thoughts that often lead to more extensive thinking. (Recommended spoken word poets and video poems are listed in the Appendix.)

One way to hook students is to share a poem or poet that is connected to your community or with whom your students may be familiar. For example, Ralph Fletcher lives in our school district and my students are familiar with his novels, but they don't usually know his poetry. I show them one of Ralph's collection of poems, *Ordinary Things* (1997), and explain how it came to be on a walk that is so familiar to my kids: the loop that circles our middle school and our high school.

I read one of his poems, asking if any of them have seen what Ralph saw on this walk. The students are stunned and fascinated by the fact there is so much poetry in the ordinary, especially ordinary things with which they are so familiar.

I open Abigail Becker's (1993) now-out-of-print collection *A Box of Rain* and tell kids what I know about Abi, who died at age sixteen in a horrific automobile accident, and how this book came to be. I read one of her poems, collected from her journals by her sisters and her mom, who taught sixth grade at our middle school, and published in this collection of Abi's writing and art. These are books I know my students will connect with right away.

As I read a poem from each of these poets, I point out there are hard copies on the tables so kids can see them, as well as hear them.

You know your students, your school, your environment better than anyone. I begin with what I know my students will relate to. You should begin with the poems you know your students can connect to. If you live in the city, perhaps you begin with Allan De Fina's (1997) *When a City Leans Against the Sky*, or Tupac Shakur's (1999) *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*, or Jacqueline Woodson's (2014) *Brown Girl Dreaming*, or Kwame Alexander's (2018a) *Rebound*, or Rupi Kaur's (2015) *Milk and Honey.*

When choosing the poems I share with students, I keep the following questions in mind:

- Are the imagery and wording accessible? Are the students able to enter into the poem and understand most of the language? Can they see the imagery in their heads? Can they hear the rhythm and music in the phrasing and word choices?

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- Is this poem both personal enough and universal enough to engage and expand the students' perceptions of themselves and the world?
- Is the poem short enough to sustain the students' interest?
- Is it clear enough to understand the point? Is it mysterious enough to raise questions and wonderings?
- Have I intentionally found a variety of culturally diverse voices and perspectives?

If you know your students' experiences with poetry have been limited, start with a poet with whom they are familiar, giving them words and feelings they recognize and understand. Start with poems that are accessible, comfortable—moving them slowly to new poets who will nudge and challenge their thinking.

I do not read all of these poems at once. I spread them out over one or two days a week, every six-to-seven weeks, while we are working on the Heart Books. These are the poets I want the kids to begin to recognize. There are so many others.

When I show and read these poems (often several times), I ask the students to pay attention to some, or all, of the following, in the hopes they will do or notice some of these same things in the poems they choose for themselves:

- **What's a line that stood out to you? In your writer's-reader's notebook, jot down quickly—for two to three minutes—all that the line brought to mind for you, letting the line lead your thinking.**
- **As a whole, what does the poem bring to mind for you?**
- **What do you notice about this poem?**
- **What do you notice specifically about the title, the beginning, the ending, white space, length of lines, use of punctuation, word choices, point of view, perspective, tense, line breaks, how lines end or run together, layout on the page, stanzas, metaphors . . . (*never* all of these at once, just one or two noticeable techniques in a specific poem)?**
- **What is a particular craft move or technique the poet uses in this poem? How does it affect the poem and/or you, the reader?**

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Sometimes "hoping" kids notice or pay attention to all (or any) of these things in the poems they choose is not enough. I put a border around these suggestions, so that you might make a copy to share with your students if you think it would be helpful to them. The list is simply a gentle reminder to students of all we talked about in the shared poems that *might* be helpful in their thinking about their chosen poems. What I *don't* want to do is ruin the feeling a reader takes from a poem by asking lots of questions or steering their response in any direction other than their own.

On a bulletin board and/or in a three-ring binder, I post or collect a copy of each poem I read aloud because kids often want to return to those poems to find others by the same poet. I also show them where I have assembled all the art supplies for their use, briefly explaining the variety of tools available. In the Art Invitations (see the Appendix), I list the supplies needed for each technique, but in general I have lots of colored pencils, watercolor sets, paint brushes, scissors, rulers, construction paper, and watercolor paper available.

