

WHAT CHILDREN'S POETRY IS FOR

BY J. BOTTUM

A RECENTLY published anthology of children's poetry—designed, its British editor declared, "to speak to today's children"—includes two difficult poems that do not initially seem likely candidates for children's poetry.

The first is Edgar Allan Poe's small rhythmic 19th-century gem that begins,

*Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight,
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of Eldorado.*

The second is Delmore Schwartz's 20th-century lyrical lullaby—entitled "O Child, Do Not Fear the Dark and Sleep's Dark Possession"—that begins,

*O child, when you go down to sleep and sleep's
secession
You become more and other than you are, you be-
come the procession
Of bird and beast and tree: you are a chorus,
A pony among horses, a sapling in a dark forest.*

These are both well-constructed, well-found verses: serious, competent, and betraying some genuine poetic inspi-

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ration in their American authors. But I have the feeling that anyone who tries actually reading these poems aloud to a classroom full of children, or even to a single child propped up in bed with pillows, will quickly find that Poe's poem is successful as children's verse while Schwartz's poem is not. And if we could determine the reasons for this dissimilarity in the reception of the two poems, we would have gone a long way toward discovering what it is that makes good poetry for children—and what it is that we may reasonably hope to gain by teaching children to read it.

One obvious difference between Poe's verse and Schwartz's poem is the effect of the form. Though "Eldorado" mixes such masculine rhymes as "long" and "song" with such feminine rhymes as "shadow" and "Eldorado," the rhymes are all strong, hard couplings and the short, heavily accented, two-foot lines hammer them home. In Schwartz's lullaby, the extended, lightly accented, six-foot lines force the rhymes off a long distance—and even then those rhymes are feminine and, in the case of "chorus" and "forest," false.

Another obvious difference derives from the complexity of the writing. There are difficult words in each of the stanzas, words the hearers are unlikely to know—though young children are perhaps marginally more likely to know "secession" than "bedight," and "secession" is certainly a more useful word in contemporary speech to

teach them. But there is still an advantage to “Eldorado,” for understanding “secession” is key to following Schwartz’s poem in a way that understanding “bedight” is not to following Poe’s. So, too, with such phrases as “more and other than you are,” there is a grammatical density in Schwartz that a child would be hard-pressed at first hearing to sort out—and that is utterly missing in Poe.

Yet a third obvious difference between the poems is the result of simple historical accident: Regardless of whether or not he is a better poet, the fact remains that Poe wrote a hundred years before Schwartz, and his work’s long tenure in the genre of popular Victorian parlor verse, the greatest era of poetry reading in the history of English, gives him a patina of familiarity that Schwartz could never hope to obtain in the 1950s. “O Child, Do Not Fear the Dark and Sleep’s Dark Possession” does not rank among Schwartz’s best works, but even a universally admired poem like his “Ballad of the Children of the Czar” will never awaken the resonances effortlessly maintained by Poe in “The Raven,” “Annabel Lee,” “The Bells,” and “To Helen.” Indeed, even the word “Eldorado,” meaning a long-sought but unobtainable goal, has permanently entered the English language thanks to Poe.

These three differences—of form, complexity, and familiarity—offer some explanation of why, when read to children, Poe’s “Eldorado” is much more likely to be a success than Schwartz’s verse. And these three differences offer as well, I think, some explanation of what we ought to look for in any successful children’s poetry.

The Role of Form

The importance of form is obvious even at a quick glance through any standard children’s anthology: *Mother Goose’s Nursery Rhymes*, for instance, Louis Untermeyer’s once-best-selling (and generally underrated) *Golden Treasury of Poetry*, or Iona and Peter Opie’s classic 1973 edition of *The Oxford Book of Children’s Verse*.

There is, for instance, a *Mother Goose* rhyme that goes:

*How many miles is it to Babylon?
Threescore miles and ten.
Can I get there by candle-light?
Yes, and back again.*

A professional student of prosody (as the technical study of the rhythms of poetry is called) might say that the verse shows two rhythms: a falling rhythm composed basically of dactyls in the four-foot lines (*HOW many / MI-les / IS it to / BAB-y-lon?*) alternating with a rising rhythm composed basically of iambs in the three-foot lines (*YES / and BACK / aGAIN*). Or perhaps a prosodist might give a different explanation of the verse’s rhythmic variety. But the far more difficult thing to explain is how the verse tells us in the first place that it requires to be read aloud in a galloping trot—though that is something that thousands of children reciting the verse have known intuitively without any notion at all of what a dactyl might be.

