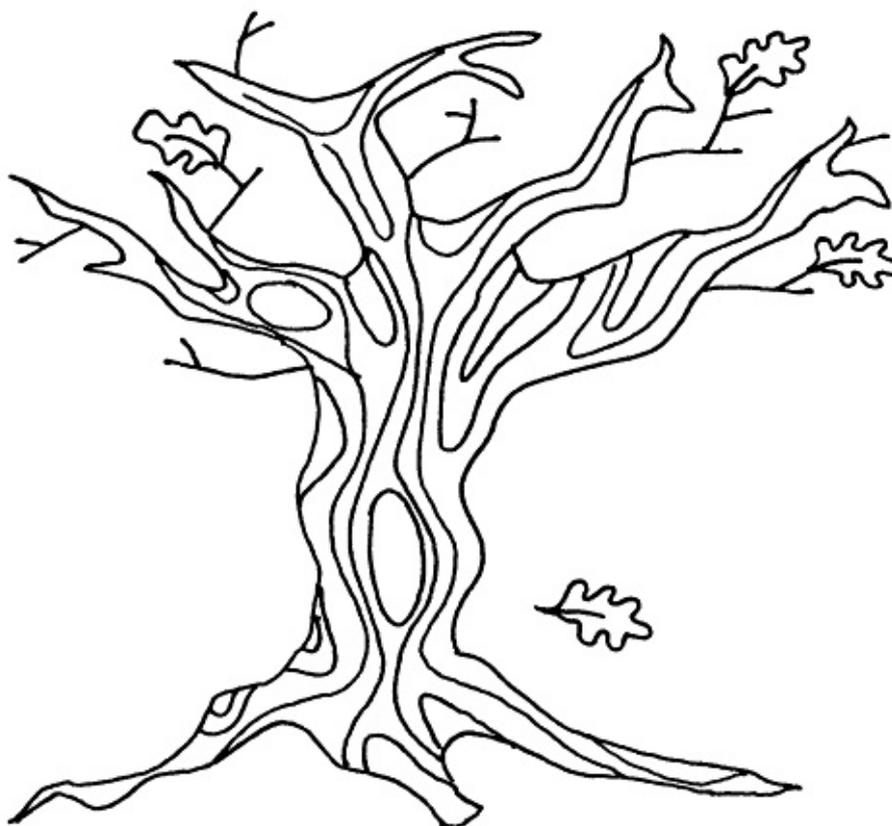


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The Poet Tree

Sharron L. McElmeel

Illustrated by Deborah L. McElmeel



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*For E. J.
Michael
Deborah
Thomas
Matthew
Steven
Suzanne
because they are the rainbows of my life.*

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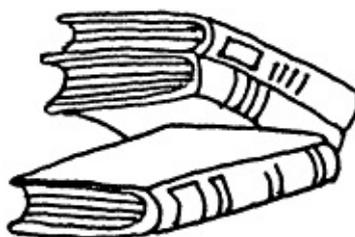
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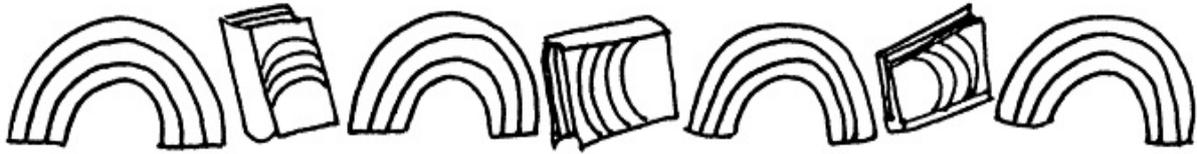
Acknowledgments

Among the first rhymes I told my granddaughters, Aubrey and Jade, was "This Little Piggie Went to Market." They giggled and laughed and brought my fingers back to their toes to say the rhyme again. Another of their favorites was "Patty-Cake, Patty-Cake." They clapped their hands and pulled mine together so I would say the rhyme again. The rhyme and rhythm of the words delighted them. Mick, my grandson, enjoys Silverstein and Prelutsky—their poems make him smile. It is the giggles and smiles of those three grandchildren that inspired this search for more poetry and poets to share with them. And it is my "grown-up family" that continues to make it possible for me to do that. They give me time to write by often managing the family schedule, filing research folders, replacing books, and handling the everyday household tasks. A special thanks to each of them.



