

PROFILE



A POEM IS A HOUSE FOR WORDS: NCTE PROFILES MARY ANN HOBERMAN

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Profile

Mary Ann Hoberman is the 13th winner of the prestigious NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. While some might not consider the number 13 to be auspicious, when we called to tell Mary Ann of her selection as the 2003 award winner, she was delighted to become part of such an august group of poets.

Mary Ann has published over 30 children's books, mostly in rhyme. Some are collections of verse while others are picture books or picture book editions of single rhymes. Her poems ring with the sounds and rhythms of children's everyday lives while also giving fresh insights into the world. She draws from her personal childhood memories as well as the experiences of her own children to inform her work and to ensure that her images are truly from children's perspectives.

One of Mary Ann's most well-known and well-loved books is *A House Is a House for Me* (1978). Winner of the National Book Award, this book uses repetitive rhythm and phrasing along with a consistent rhyme scheme to describe all kinds of houses in creative ways, including "a glove is a home for a hand," "a husk is a home for an ear of corn" and "a pen is a house for ink." The book continues to be quite popular with young children, generating much talk as they listen to the musical text and pour over the pictures, often inventing new homes. Parents tell how the book was so loved in their families that it was one of the few they didn't discard when their children grew up. Young readers love to hear the descriptions of different kinds of houses for a variety of animal inhabitants (1978, excerpt):

A hill is a house for an ant, an ant.
A hive is a house for a bee.
A hole is a house for a mole or a mouse.
And a house is a house for me!

We might think, however, of adding a line to this poem describing another kind of house. Mary Ann, after all, builds poems, and a very fitting addition to her list of houses might be "a poem is a house for a thought and for playing with words." Playing with words is, indeed, what she does, and it is her skill and ability at wordplay

that led to her selection by the Committee for the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children.

Although Mary Ann was born in Stamford, Connecticut, her father changed jobs often, and so the family moved to New York, New Jersey, and then to New Haven, Connecticut. When she was five, they returned to Stamford where her family still lives. She has lived in Greenwich, Connecticut for the past 45 years.

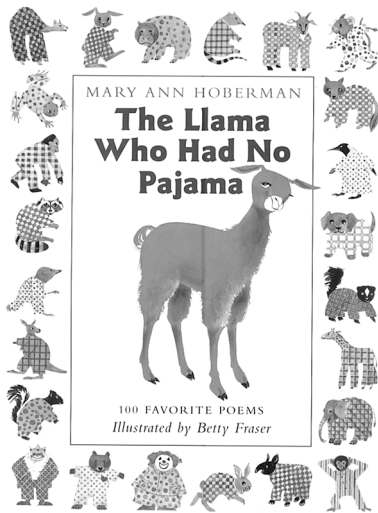
On a mild January day, we drove to Greenwich where Mary Ann lives with her husband, Norman, and their two dogs, Pico and Maria. When Mary Ann gave us the directions, she said we couldn't miss the house—the only contemporary house on the street. What she didn't say until our arrival was that Norman had designed their home and that it is a haven for the various sculptures, ceramics, and other art forms that he is either working on or has completed. The garden includes the stone walls so prevalent in New England and was designed and built by Norman, along with a pond and a teahouse. Their four children enjoyed playing there while growing up, and now they, along with five grandchildren, journey from their New York City homes for visits. It is easy to see the match between Mary Ann's home environment and the textural sensations in her poems.

Mary Ann says that she has always been a storyteller. As a child, she made up stories for her younger brother and an imaginary playmate named Billy. She has always loved books. Growing up in the Depression, she had few books in her home and so her favorite childhood excursion was to the Stamford's public library, a place that "had an aura of rich, ripe sweetness, of dark juicy savor" for her. "The sidewalk running from home to the library along Broad Street was literally my lifeline, nourishing my mind and spirit, stimulating my imagination, leading me directly to my life's calling. All of those books that I carried back and forth every morning, that I read and often reread and sometimes eventually knew by heart, were written by *authors*. Another magical word. When I grew up, I would be one too!" The children's librarian in Stamford, who was a wonderful storyteller, was a major influence on her love

of books. This childhood spent devouring and cherishing books certainly influenced her poetry.

