

Profiles and Perspectives

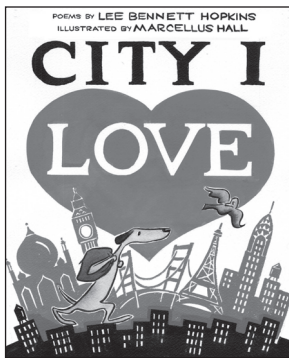
Janet Wong and Rebecca Kai Dotlich

Mining with a Jeweler's Eye: The Work of Lee Bennett Hopkins

When Lee Bennett Hopkins was announced as the latest winner of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children at last November's NCTE convention in San Antonio, murmurs spread through the room in disbelief: "Hadn't he won this yet?"

The NCTE poetry award, created by Bee Cullinan and NCTE in 1977, has to this point acknowledged poets who write collections of their own poems; anthologists who compile the works of other poets have been largely ignored. While Lee Bennett Hopkins has written acclaimed collections of his own original poems—most notably *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life, Good Rhymes, Good Times!* and his new *City I Love*—he is known primarily and most widely as an anthologist.

This year, the description of the award was modified to include anthologists, presenting the Committee with a clear choice: Lee Bennett Hopkins.



The new guidelines for the award that the Committee is asked to consider include:

- Literary Merit
- A Poet's or Anthologist's Contributions
- Evolution of the Poet's or Anthologist's Work
- Appeal to Children

Lee Bennett Hopkins has produced over 126 books—mainly poetry anthologies and collec-

tions, but also books for teachers and novels. He and his books have received dozens of accolades, honors, and awards. These awards include:

- The Christopher Medal
- The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) Golden Kite Honor Award
- The University of Southern Mississippi's Medallion for "outstanding contributions to the field of children's literature" in recognition of his body of work
- Parents' Choice and Children's Choice awards
- Notable and "Pick of the List" distinctions from the American Library Association (ALA), the American Booksellers Association (ABA), the Children's Book Council (CBC), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the International Reading Association (IRA).

But equally as significant as the awards he has received are the awards that he has created. No one has worked harder to recognize and promote children's poetry in America. There are only four major American awards for children's poets, and two of them bear his name. The Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, established in 1993, is presented annually by Penn State University for a poetry book published the preceding year. The Lee Bennett Hopkins/International Reading Association (IRA) Promising Poet Award, established in 1995, is presented every three years by IRA to a poet with no more than two books. Promoting new poets is essential to Hopkins, who makes a practice of including works by lesser-known poets in his anthologies. He says: "My philosophy is to bring new works to teachers, librarians, parents and children that speak in today's voices while carefully preserving voices of the past."

The prominent children's poets of the late 20th century (and some of the most important children's poets of today) are identified in Hopkins's com-

prehensive resource book for teachers, *Pass the Poetry, Please!* Hopkins failed to include a chapter about himself in that book, but wrote about his own life as a writer and his sources of inspiration in his welcoming “Meet the Author” book, *The Writing Bug: An Autobiography*. “I never thought of becoming a writer. It happened by accident. I was stung by the writing bug the first time an article I wrote appeared in a magazine. I’ve been writing ever since.”

Hopkins has also been the subject of poetry, as seen in J. Patrick Lewis’s *Homage to Lee Bennett Hopkins on the Occasion of His 2009 NCTE Excellence in Poetry Prize*. This poem, “The Word’s the Thing” (see sidebar), captures Hopkins perfectly: a “jeweler’s eye for *mining* worlds of words.” Although Hopkins often includes a sprinkling of the classics in his books, he is not a simple gatherer of previously published poems. Especially in his anthologies of the past decade, he has broken new ground, commissioning new works on a variety of subjects. For *America at War*, Hopkins commissioned more than half—over 30—of the poems, presented in sections spanning the American Revolution to the Iraq War. *Incredible Inventions* features 16 original poems, including selections by some of the most-respected practitioners of our craft: Alice Schertle, J. Patrick Lewis, Marilyn Singer, Kristine O’Connell George, and others.