Let's pause for a moment, take a breath, and review what we've done so far and the order in which we've done it. I cannot tell you how long each of these steps takes, except that I take the time during the first six weeks to somehow fit this in. Keep in mind that most of the work with Heart Books is completed after we've done all that is listed below and during *transition times*—those times in between the writing and reading you do on a regular basis. Everything I've described up to this point is done first, so the students are set to work independently during transition times. The students have done all of the following:

- created a Heart Map
- received a blank book
- glued their Heart Map to the cover of the blank book, which is now called their Heart Book
- received and glued their instructions into their Heart Book
- written what comes to mind when they hear the word *poetry*
- seen what a double-page spread might look like
- read and reviewed the instructions glued in their Heart Book
- seen my Heart Book and heard my response to the first poem I chose
- been introduced to several poems and poets and talked through what they notice in these shared poems
- been shown where the art supplies are kept and where their Heart Books can be found.

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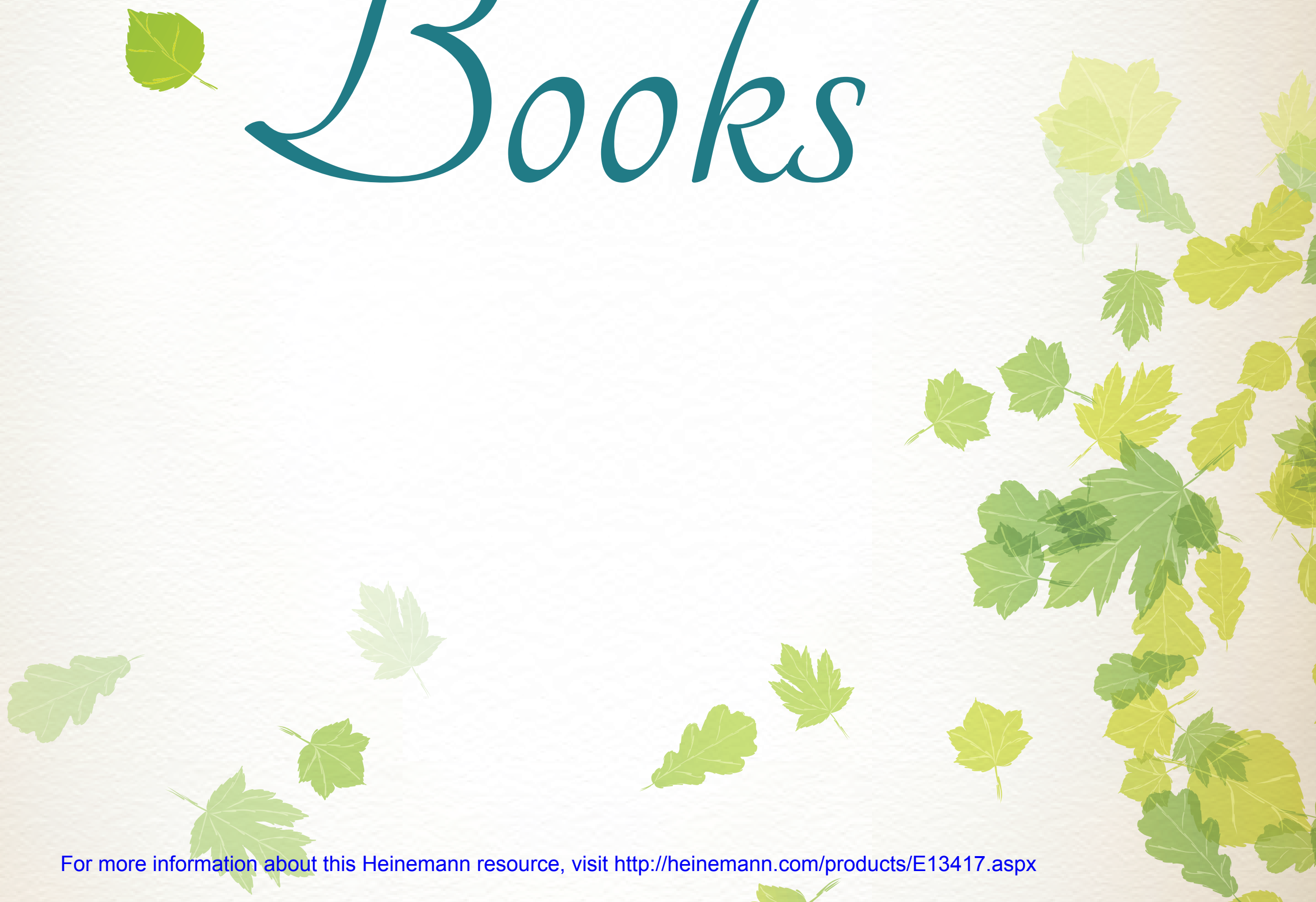
SECTION FOUR

