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IMAGING CHILDHOOD

Edited by Rosemary Ross Johnston
and John Stephens

A selection of Refereed Papers from the
Biennial Conference of the Australasian Children's Literature Association
for Research (ACLAR), held July 16-17 2004 at the
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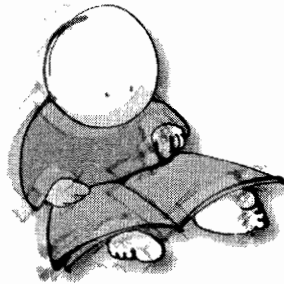
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poetic voices

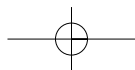
Poetic Voices

Alison Halliday

Of all the various forms or genres in 'literature', it is poetry that children are encouraged to write and it is poetry that is published in a public arena. Obviously these two processes are linked: without the writing of poetry there would be none to be published. But it is not a necessary sequence; children at school write essays, prose pieces and short stories but these usually only find official publication in their school magazine or paper. Many also write diaries, journals, notes and text (SMS) messages. Most writing by young people has an ephemeral life and certainly not a public one. Poetry is the exception.

I wish to touch only briefly on the actual writing of poetry for I will come back to it later. The process of children writing poetry is full of largely unexamined assumptions. From that which assumes the writing of poetry will not only improve any and all writing but also, presumably by some sort of osmotic process, that it will enable a greater understanding of poetry itself; to the assumption that it will make the child writer more observant and (somehow but no one seems quite sure exactly how) 'improve' the imagination. The poetry that children write is also the source of a controversy that is essentially a debate about the value of the poetry. Myra Cohn Livingston (1990) asserts that poetry written by children deserves honest evaluation and that children need more than romantic illusions about their 'genius'. In the other corner of the poetry ring are the followers of Kenneth Koch, who believe that all children can and should be able to write poetry, and that it is all good. This debate is centred in the USA and is ongoing (see Thomas 2004, p.152); nevertheless, there are implications for poetry in Australia. Having raised the issue of value, and the associated one of the difference between verse and poetry, I wish to take it no further. This is not a paper about aesthetics of the poetry written by children, and, since I am primarily looking at poetry that has been published, the first decision about its value, aesthetic and otherwise, has already been made.

There are several reasons for poetry by children to be published. The nature of poetry means that a number of poems may be published in one volume, so many child-poets have the pleasure of seeing their work, and their name, in print. In an anthology there is more value for money, and more bolstering of self esteem. The anthology often includes some sort of illustrative material, such as photos, drawings and paintings,



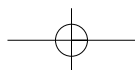
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thus allowing for further imaginative input from other students. An anthology may be published to raise funds: for schools, for youth groups, and for more unusual institutions such as children's hospitals or, in a recent example, Taronga Zoo (Pretty 2003). The poem may be published as a demonstration of the talent of the children, and thus presumably, of the educative skills of the teachers and others involved in its production. It may be published also to inform the wider Australian culture of the existence or needs of a particular group of children. Anthologies have been funded also as philanthropic gestures for local communities. Whatever the explicit reason for publication, the underlying ideology arises out of, and reinforces, the cultural position of poetry. Poetry is an example of 'high' culture; it is a metonym for civilization and for the civilizing process. The young writer of poetry is not only acknowledging the power of poetry as a pinnacle of cultural achievement, but he or she is also saying: 'Look! I can do this too, I can belong here'. In essence, the published anthology represents a fusion of the practical and the cultural elite.

I want to examine some examples of poetry anthologies by children to see what is reflected about childhood itself. Poems, adult poems read by and to children, offer up a particular view of childhood but one that is always fully mediated by the adult. This poetry will reflect, at best, a broad canon of poetry, or at the other end of the poetic spectrum, what Thomas discusses as 'official school poetry', that is, 'poetry notable for its apparent teachability' (2004, p.153). The view of childhood will be a combination of what they see children being, what they think childhood should be, and their own, necessarily remembered, childhood. Whatever the balance of these is, the poetry is reflecting, and (at worst) imposing, an adult understanding of children's perceptions of the world and of themselves. In contrast, in this paper, I am interested in how childhood is being framed when the writer is writing directly for their peers. That is, in what poetry written by a child says about childhood.

