

# NEWSLETTER

## Making it Real & Fun...

*writing with young people*



What are we doing here? Something called a “poetry walk.” I’ve written out the lines to Tim Wynne-Jones’ poem “Holes,” and the kids are walking through, line by line, reading aloud. There’s nothing quite like an entire class, reading several different poems simultaneously, every one of them at a different line. It’s a wonderful introduction to reading poetry. No reason why adults can’t do it, too, with a poem that lends to movement. (Why DO we sit so much?!)

What about *writing* poetry? This can be done similarly. Have ready 2 inch strips of card....or for a table activity smaller strips of thick paper. Young writers might work individually, or in groups. You might start with a half dozen thematic words already on some of the strips, or perhaps a choice of ideas...depending on the age or the group.

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### Thanks, Sarah!

Last month I set out an invitation for readers to request topics they’d like to see in this newsletter...and Sarah M. wrote back to ask if I’d include some ideas on working with children, and sharing writing ideas with them...one of my favourite things to do! So here it is—thoughts on working and writing with young people!

Do send feedback and any other requests...bring ’em on!

*Alison Acheson*

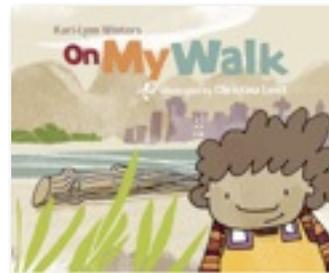
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### PUBLISHING RHYMES IN DIFFICULT TIMES

*by Kari-Lynn Winters*

Getting published can be difficult, especially in today’s economy. But getting your rhyming picture book manuscripts or rhyming poetry collections published can be even more challenging.

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PUBLISHING RHYMES... FROM PAGE 1

### ***Why is it So Difficult to Get Rhyming Manuscripts Published?***

You may ask yourself, “Why is it so difficult to get rhyming poetry published?” or “Don’t kids love rhymes?” or “What about Dr. Seuss—people love his rhyming books, don’t they?” The answer is multi-layered.

First, as prolific poet Carol-Ann Hoyte states, “Many submitted poems have been poorly executed. Editors get tired of it.” I explored this idea by speaking with two editors and two publishers from four Canadian publishing companies. Three of the four agreed. One of the publishers said, “All too often, people send in poetry that is not ready. The plot is not layered enough and the rhymes are not nuanced. It is a mistake to choose the first rhyme that comes to mind.” Another spoke of the dreaded poems she has found in the slush pile. She went on to say, “What some writers do not realize is that even short rhyming manuscripts, like fine wine, require significant time and constant care.” I couldn’t agree more—even a short rhyming picture book (75 words) such as *On My Walk* (Tradewind Books, 2009) took me two years to write/rewrite. In other words, just because it is brief, doesn’t mean that it takes less rigor.

Second, poems need to be multimodal. This means that they not only need to work for the eye, but for the mouth, the ear, and the body as well. Hoyte’s poems are sensory. She spends a great deal of time not only ensuring that they work on the page, but also multimodally. Here is an example:



### **BERRY HEAD**

by Carol-Ann Hoyte

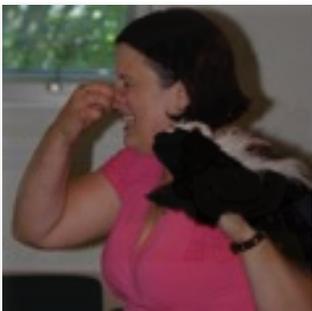
A strawberry wears  
a green beret,  
shaped like a star,  
on its head.

It wears its seeds,  
like yellow freckles,  
on the inside out  
instead.

Not only is *Berry Head* quirky and fresh, it makes sense, and it can be easily spoken and performed.