Core of the Heart Books



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I think we actually need poetry. We need the immersive experience in our humanity that poetic language can give us . . . that allow(s) us to contemplate what matters in our lives. One new phenomenon that I've observed that goes to why we need poetry, is how much we love podcasts. How suddenly, in a world where we can be looking at a million screens at a time and multitasking our brains out, what we want is a human voice in our ear that actually pushes everything else away. (Podcasts) . . . provide a chamber for a certain kind of mental relaxation and exercise. And that is what poetry can do if one doesn't begin with a kind of coughing and sneezing, allergic, terrified reaction to it, or if one doesn't go lunging after the meaning. "What does this poem mean? I don't know!" or "I'm stupid. It's stupid. Goodbye." . . .

The experience of drawing students in to that refreshing kind of exercise of reading a poem, is the most important work I do. . . .

—Sarah Aronson, November 8, 2018, Montana Public Radio, Elisa New, PBS Host and Creator of "Poetry in America"

As students pour through poetry collections in my classroom, I ask them to read the poem aloud before they select it to include it in their Heart Book. How did it sound? What did they notice about pace and rhythm? What kind of feeling did they get from the way it sounded, the words used? As they read it aloud, could they show that feeling coming through in their voice? Each time I introduce them to a new poet, I try hard to capture the feeling with my voice and pacing.

When we read a poem aloud, we seldom talk about what the poet might have meant. We do not analyze the poem. We talk more about what it makes us think, what it makes us feel, and what we notice the poet does to make us think or feel that way. In the pages that follow showing the students' Heart Books, you will notice they are *responding* to the poems they chose. Responding, not analyzing. "The experience of drawing students in to that refreshing kind of exercise of reading a poem" (Aronson 2018) may be some of the most important work that we do.

Students' Reconstructed Heart Book Pages

Throughout this book I give examples of what a double-page spread looks like. All quite different. The students have to figure out an organizational pattern and layout that make the pages easy to read. On the instruction sheet in the Appendix, you can

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see what I expect the students to include on these two pages. To make these double-page spreads easier for you to read, I reconstructed them here, pulling from a considerable number of students' Heart Books what they did well to share as examples with your students. The pages you see here, in this section, are not the way they appeared in each student's Heart Book. *They are reformatted for your ease of reading.*

Trying to include an entire Heart Book was not possible, but hopefully what I chose to include will be helpful to you and your students. Each poem they are writing about was always in the Heart Book, but it is often not here in the shared pages (it is prohibitively expensive to gain permission to obtain the rights to publish some poems). What is most important is the student's response to the poem. In some cases, that response only makes sense with the poem, which I did try to include.

At the top of each student's page or pages, I listed what might be most helpful to notice. Regardless, everything on these pages is worthy of our attention. I was most impressed with the way so many students were motivated to go back to poems again and again, thinking through what they noticed the poet did that touched them personally or helped them garner ideas or craft moves for their own writing. It could be any of the following:

- the student's thoughts on the concept of "poetry" before and/or after doing the Heart Books
- what struck them about a particular poet
- their reaction and/or response to a particular poem
- personal connections brought to mind from the poem
- illustration/art techniques
- using the Heart Map for more fully developed pieces of writing.

