

## Panning for Gold: Finding Poetry in Children's and Young Adult Literature

*Jaqueline Bach and Steve Bickmore*

While poetry permeates children's and young adult literature, one is unlikely to find a separate section devoted to the genre in a chain bookstore. From singled-authored collections like Shel Silverstein's to the memorable appearance of Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), poetry continues to appeal to young readers. Rather than trace the historical aspects of children's and young adult poetry, we want to point to the forms it currently takes. In doing so, we wish to remind readers how poetry captures children's love of language in ways that schools often neglect when they choose more conventional types of literature.

The most dominant form today is the verse novel—books which are either written entirely in poetic verse or which alternate between verse and prose. One of the most notable examples is Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade* (1993) Trilogy. Its poetic language seems effortless and students, when they discover that it is poetry, want to argue that it really couldn't be. Today, Ellen Hopkins takes edgy subject matter and carefully manipulates words on the page to resemble characters' movements and thoughts. Nikki Grimes, on the other hand, often alternates between prose and poetry as in her novel *Bronx Masquerade* (2002), a story told in first person narrative and poems. Mel Glenn also frequently rotates among a large cast of characters, and his free verse poems slowly reveal the narrative. Our students find that the poetic form controls the pace with which they read these books. But they consume them quicker than novels written in prose forms, making a hefty 500-page Hopkins' novel a fast read.

Some young adult novels incorporate poems within the text either through an allusion to a familiar poem or as creations of the characters. They introduce a chapter, a character, a mood, or a theme. The focus of *The Outsiders* shifts when a rugged boy from the wrong side of the tracks discovers the wonder of poetry. The story is no longer only about class struggle, but becomes about mutability as well, a theme as timeless as literature. The intimate moments of friendship and heroism are fleeting and it is Frost's poem embedded in the text that guides the thematic impulse of the book. In a similar fashion, Sharon Flake's novel, *The Skin I'm In*, lets a poem capture the essences of its theme:

To Maleeka: My sweet dark chocolate candy girl  
Would you be my Almond Joy  
My chocolate chip, my Hershey Kiss  
My sweet dark chocolate butter crisp?

Hand and hand we'd walk to class  
And sit and talk in sweet green grass.

Roller coaster way up high,  
Pick moonbeams from out the sky.

Would you be my Almond Joy  
My chocolate chip, my Hershey Kiss  
My sweet dark chocolate butter crisp? (Flake 169).

Maleeka finds it easier to accept herself as she savors the words of Caleb's poem that he leaves as an offering of her beauty.

Gary Soto, Naomi Shabib Nye, Rita Dove—the list of those authors who write collections of children's and young adult poetry is larger than one might imagine. Any poem that reflects an adolescent experience—a first date, finding one's place in the world, a geometry problem—connects with a reader in an extraordinary way. As textbooks continue to reconstruct the canon, we've noticed more of these poets reflected in their collections.

Not to be ignored are those young authors who write poetry themselves. Whether keeping hand-written journals, posting poems to Internet websites, or engaging in spoken word poetry, children and young adults appreciate the freedom to express themselves in ways that go beyond traditional forms of writing. How often do educators bring in those voices to share with their students?

As in most forms of children's and young adult literature, the poetry genre is difficult to define. Is it poetry written for children and young adults; is it poetry featuring children and young adults; or is it poetry written by children and young adults? We contend that it is all of these and perhaps most simply whatever readers chose to keep reading. And perhaps, after all, something gold can stay.

### Works Cited

- Flake, Sharon G. *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1998.  
Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. New York: Puffin Books, 1967.  
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### About the Authors

**Jacqueline Bach** and **Steven Bickmore** are assistant professors of English Education at Louisiana State University. They are current editors of *The ALAN Review*, an international journal devoted to the studying and teaching of young adult literature. Their work encompasses the ways in which preparing and practicing educators use young adult literature with their students.