It would be naïve to imagine that the child writer of poetry is writing unencumbered by any adult influence or direction. The topics for poetry writing may be set, the form may be proscribed (think of all the thousands of limericks and haiku produced in the classroom); advice may be given, usually framed by the qualifying statement to make it 'better' or more 'poetic'; an adult will usually be the editor, selecting the poems to be published; and, almost certainly, it is an adult world that is funding the publication. Nevertheless, I assume that the voice, attitude and opinions of the child would escape, to some extent, these adult confines.

The following examples are all Australian. *Peter Pan Land and Other Poems* is the earliest I found.¹ It was published in 1916 in Brisbane and the poems were written by pupils of All Hallows and other Convent Schools. The foreword is by James Duhig, Coadjutor Archbishop of Brisbane. The poems were first published in the *Catholic Advocate*, 'the columns of which have ever been generously open to these young verse-writers, [it] is heartily to be congratulated on the choice of flowers of song now culled from Wendy's garden [Wendy being the pseudonym for the editor] and placed



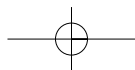
before an appreciative public in a form the cost of which is happily before all' (Duhig, unpaginated). This path from local newspaper or school newspaper/magazine to published anthology is a common one for the anthologies of children's work. I should say here that I have not used the resources of newspapers' children's pages as part of this research.ⁱⁱ These would be a fruitful source of investigation but the poems do not form an anthology and obviously would not be free of editorial influence. *Peter Pan Land and Other Poems* is unusual in publishing 26 poems, out of a total of 44, by one person, Ernestine Hemming, who Duhig praises as a 'brilliant young poetess ... a star of the first magnitude ... demonstrated as her genius develops' (Introduction). She is joined by two boys and four girls. The poems all exhibit a self-righteous virtue, a fierce and parochial nationalism, and a keen interest in fairies and nature. Chinese people are condemned as evil heathens in a poem which attempts to ally the children of the world while imposing a position of 'other' on the entire Chinese population:

Over there in China, missionaries live,
Life and faith and happiness, hope and joy to give;
And they buy these little girls when they've an opportunity
So that horrid old John Chinaman can't throw them in the sea.

And they're sent away to Convents, where they learn to read and write,
And their lives are all so happy, and so useful, and so bright...

The fighting deeds of ANZACS are celebrated and all 'play the game'. One can only imagine the encouragement and help that Wendy offered to her young contributors. Reflecting the morality of late Victorian rectitude, these poems are about childhood rather than about children. The gap is large and there is little sense of the mundane or quotidian of their young lives. Here, childhood is a time of obedience, learning and responsibility; so much so that it is only through their implied opposites that the children can be glimpsed. The anthology includes a photograph of each child.

Twenty years later, in 1938, 'an anthology of child verse compiled from the work of pupils of the correspondence classes of Western Australia' was published by Melbourne University Press. Titled *Brave Young Singers* this collection was drawn from the work of isolated and remote students over an eight-year period. The introduction assures the reader that 'assistance in the home has been confined to the writing down in correct form of the poems composed by children in the junior classes.' In contrast, the pupils received a great deal of help from their teachers: books of poems to read; voice production and reading aloud; 'insight into verse-making' following written methods; review by teachers who 'suggest improvements and further study'; and those that 'give evidence of more than ordinary literary ability' have a special teacher who directs their 'verse-making'. All this is because it was felt important to 'exploit to the fullest extent those avenues of self-expression which lead to the enrichment of the emotional and intellectual life, and to the fuller development of the personality,' a heavy burden for poetry, and the young poet, to carry. This encouragement and direction has produced an anthology that seems less contrived in



poetic voices

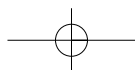
content but still features a strict adherence to formal forms and elevated language. The poems reveal a delight in the landscape, birds and wild creatures, and most of the poems reflect something of the natural world. There are also poems about toys (for example, 'The Dead Doll'), and, as one would expect from the older students, poems about the future, nationhood and death. Most of the poets are girls with several poems each, and there are only three boys, each having one or two poems.

On a modest level this is 'flag waving' by the West Australian Department of Education, as is reinforced by the introductory map which shows how widespread are the homes of the contributors. The underlying message is that even these pupils are being fully and properly educated as evidenced by the poetry. The absence of a formal school and the remoteness of teachers may be the reason for revealing a childhood that is concerned with itself, with the immediate world of the child, but nevertheless, a childhood where the children are still 'cultured'. There is one page of photographs of, one assumes, some of the children. All are very neatly dressed and sitting at a variety of home-made desks in their homes and in the open air. The formality of their appearance is in contrast to the informality of their surrounds. These are children who have an intimate connection with life on the land, its people, animals and activities; and these things surround their childhood. They are observers and active participants in what they write about. This is most apparent in their use of the first person pronoun, a feature that is not found in the earlier *Peter Pan Land and Other Poems*.

