

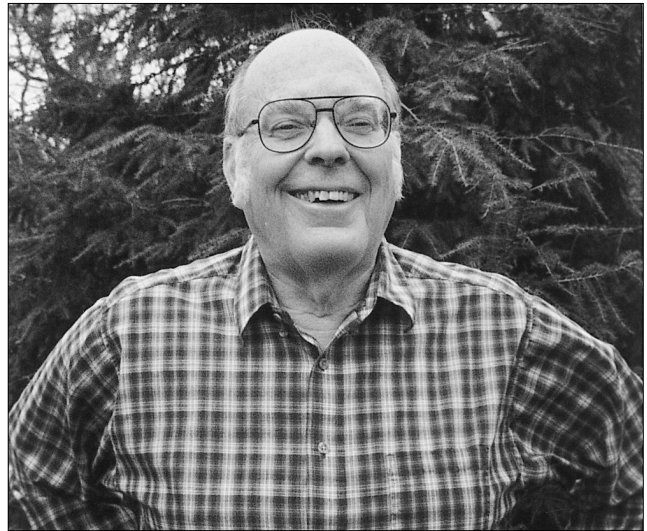
# NCTE Poetry Award Recipient *X. J. Kennedy*

DANIEL L. DARIGAN

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Daniel Darigan profiles X. J. Kennedy, the recipient of the NCTE Poetry Award for the year 2000.

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295

Throughout his long and illustrious career, poet and author X. J. Kennedy has cut a wide literary swath. He has informed tens of thousands of college students about poetry and literature in his many editions of *An Introduction to Poetry* (1997, in its 9th edition), *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (1998), and his *Bedford Reader* (1999), all academic texts. His adult poetry, which includes *Nude Descending a Staircase: Poems, Songs, Ballad* (1995) and *Dark Horses: New Poems* (1992), has won many national awards including a Guggenheim fellowship. His anthologies of poetry for children and his own volumes of original poems range from realistic to nonsensical and are tempered in between by his hilarious *Brats* series that portrays mischievous children in many a domestic squabble. It is for the latter, his great contribution to children's poetry, that the NCTE Selection Committee has honored him with the prestigious National Council of Teachers of English Award for Poetry for Children. This award, presented once every three years, is bestowed on a given poet for his or her distinguished body of work sustained over a period of years (Cullinan, 1996, p. ix). I was able to interview X. J. Kennedy in June of 2000.

X. J. Kennedy, born Joseph Charles Kennedy, decided to use that pen name at the end of his hitch in the United States Navy. After being chided for his seeming relationship with the

then U.S. Ambassador to England, Joseph Kennedy—also father to the future president John F. Kennedy and brothers Robert and Ted—he decided that adding an X to his name was far more to his liking. X. J. Kennedy, poet, sounded best.

Born in Dover, New Jersey, just before the stock market crash of 1929, Kennedy was raised in a nurturing working-class family. His father, a timekeeper and paymaster at the local boiler works, kept the family fed and provided Kennedy with his first exposure to poetry. His father would recite poems he himself had learned as a student. More book-oriented than athletic, Kennedy was forever scribbling out his own comics, patterning these after the *Marvel Comics* series. His growing interest in science fiction led him to publish two “fanzines” of national circulation while still in high school.

His parents surprised him by insisting that he go on to college, not a common occurrence for most of his peers. After four years at Seton Hall College and a year at Columbia University, Kennedy's interest in science fiction waned, but his love for poetry blossomed. He then enlisted in the U.S. Navy and over the next four years he was allowed an abundant amount of time to write. About his poetic influences Kennedy says:

The biggest influence that I ever felt was William Butler Yeats. In fact, when I was a sailor in the Navy I used to carry Yeats' collected poems around in my sea bag and pore over them. The problem, of course, is that you learn from whomever you love. And Yeats is, in a way, a dangerous influence because he is so very good that you can never hope to equal him. You can only trot after him in dumb, dog-like admiration. I think I also picked up a lot from reading William Blake and the Medieval ballads, not to mention Wallace Stevens, Thomas Hardy, and Emily Dickinson.