These two Hopkins titles are typical in their usefulness in the classroom. In the 1960s and 1970s, he worked as a public school teacher, a consultant to the Bank Street College of Education, and an editor at Scholastic. Hopkins also worked in children’s television as consultant/host for “Zebra Wings.” Hopkins consistently encouraged and facilitated the use of poetry as a way of teaching reading—and the love of reading. (For example, over lunch in a posh New York City restaurant, Lee Bennett Hopkins pitched his idea of simple poetry books to editor Charlotte Zolotow, and the “I Can Read” poetry anthologies were born.)

A large part of this work involved pioneering the trend toward themed collections and anthologies. Hopkins says: “I compile the kinds of poetry books I wish I had had while I was teaching. And why not combine poetry with mathematics? Why not combine poetry with every area of the curriculum . . . poetry must be shared every

The Word’s the Thing

by J. Patrick Lewis

*Homage to Lee Bennett Hopkins on the Occasion
Of His NCTE Excellence in Poetry Prize, 2009*

Our lapidary knows what boon to bring
To books of poetry: a jeweler’s eye
For mining worlds of Words. The one good thing

That we the silent singers seek to sing:
A trope’s a trip to an unnatural high.
The lapidary knows what boon to bring,

Waiting for line and stanza to take wing—
Not to preserve the moth but the butterfly.
Then mount the dusted Words, the one good thing.

Let those pursuers of the vaunted ring,
Who trade in sugared rhymes that stupefy,
Stop to consider, *Where’s a boon to bring*

Us breathless out of winter into spring?
May their first *tabula rasa* be the sky
Of fabled worlds where Word’s the one good thing.

In lieu of accolades, I weave this string,
A skein of recollection. Let it fly
To you, prized lapidary. May it bring
You iambs of delight. The Word’s the thing.

“The Word’s the Thing,” copyright © J. Patrick Lewis, 2009

day in every way possible.” These connections to the curriculum are not gratuitous; as Sylvia Vardell has noted, the poems in *Marvelous Math* “help clarify terms and concepts, as well as add fun and enrichment to math lessons or tutoring.” This is not to say that Hopkins does not tout the importance and beauty of volumes of poetry that include a potpourri of poems on every subject. As he says, “Writing poetry is taking a subject—be it a pigeon or a Popsicle, and breathing new life into it.”

Lee’s editor and publisher, Emma Dryden (Vice President & Publisher, Atheneum/McElderry Books), says, “Lee is a master of his artistry and craft—as a poet and an anthologist, he brings a great sensibility to the choices he makes when pulling together a collection of poetry. He not only explores a range of excellence in writing, but he also remains alert to the timeliness of his themes and to the pertinence of a collection to a young reader and, in fact, to readers of all ages. His anthologies are a marvelous range of classic and new; expected and surprising; beautiful and provocative.”

Students often complain that poetry is not their favorite type of reading or writing; with these students, the problem might be that they haven't yet been introduced to contemporary, accessible poems that resonate with their everyday lives. A child raised by a single mother will find his or her own experiences mirrored in *Been to Yesterdays*. A budding engineer would enjoy *Click, Rumble, Roar: Poems about Machines*. For the reluctant reader who loves sports, Hopkins has assembled two anthologies of sports poems, *Extra Innings: Baseball Poems* and *Opening Days: Sports Poems*. Children living in or visiting a city anywhere in the world will appreciate Hopkins's newest, *City I Love* (starred by both *Publishers Weekly* and *School Library Journal*), in which the following poem appears:

Sing a Song of Cities

Sing a song of cities.
If you do,
Cities will sing back
to you.

They'll sing in subway roars
and rumbles,
People-laugh, machine-loud grumbles.

Sing a song of cities.
If you do,
Cities will sing back.

Cities will sing back
to you.

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In his own words: "Poetry and I fit together. I can't imagine being without it. Were it in my power I would give poetry to every single child everywhere. What it can do for children is powerful-plus! It is food and drink, it is all seasons, it is the stuff of all existence."

