

Profiles and Perspectives

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J. Patrick Lewis: A Joyful Master of Poetry, Pun, and Word Play

The adjectives “versatile” and “prolific” may have been coined with poet J. Patrick Lewis in mind. Not only does Lewis seem effortlessly to write haiku (*Wing Nuts: Screwy Haiku* [with Paul Janeczko], Little Brown, 2006), but he has also composed renga (*Birds on a Wire* [also with Janeczko], Wordsong, 2008), poems giving voice to soldiers during the Civil War (*The Brothers’ War: Civil War Voices in Verse*, National Geographic, 2007), poetic ruminations on superlatives (*The World’s Greatest: Poems*, Chronicle, 2008), and even poems on the history of flight (*Skywriting: Poems That Fly*, Creative Editions, 2010). The 16th recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, Lewis has written 73 books for children, of which 60 have been poetry. NCTE established the Poetry Award in 1977 to honor a living American poet for his or her aggregate work for children ages 3–13. Lewis will be honored at the Books for Children Luncheon and at a poetry session during the NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago in November.

In selecting the prolifically versatile poet for the award, given every two years, the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award Committee considered: 1) literary merit (art and craft of the poet or anthologist’s aggregate work), 2) the poet’s or anthologist’s contributions, 3) the evolution of the poet’s or anthologist’s work, and 4) its appeal to children. This writer of prose and poetry is particularly noted for his children’s poems and other light verse, ranging from giggle-inducing to thought-provoking, from free verse to form, from nonfiction to nonsensical. Lewis loves sharing his stories, poetry, and humor with children, having visited more than 500 elementary schools during his years as a poet. He has also served as the keynote speaker at various literature conferences and conducted workshops on introducing poetry in the classroom. In addition to writing and publishing short stories and poems, Lewis has won many

awards for his publications, even receiving an Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Grant for his adult poetry in 1991.

FIRST CAREER AND ENTRY INTO WRITING FOR CHILDREN

Poetry was not Lewis’s first career, however. He earned his PhD in economics at The Ohio State University in 1974, teaching at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, until 1998, when he became a full-time writer. Lewis has published articles and reviews with an economic focus in numerous academic journals. Additionally, his poems for children appear in 70 different anthologies, as well as magazines designed for young readers such as *Cricket*, *Highlights for Children*, and *Ranger Rick*. Journals for teacher practitioners, such as *Bookbird*, *Journal of Children’s Literature*, and *Language Arts*, have also featured poems by Lewis, who always seems to have the knack for finding the right words for whatever occasion calls for a poem.

In the case of poet Lewis—known to friends and colleagues as Pat—the old chestnut “better late than never” must surely apply. Lewis came to the world of poetry relatively late in life, having worked as an economist for several decades. He relates how the life-changing and career-rearranging revelation struck him that he was, perhaps, wasting his time and should be doing something else. “I had been writing in the toxic prose of economics for more than twenty years when it came to me, slow learner, that my work was being read (in journal articles, magazines, newspapers, et al.) by perhaps 1.67 people. And I was the 1!” he says in amazement.

This was long before the publication of such zany and highly readable tomes as *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005), and in those days, academic writing that focused on economics was, in Lewis’s words, “stultifyingly boring.” Once

he left the academic field, Lewis says he never looked back. “I gave thirty years of my life to teaching college economics and I was certain I had discovered the best job in the world,” he says. But once he began writing and reading poetry for a living, he says, he realized that it “beat teaching by a length and half.”

Lewis describes his entry into the unique paths walked by poets as coming “very late.” His early influences were, surprisingly, not English teachers, but rather social scientists whose passions influenced his first career choice. “Hence, my career in professing the mythologies of economics” followed the passions of those social scientists, he says. But all that was to change in a surprising way. “When I was 39 years old, and weeding in the garden of earthly delights, poetry put me in a half-nelson, and pinned me right there next to the nasturtiums,” Lewis explains.

Although he had fallen in love with poetry and begun to write part time, Lewis continued to work in the field of economics until retiring early and devoting his full attention to writing. He calls himself “a walking/talking example of *It’s Never Too Late*. It was pure serendipity.” Success in the children’s publishing industry did not come swiftly, nor did it prompt his quick escape from academia. In fact, Lewis recollects that he had published 10 children’s books and many adult poems in literary journals before finally leaving teaching. “I descended to the dunes and lived on nothing but watercress and toadspawn, as I tried to keep my extracurricular writing under my hat during those later years,” he says in his own inimitable fashion.