Similarly, when A.A. Milne, the early 20th-century author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, writes:

*James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree
Took great
Care of his Mother,
Though he was only three.*

a prosodist might tell us that Milne is nearly recreating, in a stressed English line, the rhythms of a quantitative Sapphic strophe straight out of Horace’s Latin odes. There may be some interest in the fact that the rhythm technically runs *- / -uu / -uu / -u / - / - / - / -uu / -u / -uu / - / -*, just as there may be some interest in identifying the flaw in the ninth foot (“Mother” is one unstressed syllable short). But it’s awfully hard to imagine any child being interested, just as it’s hard to imagine any child who couldn’t immediately hear the rhythm in the poem without ever having heard of either Sappho or Horace.

It’s worth noticing that both these verses are as strongly rhymed as they are strongly accented in meter. And, in fact, strong rhythms and strong rhymes seem to characterize every successful children’s poem. But figuring out quite why that should be so is difficult.

Such strong meters and rhyme schemes are certainly not characteristic of adult verse. (An exception might be comic and pornographic poetry—the English poet W. H. Auden once complained that every time he tried to write in heavily stressed alexandrines it came out obscene—but part of the joke in such verse is the way it plays ironically with forms familiar to us first in children’s poems.) But children seem to respond first to unity in poetry. Heavy meter and insistent rhyme are a kind of sorcery in which words appear suddenly not just as pointers—referring signs, unreal in themselves, that merely pick out things in the world—but both as designators of things and as real, individual things in their own right: “Every word,” Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, “was once a poem.”

Perhaps we could put this more simply by suggesting that meter and rhyme serve three functions for children. The first is to confirm something of the mystery children feel about language—the magic power that words have to connect things. The second is a kind of deep empowerment, a making of words into things that children may feel that they can own. And the third function is a reflection of children’s deeply conservative desire that the world make sense in all its parts—that language not be some arbitrary and meaningless system of reference, but a graspable and unified explanation of a universe in which grammar and reality are one.

The Role of Complexity

We can overprotect children from difficulty, absurdly refusing to expose them to things beyond their knowledge when the purpose of education is to teach students things they don’t know. But there’s a difference between exposing children to things beyond their knowledge and exposing them to things beyond their comprehension.

For a contemporary child, and indeed, for every child who read it since it first appeared in 1678, John Bunyan’s Christian allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, will be full of things unknown. But its popularity for three centuries as a chil-

dren's classic—perhaps, after the Bible, the most-often-republished book in the English language—testifies to the intuition of the purchasing parents that there is nothing in *Pilgrim's Progress* beyond a child's comprehension.

As countless contemporary teachers and parents have discovered, the same point might be made about C. S. Lewis's 20th-century Christian allegory in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the other volumes in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. Or the point might be made about Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, *Jungle Books*, and other tales of India: half the fun of reading Kipling, as the literary critic Lionel Trilling observed, is that he studs his prose with undefined Hindustani words like "sais" or "sahib" but gives just enough information for a twelve-year old to parse them out by a kind of triangulation from context and other words which gives the child reader a sense both of accomplishment and of being in on a secret and arcane knowledge.

To take a somewhat absurd counterexample, however, we might imagine the disaster we would find reading T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* to a child. The poem is certainly full of references a child would not know—the fifty pages of notes Eliot appended to the poem at his publishers' insistence is proof that the poem is full of references nearly anyone would not know. But more to the point is the fact that the poem is not just beyond any child's knowledge; it is beyond any child's comprehension, requiring for its understanding things that it would be foolish—or even cruel—to expect a child to see: the complicated sexual relations between men and women, the power of historical example on politics, the psychology of myth, and the way in which the enervated populations of Western Europe after World War I felt that Christianity and the revolutionary impulses of the French Revolution had reached a near mutual exhaustion.

The same point might be made about Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a book-length poem with much the same view as *Pilgrim's Progress* but with a latinized grammar and an intellectual theology unfair to ask a child to grasp. And the point might in fact be made even about nearly any one of Shakespeare's sonnets. A well-trained child might be able to parse one of the sonnets, much as British schoolboys were once expected to take apart a Latin ode by Horace. But it would be only a cold and analytical process, lacking everything that makes the sonnets poetry. The emotions to which Shakespeare gives voice require for their comprehension adult experience. And though children might be taught to identify the rhyme schemes and the metaphors, they can no more grasp their meaning than a circus pony can understand math.

The amount of intellectual and emotional complexity a child can stand will obviously vary greatly from age group to age group and from child to child. But all the best children's verse has a grammatical correctness and a straightforward narrative that makes it run. Consider the opening of Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman," a poem it's hard to imagine bettered for reading to almost any school-age child:

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.

The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon

cloudy seas,

The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor;

And the highwayman came riding—

Riding—riding—

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

There are obviously hard words here, and things—like the "highwayman" himself—with which a child might not be familiar. But in addition to its trotting rhythm and strong rhymes, there is in Noyes's poem a straightforward narrative flow and a grammatical simplicity that insures that a word missed here or there will not ruin the verse. And it is this effect that we rightly demand from successful children's poetry.