Readers, writers, and teachers of poetry have much to look forward to in the upcoming years, with quite a few new titles by Hopkins in the publishing queue, including *Sharing the Seasons*, *I Am the Book!*, and *Give Me Wings*. Lee is unwavering in his belief that poetry can change lives. It changed his. Of the poem "To," from his book *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life*, Lee writes:

To
make
this world
a whole lot
brighter

when
I
grow up
I'll
be
a writer.
I'll
write about
some things
I know —

*how to bunt
how to throw . . .*

*a Christmas wish
a butter dish . . .*

*a teddy bear
an empty chair . . .*

*the love I have inside
to
share . . .*

Yes.
To make
this world
a whole lot
brighter,

when
I grow up
I'll
be
a
writer.

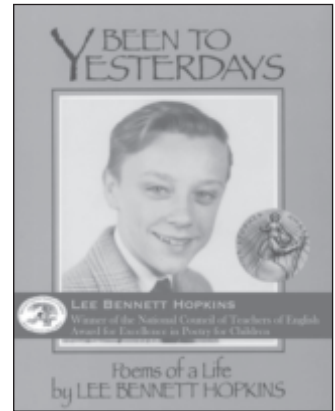
"To" from *Been to Yesterdays* by Lee Bennett Hopkins.
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Anyone who has had the chance to speak with Lee Bennett Hopkins about poetry knows these words are deep and heartfelt: "How rich I am because of the genre."

And how rich we are, too. Thank you, Lee Bennett Hopkins.

Authors' Note

Please join us at the NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia for a session titled "Poetry Party! Celebrating 2009 NCTE Poetry Award Recipient Lee Bennett Hopkins" (Ses-



Selected Titles by Lee Bennett Hopkins

Hopkins, L. B. (2008). *America at War*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry/Simon & Schuster.

Hopkins, L. B. (1995). *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life*. Honesdale: Boyds Mills.

Hopkins, L. B. (2009). *City I Love*. New York: Abrams.

Hopkins, L. B. (1987). *Click, Rumble, Roar: Poems about Machines*. New York: Crowell.

Hopkins, L. B. (1993). *Extra Innings: Baseball Poems*. San Diego: Harcourt.

Hopkins, L. B. (in press). *Give Me Wings*. New York: Holiday House.

Hopkins, L. B. (1990). *Good Books, Good Times!* New York: Harper.

Hopkins, L. B. (2006). *Got Geography!* New York: Greenwillow.

Hopkins, L. B. (1994). *Hand in Hand: An American History through Poetry*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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Hopkins, L. B. (2009). *Incredible Inventions*. New York: Greenwillow.

Hopkins, L. B. (1997). *Marvelous Math*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hopkins, L. B. (2000). *My America: A Poetry Atlas of the United States*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hopkins, L. B. (1996). *Opening Days: Sports Poems*. San Diego: Harcourt.

Hopkins, L. B. (1998). *Pass the Poetry, Please!* New York: HarperCollins.

Hopkins, L. B. (2010). *Sharing the Seasons*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hopkins, L. B. (1999). *Spectacular Science*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hopkins, L. B. (1994). *The Writing Bug: An Autobiography*. Katonah: Richard C. Owen.

sion A.18, Friday, November 20, 2009, 9:30–10:45 a.m.). In this session, hosted by Sylvia Vardell and the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children committee, Hopkins will be joined by poets Rebecca Kai Dotlich, J. Patrick Lewis, Jane Yolen, Georgia Heard, and Walter Dean Myers.

References

Vardell, S. (2006). *Poetry aloud here! Sharing poetry with children in the library*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Vardell, S. (2007). *Poetry people: A practical guide to children's poets*. Westport: Libraries Unlimited.

Janet Wong (www.janetwong.com) is the author of 20 books for children and teens, including her "Meet the Author" book, *Before It Wriggles Away*. **Rebecca Kai Dotlich** (www.rebeccakaidotlich.com) is a poet and author of children's books, including her latest picture-book, *Bella and Bean*.