



# A Jostle of Poetries

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**Robert Hull** assesses some new anthologies.

**Robert Hull** assesses some new anthologies and the thinking behind them.

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A quite well-known poet once explained to me that poems written by children weren't real poetry. They weren't crafted, you see, didn't have shape and suchlike - not like poets' poems.

Well:

*My brother would put me in a*

*SHUT-UP-JOANNE BOX*

*because I speak a lot.*

*My mum would put me in a*

*TURN-ON-'NEIGHBOURS' BOX*

*because she likes it.*

*My dad would put me in a*

*GO-TO-BED BOX*

*because he wants me out of the way.*

*My teacher would put me in a*

*THE WORKBOX*

*Because I never do my work.*

*My friend would put me in*

*THE SAME BOX AS HER*

*because she likes me.*

Joanne Yates was eight when she wrote that (for the poet's NOT-REALLY-A-POEM BOX) and Carl Saville was five when he wrote his equally uncrafted shapeless `Salty Sea':

*Salty sandcastle Salty sea Salty footprints Salty me.*

Both are from **Cadbury's Ninth Book of Children's Poetry** (Red Fox, 0 09 983450 2, £2.99 pbk), the kind of collection that begs for everyone in the class to have their own copy, to see and share and shout about. At £2.99 a head, or about a day and a half's supply teaching, it would be more than good value. It would also be a reminder to us, from children, of what the poetry we take to and write for them ought to be like.

We can take our teacherly bearings from them. They show us where children's feelings and thoughts are. They make clear what children want to do with words, and what they want words to do. They describe the central features of a poetic world - a world that strikes me as above all serious, not least when it's funny:

*They all say `God Save*

*the Queen': I don't know what*

*to save the Queen from.*

Comparing these Cadbury poems by children with too much of what is written and published for them, you notice how few duds there are here; how convincingly young girls and boys arrive at expressive shape and structure; how seldom they write the poem that isn't felt; and how easily they carry an un-self-conscious, lightly worn gravity, on `serious' and not so serious subjects.

And yet ... how many poems by children appear in most anthologies offered to them? Not a lot. How many questions on poems by 15 and 16-year-olds at GCSE? Again, not a lot. For all the `popularity' of poetry now, the poetic world of the young still hasn't, it seems to me, and not just from the evidence of many new books, sufficiently shaped what they are offered in what's compiled for them.

And so, caveat emptor, to the market-place - with a question to orient one's searches. Is this a book of the breadth and depth that children aspire to and need, a poetry book for children that's as rich and serious as the poetry written by children? Or is it one of the adult-centred sort? A topic-the-publisher-and-consultant-think-would-go-down-well poetry book? The outcome of a hurried trawl through nearly all right stuff that fits the subject? Or worse, a mini-tome of heavy jokiness, a miasmatic trail of hyper-comic unfunniness left by poets with glue ear?

**Dancing Teepees**, a splendid collection of North American Indian poems, is emphatically an exemplar of the former kind, a through-and-through *children's* book.

*Grandmother,*

*I watched an eagle soar*

*high in the sky*

*until a cloud covered him up.*

*Grandmother,*

*I still saw the eagles*

*behind my eyes.*

I like the Mescalero Apache `Song for Young Girls':

*You will be running to the four*

*corners of the universe;*

*To where the land meets the big waters;*

*To where the sky meets the land;*

*To where the home of winter is;*

*To the home of rain.*

*Run!*

*Be strong.*

*For you are the mother of a people.*

A few (30 or so) poems, one a page, with plenty of space for Stephen Gammell's impressive, quiet artwork to fit round the printed words and allow the poem-picture page to be contemplated, stayed with and returned to. The word 'contemplate' isn't often used in the pidgin of curriculum state-speak, but it is a success of certain books that they induce - at least make possible - a willingness to pause, explore the visual image as it in turn explores the poem, re-read. The pages of **Dancing Teepees** do; they will sink in, as we used to say.