After studying for a year at the Sorbonne in Paris, Kennedy was accepted to the University of Michigan and began his doctoral studies. Spending six years in Ann Arbor allowed Kennedy the opportunity to meet with a variety of writers and poets, two with whom he would later collaborate and one whom he would subsequently marry. Along with Kennedy, James Camp, and Keith Waldrop compiled the hilarious *Pegasus Descending: A Book of the Best Bad Verse* (1971). This book has gone out of print. The writer he met and married at Michigan was Dorothy Mintzloff<sup>1</sup> (also a poet) who is still very much “in print”; so far, the marriage has lasted 38 years.

In 1962, Kennedy taught for a year at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, then went on to teach at Tufts University as well as to serve as a visiting lecturer at Wellesley College and the University of California at Irvine. During this time, he continued to write in earnest for ardent, adult, poetry aficionados.

Interestingly, his book *Nude Descending a Staircase* contained two poems appropriate for children. It was the notice of these that led him to editor Margaret McElderry in New York City who, upon seeing his talent, signed him for his first book of po-

etry for children, *One Winter Night in August and Other Nonsense Jingles* in 1975. This was the beginning of Kennedy's career in children's poetry. Following his *The Phantom Ice Cream Man: More Nonsense Verse* (1979), he and his wife put together the enormously successful children's poetry anthology *Knock at a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry* (1982). Kennedy says:

We wanted to produce a book that you could just place in a child's hands without any adult interference, and just turn the kid loose to read the poems with brief remarks about their elements. In first putting together *Knock at a Star* we went against much received advice that you don't dare analyze poetry with children. But we thought that since children love to inspect things close up, like machines, animals, birds, and plants, they might not mind looking closely at poems as well. So we tried to do that without overburdening the kids with a heavy weight of analysis, but just to help them see what makes poems go.

For example, at the beginning of a section in *Knock at a Star* called “What's Inside a Poem?” they discuss some images children may meet in their reading with a short three-paragraph introduction. They write:

When a poet tries to capture in words . . . how something looks, tastes, smells, feels, or sounds, those descriptions are called images. Images can even help us imagine heat or cold. When John Keats wants us to sense how cold it is on a bitter evening, he writes: “The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass”—a line that almost makes you want to go *brrr-r-r!* (Kennedy, 1982, p. 42)

These short descriptions prompt the child reader to see, perhaps for the first time, elements of poetry that would have possibly gone unnoticed. The poems that follow each introduction are superb examples of their point. In this section on “images” for instance, they refer to “My Fingers” by Mary O'Neill, “September” by John Updike, and “Snowy Benches,” by Aileen Fisher.

Recently, *Knock at a Star* was reissued with new illustrations by Karen Lee Baker, and it included 75 new poems. Of the new collection, Kennedy says:

*Knock at a Star* has continuously been in print since 1982 and when we suggested that we'd like to update it, John Keller, publisher at Little, Brown kindly subscribed to this notion. Children's poetry doesn't stand still and in the eighteen years since the book originally came out many excellent new poets have emerged, and a number of new tendencies that we wanted the book to reflect. In the new edition we have introduced poets such as Sandra Cisneros, Barbara Juster Esbensen, and Constance Levy who have burst onto the poetry scene.

Further, one of our strong concerns was that children be introduced to ways of life and patterns of culture other than their own. We have a section now in answer to our question, “What do poems do?”, in *Knock at a Star* called “Help You

Understand People” which, without being blatantly politically correct, I hope, suggests that there are many different kinds of Americans.

In that section, the authors include new poems such as Charles Reznikoff’s “Puerto Ricans in New York,” Karama Fufuka’s “The Park People,” Ashley Bryan’s “Mama’s Bouquets,” and Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Narcissa.”

