When Times Are Worse, Turn to Verse!

Poetry during a Pandemic

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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 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...
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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, staycations, 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.

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.

Bibliography