Today Lewis has no need to look back with regret at the academic career he left behind. It was satisfying in its own way, just as writing poetry for children is satisfying today. When he isn’t writing poems, sometimes alone, at times with others, Lewis stores up experiences for poems, revels in life, and satisfies his curiosity about a wide range of topics. He enjoys spending time with his children and grandchildren who call him “Grandpat.”

As a budding poet, Lewis quickly found himself attracted to the possibilities of word play in children’s poetry. So much of adult poetry relies “much less on wordplay and much more on Serious Introspection,” he maintains. Although it might be interesting to write a novel, Lewis is aware that writing novels “requires a very different sort of skill set from writing poetry. To me,

concision is virtue. Like all poets, I suppose, I want to do what Coleridge suggests, and that is to spend my life writing not simply words in the best order but the best words in the best order. The mere act of laboring over a line is as good a reason as any to get up in the morning.”

Lewis modestly recalls that the first poem he ever wrote was “indisputably forgettable and occupies a landfill somewhere. Deservedly so.” Lewis recalls chastising himself for his initial foray into poetry—as did others. Subsequently, he decided to learn more and became a student of the craft of poetry, spending three years “immersed in the classics before I dared to write poetry again,” he says. Lewis considered his literary heroes then and now to be Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and what he likes to call “a raft of 19th century wits.” He points to those authors as inspiring what became his adult poetry collection, *Gulls Hold Up the Sky* (Laughing Fire Press, 2010), claiming that “the bulk of the poems in it were inspired by the modernists, both British and American.”

HIS WORK, WRITING PROCESS, AND ADVICE TO OTHERS

Today, the prolific purveyor of words claims that the ideas for his poems come not from long nights spent pondering topics and world issues, or even from assigned topics, but from hard work. “They come from the bottom of the chair I’m sitting on after several hours of relentless inner upheaval,” he says ruefully. Good poems come from “perspiration, not inspiration, as Thomas Edison once said about invention.”

All writers gravitate to certain words and/or topics, and Lewis is no exception. He loves unusual but wonderfully mouth-filling words, such as “schmegeggy, vermillion, ambergris, forlorn, vicissitude, oh, the list is endless, but all of my favorite words tend to be euphonic.” He relishes words that roll off the tongue in interesting ways. “Frog, hippopotamus, meerkat, dromedary, so many wonderful animal names are sound-rich also,” he says. Lewis is not afraid to create his own words when nothing else can suffice. “I can never resist adding my own neologisms, like borgaderanous, philitastical, and ambisillosity, which have six different meanings each and an extra one on Tuesdays,” he says. The author of such poetry collections as *The Underwear Salesman: And Other Odd-Job Verses* (Simon & Schuster,

2009) claims that his preferred topics are “those I believe have been unduly ignored,” leading him to write poems about every topic imaginable.

Family has always mattered to Lewis. Born in Gary, Indiana, in 1942, 20 minutes after his brother, Lewis credits his parents for fostering his love for words. “When they passed out parents, I was first in line,” he says. Both parents read to their three sons, which made a difference in their lives and academic careers. “My mother’s lap was as big as the ocean, as comforting as the sky,” Lewis recalls wistfully. “I can’t contend that I always wanted to be a writer, but I always loved words, so I think they put me on the right path. It just took me longer than normal to get there.”

Lewis describes his office as “a mushroom room in a periwinkle house at the intersection of Exhilaration and Turmoil Streets. It’s the only place where I can write.” He and his wife Sue live in Westerville, Ohio, where Lewis claims to be “lucky in my neighbors: the Snigglebottoms and the Trapezoids invite me in for tea, and I pick their brains for barrels of ideas and baskets of nosebags.”

Since the poet claims not to be an aural person, he says he needs quiet in which to write, resisting “the white noise of music, pots and pans, or playgrounds.” He also works on a computer when he writes these days—“much simpler than No. 2 longhand,” he says—and “a thesaurus is my constant *vade mecum*.” As do many published writers, Lewis has advice for budding writers: “Dive into a dictionary and a thesaurus, close the covers, and don’t come out until you are good and ready.” He also tells budding poets to avoid rhyming. “Rhyme is the essence of sound, and sound is as important as sense,” he says. “But telling a child to write in rhyme is like telling a budding illustrator that he or she must draw inside the lines,” Lewis says. “Nonsense. Good rhymes are not a holiday game. They require endless hours of thought.”

Because children and teens tend to be busy living life and storing up experience for poems to be written later, he says, they shouldn’t “be sitting all day in a chair. So for now, just write. Write with strong verbs (not adjectives!). Ignore all diamonds. Imitate the classics (for practice). Read poetry until your eyeballs turn blue.” Young readers and adults, for that matter, need to realize that “poetry is meant to be enjoyed and not dissected with caliper and tong,” Lewis says, adding that many teachers fail to learn this as well.

