



Editorial 212

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At the 35th IBBY Congress in Mexico City last year, delegates were introduced to Mardonio Carballo, the Mexican actor, journalist, writer and poet. He writes his poems not just in Spanish but in Náhuatl, one of the indigenous languages of Central America. He read some of his poems, short, to the point and often humorous, but with adult themes, because Carballo does not write for children primarily. However, as he commented, his poetry seems to cause a problem for librarians and booksellers; it regularly gets shelved either in the Anthropological section (because it is written in Náhuatl), or in the Children's section, because his poems are short. In either case, he is rendered invisible.

Invisibility seems to be the fate of much poetry, but of children's poetry in particular. While there has long been a popular perception that poetry is elitist and only for the few, the awareness and enjoyment of poetry used to be widespread. When Field Marshall Wavell compiled his anthology **Other Men's Flowers**, he drew on the poems he knew and could recite by heart. Many of these poems he first encountered at school under a system where learning by rote was the accepted method of learning anything. This is no longer the case and though in general a good move, it seems to have had the sad effect that young people are not being introduced to our poetry heritage. I believe that children can enjoy poems that haven't specifically been written for them; to say otherwise seems to be dismissive of young people.

However, there are poets who do write with a young audience in mind. We are lucky in this country to have many outstanding contemporary exponents - Michael Rosen, John Agard, Carol Ann Duffy, Grace Nichols, as well as new voices like Rachel Rooney, Kathy Henderson and Joe Coelho, to name just a few. But even these poets get little real exposure. Hats off to Janetta Otter-Barry and Frances Lincoln for championing their poetry.

Recently Chrissie Gittins, herself a poet for both adults and children, [commented on the reasons](#) [3] for poetry's invisibility: poetry does not sell so publishers do not publish it, and if poetry is published it does not get the market exposure so it does not sell. This is similar to what I was told as a children's librarian: 'Poetry does not issue.' I then conducted an experiment over the summer months in my library whereby I recorded all poetry books borrowed, and found that at least one went out every day.

There is also a problem in that there is no consistency in where Poetry is shelved in bookshops and libraries. It is often squashed between the Study Guides to Shakespeare and History. Even worse, the Poetry section can look unappealing and dated because no new stock has been added to it.

The apparent invisibility of poetry is strange because even the youngest children love rhyme and rhythm; indeed some of the most successful picture books, like those by Julia Donaldson, are in effect poems. However, publishers like Faber are beginning to produce picture book editions of poems by Eliot and de la Mare. There are also some novels written in verse, such as Sarah Crossan's [The Weight of Water](#) [4], which blur the artificial divide between fiction and poetry.

Young people need to be introduced to poetry regularly, in order to develop a love or even awareness of it. They usually

respond enthusiastically when a poet visits the school; poets are often great performers, especially when engaging with children. Children should also be encouraged to write poetry themselves. Initiatives such as the **Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award** organised by the Poetry Society or, more challenging, the [Stephen Spender Prize](#) [5] for poetry in translation, are very welcome.

Poetry has never been excluded from the major children's literary prizes such as the Carnegie and the Costa, but it rarely seems to feature on the shortlists. Congratulations to the [CLPE \(Centre for Literacy in Primary Education\) Poetry Award](#) [6], now in its thirteenth year. Championing the publication of children's poetry since 2003, it has just issued the shortlist for the 2015 award. What's more, CLPE has launched a shadowing scheme aimed at primary schools, a very exciting development with a very exciting reward for participation. We must do our best to bring poetry back into mainstream children's literature where it belongs.

Other Men's Flowers A P Wavell, Pimlico 978-0-71265-342-8

A Puffin Sextet of Poets Anne Harvey ed., Puffin O/P

Poets in Hand Charles Causley ed., Puffin O/P

[The Weight of Water](#) [4], Sarah Crossan Bloomsbury 978-1-40883-023-9

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[4] <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/198/childrens-books/reviews/the-weight-of-water>

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