In 1992, the Kennedy’s embarked on a variation on *Knock at a Star* aimed at a primary school audience. The finished product was *Talking Like the Rain: A First Book of Poems* (1992). Kennedy speaks of the process of publishing this collection:

Having done our book, *Knock at a Star*, which introduced kids from 8–12 to poetry, Dorothy and I always wanted to go back and hit the littler guys. It seemed clear that pre-readers need a bright, colorful book that they can observe while sitting on an adult’s lap. *Talking Like the Rain* seemed to be the way to go. We had collected poems for a long time for this book and again propositioned Little, Brown and John Keller who had accepted *Knock at a Star*. He, along with Maria Modugno, Little, Brown’s children’s book Editor-in-Chief, were very encouraging.

The book, of course, owes its colorfulness to illustrator, Jane Dyer. Jane spent about two years doing the watercolors for this book and Dorothy and I did not see the results of this effort until publication was imminent. We were invited into Little, Brown in Boston to behold the results of Jane’s labors. We were ushered into this big room where all of Jane’s illustrations were laid out on an immense table. We walked around and around this table “ooh-ing” and “ahh-ing” with glee when we saw what she had done. To our amazement, Jane had worked in the actual size that the watercolors were to be reproduced in the book. I was amazed at all this fine detail in watercolor. When I asked her how she accomplished this, she replied, “I had a magnifying glass.”

*Talking Like Rain* is oversized and filled with a wide range of poets, such as Langston Hughes, Eve Merriam, and Christina Rossetti. The book is divided into sections dealing with the early childhood years; “Play,” “Families,” “Rhymes and Songs,” and “Magic and Wonder,” are but a sampling of the sections available to the young child. Kennedy says:

We hope this book will offer kids a taste of outstanding poetry. Our conviction is that it is possible to give kids good poems that they will like. Those two qualities do not always go together. Take, for example the poems of Milton or Shakespeare, who are included in many anthologies for children. No doubt they are great poems, but will children find them likeable? Perhaps they are included only because they are in the public domain and therefore don’t require permissions fees.

Another very successful foray into children’s poetry came with Kennedy’s series of three books, *Brats* (1986), *Fresh Brats* (1990), and *Drat These Brats* (1993). Kennedy described his own influences:

Little Willie, and the many poems about him, was one of my early admirations. I loved all those anonymous poems about this pathetic brat who had terrible things happen to him. I hope that my Brats poems are not so sadistic and nasty as the Little Willie poems:

Little Willie from the mirror  
Licked the mercury quite off.  
Thinking in his childish error  
It would cure the whooping cough.  
At the funeral, weeping mother  
Sadly said to Mrs. Brown,  
‘Twas a chilly day for Willie  
When the mercury went down.”

This, of course, is really adult verse. But I had a lot of fun with the brats poems. I love poems that are brief and that tell stories. One hope is to show children that poems need not be solemn and that they can be fun. Humor is, of course, a way to hook kids, especially skeptical boys, to poetry. Of course, the expectation is that they will go on to read other things as well.

Kennedy’s humor is evident in every selection. Take for example this poem from *Brats*:

Snickering like crazy, Sue  
Brushed a pig with Elmer’s Glue  
And, to set Aunt Effie squealing,  
Stuck it to the kitchen ceiling.  
Uncle, gawking, spilled his cup.”  
Wow!” he cried. “Has pork gone up!”  
(Kennedy, 1990, p. 32)

His use of alliteration and assonance only heightens the enjoyment of these quirky verses:

On a factory tour, Will Gossage,  
Watching folks make bratwurst sausage,  
Jumped into the meat feet-first,  
Brats are bad, but Will’s the wurst.  
(Kennedy, 1993, p. 43)

More recently, Kennedy has written a collection of poems featuring elephants, oddly enough, engaged in the Olympics. His *Elympics* (1999) came about this way:

The seed of *Elympics* came initially from the illustrator Graham Percy, an English artist who has done many children’s books. He had, I think for his own pleasure, done a series of drawings of elephants taking part in sports, throwing the javelin and one thing and another. Patricia Lee Gauch, Senior Editor at Philomel Books had seen some of Graham’s elephant work and recognized that there must be a book in this. But for it to be just right she envisioned some verse to go with it. So the original idea came from Graham and Patti, and I was enlisted to supply the poems.