Award-winning Canadian poet Robert Heidbreder agrees. He reflects, “For me it is mostly about sound—what sounds natural, but it has to be exciting too.” And if you have ever had the opportunity to hear Robert perform one of his poems, you can see that his poems are delivered

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KARI-LYNN WINTERS...

is the author of multiple, award-winning picturebooks, including

*On My Walk* and *Jeffrey and Sloth*. Rhyme is a significant element of her work. She is an Assistant Professor at Brock University, and her work is in literacy and drama in education. This article also appeared in the SCBWI Canada West newsletter, spring 2011. Thank you for sharing, Kari!

## WRITING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE...FROM PAGE 1

Some children work well with drawing out their own material; others like to have some suggestions. My preference is to start with only the slightest of suggestions, and then turn it in some way so that it feels to have been generated by the student his/herself...

Often they'll spin off from your initial idea, and encourage this. My ultimate goal as a teacher is to be unnecessary... students need to be confident about their own ideas, and that they can find and build them.

Another positive of working with "poetry walks" and writing poems is that the young writers can play with the lines and move them around (without the inevitable erasing and frustration that happens with writing on paper).

For the young student who dreads having to read aloud, this is a wonderful way to share work: having classmates "walk" through their work is fun!

Some of the best story "starters" are visuals. National Geographic magazine is a favourite of mine for these. Among the pics that most capture kids' interests: a large model dinosaur tied into the

bed of a pickup truck; an overhead view of a small-town fair with ferris wheel at dusk; a hand-lettered sign posted on a telephone pole, asking if anyone has spotted a pet tarantula "last seen going that way" (!); and the winner is a photo of a young child looking out through a screen door of a rather aged house, and just outside, standing up to the doorframe, is a young German shepherd dog.

Do back the photos with coloured paper and laminate. They will be well-used.

Use questions with the photos—the sort of questions *you* use as a writer, including that of Why is this story starting right now? On this day, at this exact moment? And... What happened just before this picture? What is going to happen immediately after?

Or questions that cause them to take in the details. For this, select the photos yourself, looking for "hidden" or not-so-obvious elements. Talk about the role of detail in a story; what does the detail in the photo show the viewer about the character/s or situation or setting?

Or they can simply describe

the photo in words: *is there 1000 words to a picture?*

And a couple notes: some work best with the goal of an amount of work, say half a page or 2 pages or whatever; and others work best with a time, 15 minutes, even if it results in no more than a few lines. (This works for big folks, too!) If a writer is not working with a goal that's not right for her or him, it will work against.

Also with young writers, show them a real re-write manuscript page—yes the one with the worst of scribbles. Model putting away the eraser. Define messy; the printing/writing can be legible, but cross out what isn't working (one line—so you can still read if need be!). Show how to insert. Show them how to have a real, working, messy draft. Be brave in the mess of creating! Make it fun and real. This is how writers work. Our page is our stone to carve. It's somewhere in there, we know it! We will find it, we will even walk through it. ~~~~



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Questions? Thoughts? Let me know...

## WWW Calendar

### April 4

Life Writing - 8 weeks

### May-June & July-August

Writing for Children - 8 weeks

### May - August

Novel Writing

(currently a waitlist - email [alison@alisonacheson.com](mailto:alison@alisonacheson.com) for more info and if you're interested — there may be two classes)

### June

Poetry - 8 weeks with Ria Voros

## PUBLISHING RHYMES... FROM PAGE 2

through his vocal inflections, his facial expressions, and his gestures. Years ago I had the opportunity to hear his rendering of his rhyming picture book, *Drumheller Dinosaur Dance* (Kids Can Press, 2004) and I was mesmerized from the moment he took the stage.

With wild tambourines they shimmy and shake.

They rock and they roll—it's a dino earthquake.

Boomity-boom

Rattely-clack

Thumpity-thump

Whickety-wack....

(pp.16-17)

Even today when I pick up the book, his words resonate in my ears, my spine, my feet, my hands—they make me want to move!

Loris Lesynski has a similar appeal when she performs her poems. Audience members can't help but tap or clap along. But she goes a step further than most amateur poets by designing how she will present the poems after publication. She plans for and encourages multimodal responses such as rebound reading or soundscapes (see her website for details <http://www.lorislesynski.com/activities-dirtydog.html#sos>), making her collection even more delightful. Designing in this way is crucial if you want to be published—because books don't sell themselves and because publishers want to know how you will promote their product.