I wish to turn now to a series of anthologies that have a rather different origin. *Youth Writes* no. 12 was published in 2002. This is a biennial series that started in 1967. Marcia Kirsten was responsible for the first seven anthologies until her death in 1980. It was picked up again in 1994 with a different editorial structure. All of the anthologies have a few prose pieces and the later series contains some artwork from 'ArtExpress'.ⁱⁱⁱ The first issues of *Youth Writes* were drawn largely from school magazines. Kirsten was based in South Australia but endeavoured to find poems from throughout Australia. She had definite opinions as an editor and made her young contributors aware of her ideas and criteria:

... we must inform contributors that they now number thousands and that only limitations of time and funds for the purchase of stamps prevent us from giving guidance to all who seek it. We shall in future refer contributors to the warning here given: our help is for those whose work fulfils the following requirements: that its performance and presentation show signs of care and thought; that it express a sincerely personal attitude to the subject, not a borrowed attitude; that it deal with matters within a young writer's range of understanding, not attempting to present views on vast world problems; that the writer's meaning be made to emerge to the reader; that appropriate respect be paid to laws of spelling and grammatical construction; that a degree of self-criticism be applied by writers to their work... (1969, Foreword)

Nevertheless, in her thematically organised anthologies there were poems about war, revolution, protest and death, as well as ones about birds, friends, many different



places and landscapes, and emotions. The anthologies are now also windows onto the times. For example, the 1969 edition contains poems about Vietnam, 'Negro Riots' (p.72) and hippies:

Tomorrow
 You sit in transcendental meditation
 Wondering what's meet for contemplation ...
 Don't think about wars –
 (One knows how that bores);
 Don't think of hate –
 (Love's a happier state);

Dorothy von Takach (in Kirsten 1969, p.73)

In more recent editions of *Youth Writes* contributions are initially culled by a student editorial committee, but the final selection is made by an adult editor. The themes still revolve around two broad areas: family, friends and associated problems; and nature and the environment. As with the earlier anthologies, there are also topical poems; from an attempt to understand the killings by Martin Bryant at Port Arthur, to terrorist attacks (2002, pp.76-77). The number of poems about the natural world suggests a link between childhood, poetry and the natural world which has a long chronology. The power of the pastoral in the 16th and 17th centuries is described by Strand and Boland as providing 'the simplicity and shelter of a rural place [against] a deep European unease about power, urbanization, and the demands for a new centralization' (2001, p.207). They could almost be speaking about childhood and the approaching fears and uncertainties of the adult world. The Romantic Movement realigned this pastoral ideal so it became an echo of a more troubling debate about the relationship between poet and society (Strand & Boland 2001, p.208). Perhaps there is an ongoing focus on the natural world because it acts as a metaphor for childhood itself, a 'strange mix of sweet dream and rude awakening' (p.209).

In all these anthologies there seems to be a self-conscious desire and need to write 'poetry'. There is appropriate subject matter, careful control of form, language that is formal and grammatically correct, and an often forced objectivity of voice. There is a resistance to poetry that echoes writing exercises, with a complete absence of limericks and haiku; there is little that is not carefully serious; and the slang or vernacular of the young rarely appears. It is hard for the child to be seen behind a carefully wrought image of childhood. In more ways than not these poems *by* children are similar to poems written *for* children. There are several reasons for this: the writers are familiar with 'adult' poetry, and in fact are encouraged to be so; the influence of the adult in the whole publication process can be discerned; the readers of these anthologies are both adults and child peers. But of most influence, I suggest, is the fact that these are poems that are not only written, but are written down. As text, the power of poetry as high culture seems unavoidable.