So will those of **A Cup of Starshine**; Jill Bennett's choice of poems for young children is as inclusive and satisfying as could be. She lets nothing trite or frailly whimsical in, and there's no ersatz hilarity, only fun and humour. The lightest poems have an assurance to them, and something to say, like Marchette Chute's 'Reading':

*A story is a special thing,*

*The ones that I have read*

*They do not stay inside the book,*

*They stay inside my head.*

The fine selection becomes a fine book because the pages, like those of **Dancing Teepees**, can be explored through leisured looking and reading done as an integral activity - or inactivity. Graham Percy's illustrations, beautifully understated in terms of colour and emotional tone, are very satisfying, as we see his personages take on postures and expressions that respond perfectly to the particular poem.

**Birds, Beasts and Fishes**, compiled by Anne Carter, also has some irresistible pages. There are gorgeous illustrations - a primitive-naif Rousseau-an manner - by Reg Cartwright. The text is more a selection of good poems than a good selection of poems, but poem and artwork from time to time create a sumptuous world that children can investigate at letting-it-sink-in pace. A puzzle for me is 'which children?' in a book that includes Hopkins' 'Windhover' and verses from 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. And one or two of Reg Cartwright's creatures, beautiful though they are, have an elegant dream-like serenity not felt by the creature in the poem, as if anthologist and artist lost each other's phone numbers that week.

If only some equally gifted artist had been given free rein in Anne Harvey's **Shades of Green**. The book outstandingly represents the skilled, scrupulous anthologist at work. There's a felt reason for the collection (a not always satisfied criterion). It's pointedly organised, with sections called 'So They Are Felled', 'Goodbye to Hedges', and so on. The range is splendid. Anne Harvey goes back in time, more than most but not too often, and pokes in odd corners all round

the world. She discovers and re-discovers. Here is a fragment of Emily Dickinson:

*In the name of the bee*

*And of the butterfly*

*And of the breeze*

*Amen.*

There are poems one hasn't - I haven't - read, and a number of new ones. There are energising juxtapositions: Chaucer with Spike Milligan, a limerick with William Barnes (good for her to 'risk' his beautiful 'Vellen o' the Tree'), a Hindustani proverb alongside Norman MacCaig, short moments with longer poems. There is space round the poems on the page, and the type-face is peculiarly agreeable. If only the illustration, sensitive though it is where it appears, hadn't been so meagre, and the cover didn't incline one to turn away from what one ought to buy.

It's interesting to compare this dull-outside but fresh-inside anthology with **The Puffin Book of Twentieth-Century Children's Verse**, which seems to have the careful hand of the poets' union on it. Certainly it lacks the kind of range that Anne Harvey deploys. The title sounds like an official culture-stamp, and such an implicit claim to definitiveness would be hard anyway to justify, even with a collection more ambitious and wide-ranging than this, over a period when so much good verse for children has been written by so many different writers. Here the claim isn't worth risking. Brian Patten's volume is a book of good poems for children written in the twentieth century, and that's about it.

Far away from Establishment Land is Morag Styles' and Helen Cook's **The Cambridge Poetry Box**. If the risks intrinsic to picking a poetry curriculum are ever avoidable, they might be here. An essential success is to have produced a number of short-ish books that feel lively and usable. (The device of dividing one hardback - for the teacher presumably - into three 30-page paperbacks is rather cunning.) The compilers have anthologised with the kind of zeal that turns up new things, and yet they've created local and overall balance - a different balance from Anne Harvey's, with a greater stress on accessible contemporaneity, perhaps, and less on the past and the distant. This version of poetry-for-children conveys the sense of being at the sharp end, of evangelising for the poem in the classroom, in ways that are open-ended and expansive.

The Teacher's Book is full of enlightened common-sense, useful short-hand for students, or for anyone who feels their teaching lacks shape, or just doesn't know how to 'do' poetry. For instance, a sentence I particularly liked: 'Each child in a group ... has an individual copy of the same book from which the teacher reads aloud, while children follow the text.' (Heads and those with the money-bags learn by heart for tomorrow.)