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Introduction



Eve Merriam refers to poetry as "rainbow writing." ¹ The many colors or facets of the rainbow seem to be an appropriate analogy for poetry—a literature form that brings forth a wide variety of experiences (colors) and showcases unique views (facets) of the words used. The poet's choice of words can bring new images to readers and listeners and can give them new insight into otherwise familiar topics. The purpose of this book is to help create opportunities for the sharing and reading of poetry and to surround and immerse children in poetry. In other words, to bring children underneath the poet tree.

This book provides information about poets and their lives, including experiences that have contributed to their writing. Suggestions for activities and curriculum connections are also provided to give those who work with young readers a selection of responses to use that may help readers extend their experiences with and enjoyment of poetry. A suggestion to "create an illustration" or "write a ..." should be adapted to best meet the needs of those who are involved in the response. In some instances, it might be appropriate for individual students to create the illustration or write the response. At other times, the teacher might model the creation of an illustration that fits the objective and focuses on the element of the discussion. And in other situations, the response might be a small-group or cooperative effort, or the response suggestion might simply be placed on an idea list for later use. Discussion suggestions would be handled in a similar manner—by individuals, small groups, larger groups, or the whole class. Sometimes the discussion topic might be seeded in a small group of students, whereas at other times, the teacher might initiate a discussion of a specific point. Suggestions for reading other poetry can be adapted for individual read-alone sessions, peer-reading/sharing groups, teacher read-alone, etc. The specific manner in which any suggestion from this book is implemented should depend on the maturity level and reading ability of each group, the goals of the activity, and the general makeup of the student/teacher group. In all cases, however, the

ultimate goal is to put poetry into the lives of children. The ultimate response to the reading of *The Poet Tree* is the reading of more poetry.

In an interview in *Early Years*,² Jack Prelutsky told of an unpleasant experience he had in grade school. One of his teachers obviously did not like poetry, but felt compelled to recite it once a week. "She'd take a boring book off a boring shelf. She'd turn to a boring page, recite a boring poem and be bored while doing it." Prelutsky thought poets were "very strange people to write this sort of tripe." He and his classmates thought all poets had to be dead, boring, or sissies. "The ideal poet would be a boring dead sissy," said Prelutsky. Prelutsky prefers to avoid the type of verse often found on greeting cards and those verses considered in the Victorian tradition. He prefers to write fresh, contemporary poems, using humor to capture the interest of youngsters who might read or hear his poetry.

Prelutsky's experience and observations about poetry bring to mind an incident that occurred in my own family. My middle child was (and in many ways still is) a very reluctant reader. He enjoyed information books dealing with sports of all types. He read the sports page faithfully and could quote statistics about every sport played. But he did not read any books other than those related to sports. One day, when he was in ninth grade, I found him waiting for me when I arrived home. He could hardly wait to find out what I was going to do with "those two books on the table." (The books were *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein.) I had actually purchased the books as a gift for a friend-however, I asked my son why he wanted to know. His response was a pleasant surprise: "Because, I want to read them." I figured buying another copy of each of the books was worth it, so I handed over the copies to him. He immediately disappeared into his bedroom, a large dorm room he shared with his two younger brothers. It was three or four weeks later when one of his younger brothers asked, with irritation in his voice, "When are you going to take those books back from Tom?" It seems that every night since Tom had gotten the books he had bribed his brothers to listen to him read Silverstein's poems aloud. He had offered them money and the use of his basketball and stereo just for listening to him. "The trouble is," said Steve, "he says he's going to read three or four and ends up making us listen to at least twenty." All this from a child who had up to this point never before voluntarily picked up a book to read. And why was Tom so interested in Silverstein's poems? It seems that his seventh-grade teacher had played an audiotape of Silverstein reading poetry from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. The memory of Silverstein's reading had stayed with him for nearly two years. In most situations the teacher would never have known the impact she had made on that one child. That impact lasts to this day. Tom still enjoys those books-eight years later. NOW, however, it's not his brothers he is reading to, but his young daughter.