*Elympics* includes both summer and winter games, in which elephants are seen sprinting, balancing on the beam, high jumping, and, of course, skiing, figure skating, and playing ice hockey. All of Kennedy's strengths seem to be put into play in this book. As in *Brats*, he uses the basic lyric form, adds his offbeat humor, and combines it with his great facility with wordplay to conjure verses, like this one from "Bobsled":

Swift as the wind, Eileen and Trish,  
Two tusky girls in goggles,  
Take a bobsled ride down a slippery slide  
All bumps and wiggle-woggles.  
(Kennedy, 1999)

This charming book has proved so enjoyable that Kennedy decided to go even further:

*Elympics* has led to a sequel, which is now nearing completion. The sequel is called *Elefantina's Dream*. It takes one of the characters from *Elympics*, the little figure skater, and tells how she learned to skate. She goes on to become an Olympic champion, which is quite a feat because if you're an elephant living in the jungle, there is a paucity of ice. She managed it by using the icehouse in her village, where big blocks were stored, and begins her training on these frozen lumps.

With Kennedy's great experience in poetry, both as an academic and a writer for adults and children, he has some important insights into the genre and draws a distinct line between poetry and verse:

I think of *verse* as anything in rhyme and meter, which may or may not be poetry. For it to be poetry it has to go a little bit deeper than the mere piece of verse like, "Thirty days hath September." Poetry leaves you wondering and perhaps finding something else when you return to it that you haven't seen the first time around.

I think that much of the poetry for children that we care most to remember has been written by poets who also wrote for adults; from Robert Louis Stevenson and Christina Rossetti to us petty moderns. I first got interested in poetry for children because I saw contemporary poets writing it. People like William Jay Smith and Randall Jarrell, John Ciardi, Theodore Roethke, and Richard Wilbur were writing for kids and not apologizing for so doing. And, to this day, we still find many poets that write for adults who also care to write for children, as well, and this has been a lovely thing. Nancy Willard and Naomi Nye among others are great examples of these.

When asked to give his assessment of the health of poetry today, Kennedy, in his wry way, stated:

I'll try and polish up my crystal ball. At the moment, poetry for children suddenly seems in a healthy state. Publishers, again, seem more willing to take risks on poetry collections.

Certainly the impact of poetry in the schools has been felt more and more in the last ten or fifteen years since the California Reading Initiative encouraged the return of poetry to textbooks. It clearly is very popular with today's teachers.

As for the future of poetry, a lesson might be learned from the adult world, for it seems it is in the process of changing. And by that I mean through the media by which poetry reaches its readers. Nowadays you find more poetry first published on the Internet and listened to in the poet's own voice. No doubt this will affect children's poetry too. I am a book person and do not believe that books will ever be obsolete—indeed they seem to be holding their own—I do think that the computer world is going to impinge even more upon poetry and perhaps make it more widespread and more easily available.

For example, there are magazines of poetry on the Internet that enable you to hear the poet reading his or her own poems. I know the *Atlantic Monthly*, a big magazine, has had a website for some time that enables you to hear the poets themselves.

As for the "Bill of Health" and future of poet X. J. Kennedy, the NCTE Award for Poetry is but another manifestation of this man's great contribution to poetry and children's literature. The real test is what children think of his work, and, in that, they give two thumbs up. His topics are timely and accessible, his use of the language sophisticated, and his humor leads children and adoring adults into a genre that often gets overlooked and ignored. Children who read his collections as well as his anthologies will receive a better understanding of what poetry is and the joys it holds for them.

## Note

1. Mintzlaff and Kennedy have collaborated on both the *Bedford Reader* (2000) and the *Bedford Guide for College Writers* (1999).

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*Daniel L. Darigan is an Associate Professor at West Chester University in the Department of Literacy.*