

When Times Are Worse, Turn to Verse!

Poetry during a Pandemic

SYLVIA VARDELL AND JANET WONG

The lockdown last spring shut down everything—our daily routines, our travel plans, in-person conferences, and—for many people—even our usual reading habits. It was difficult to concentrate. We were all hungry for news and guidance, yet we could hardly grasp it. Authors and illustrators began reading their books out loud and sharing those recordings online; publishers widened their permission rules to allow this sharing of content and images

One of our first responses to the pandemic was to add short videos to the Vimeo channel for Pomelo Books to make it fun and easy to share a poem with a simple click. The brevity of poetry allows for our short attention spans; the beautiful language and wisdom is comforting and even therapeutic.

We are two people who spend a lot of time spreading the word about the power and pleasure of poetry for young people. We've created several "teaching anthologies" that combine



Dig that shirt! Anthologist Sylvia Vardell models a shirt emblazoned with her book jacket art!

new poems alongside teaching and learning connections and resources. During this period of quarantine and unrest, we continued in this work, devoting our energies to several poetry projects—a solo project for Sylvia, virtual presentations with children and educators for Janet, and a collaborative project together.

Sylvia's assignment was gathering poetry (and permissions) for *A World Full of Poems*, an anthology of poems for children ages 5-12 by more than eighty wonderful poets from the US, as well as more than thirty poets from Canada, England, Ireland, Wales, Australia, and the Netherlands. Back matter features a poem treasure hunt, tips for acting out poems, activities for writing poetry, and suggestions for family sharing at home.

Our joint project was *Hop to It: Poems to Get You Moving*, which gathered one hundred poems by ninety poets. It started with a focus on a single theme—movement—from



Sylvia Vardell is a professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University and teaches graduate courses in children's and young adult literature. Her current work focuses on poetry for children, including a regular blog, PoetryforChildren.Blogspot.com. Vardell has served as a member or chair of several national award committees, including the NCTE Award for Poetry, the ALA Legacy Award, and the Odyssey, Sibert, and Caldecott award committees, among others. Children's author **Janet Wong** is a graduate of Yale Law School and a former lawyer. She is the author of more than thirty books for children and teens on a wide variety of subjects, including identity (*A Suitcase of Seaweed & More*), writing and revision (*You*

Have to Write), community and inclusion (*Apple Pie 4th of July*), peer pressure (*Me and Rolly Maloo*), chess (*Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club*), and yoga (*Twist: Yoga Poems*).

I SMILE WITH MY EYES

by David McMullin

My face may be masked, but I'm not in disguise.
A mask keeps us safe when we all socialize.
I'm showing more feelings than you realize.
How will you know? By the look in my eyes.

If something is shocking? My brows show surprise.
I find a joke funny? My eyes energize.
When someone acts shady, I squint at their lies.
"That's so annoying," my eye roll implies.

As anger grows hotter, my eyes shrink in size.
Say something sad and my tears start to rise.
I'm in on a secret? My wink shows I'm wise.
And when you are near me, I smile with my eyes.



Poem © 2020 David McMullin; from *Hop to It: Poems to Get You Moving* by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong; pomelobooks.com

When you read this poem out loud, see if you can use your eyes and eyebrows to make the movements in the poem.

Based on research, when we smile a true enjoyment smile, our eyes narrow and crinkle. With a fake smile, the muscles around the eye do not move.

In this question poem, the poet asks some questions about himself—and then answers them. Try writing a question poem of your own!

Learn how some animals defend themselves in *Never Smile at a Monkey* by Steve Jenkins.



David McMullin's poem is one timely poem included in the collection.

sports to dance to stretching. But then we found ourselves mired in the pandemic and decided to expand the theme of the book. We chose to include poems about COVID-19, stay-cations, keeping connected with friends, learning via Zoom, and mask-wearing, with poems like "I Smile with My Eyes" by new poet David McMullin.

History took another turn, as we stood up to proclaim Black Lives Matter, and once again poetry helped us grow in understanding and self-expression. There is a rich, long history of poetry by Black poets, and new works are published every year offering a glimpse of painful struggle, as well as celebrating identity, family, and everyday joy like *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice* by Mahogany L. Browne and *Say Her Name* by Zetta Elliott, for example—and we knew that we wanted to include poems about exercising your voice, standing up for what you believe in, marching together, and even voting. The result, we think, is a book that sums up 2020 and helps us move forward.

Bibliography

- Acevedo, Elizabeth. *Clap When You Land*. HarperCollins, 2020. 432p.
- Browne, Mahogany L., Acevedo, Elizabeth, and Gatwood, Olivia. *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice*. Illus. by Theodore Taylor III. Roaring Brook, 2020. 56p.
- Elliott, Zetta. *Say Her Name*. Illus. by Loveis Wise. Jump at the Sun, 2020. 96p.
- Engle, Margarita. *With a Star in My Hand: Rubén Darío, Poetry Hero*. Atheneum, 2020. 160p.
- Krok, Lisa. *Novels in Verse for Teens: A Guidebook with Activities for Teachers and Librarians*. Libraries Unlimited, 2020. 151p.

We kept the thread of movement throughout the book by providing suggestions for sharing and performing each poem—climbing like cats, dancing at your desk, standing or stretching, breathing mindfully, and even incorporating American Sign Language (ASL). We also packed the book with fun facts, including many with science or social studies connections, as well as language arts skill suggestions and recommended relevant picture books for every poem.

All of us—especially children doing remote learning—can use "brain breaks" from our computers, and a one-minute poem can provide just that. Since the publication of *Hop to It*, we've been busy spreading the word about the balm that poetry offers through informative blog posts and timely tweets, as well as silly poetry-themed clothing, hopping poet collages, and fun Zoom poetry parties with poets reading their poems aloud while we all waved, hopped, and laughed together.

Sylvia keeps a "sneak peek" list of all the year's poetry for young people on her blog, PoetryforChildren.Blogspot.com, starting in January and updated throughout the year. During 2020, we were able to choose from collections such as *A Hatful of Dragons: And More Than 13.8 Billion Other Funny Poems* by Vikram Madan, *This Poem Is a Nest* by Irene Latham, and *Everything Comes Next: Collected & New Poems* by Naomi Shihab Nye, as well as novels in verse like Elizabeth Acevedo's *Clap When You Land* or Margarita Engle's *With a Star in My Hand*. This comprehensive list can be supplemented with Lisa Krok's overview and 2020 poetry handbook for YA, *Novels in Verse for Teens: A Guidebook with Activities for Teachers and Librarians*.

The best news about pandemic poetry may be that it has helped us all rediscover the value of sharing poems during "normal" times, too. Perhaps we had forgotten how fun a poem could be or needed to unlearn how "stuffy" or "serious" we once thought poetry was. We hope people continue to seek out poems and poetry books that give us the energizing brain breaks and social-emotional affirmation that young readers—and readers of all ages—need and deserve. &

- Latham, Irene. *This Poem Is a Nest*. Illus. by Johanna Wright. Boyds Mills & Kane/Wordsong, 2020. 112p.
- Madan, Vikram. *A Hatful of Dragons: And More Than 13.8 Billion Other Funny Poems*. Illustrated by the author. Boyds Mills & Kane/Wordsong, 2020. 64p.
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- Vardell, Sylvia and Wong, Janet. *Hop to It: Poems to Get You Moving*. Illus. by Franzi Paetzold. Pomelo Books, 2020. 145p.
- A World Full of Poems*. Ed. By Sylvia Vardell. Illus. by Sonny Ross. London: DK Books, 2020. 204p.