But there are risks, I think, not least for the teachers who want to carve their own trips through poetry and want children to as well. It could mean we have a Poetry Scheme as well as a Reading Scheme (teaching in a POETRY-BOX BOX), with a ready rationale that makes it less necessary to read books about teaching poetry. There's a danger, too, of annexing poetry to language development. Ultimately there's the temptation of Being Responsible, implicating the best liberal-progressive traditions of handling poetry in the coercive pseudo-enlightenments of the National Curriculum. But one can always buy the bits one likes. I'd certainly buy some of this.

I'd also buy John Foster's **Twinkle, Twinkle, Chocolate Bar**, a most engaging collection for the 'very young', and Judith Nicholls' **Sing Freedom**, a necessary collection for much older youngsters, on a topic that other publishers seem to be shy of.

And I greatly enjoyed **You Just Can't Win**, a family anthology by Brian Moses, a fine poet and anthologist. I absorbed varied pleasures from **Niffs and Whiffs**, a book of smells compiled by Jennifer Curry, till after about 40 pages (80 in the book) I needed fresh air.

It's nevertheless true that the more fashionable the poetry, the more likely we are to meet the not-so good poem, the

modish bad poem being often better - more saleable - than the unmodish good poem. This is particularly so if a few writers corner an area of the market ('green' issues or multiculturalism, for example) and if some of them are writing and publishing too much. Since I'd like children to meet only good poems, it's worrying if they keep meeting the other sort. We can hardly draw up a league table which relates particular poetries to the likelihood of generating duds, but we can at least, again, and again, go back to the kind of poems written by children to see what their poetry-for-children is.

One feature we see there - as in the first poem above: *My friend would put me in / **THE SAME BOX AS HER** / because she likes me* - is a frequently 'adult' complexity, of both feeling and poetic organisation. I've wondered, reading a number of anthologies, if one kind of writer-for-children (other than children themselves) isn't consistently under-represented, namely the kind whose poems for children, some of them, can also be read by adults as adults, or some of whose poems for adults are accessible to children.

Writers like Irene Rawnsley, Gerda Mayer, John Mole, Kevin McCann, Vernon Scannell, Barrie Wade, Matt Simpson, and so on, do write 'easy' poems, but they also take up more demanding stances. Children want to be able to read some poems twice or three times and more, and have the books left in their hands. They want to read, in other words, as well as to be read to and performed at. They want books which have been bought for them - in sufficient numbers, need one say. (Yes, one need.)

Details of the anthologies are:

**Cadbury's Ninth Book of Children's Poetry**, Red Fox, 0 09 983450 2, £2.99 pbk

**Dancing Teepees - Poems of American Indian Youth**, selected by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, with art by Stephen Gammell, Oxford, 019 2798812, £6.95

**A Cup of Starshine**, selected by Jill Bennett, ill. Graham Percy, Walker, 0 1445 1545 9, £10.95

**Birds, Beasts and Fishes**, selected by Anne Carter, ill. Reg Cartwright, Walker, 0 7445 1920 9, £10.95

**Shades of Green**, selected by Anne Harvey, ill. John Lawrence, Julia MacRae, 1856810313, £14.99

**The Puffin Book of Twentieth-Century Children's Verse**, edited by Brian Patten, ill. Michael Foreman, Viking, 0 670 81475 X, £12.99; Puffin, 014 03.2236 1, £4.99 pbk

**The Cambridge Poetry Box**, Morag Styles and Helen Cook, Cambridge (telephone Ros Horton on 0223 325915 for further details or write to Cambridge University Press at The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU)

**Twinkle, Twinkle, Chocolate Bar**, compiled by John Foster, Oxford, 019 276092 0, £10.95

**Sing Freedom**, edited by Judith Nicholls, Faber, 0 571 16513 3, £8.99; 0 571 165141, £4.99 pbk

**You Just Can't Win**, edited by Brian Moses, Blackie, 0 216 93164 9, £7.95

**Niffs and Whiffs**, compiled by Jennifer Curry, ill. Susie Jenkin-Pearce, Bodley Head, 0 370 31556 1, £6.99

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