Mary Ann has other detailed memories of childhood. She remembers having non-structured time, except for her piano lessons, that allowed her opportunities to play and to imagine. She played with her dolls, ran an animal hospital, and invented games. And when she began to make her own little books and newspapers, her father got her a child's printing press. Later on, she worked on the high school newspaper and was editor of the yearbook.

Mary Ann also remembers the influence of her mother's two brothers. One was a musician and the other, Uncle Phil, went to Yale and talked to her about books. He was a major contributor to her love of books and words, and she still has one of the books he loaned her long ago, *Modern American Poetry* (Untermeyer, 1930). She credits the rich and varied contents of this book with contributing to her knowledge and understanding of poetry.



Mary Ann was the first woman in her parents' families to attend college. While enrolled at Smith College, where she worked on the school paper, she majored in history rather than English because she wanted to go to Paris. She was part of the first college group to go there after the war. In her senior year of college, she married Norman Hoberman and followed him to Newfoundland where he was stationed in the Air Force. Norman, a lawyer, left the service and returned to Harvard to become an architect. They had three children in three years, and it was during that time that Mary Ann wrote her first book, *All My Shoes Come In Twos* (1957), which evolved from observations of her children. One autumn day, she was pushing her babies in their carriage, scuffling the crunchy leaves as she walked. She started thinking about how fascinated her older daughter seemed to be with shoes, often pulling them off to play with soon after her mother had struggled to put them on. Suddenly the phrase, "all my shoes come in twos" came into her mind. Knowing that many children seemed fascinated by shoes, she went home, wrote ten shoe poems that she asked Norman to illustrate, and sent

them off to Little, Brown Publishers. Following the acceptance and publication of this volume, she began writing for children in earnest.

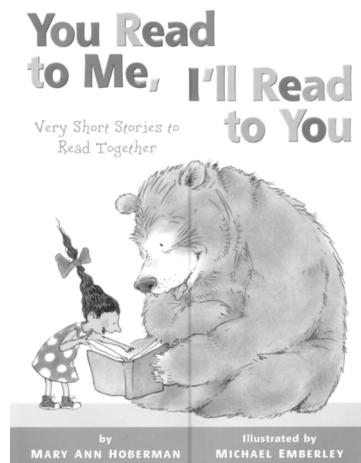
Mary Ann doesn't typically set aside a specific time every day to write. Rather, she creates many of her poems as she's walking or driving. "A line will just come to me and that starts the pearl in the oyster" (1993, p. 52). She also doesn't compose on the computer, using it only to type the finished product. Rather, she uses a fountain pen and a yellow legal pad because these materials stimulate the creative juices that have resulted in many well-crafted poetry collections for children.

Among these collections is *Fathers, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers: A Collection of Family Poems* (1991), an inclusive celebration of family diversity illustrated by Marilyn Hafner. From the first poem, "What Is a Family?" which explores all sorts of family configurations, to the last poem, "Our Family Comes from Around the World," this collection highlights family interactions that resonate with children. Humorous and contemplative pieces describe cheek-pinching aunts, stepsiblings, adopted children, and those times when you just want to be alone.

The Llama Who Had No Pajama: 100 Favorite Poems (1998) brought together many of her poems originally published in other collections, including *Yellow Butter, Purple Jelly, Red Jam, Black Bread* (1981), *The Raucous Auk* (1973), *A Little Book of Little Beasts* (1973), and *Hello and Good-by* (1959). The collection includes many of her humorous poems as well as more contemplative pieces, from odes to insects, to animal tongue twisters, to observations on everyday life from a child's perspective. With poems covering a wide range of topics interesting to children, this collection is an excellent introduction to poetry for preschool and primary children because it develops an affinity for rhythm and rhyme as well as a love for reading. As one first grade teacher said after reading