It is in oral poetry that a different voice can be found. I want to examine the freedom

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that orality seems to bring to poetry by children by looking at two very different examples. But first, a disclaimer: I do not want to get involved in an argument about the difference between song and verse and poetry. I suspect there is a difference that goes beyond the gap between written and spoken language, but the child or young adult writers seem to use the terms almost synonymously. In their discussion of poetic forms, Strand and Boland give several reminders of how early poetic forms, from sestina to ballad, were not only sung but also accompanied by music. The 12th century French troubadours delighted in 'produc[ing] the wittiest, most elaborate, most difficult styles' (2001, p.23). These were not folk singers of their time but court poets. Thomas also emphasises how oral poetry is more than just words: 'They are not poems for the page [but] are often lyrical in the original sense of the word: musical, sung to the lyre' (2004, p.169). It is, perhaps, an (adult) imposed artificiality to see these forms as entirely separate.

Over many years 'playground' rhymes have been collected and published by, for example, the Opies in England, and June Factor and Ian Turner in Australia. These poems are often, but not always, parodic:

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
 All the King's horses and all the King's men
 Said, 'Oh no, not scrambled eggs again!'

The boy stood on the burning deck
 Picking his nose like mad;
 He rolled it into little balls
 And threw it at his dad

(c.1930, and later)

These poems are fluid and elusive, reflecting the local and the immediate in the children's lives. They reveal a childhood that is funny, weird, personal and fleeting. The poems are about the children themselves, or about the juxtaposition of the adult-child worlds. The use of parody is a means by which the children assert their own subjectivity and ownership, and subversion is a powerful tool against the adult world. Thus, there is both an awareness of the niceties of polite behaviour, and of the poetic canon; both of which are undermined with a joy and playfulness that may be aligned with the carnivalesque (Stephens 1992, p.120-21). These poems also reflect a disdain for adult sensibility or probity with an overt delight in the bawdy, vulgar, and forbidden. Playground poetry not only 'dismantles nostalgic notions of the innocent, obedient and controllable child' (Thomas 2004, p.155), but it is also held in common. There is no designated author or poet here but, rather, the elusive yet continuing voice of 'anon'.

When I was just a little pup
 I asked my mother,
 'What will I be?
 Will I be Lassie,
 Or Rin Tin Tin?'

Here's what she said to me –

'You ain't nothing but a hound dawg'.

The above example from the *Peninsula Post*, Melbourne (23 Sept. 1959) was accompanied by the comment that:

This little jingle, sung to the music of a recent hit song, was overheard in a playground. It is a constant source of wonder to teachers, parents and all who deal with children where and how they make up these rhymes. (in Turner 1969, p.108)

It may be more relevant to wonder at the naivety of 'all who deal with children' for the poem reveals a thick cultural intertextuality combining the raunchy Elvis Presley and the saccharine musings of Doris Day with the early American television series of the detective dog *Rin Tin Tin* and that of *Lassie*, the latter metamorphosed from the earlier novel of the same name. Moreover, these cultural markers reveal children 'eavesdropping' on the activities of adults, and the early days of the teenager.

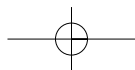
A final example of the playground rhyme is indicative of the debt owed to the music hall tradition:

Ask your mother for sixpence
To see the tall giraffe
With pimples on his hind legs
And pimples on his...
Ask your mother for sixpence... (in Factor 1985)

The elision of the last line is similar to the 'infamous 'Ms. Lucy' hand-clapping rhyme', which Thomas argues is as significant for its play with language as for its subversion of cultural codes (2004, p.170).

That such poems have moved from oral to print form is also indicative of changes in social attitudes to poetry, to language, and to ideas about childhood. Playground rhymes were initially seen as the domain of the folklorist or social historian, but to continue to do so would be to negate the work of the collectors (mentioned above) and to ignore a substantial part of children's poetry.

At the other end of the oral continuum (as a function of the age of the creator) is rap or hip-hop verse. Here the separation of poem and song is not only blurred but ignored. Again, it would be naïve to see some of this poetry as solely the product of the world of the young adult. The adult world, or wider society, is involved in production and publication in ways similar to those of the earlier anthologies: they are concerned with the production and dissemination of the poems/songs as soon as they exist in any permanent form, such as making a video clip, DVD or CD. Nevertheless, rap is a long way from the poems in any of the anthologies. The world of these young adults is one of extremes: love/hate, friends/enemies, peers/adults, success/failure. It is not a world of moral absence but it is a place and time where solipsism may be a way to survive. My example is American, but rap flourishes here in Australia, especially among young Aboriginal boys, such as the Wilcannia Mob.