During presentations to teachers, Jack Prelutsky tells of his belief that the way a teacher reads or shares poetry can create a positive climate for the enjoyment of poetry. "One teacher," he says, "can take kids who love baseball and in 45 minutes they will want to sell their gloves and never play baseball again." And that is exactly what one seventh-grade teacher did for at least one child. She used Silverstein's own words to get one of *those* kids to put down his baseball glove, basketball, and golf clubs- for a little while anyway. Not every teacher will be able to reach children in the same manner. They must

find their own place, their own technique, their own style of sharing-but if teachers are going to teach they must find some way to inspire children to enjoy and read all types of literature (including information literature, poetry, and many other forms of writing). Poetry can help reach children that other types of literature cannot draw in.

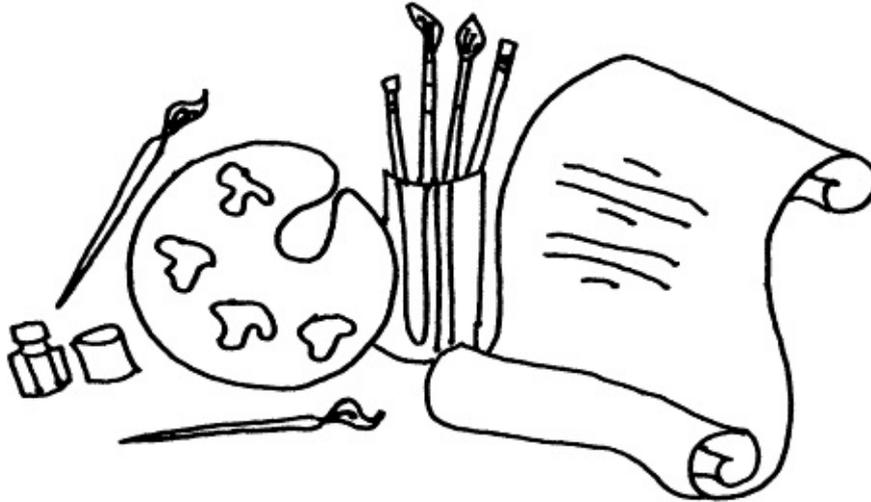
The goal of this book is to bring poetry into the realm of every child's experience-poetry to share, to enjoy, and to savor. This book is my contribution to those who would share that goal.

Read, share, and enjoy.

Notes

1. Eve Merriam, *Rainbow Writing* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 3.
2. Allen Raymond, "Jack Prelutsky ... Man of Many Talents," *Early Years* (November/December 1986): 38-42.

Chapter 1 Poetry in the Classroom



Poetry as Literature

Poetry is a form of literature that intensifies experience. A poem communicates emotions, ideas, and images through words that mean more than the words actually say.

Children respond to hearing poetry read aloud, and more and more they are reading poetry on their own. Lushly illustrated poetry collections are increasingly being offered to the young reader. The collections contain poetry from traditional or classic poets such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Christina Rossetti, and Edward Lear, and from contemporary poets such as Arnold Adoff, Jack Prelutsky, Eloise Greenfield, Eve Merriam, Lee Bennett Hopkins, and many others. The source of a poem matters not so much as its appropriateness (and appeal) for children. Rhythm and rhyme are very important in poetry for young readers. Other elements of sound—alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, and coined words—all contribute to poetry's rhythmic flow. Poetry brings visual and auditory imagery to evoke a mood or response, often involving touch, taste, and smell.

There are several excellent books that examine the elements of poetry. *Knock at a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry*, a collection published by Little, Brown in 1982, includes poems by X. J. Kennedy, selected by Dorothy M. Kennedy, and is intended to help children understand the elements of poetry