In some cases, I added comments about what the student did especially well or what the student missed or could have done better. In this second case, it is clear to me, I am the one who missed the boat, by not taking the time to note more carefully what the student needed from me to help clarify their thinking and understandings. These comments on the student pages are in red, so you can distinguish my discoveries from their words. Each student's page is different, just as it was in their Heart Books.

Teacher Tip

As I reconstructed these pages, it occurred to me that it might be effective to have students go back into their Heart Books to find those things they did well and post them on what they might call a "Year-End Reflective Evaluation" of their discoveries about poetry and themselves. My students' reconstructed pages could be used as examples to show your students.

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Thomas B.

RESPONSE TO POET: Charles Simic

ILLUSTRATIONS: pencil and pen sketches

THOUGHTS ON POETRY

WHAT I NOTICED ABOUT THOMAS' RESPONSE

"Listen" by Charles Simic

From That Little Something *(Simic 2008)*

RESPONSE: "Listen" explores the idea of unknown, or just ignored, consequences of your actions. That idea intrigued me, and lured me into a further analysis of the poem. The thought of ignored consequences is a thought that drifts into my head at night. In my past, I've said or done many things that I had not fully thought through, leading to consequences that I had not intended or expected to happen. Thinking about those mistakes leads me to regretting them.

Working in a bomb factory is an extreme example of how this can be applied to someone's life. The people know what they're making, bombs. But they don't imagine how they're used after production and how they will affect people. They try to ignore the obvious with the intention to make themselves feel better.

The couple working the night shift observes the child engulfed in flames, leaping from the window, surely to his or her death. Their consequences that were once ignored, are now being presented in a truly horrific fashion.

This poem forces me to rethink my decisions more thoughtfully than I have in the past. It urges me to wonder how my current and future actions will affect me in my life.

Illustrated response to "Listen" by Charles Simic

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"Death's Book of Jokes" by Charles Simic

From That Little Something *(Simic 2008)*

RESPONSE: "Death's Book of Jokes" is about death, something that interests and scares me. At first glance, the first two stanzas reference and address the grim topic. They also contain numerous symbols of death, such as constant reminders of time, a touch on a church, and a mention of the Grim Reaper. But the last stanza takes an unexpected twist on this dark topic.

Illustrated response to "Death's Book of Jokes" by Charles Simic

As Death approaches the protagonist, he is going to tell him it's "his time." The watch is then presented, surely showing him it's "his time," but rather than the protagonist reacting to Death, he ignores it and simply laughs at the price of the watch. In essence, he is standing up to Death, telling him it's not his time yet. Essentially a big "screw you" to Death.

Death scares me, worries me, gives me anxiety. Who's not afraid of it? This poem shows me that I should not be afraid of death, but rather have Death reorganize his schedule around me.

In Simic's words: "Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them."

"One writes because one has been touched by the yearning for, and the despair of, ever touching the Other."

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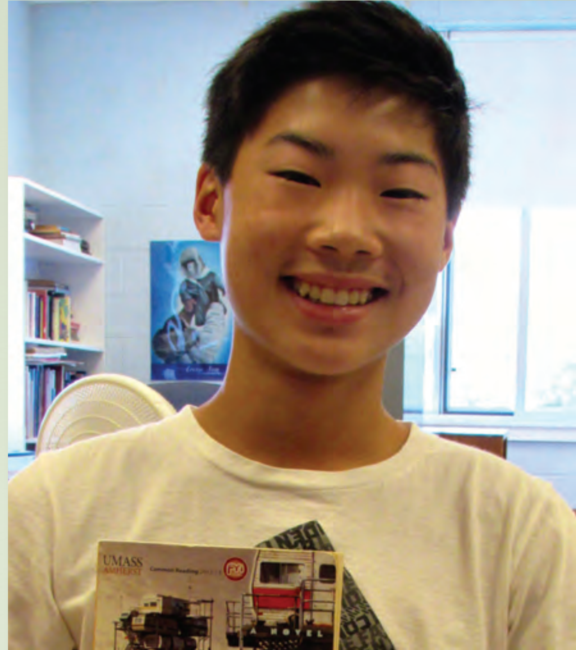
After reading so many poems I realize that poetry makes me think of writers who pour out their heart and emotions. More heart and emotion than I initially thought.