poetic voices

Mentored by Morganics, their song 'Down River' won a Deadly award for the best single release of the year (2003). This is a song or poem about their lives: swimming, fishing, and jumping off the bridge; 'it's about [...] what's there in the river and being part of our life' (Kerry King qtd. in Jopson 2003)

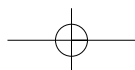
In the film *8 Mile*, the singer and actor Eminem plays a character who is a young white man in a black urban American world of poverty, drugs and sex. Confrontation between groups of young men takes place in the form of rap competitions where, on a one-to-one basis, the competitors attempt to out-sing and out-perform each other:

I know everything he's got to say against me,
 I am white, I am a fuckin bum, I do live in a trailer with my mom,
 My boy Future is an Uncle Tom.
 I do got a dumb friend named Cheddar Bob who shoots
 himself in the leg with his own gun,
 I did get jumped by all 6 of you chumps
 And Wink did fuck my girl,
 I'm still standin here screamin 'FUCK THE FREE WORLD!'
 Don't ever try to judge me dude
 You don't know what the fuck i've been through

This is essentially about Eminem himself.^{iv} Just as the young makers of playground rhymes gain a measure of control and power through their re-writing, so, too, does the maker of rap. In describing himself he defines the limits of his own subjectivity, and shapes himself as he would have it. In this case it also means an exposure of his vulnerability but this becomes a means to power, and to literally winning as his opponent is silenced. The performer cannot be contradicted and he cannot be bettered in knowing himself.

The second way in which these oral poems differ from the written ones is the nature of the audience, as is evident from viewing the film. Not only are these poems performed, but they are said to their peers. The feedback is immediate and, in some cases, the poem is almost a product of a collaborative process between performer and listener. Words are repeated with the singer and as a chorus to the main line, and body movement and the sound of clapping, stamping and general shouts of encouragement provide a strong rhythmic accompaniment. The poem becomes a reflection of a process of inclusion and thus, also of exclusion. The language – slippery, arcane, and full of street slang and swearing – reinforces this process of possession. All of this is also to be found in playground rhymes and in performance poetry ... coming to a pub near you. The slippage in the latter between poetry and theatre is beyond the scope of this paper but the performative nature of this whole genre is worth further investigation.

When I began this research, I had hoped to find images of childhood in poetry by children that revealed aspects of that time of life that we, as adults, had lost, forgotten, or chosen not to remember. But this was not to be. In the anthologies of written poetry, children are adeptly creating and constructing images of childhood



that complement those of wider society; even the interrogations and protests are polite rather than passionate. It is in the ephemeral oral poetry that a different voice is heard. This work is subversive, derisive, passionate and angry. It is also about subjects that are not 'poetic': urban landscapes, drugs, alcohol, violence, sex, bodily functions and images, love, friends, cars, 'hanging out', and so on. This poetry is aggressive, urgent and heartfelt. Of course, this may be just as much an illusory depiction of childhood as that within the written poetry. It may reflect the uncertain and wary expectations of a fearful adult world for the young that they share the time and place with, but I think not. Most adults do not want to hear it, and thus, I suspect, it is they who refuse to call it poetry.

During the Sydney Festival at the beginning of 2004, I went to hear 'Def Poetry Jam', poems written and performed by a group of young American adults. I was different to every one else there for two reasons: I was by myself, and I was the oldest person there by at least 25 years. The audience was young and totally responsive to what they heard. Throughout the performance the poets called their words 'poetry' and it was recited, not sung. Some of it even rhymed. Each of the performers introduced themselves at the beginning, and the last performer strutted around the stage as she listed what her work was about, finishing with 'poetry is about me'. The audience howled and cheered their appreciation. It may be selfish, narcissistic and even solipsistic but it has the power of honesty. It may be the poetry of tomorrow's children, and we should be listening.

Notes

- ⁱ The journal *Stone Soup* is published in the USA three times a year with 'the best in English language creative writing'. As it contains prose and artwork as well as poetry, it was not examined for this paper. Nevertheless, it is regarded as a showcase for children's work.
- ⁱⁱ Jill Holt has done extensive research in this area in New Zealand but I am unaware of anything similar having been done in Australia.
- ⁱⁱⁱ This is a selection of the artwork done by NSW Higher School Certificate students as part of the formal requirements for the subject 'art'. The works are displayed in several public buildings, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, during the summer holiday.
- ^{iv} Eminem has been open in acknowledging the relevance of the lyrics to his own life.

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