



Taking lessons from Miss Stretchberry: poetry writing with children

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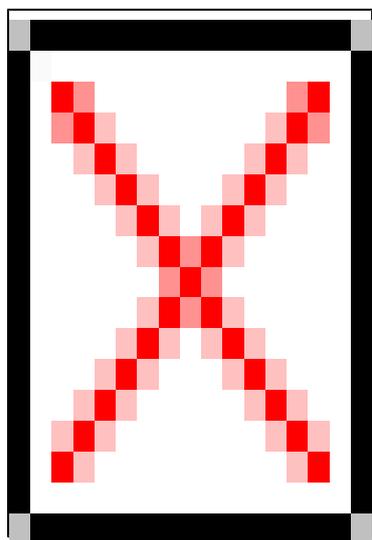
[Kate Clanchy](#) [1]

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Poetry writing caught not taught

*Poet and teacher Kate Clanchy explains why, as the teacher in Sharon Creech's award-winning **Love that Dog** knows, the best way to teach poetry is by letting children create their own responses to grown-up poems.*



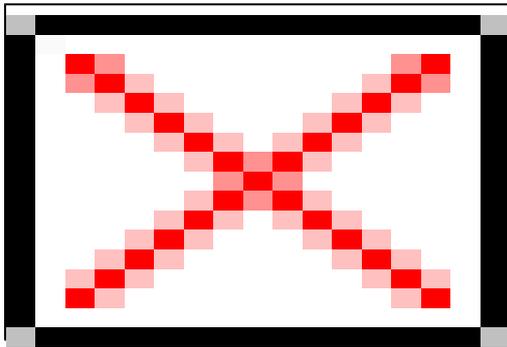
If you are thinking of starting a poetry group with young people you could start by reading **Love that Dog** by Sharon Creech. I'm a great admirer of Miss Stretchberry, its teacher heroine. Miss Stretchberry seems to be a lucky teacher: she only has our protagonist Jack's class once a week. She's also marvellously unbothered by exams or the National Curriculum (she lives in an unnamed place in America, as well as in a book, so I suppose that's why) and just teaches poetry-writing. She has money for special notebooks and a visit from poet Walter Dean Myers, and she has time each week to type up the classes' poems and pin them on the noticeboard, where, as, Jack notices, they really look quite good.

But if we can't all have these advantages, we can still share Miss Stretchberry teaching practice and belief in poetry. Each week, she shows Jack's class of 12 year olds a poem - ambitious, grown-up poems by Robert Frost, for example or William Carlos Williams ? and has them respond with a poem of their own. She teaches them to use the sounds of words and the white space on the page simply by experimenting. She helps them understand that a version or answer to someone else's poem is not the same as stealing it. She gives Jack a frame to express his feelings, especially about the recent Sad Thing that has happened to his dog, Skye, and steadily, in his own time and under his own control, Jack fills it.

Poetry writing really is better caught than taught

Love that Dog is a particularly great book for a child or class between the ages of 10 and 15, but the Miss Stretchberry method works for all sorts of groups. Poetry writing really is better caught than taught: if you read a strong poem to a group and let them make a version of it, they will write better poems. They will also very often, paradoxically, be more

original and express themselves more personally, because being told to write 'just anything' can be intimidating, whereas being invited to express your feelings in the frame of a poem is more reassuring and so more liberating. For example, being told to write a poem about the end of Primary School in Year 6 will likely end in a pile of clichéd couplets. Being shown Kit Wright's *Magic Box* poem, on the other hand (so beloved of teachers that it is all over the internet, with pictures and examples attached) and then asked to fill your own Magic Box with specific, concrete memories, will create something to bring down the house at end of year assembly.



Sharon Creech is also spot on in the creation of her poetic narrator, Jack. The best young poets, like Jack, don't necessarily come from the ranks of the super clever, and they don't have to be girls, either. My most gifted poets, in fact, and I have been working in schools, trying to be Miss Stretchberry, for more than 30 years, have often been boys and very often had some sort of difficulty or delay in their education or upbringing. Lots are dyslexic, some have ASD, or are deaf, or have, like Jack, deaf parents, and many have come from another country before they were ten and been suddenly immersed in English. All of these backgrounds, however difficult, seem to help create poets: perhaps because their experiences have to sit inside the children's heads a little longer than usual before they can be expressed in words, perhaps because they become just a little more emotionally mature.

These sorts of children, though, do often find it extra difficult to make their writing clear and their poems look good, which is why the Miss Stretchberry treatment of typing them up and presenting them back to the writers beautifully, whether pinned on the board, as she does, or on sheet of paper, or on a blog, is so powerful. Best of all is to print up a class or school anthology in a book, and it's surprisingly cheap and easy to do this in the age of the online printer. I've used a combination of Microsoft Publisher and Mixam Print to create many professional looking books from 75p and £2 a copy.

Miss Stretchberry is also right about her choice of poems: she shows the class sometimes challenging, emotional poems by mostly living poets. Direct, contemporary voices are the way to get a response from young people and there are an amazing array of them available in anthologies and in video form on the internet. Try googling [Button Poetry](#) [3], **Chill Pill** or the **Poetry Foundation**, and sit back and enjoy. Browse in your local bookshop or library, you'll find that poetry is having a resurgence. It's important that you personally love any poem you share: the group will catch your enthusiasm, or your apathy, infallibly.

The climax of **Love that Dog** is the visit to Jack's school by Walter Dean Myers. Myers himself has sadly died since **Love that Dog** was published, but we have here in the UK a host of poets just as attractive to young people and with whole programmes of activities to bring to schools and libraries. Pie Corbett, Brian Moses, Joseph Coelho, Rachel Rooney and of course the great Michael Rosen all regularly visit schools, while **The Poetry Society** and **CLPE** will give you lots of free and excellent advice. And don't forget to check out my anthology, **England Poems from a School** (Picador, £9.99) a whole book of poems by young migrants, most of them written in the school library using the Miss Stretchberry method.

Kate Clanchy is a poet and creative writing teacher, author of **Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me** and editor of the poetry collection **England, Poems from a School**. In 2018, she received an MBE for services to poetry.

[Love that Dog](#) [4], Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 978-0747557494, £5.99 pbk

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