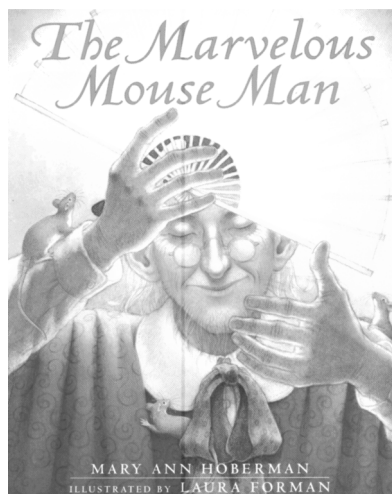
the book aloud to her students, "My first graders are eating this stuff up and going back for more!"

You Read to Me, I'll Read to You: Very Short Stories to Read Together (2001), illustrated by Michael Emberley, was written in response to Mary Ann's work with the Literacy Volunteers of America program.



These stories are actually a series of twelve rhymed, repetitive poems, each ending with a reference to reading together (i.e., “Well, if we both can read, / Let’s do! / You read to me / I’ll read to you!”) The result is a lively series of short plays, written in rhyme, for two voices that focus on simple, everyday experiences like building snowmen, talking on the telephone, and washing the dog. All feature poetic qualities like rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and a consistent refrain that provide helpful support for beginning readers.

Mary Ann also enjoys reworking familiar rhymes and stories. *Miss Mary Mack* (1998), *The Eensy-Weensy Spider* (2002), and *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (2003), all illustrated by Nadine Westcott; along with *It’s Simple, Says Simon* (2001), illustrated by Meilo So; and *The*



Marvelous Mouse Man (2002), illustrated by Laura Forman are fine examples. In *The Eensy-Weensy Spider* (2002), the original song is extended beyond the “spider spout” to describe a small creature who ventures away for the first time from mom’s cozy web. The other books in this series,

called “The Sing-Along Stories,” also feature clever new verses added to the traditional nursery rhymes and songs. *It’s Simple, Said Simon* (2001) begins with a dog and boy challenging each other. The dog says, “I’ll bet you can’t growl.” But Simon can. “It’s simple,” said Simon and proceeds to impress the dog with his “low growl.” Simon then imitates a cat and a horse he meets. When he meets a tiger, however, the challenge is tougher, and Simon must escape being the tiger’s dinner. *The Marvelous Mouse Man* (2002) is a humorous retelling of the traditional story of the Pied Piper, but with a happy ending.

Mary Ann uses poetic techniques in innovative ways, yet her poems are very accessible to young children. She wants children to experience the aural enjoyment of language play through skillful repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, along with the fun of ridiculous situations like a “llama with no pajama” or people “who live in backward town.” In the process, she hopes they also gain fresh insights about the world around them.

This emphasis on providing a unique, often humorous, perspective on everyday experiences or phenomena is evident in much of her poetry, such as the following poem from *The Llama Who Had No Pajama* (1998, p. 41):

Growing

The grown-ups say I’m growing tall
And that my clothes are growing small.
Can clothes grow *small*?
I always think
That things grow *big*
Or else they shrink.
But did they shrink
Or did I grow
Or did we both change?
I don’t know.

Sometimes Mary Ann explores sounds or letters, as in “O is Open” in which she describes the letter “O” as “open,” “round,” “a loop,” “a hoop,” among other images (1998, p. 65). Or she ponders animal traits as in “Sloth,” where a tree is described as a “sloth’s trapeze” on which he leads an upside down life (1981, p. 51). In “Pick Up Your Room” (1991), she cleverly mirrors a child’s reluctance to do pesky chores:

Pick up your room, my mother says
(She says it every day);
My room’s too heavy to pick up
(That’s what I always say).
(p. 7 excerpt)