Poetry finds a way to convey its theme in a more complex way than other genres of writing. Other writing will feed the events to the reader, while poetry will often convey it symbolically or through a metaphor, forcing the reader to think and analyze the piece more thoroughly. Poetry often requires multiple reads and careful analysis of the words the poet uses to fully understand the idea, or theme, behind the poem.

While crafting the Heart Book I stumbled on multiple poems by Charles Simic that impressed and interested me. . . . They all forced me to rethink how I will act in the future and they made me regret some of my past decisions.



Thomas B.

As I mentioned earlier in the book, it is a good idea to introduce your students to classic and contemporary poets from your state (from New Hampshire: Robert Frost, Donald Hall, Jane Kenyon, May Sarton, Charles Simic, Ralph Fletcher, just to name a few). Without the introduction, I am not sure that Thomas would have found Simic on his own. But his poetry struck a chord in this eighth grader. Simic's poems gave him pause to think about big ideas: ignored or unintended consequences of our actions, on a personal or world stage, and death.

I am impressed with how thoughtful and articulate Thomas is in his response to both poems. He chooses his wording carefully, the way poets do in their writing, showing us these poems "urge" him to think.

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SECTION FIVE

Students' Thinking as We Crafted Heart Books

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What Students Learned About Poetry

I was most interested in hearing what the students had learned for themselves about poetry. What had they noticed as they read poem after poem and collected those poems that meant the most to them? I was astonished at what they learned:

I've noticed that most poems have hidden messages that the author is trying to get you to understand. Trying to figure out what the message or meaning is, is like uncovering a mystery. Some authors hide the meaning or message really well, often in metaphors, while others completely give it away. I also noticed that the way the poet shapes the stanzas really affects the poem.

–Kristen

Finding poems you love is like buying shoes; someone else can't do it for you.

—Lindsey

A lot of poets like to use metaphors . . . sometimes it's more interesting to explain something using a metaphor or personification, like what Carl Sandburg does in "Under a Telephone Pole" [Bolin 1995]: "I am a copper wire slung in the air."

—Caleb

Poetry can sometimes be short and concise, like "Dust of Snow" [Frost 1969] or it can be funny, like "Boy and Mom at the Nutcracker Ballet" [Nye 1998]. [No matter what they write or how they write], poets are passionate about what they write about.

—Brady

Poetry makes me think, makes me visualize, and brings back memories.

—Kitiara

I find that poetry often addresses large, broad topics of life. Such as, in "Listen" [Simic 2008] where two people who work in a factory learn what their bombs do. This poem addresses the topic of ignored consequences. "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (Frost in Hinton 1967) addresses how nothing great in life will last forever.

–Thomas

If you like one poem from a poet, there is a good chance you will like all of their work.

—Morgan

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About the Author

Linda Rief left the classroom in June of 2019 after 40 years of teaching Language Arts, mostly with eighth graders. She misses their energy and their apathy, their curiosity and their complacency, their confidence and their insecurities, but mostly she misses their passionate, powerful voices as readers and writers.

She is an instructor in the University of New Hampshire's Summer Literacy Institute and a national and international presenter on issues of adolescent literacy. She is the author of *The Quickwrite Handbook*, *Read Write Teach*, *Inside the Writer's-Reader's Notebook* and *Seeking Diversity;* she is co-editor (Beers, Probst, and Rief) of *Adolescent Literacy*.

In 2021 she was honored with the Distinguished Service Award from the National Council of Teachers of English. In 2020 she received the Kent Williamson Exemplary Leader Award from the Conference on English Leadership, in recognition of outstanding leadership in the English Language Arts. Her classroom was featured in the series *Making Meaning in Literature* produced by Maryland Public Television for Annenberg/CPB. For three years she chaired the first Early Adolescence English/Language Arts Standards Committee of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Her inspiration: granddaughters Julia and Fiona, and grandsons Hunter and Harrison

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