The Role of Familiarity

There is marvelous children's verse being written today, as for instance Jack Prelutsky's 1990 "Mother Goblin's Lullaby" that begins:

*Go to sleep, my baby goblin,
hushaby, my dear of dears,
if you disobey your mother,
she will twist your pointed ears.*

So too there was a great deal of truly horrible parlor verse produced for children in the nineteenth century, as for instance such work by the late-Victorian newspaper versifier Ella Wheeler Wilcox as:

*Have you heard of the Valley of Babyland,
The realms where the dear little darlings stay
Till the kind storks go, as all men know,
And oh! so tenderly bring them away?*

But the fact remains that a greater effect in education is obtained by reading to a child a well-known poem than a little-known poem. Part of the reason for this is the simple fact of the knowledge being shared. The vision held by Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century—that universal knowledge of poetry would take the place of the universal knowledge of the Bible he could already feel fading in England—has certainly not come about. But there is *some* knowledge of poetry shared in America, and if the metaphorical resources of the language are not to be reduced entirely to references to 1960s television programs, that shared knowledge needs to be preserved.

But there is another and better reason to read William Blake's "The Tyger" to a child, and Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," Eugene Field's "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod," Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verse*, and all of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Edgar Allan Poe. And that reason has to do with handing on a language as rich as the language we received.

One reason we read poetry to children is to maintain the deposit of word and phrase—prior generations' investment in the language. There is a purpose in putting "young Lochinvar is come out of the West" and "The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees" in children's anthologies—and "'Twas the night before Christmas" and "what is so rare as a day in June?" and "I hear America

singing” and “Under a spreading chestnut tree” and all the rest of the Victorian parlor classics. The person who is not given these references as a child is finally deprived as an adult, for the language will never thicken and clot around old memories.

And that use of poetry for children serves yet another function. Good as some modern work is, it’s all somehow thin, lacking a real sense of the titanic waves of emotion that mark a child’s life: either a sort of wild excitement, a mad glint in the poem’s eye, or an oceanic sadness swelling underneath the lines. The poetry from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have become established as children’s classics fall naturally into either the categories of nonsense verse or mythical tales of heroes and villains and frenzy and weeping and death. Lewis Carroll’s verse would be mostly bad puns and logic games were it not that he, more than any other poet, conveys childhood’s madness. Kenneth Graham, after he finished *The Wind in the Willows*, edited a collection of children’s poems in which he mocked, “The compiler of Obituary Verse for the delight of children could make a fine fat volume with little difficulty.” But there is something about the *rightness* of sorrow in children’s verse that Poe knew when he wrote “Annabel Lee” and Stevenson knew in nearly all his poems.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES most good children’s poetry from bad is at least these three elements: an emphasis on form, a not too elaborate grammatical and narrative complexity, and a reasonable familiarity and established place in the language. It’s worth noticing, however, that this has the harsh consequence that children are unable to write good children’s verse—and we make a mistake when we demand they do so.

There is an obvious difference between poetry written for children and poetry written about children. But beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, a third genre emerged—a genre of “poetry by children”—with popular magazines running innumerable contests aimed at producing a great child poet. The most successful of such endeavors was the *St. Nicholas* children’s

magazine, and the most successful author it had promoted by the early twentieth century was undoubtedly the young Edna St. Vincent Millay.

None of this early journalistic verse by children, however, not even Millay’s, has stood the test of time, and the vast majority of it was printed by editors with a pretty clear notion that adults rather than children were the primary readers. But the genre received a new life in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the poet Kenneth Koch published the widely noticed *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, his account of a year as poet-in-residence at a New York City public school.

Koch argued that teaching the composition of poetry empowered children in the language in a way that nothing else would do. The point is at least debatable, though the desired result of children who speak clearer and more colorful English than previous generations was never tested empirically and seems in my admittedly limited experience to be false. But, regardless, the movement to introduce poetry writing into the schools did not manage to produce any poetry that other children would care to read.

The reason for this is fairly clear: Poetry is very hard. The contemporary British literary critic George Steiner has observed that child prodigies are well known in such fields as mathematics, chess, and music, while there has never been a child prodigy in poetry. Rimbaud in French and Keats (and to a lesser degree Millay) in English were writing interesting verse in their late teens and early twenties, but no one younger has ever managed a poem of any importance. Steiner’s explanation is that poetry requires an emotional knowledge and maturity not necessary in mathematics, chess, or music. But a further explanation—at least of the failure of children to produce good verse for children to read—might be the difficulty of the heavily stressed meter and the strong rhymes. And if children in fact will not produce good poetry—and if very few of them will grow up to be poets—then the teaching of children to write poetry in lieu of reading poetry to them has the terrible effect of creating students who have never learned how to read—or to love—a poem. □