Mary Ann thoroughly enjoys playing with language, particularly word meanings. “I like to think of words with double meanings and then just *play* around with them,” she says. “Many of my poems are like puzzles, which isn’t surprising because I adore crossword puzzles and all kinds of word games” (1993, p. 54). For example, in “Centipede” she uses words with the same root, like “pedal,” “pedestrian,” “pedestal,” and “cents,” “century,” and “centigrade,” to lead the reader to discover the title’s meaning. “Waiters” (1981, p. 21) is an excellent example of her skill in this area:

Waiters

Dining with his older daughter
Dad forgot to order water.
Daughter quickly called the waiter.
Waiter said he’d bring it later.
So she waited, did the daughter,
Till the waiter brought her water.
When he poured it for her later,
Which one would you call the waiter?

Poetry has much in common with music. The words skip, they tug at you with an insistent voice, tapping out a

rhythm that won't let you go. Poets love the harmony of sound and rhythm created by words. Mary Ann is particularly skilled at using rhyme and rhythm effectively to create musical language. "Rhyme is one of the wonderful resources of the English language. And for better or worse, I am an inveterate rhymers," she states (1993, p. 57). She has also said, "There is eye-poetry and there is ear-poetry, but the best poetry provides a feast for both ear and eye" (2003). Her poems often have a rollicking, musical quality that appeals to children. "Hello and Good-by" (1998) is a particularly good example of her ability to take a common childhood experience and turn it into a memorable poem that swings with an infectious rhythm.

Hello and Good-By

Hello and good-by
Hello and good-by

When I'm in a swing
Swinging low and then high,
Good-by to the ground
Hello to the sky.

Hello to the rain
Good-by to the sun,
Then hello again sun
When the rain is all done.

In blows the winter,
Away the birds fly.
Good-by and hello
Hello and good-by
(p. 7)

Sometimes Mary Ann uses repetition to create a rhythm that evokes a feeling or setting. "It's wonderful to have words come around again and have sounds become familiar as the poem is read. I love refrains. I don't think familiarity breeds contempt; rather it brings joy and pleasure. Repetition is a natural, logical part of language" (1993, p. 57). So in "Snow," for example, the word "snow" is repeated again and again, giving the effect of a town completely covered "everywhere we look and everywhere we go." She says that "the poem is to be read slowly and deliberately so children get the effect of snow blanketing the neighborhood."

Mary Ann is also known for skillful use of assonance and alliteration. For example, in "Brother" (1998, p. 10), she plays with the various sounds of the letter "o" to create an appealing, rhythmical tribute to sibling rivalry:

Brother

I had a little brother
And I brought him to my mother
And I said I want another
Little brother for a change

But she said don't be a bother
So I took him to my father
And I said this little bother
Of a brother's very strange.

But he said one little brother
Is exactly like another
And every little brother
Misbehaves a bit, he said.

So I took the little bother
From my mother and my father
And I put the little bother
Of a brother back to bed.

In fact, Mary Ann considers this poem to be one of her favorites as well as most representative of her work. "It rhymes, is strongly rhythmical, delights in word play, rolls off the tongue easily, and uses particular attributes of the English language—in this case the fortuitous rhyming and near-rhyming terms for three members of the nuclear family—to work its magic" (2003).

Mary Ann loves to experiment with space and line arrangement. "I'm very interested in the shape of a poem and how it relates to both its subject and to its language. I like variety. I like to experiment. I tend to use punctuation very sparingly, preferring to let the line divisions and the voice of the poem do the work. But, at other times, for a regularly rhyming poem, I use the standard line pattern. Again, it's the poem itself that suggests how it should look on the page" (1993, p. 56). For example, in "Rabbit" (1998, excerpt from p. 18), she deliberately put the repeated word "bit" down the middle of the poem so that this part became the "literal and figurative spine of the poem" (1993, p. 56), emphasizing the wordplay:

Rabbit

A rabbit
Bit
A little bit
An itty-bitty
Little bit of beet
Then bit
By bit
He bit
Because he liked the taste of it

Even when her poems are finished, she continues experimenting with lines and spacing. Thus, the same poem might appear in different collections with a different line arrangement.

