

# Children's Poetry has an 'Identity Problem'



By Chrissie Gittins

I'm a freelance writer - I write poetry for children and adults, short fiction and radio drama. I attend Children's Poetry Summit meetings every few months in London; we are a group of poets, publishers, librarians, educationalists and other interested parties who are trying to raise the profile of children's poetry.

One of my joys is to visit schools and to see children responding to my poems. After a recent visit a teacher wrote, 'The children were entranced, as well as amused by her more hilarious poems, the younger children giggling uncontrollably at times!' This is, of course, very gratifying to me, and there is no doubt that children love poetry when they hear and read it. But what happens when children/parents go looking for poetry in their local library? Or, more worryingly, what if a child/parent isn't familiar with poetry and doesn't know it's there?

More often than not I have to look very hard for children's poetry in public libraries. It is usually shelved under non-fiction. Signs for fiction proliferate, but I've very rarely seen a sign for poetry. What does this say about the way that libraries value poetry compared to fiction?

From what I understand, books arrive at libraries from suppliers pre-classified, shelf-ready with spine labels and dust jackets, carrying the J821.008 Dewey classification for literature. But there is nothing to stop librarians shelving poetry wherever they want. Would it encourage children to read poetry if it were attractively presented, in a separate section, with its own sign? I know of one school librarian who shelves children's poets alphabetically alongside children's fiction writers, so that students are more likely to pick out poetry books and take a look.

It's also possible to ask your library supplier to label and colour code children's poetry differently. I've spoken to one of the main suppliers and they would be more than happy to do this if asked; I'm assuming that other suppliers would too.

Another way that poetry books can swim into consciousness is through prizes. The Carnegie Prize is open to collections of poems. Sadly, these are the statistics for nominations of single author poetry collections over the last few years:

2015 - 0 poetry collections out of 91 nominations  
2014 - 0 poetry collections out of 77 nominations  
2013 - 1 poetry collection out of 68 nominations  
2012 - 1 poetry collection out of 52 nominations  
2011 - 1 poetry collection out of 60 nominations

(I haven't included verse novels here as they do get nominated, and shortlisted - possibly because they are nearer to novels in their sustained narratives than poetry.)

©PMLG ACCESS - Issue 10 - Spring 2016

23

I'm baffled by these statistics given that poetry is a significant part of literature, and any CILIP Member can nominate a book. Why isn't poetry being submitted? Various reasons have been suggested - a perception that the award is for fiction only, a possible lack of confidence in reading and having opinions about poetry, a lack of promotion of poetry collections by publishers, and possibly that poetry just isn't uppermost in people's minds when they think about which books to submit. Also, poetry requires a different quality and rhythm of reading from fiction - a gear change to a slower, more ruminative approach, with short bursts of concentration. Though shorter, poetry still takes time to absorb. Maybe its shortness works against it and it doesn't appear to have the weight of a novel. (I should say here that I'm aware that non-fiction books and graphic novels are also eligible for the Carnegie, but as it's mostly fiction which is submitted I'm using it as a comparison).

You will have your own take on why poetry isn't submitted to the Carnegie, and why it generally has a low profile, but can I please issue a rallying cry for poetry? For shelves brimming with new and classic collections, and for stock which represents the entire body of work by individual poets. Invariably when I visit schools, children can name numerous fiction writers but are hesitant about poets and need to be encouraged to name one or two.

I'm sure many of you already do, but can I suggest inviting poets to read in libraries, and including poetry in your book sessions. You might like to make displays of poetry books with objects which are pertinent to the collections. You could display a poem of your choice on a huge piece of paper and ask children to make comments on post-it notes, or invite them to illustrate the poem. Once they become engaged with poetry they might like to bring in a poem of their choice to be displayed.

There are two anthologies which provide a poem for every day of the year (Read Me 1, and Read Me 2, edited by Gaby Morgan, published by Macmillan). If you want to respond to the seasons, to celebrations, to sporting events, to an emotion, travel, food, relatives etc., the anthology *The Poetry Store* edited by Paul Cookson (Macmillan) covers these and many more. Another route to finding poems is through the search facility on the Poetry Library's website where you can search by 'Word', 'Book theme', 'Author' or 'Title' from the drop down menu.

<http://p10311uk.eos-intl.eu/P10311UK/OPAC/Search/AdvancedSearch.aspx>

I hope you agree that Children deserve to know poetry, and to have the opportunity to make it part of their lives. Most of all, I hope you have fun with it.

*Chrissie Gittins was born in Lancashire and lives in London. Her first three children's poetry collections (Now You See Me, Now You ... I Don't Want an Avocado for an Uncle and The Humpback's Wail) were all Poetry Book Society Choices, and two were shortlisted for the CLPE Poetry Award. Her new and collected children's poems Stars in Jars (Bloomsbury) is a Scottish Poetry Library recommendation. Her new collection Adder, Bluebell, Lobster will be published by Otter-Barry Books in August. It takes 40 of the 110 nature words deleted from the Oxford Junior Dictionary as titles. She features on the Poetry Archive, and her poems have been animated for Cbeebies and included in many anthologies. She visits schools, libraries and book festivals across the UK and has read her poems in Shetland, West Cork, Bangkok and New York. Chrissie is involved in campaigning for libraries.*

[www.chrissiegittins.co.uk](http://www.chrissiegittins.co.uk)

©PMLG ACCESS - Issue 10 - Spring 2016

24