



Be Our Guest...

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Poetry - a look at some new anthologies.

Poetry - a look at some new anthologies

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'My kids are really into poetry at the moment,' remarked **Bill Boyle**, one of our reviewers. So we rounded up some of the poetry that has come our way in recent months and sent it off to see what he, and they, made of it.

This very mixed bag of poetry books contains such an assortment of styles and quality, that the average teacher must be left completely bemused by the publishers' interpretation of material fit to be classified and distributed under the heading of 'children's poetry'. This collection of anthologies illustrates some of the worst examples of the genre and, fortunately, several marvellous exceptions which are worth adding to any school library.

In and Out of the Windows is subtitled 'poems for children'. It is neither poetry, in even the most liberal interpretation of the term, nor is it likely to be read by many children. How can reputable publishers find the funds to distribute this trite and silly nonsense while there is so much excellent verse suitable for kids not available in themed or anthology form? Don't be lured towards **In and Out of the Windows** even by a sense of masochism just to see how awful it is: take my word for it and avoid it.

Ian and Zenka Woodward have had an excellent idea to attract kids with their collection of **Creepy Verse**, a subject dear to the heart and the emotions of most youngsters. The book opens with the marvellous James Kirkup's 'Who's that"', continues in similar quality through Lawrence, Fuller, Serrailier and Milligan, with some old, venerable favourites thrown in as good measure for the traditionalists. Something for everyone here and even the most hardened teacher will force a smile or grimace at Roger McGough's 'Gruesome'.

It was with high hopes, seeing the name of Christopher Logue as compiler, that I turned to **The Children's Book of Comic Verse**. Well, there are the obligatory contributions from Spike Milligan, Ogden Nash, A. A. Milne and T. S. Eliot - tried and trusted all. But these apart, the collection is a great disappointment. There isn't much classroom mileage to be gained from this one - my kids couldn't even see the comedy in most of this verse. Small consolation in some excellent cartoons by Bill Tidy, which raised more laughs than the poems.

All Sorts of Poems, an unassuming little paperback collection, edited by Ann Thwaite, gave me more pleasure than any of the other books in this selection. Breaking away completely from the safe, steady selling pitch of the old chestnuts with a couple of modern names thrown in, Ann Thwaite has chosen a marvellous selection of newish poems on themes as diverse as supermarkets, Parents evening, Bringing up babies and Death of a Snowman. The quality of the writing is

of the standard necessary to present as examples of good observation and sensitivity to children. Poets represented include Roy Fuller, Charles Causley, Vernon Scannell, Elizabeth Jennings and Philip Larkin. You have the unusual feeling that all these poems have been chosen for a purpose - most odd when you are used to looking through children's anthologies! Excellent value at 85p - in fact if you can only afford one of these selections, make it this one!

Witch Poems and **Giant Poems** are two thematic collections, edited by Daisy Wallace. There is little, if anything, new or appealing about the **Witch Poems**: the short volume (only eighteen poems in all) pales in comparison with **Hist Whist!**, (Piccolo, out of print) both as an anthology, and with the poem of that name by e. e. cummings, which is included, tucked self-consciously away at the end of the book, embarrassed at the company it's keeping.

Giant Poems has slightly more to recommend it. The unusual **Momotara**, a Japanese nursery rhyme, is well worth reading with kids, but there is still too much worthless nonsense. How, in a book containing seventeen poems, can two poorly illustrated pages be justified for the four lines of the hardly original **Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum**? Both of these 'slim volumes' are priced at £3.50 each. Not really value for money in these stringent times for librarians and English Departments.

I liked **Songs for my Dog and other people**. It was light, it was funny, it wasn't pompous and didn't try to preach: it didn't pretend to be great poetry. Perhaps it was because Max Fatchen had blown some fresh air and a sense of fun into a mind still reeling from the inanities of **The Fairest Flowers**, the most ponderous and unsuitable children's poetry book that I have read for a long time, all suitably illustrated by Barbara Sampson. Try **Songs for my Dog** with your class. its fun! The illustrations by Michael Atchison capture and expand the sense of the poems ideally. The stodgy **Comic Verse** collection would have greatly benefited from **Nutty Nursery Rhymes** to mention only one example.

Ducks and Dragons has obviously been compiled with the thesis that a melange of Rossetti, de la Mare, Lear and Stevenson, a token Ted Hughes, McGough and Patten, arranged under the imaginative headings of Seasons, Animals, Fantastical, etc... adds up to a school poetry anthology. 'Children take to poetry like ducks to water,' says the editor, Gene Kemp, quoting from her own experience in the classroom. To misquote the saying: 'You can take a duck to water, but you can't make him drink.' Not for very long anyway if this is the sort of gibberish that's being churned out for our children.

Please, publishers, can we have collections that contain poems that touch on the experiences of kids, poems they can relate to, poems that *they* find funny, poetry books they want to open again, and again. Take home and read . . . then perhaps you, the publishers, might actually benefit too. Your books might be bought! Thank heavens for Ann Thwaite's **All Sorts of Poems**, Max Fatchen's **Songs for my Dog** and the Woodward's **Creepy Verse** - what a sorry selection this would have been without them.

In and Out of the Windows

Peggy Dunstan Hodder and Stoughton 0 340 25055 0, £3.95

Creepy Verse

Ian and Zenka Woodward Beaver Books 0 600 20178 3, 90p

The Children's Book of Comic Verse

Christopher Logue Piccolo 0 330 26273 4, 95p

All Sorts of Poems

Ann Thwaite Magnet 0 416 89570 0, 85p

Witch Poems

Daisy Wallace Pepper Press 0 560 74506 0. £3.50

Giant Poems

Daisy Wallace Pepper Press 0 560 74507 9, £3.50

Songs for my Dog and other people

Max Fatchen Kestrel 0 7226 5645 9, £3.95

The Fairest Flowers

Barbara Sampson World's Work 0 437 73000 X, £3.95

Ducks and Dragons

Gene Kemp Faber & Faber 0 571 11523 3, £3.25

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