When asked which are her favorite books, Mary Ann named five: *Hello and Goodby* (1959), *The Raucous Auk* (1973), *A Little Book of Little Beasts* (1973), *A House Is a House for Me* (1978), and *You Read to Me, I'll Read to*

NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children

NCTE established the Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children in 1977 to honor a living American poet for his or her aggregate work for children ages 3–13. The award was given annually until 1982, at which time it was decided that the award would be given every three years. In a year when the Award is given, it is presented by the Poetry Committee Chair during the Books for Children Luncheon at the NCTE Convention in November.

Criteria for the award include:

Literary Merit (art and craft of aggregate work)

- Imagination
- Authenticity of voice
- Evidence of a strong persona
- Universality; Timelessness

Poet's Contributions

- Aggregate work
- Evident potential for growth and evolution in terms of craft
- Excellence

Evolution of the Poet's Work

- Technical and artistic development as evidenced in the poetry

- Evidence of risk, change, and artistic stamina
- Evidence of different styles and modes of expression

Appeal to Children

- Evidence of students' excitement for the poetry
- Evidence of childlike quality; yet poem's potential for stirring fresh insights and feelings should be apparent

Award Winners

2003—Mary Ann Hoberman

2000—X. J. Kennedy

1997—Eloise Greenfield

1994—Barbara Juster Esbensen

1991—Valerie Worth

1988—Arnold Adoff

1985—Lilian Moore

1982—John Ciardi

1981—Eve Merriam

1980—Myra Cohn Livingston

1979—Karla Kuskin

1978—Aileen Fisher

1977—David McCord

You (2001). She regrets that she didn't know enough to save extra copies of her books when she was first starting out as a writer. As a result, she has only one copy of what is probably her favorite of all, *Hello and Good-by* (1959), one of the four books illustrated by her husband, Norman. She stated that she would like very much for him to resume illustrating books again.

Mary Ann Hoberman's advice to young poets and writers is to "Read, Read, Read." She tells would-be writers that "Your childhood is what you'll draw your work from. You need to remember what you are now. Look at everything, notice everything, remember all that you can. "Visual language," she says, "is for writers. So are word games and word play. Just think of what you can do with words." She also tells them "each time you discover the perfect word for your purpose, each time you

shape a sentence, each time you awaken a reader's imagination, you will feel fulfilled" (2002, pp. 48–49). Indeed, one only has to look at what she has done with words throughout her life to see the truth of this advice. While Mary Ann has been actively involved with school presentations over the years, she has cut back on many of these activities recently, confining them to destinations near her home. She does, however, communicate with her fans, both children and adults, who might find it quite easy to "talk" with her via the guest book on her Web site (<http://www.maryannhoberman.com>). This site was designed as a birthday present from one of her sons several years ago. While she is still learning how to manage the site, there are many messages to her along with a number of her responses. It is interesting to note that over half of the messages are from adults, suggest-

ing that it is not only children who enjoy Mary Ann's poetry, but their parents as well.

We're at the end
The very end
The very
Very
Very
End
No more words
Or pictures. Look!
No more stories
in this book.
But there are other
Books to read
Hundreds
Thousands
All we need.

(The End, 2001, unpagued)

There may not be any more words in this profile; however, we know that there are many more stories and words in Mary Ann Hoberman's memory and imagination. We join with the many children and adults who hope that she will continue her writing so that children's ears, hearts, and minds will be tickled and stimulated.

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Author Biographies

Shirley Ernst, professor of reading, language arts, and children's literature at Eastern Connecticut State University, and **Amy McClure**, Rodefer professor of reading, language arts, and children's literature at Ohio Wesleyan University, are cochairs of the NCTE Poetry Committee. The committee members also include Barbara Chatton, Janice Kristo, Barbara A. Lehman, Peggy Oxley, Glenna Sloan, Deborah Thompson, Sylvia Vardell, and Daniel Woolsey.