A third reason why rhymes are difficult to get published is because the author is more focused on the form or patterning rather than on the story itself. Poet extraordinaire, Sheree Fitch states, "The unrelenting cadence of iambic pentameter and Dr Suessian imitations are a dime a dozen." Fitch's rhythms, on the other hand are meaningful and varied.

First there were gorillas

In a grand ballet

Pirouette

Arabesque

Plié

Sauté

They wore ballerina slippers

And purple fishnet socks

And when they danced

The city shook

For forty-nine blocks

So ... (*There Were Monkeys In My Kitchen*, Doubleday, 1994, pp. 6-7)

Just when you think she will add an identical stanza, she shifts the patterning for the sake of the meaning.

Rob Paul Weston, winner of the 2010 Silver Birch Award for his rhyming fantasy novel *Zorgamazoo* (Penguin, 2008) argues, "The rhythms need to be consistent, but not too consistent or they may sound robotic... In a way, Dr. Suess ruined it for all of us. He had it all. His books were a lot more than just silly rhymes for kids. They included relevant themes, perfect rhymes, good stories, and art work." Weston goes on to say, before you submit, "Think to yourself, Is my work as good as or better than Dr. Suess' because it needs to be."

Fitch and Weston touch on some important points: a) though you want your poetry to be catchy and readable, it doesn't need to sound robotic; and b) it needs to make sense and further the story. My number one rule for poems and rhyming picture books is never compromise the meaning for the sake of making a rhyme; doing this only makes you appear lazy to editors and publishers.

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## PUBLISHING RHYMES FROM PAGE 4

A fourth reason why fewer rhyming texts are published has to do with the publishers themselves. As Heidbreder mentions, “Rhyming texts require a different kind of editing. And a different kind of marketing.” He’s right. Editors need to be skilled in word usage and intuitive enough to notice the nuances of the author’s patterning and voice. Additionally, because so many poem have been “dissected to death in school, marketing is more of a sell job” (Heidbreder, 2010).

Well-loved Canadian poet Tiffany Stones states, “Publishers believe that collections might not sell or that they will never get translated.” Stone realizes that translating rhymes can be challenging. For example, though Stone’s poems in the *aRHYTHMetic* collection (Gumboot Books, 2009) have been translated into French (*aRYTHMétique*, Gumboot Books, 2010), the publishers needed to hire a children’s author in her own right (Christine Jutras-Tarakdjian)—not merely a translator. For word-for-word translations don’t often work with rhyming texts. This idea is demonstrated below in the English and French renditions of Stone’s poem, “Third in the Herd.”

Third in the Herd	Le Troisieme du Troupeau
<p>I’m third in the herd            And I’m proud of it.            Third in the herd is a perfect fit.            One cow, two cows,            Three—that’s me.            Third in the herd’s            where I want to be.</p>	<p>Je suis le troisieme du troupeau            Et croyez-moi j’en suis fier.            Etre le troisieme du troupeau,            c’est vraiment extraordinaire!            Un bison, deux bisons...            Je suis le numéro trois.            Le troisieme du troupeau,            c’est ma place a moi.</p>

Here, Jutras-Tarakdjian not only captures the meaning of the poem, she also interweaves the original author’s rhythms, voice, and intention for the poem.

### ***What you can do to put your best foot forward?***

If the above information leaves you feeling confused and disempowered, do not let it. Instead think about what you can do. Here are some suggestions for you.

Read other rhyming texts.

Ensure your rHymes tell a good story.

Compromising meaning for rhYmes appears careless or amateur.

Make your poems MUltimodal.

Take your time. SubmIt only when you are 110% ready

Choose the less obvious word, makiNg your poem more delicious.

Within stanzas, line lengths can chanGe.

Publishing rhymes in picture books and collections is possible. These are some of the strategies that have worked for me...but most importantly—don’t give up. The world needs to hear your unique rhyming voice!

