



Outside the Realm of Time:

Reading

Poetry



By Georgia Heard

I stagger into Debbie Futterman's third-grade class, lugging a big bag of poetry books. I have visited Debbie's wonderful class before, and I know how enthusiastic the students are about reading. I spread the books out on tables and ask the students to choose what they want to read, either alone or in pairs. I've categorized the books into anthologies, thematic anthologies, and books by individual poets.

The kids race to grab a book. They spread around the room, under tables, in corners. I show them my notebook, where I have collected favorite lines, poems, feelings, and ideas that come to mind as I read. From the start, I've encouraged them to keep their own reading notebooks. Judging by the looks on their faces, you would think I just brought in a banquet.

As I walk with Debbie around the room I notice two boys reading Myra Cohn Livingston's *Celebrations*. They take turns reading it aloud to each other. I ask, "Why did you decide to read the poems aloud?"

"You can hear it," one boy says. "You read stories quietly and poems out loud."

The other boy says, "By reading it out loud you feel the meaning of the poem. You hear yourself saying a poem that somebody else has written."

"What made you choose this book?" Debbie asks.

"Because I like books about special holidays."

Nearby, Alicia is copying a poem into her notebook. When I ask her why, she says, "I like to read things to my mother. I want to read this poem to my mother, who doesn't know about poems."

Jenny has written "favorite lines" in a box in her journal, followed by lines from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." When I ask why she picked those lines, she answers, "I wrote them down because they rhyme, and because it gives me a picture without a picture."

Janice writes down names of her favorite poems from Carl Sandburg's *Early Moon* (1958). "Most of my favorite poems are quiet poems," she says.

"What do you mean by quiet?"

"If the poem's personality is quiet, calm, like the poem 'Sea Wash.'"

One group is preparing a choral reading of a poem they like. It's short, so they decide to memorize it and recite it to the class. A girl in the group says, "We want to show that if you really like a poem, you can memorize it."

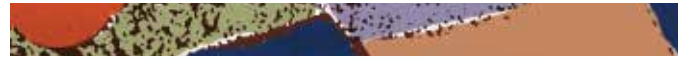
Henry is sitting in a corner reading. He says about "Sea Wash," "It's like a river, like a washing machine that cleans things. It gives me a little feeling of something special."

I don't have to say too much. If the books are there, the children are eager to read and discover many ways to enjoy them. (Heard 1989)

These words were written years ago in my book *For the Good of the Earth and Sun*. I can still picture the classroom, sunlight streaming through the window, kids sitting cross-legged on the floor reading poems, some lying on their stomachs with noses buried inside a poetry book, others lounging on beanbag chairs reading a poem out loud and trying on the sounds with their mouths, a group of boys

chuckling as they whisper a few lines from a Shel Silverstein poem into each other's ears like passing on a secret.

Robert Grudin, author of *The Grace of Great Things: Creativity and Innovation* (1991), writes about how creative people carve out regularly scheduled periods of time during which there is the "illusion of infinite time." He calls these *time worlds*. Fifteen minutes, an hour, a day when you can hear the clock ticking minute by minute and there are no looming deadlines. Reading is a creative act, and that day in Debbie's class felt like what Grudin describes as a time world.



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The only way anyone could have assessed Henry's poetic description of Sandburg's poem "Sea Wash" is to lean in closely and listen carefully to his words—a snapshot of wisdom. No standardized assessment, no matter how technologically sophisticated, can capture what Sandburg's poem gave Henry: "It gives me a little feeling of something special." Or measure the value of Alicia's wish to share a poem with her mother because she "doesn't know about poems." Although we can't ignore the CCSS, it doesn't have to consume every minute of every day. We need to make room for Grudin's time worlds because it is in this slowness, or illusion of infinite time, where deep thought and reflection happen.

When children have these kinds of conversations and connections around poetry, they do so because teachers value the life lessons poetry can teach. At the same time, students learn authentically how to interpret a complex poem or discover how a poem's craft such as repetition or figurative language supports its meaning.

In an interview in *The Paris Review*, Richard Powers speaks about how the act of reading slows down time:



Let's remember to read poems that give children time worlds—opportunities to let artistic language permeate their inner lives. We will see it on their faces when they're gathered around us listening, taking in the cadences and the words.



Reading is the last act of secular prayer. Even if you're reading in an airport, you're making a womb unto yourself—you're blocking the end results of information and communication long enough to be in a kind of stationary, meditative aspect. A book is a done deal and nothing you do is going to alter the content, and that's antithetical to the idea that drives our society right now, which is about changing the future, being an agent, getting and taking charge of your destiny and altering it.

For so long as you are reading, you are also outside the realm of the time. (2002–2003)

We need to carve out time for reading poetry—once a day, once a week—for students to read for pleasure, for validation, and for transformation. In these time worlds, they are learning, and we are teaching, something far deeper than a reading standard or what can be measured on a one-size-fits-all assessment, to slow down, to reflect, to respond to literature authentically, intuitively, and with their hearts.

Recently, I heard someone speak about poetry as being perfect for “close reading practice.” I understand what she meant, and I would agree that the process of reading poems is to delve in deep and close, but we also don't want to turn poetry into practice time for close reading just because poems can be short and dense with meaning and nuance. Instead, we want to include poetry in our classrooms because it can be transformational, validating, and is, ultimately, soul work.

Let's invite students to explore a poem through natural talk, curiosity, and revelation and encourage students to generate questions that will help them understand a poem. Let's help our students revive those old responses to poetry, and let's trust them again. Does the poem make your body sway or break into dance? Does it make your insides move? Does it bring you to tears, whether

from grief or from joy? Reading or hearing a poem should feel like jumping into a cool lake on a hot summer day.

Let's remember to read poems that give children time worlds—opportunities to let artistic language permeate their inner lives. We will see it on their faces when they're gathered around us, listening, taking in the cadences and the words, sometimes without even knowing it at first, the way a child hears a lullaby as she drifts to sleep unaware of the passing of time. Let's remember to include poems that will act as a key to open the doors to students' feelings, their imaginations, and their voices—and let students linger in the illusion of infinite time.

My hope is that Henry and Alicia are sitting someplace right now—waiting at an airport, on a train or bus, or on a living room couch—with a poetry book in their hands, not because they will be tested on it next week but because poetry deeply matters to them, and it will always matter, because they remember the joy and wisdom it brought them years ago.

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