

Passionate for Poetry

Its Importance in a Post-Pandemic World

SHARON VERBETEN

As National Poetry Month approaches in April, you won't find two better advocates for the genre than Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong, the duo behind Pomelo Books and both poets in their own right. They are the editors of the new collection called *What Is Hope?* (Pomelo Books, 2023).

Here they graciously share why poetry is their collective passion.

You and Janet ARE Pomelo Books; what is the mission of your company?

We like to say that our focus is “poetry plus.” We founded our small company to put fresh, new poetry for young people out into the world and at the same time include strategies and resources for educators and families for sharing poetry. We try to show them how fun it can be to read a poem out loud together, ham it up, find some props, and talk about the poems and the memories and feelings that pop up. We have added to that model now and enjoy mentoring new poets and helping them launch their poetry into the world too.

This book follows in line of your other “What Is” books; what started this theme?

This actually goes back a bit. We wanted to explore creating books for our youngest readers and listeners, so we started with *Things We Do*, an alphabet book of poems from A to Z with simple poems promoting active words like *ask*, *bend*, *clap*, etc. This ekphrastic collection had poets writing in response to vivid, contemporary photographs full of diverse children in varied contexts. We followed this with *Things We Eat* (foods from A to Z), *Things We Feel* (emotions from A to Z), and *Things We Wear* (clothing from A to Z). It was fun creating a poetry series—a first for us. But then we took a turn and used the same idea—poets writing based on a photo prompt to create a poetry collection for older children, ages 8 and up. We published *What Is a Friend?*, followed by *What Is a Family?* taking each theme in innovative directions. The third book in this series is *What Is Hope?* rooted in many different interpretations of the important theme of hope, so needed at this moment in time.



What Is Hope? by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books, 2023)

Explain why you donate 100% of the profits from your books to the IBBY Children in Crisis Fund?

We have both been involved in IBBY (the International Board on Books for Young People) for many years, as well as in the United States affiliate, the United States Board on Books for Young People. But in 2023, Sylvia was elected president of IBBY and it felt right to use our resources in support of this excellent organization. The IBBY Children in Crisis funds, in particular, are such a beautiful way of putting books in children's hands in the most difficult circumstances all around the world—like in Ukraine, Turkey, Haiti, Lebanon, and so on. For each of the books in both these series (*Things We . . .* and *What Is . . .*), all profits from the sales go to these IBBY Children in Crisis funds.

“Hope” seems like such a timely title; why did you feel the world needed this book, this message NOW?

We are clearly not the only ones who feel young people are struggling in our post-pandemic world. Teachers are feeling it. Families are experiencing it too. We wanted to inject more positivity and joy into their lives, and poetry can be an ideal way to do that. In just a minute, you can read a short poem out loud and start the day with a positive message or end with a boost and a smile. And in *What Is Hope?* we offer a fun variety of approaches to this theme with poems about butterflies, microscopes, cell phones, emergencies, music, fortune cookies, sports, books, art, pets, and more—so many lenses and examples for experiencing hope.



Sharon Verbeten is Youth Services Manager at the Manitowoc (WI) Public Library; this is her twenty-first year as editor of *Children and Libraries*.

Children's Poetry: Still the Road Less Traveled?

By Sharon Verbeten

In 1995, which seems like more than a lifetime ago, I was a fairly newly minted youth librarian in Milwaukee. And I was a huge fan of children's poetry—especially that by Jack Prelutsky and Paul Janeczko.

But I was distressed that children didn't seem more interested in rhymes and poems—so distressed, in fact, that I penned an article for *School Library Journal* that began, "811 is a lonely number. Sandwiched between the heavily traveled sports and recreation books, and the history/biography aisle . . . children's poetry meekly exists. Here sits a volume of Lear that hasn't circulated since 1980 and the unattractive and often intimidating anthology of "best loved" (by whom?) children's poetry . . .

"Children's poetry especially should be addressed with verve and fun, rather than intimidation. As librarians and teachers, we need to set this pattern. Don't analyze it too much, but rather enjoy it for what it is—a unique presentation of timeless and universal topics. Think of it as psychology without the guilt, songs without the music, art without the illustration."*

* Sharon Korbeck, "Children's Poetry: Journeying Beyond the Road Less Traveled," *School Library Journal*, April 1995, 43–44.

Today, there is a plethora of excellent children's poetry out there—and we have huge advocates in the field, such as Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong, interviewed here, but also Kwame Alexander—who makes poetry approachable to a younger generation.

Maybe there are college classes now that teach lyrics as poetry—such as the songwriting gems of Taylor Swift and Beyonce, among others.

Today, almost 30 years after I penned those words, I feel that children's poetry has come a long way in terms of approachability, but I feel teachers and librarians still need to do more to advocate for the form. We've all done blackout poetry and spine label poetry—I've even seen these trends pick up on social media.

Maybe we can celebrate and showcase the singers and songwriters of each generation—and label them what they are—poets and auteurs. Once something becomes cool, it takes off; that's my fondest wish for children's poetry.

What is the process of anthologizing? How do you choose the poets and poems?

We've invited friends and favorite poets to collaborate with us, we've held wide open calls for anyone to submit poems, and we've conducted workshops to mentor budding poets. But in each case, we give our poets assigned themes or topics (and sometimes specific photo prompts) and then they send us poems and poem drafts. We sift through them all to try to use each poet's strongest contribution while still ensuring a compelling variety of poems. We wouldn't want twenty butterfly poems, for example. So, it becomes a bit of a juggling act to choose and arrange poems into a collection that works as an engaging whole. At the moment, we're mostly focused on helping new and diverse voices launch into the world of poetry publishing, and it's been so fun and rewarding.

In 1995, I wrote an article for *School Library Journal* about children's poetry, lamenting that "811 is a lonely number." I felt poetry was often overlooked or shunned by children; do you feel that is still the case? How do you think that can be turned around?

We're so glad you're an ally in helping us promote poetry more often and more widely! We have found that children generally enjoy poetry when we read it out loud together and add

motions, props, and participation. Many children start school already knowing nursery rhymes, silly songs, jump rope jingles, and playground chants—not realizing this is the beginning of poetry. They're just not familiar with how poetry looks on the page or how to read it silently. Unfortunately, the 811 section in a library is not always easy to find and often is in need of new, fun, and contemporary poetry books. Honestly, WE adults may be overlooking poetry and thus children aren't looking for it either. That's one reason our books focus on poetry plus—offering adults tips and ideas for sharing poems right alongside the poems themselves.

Poetry is lucky to have such advocates today such as you two and, notably, Kwame Alexander; can poetry survive? Is there hope? (See what I did there?) LOL.

Thank you for your kind words! We are very hopeful about poetry's prospects, and we're grateful for powerhouse advocates like Kwame Alexander. We love seeing new books of poetry published every year and new voices emerging—fresh, diverse perspectives and fun, innovative formats. Have you seen *Animals in Pants* by Suzy Levinson or the graphic novel adaptation of *Garvey's Choice* by Nikki Grimes? So fun! And look for John Schu's new book, *The Poetry Place Is Our Space*, a celebration of poetry, possibility, and the power of creative collaboration. &