Naturally, there are many misconceptions about poetry, particularly children’s poetry, that annoy Lewis and detract from his craft. Perhaps the greatest misconception is that “writing poetry for children is easy because, well, after all it’s for children,” Lewis says. “That silliness is compounded by the fact that much of children’s poetry *is* easy, that is to say, insufferably bad. It should come with a warning: This stuff can cause headaches, nausea, and indigestion. When its purveyors write down to children (oof!), opt for the facile, contrived rhyme (ouch!), resist using any form but simple ballad or common measure (grrr), the results are predictable. No wonder John Ciardi once said that so much poetry for children sounds as if ‘it were written with a sponge dipped in sugared milk.’”

Lewis follows a particular process when creating his poems, and, happily, he is willing to share it with us. “As the French poet Mallarme once said, speaking to one of the old masters, ‘My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words.’ For example, I wanted to write a poem about how baseball came to be invented, and that odd word “shortstop” came to me. After many a trial, the poem took this shape.”

HOW THE BOOK OF BASEBALL WAS WRITTEN

An old man who lived alone on an island
was a little sad. Sprayed by whitecaps,
swayed by trade winds, he had only
his daybook, a pen, and a young boy’s heart
for company. Each day the sun rode out
at noon.

One morning a word—gleaming and new,
never heard before—appeared like the glint
of a ship’s hull on a distant swell.

He watched a gull pose, holding up the sky,
a tortoise grip the earth as if it were
a carousel. The new word hung in the air
until he reached out—and caught it.

Shortstop.

The old man put it down in his daybook . . .
and kept on writing.

Although many writers rely on “writers’ groups, journal-keeping, nature walks, prayer wheels, even Ouija boards and foot rubs,” all of which can be of tremendous importance to certain writers, Lewis says he doesn’t use any of them. “Solitary, sedentary, seat-stuck slogging through words and lines and stanzas has always suited me best,” he says. Each Lewis poem goes through 10, 20, or even more revisions, “for that’s what writing is, rewriting,” he fervently maintains. Lewis claims to gravitate “to the poetic form and subject that’s been inspired by reading other people’s poems, biographies, letters, memoirs. Reading is always more important than writing, and I’ll ask you to step outside if you claim otherwise.”

Lewis does rely heavily on feedback from his brother, “a fellow with whom I share a good deal of DNA—Mick Lewis, my twin, alter ego, and best friend. Kids, if you can arrange it, go out and get yourself a twin. Mick is my first editor.” Lewis also shares his work with “dear friends like [poet] Rebecca Kai Dotlich and Dan Darigan,” he says.

Although most of his poetry books have been written alone, Lewis has collaborated with other writers—for instance, Dotlich, Douglas Florian, Paul B. Janeczko, and Jane Yolen. But in those collaborations, Lewis says, “I use the word ‘collaboration’ loosely. It’s not a back-and-forth process between two poets hammering out ‘the best words’ in a single poem. Not quite like tossing a salad together, but more like two bakers each adding their own ingredients to the pie.” During his collaborations, each poet tended to select a topic such as senryu, castles, twins, futuristic cars, inter alia, and then “proceeded to write our own poems—8 or 10—until we had put together an entire collection,” he explains.

BREADTH OF HIS POETRY

Lewis’s poetic versatility and interest in many different topics allow him to explore serious topics in a variety of ways, examining the rift among families caused by the Civil War in *The Brothers’ War: Civil War Voices in Verse* (National Geographic, 2007) as well as the fun of solving puzzles in *Spot the Plot* (Chronicle Books, 2009). Lewis acknowledges that he doesn’t enjoy staying on the same topic or relying on one type of poetry or poetic voice. “The best thing that can be said about my work is that it runs higgledy-piggledy over the entire curriculum,” he says. “I don’t want

to be pigeonholed as having a single voice. The poem is always more important than the poet, so I am trying to write in a hundred voices.”

As does anyone who has labored over and crafted a piece of writing or a collection, Lewis has some favorites: *Swan Song: Poems of Extinction* (Creative Editions, 2003) and *Freedom Like Sunlight: Praisesongs for Black Americans* (Creative Editions, 2000). “In both of those books I strived to join the hallelujah chorus by adding a small poetic voice to critically important subjects,” he says.

Of course, Lewis would like to be remembered, but he also recognizes the fleeting quality of fame and of popular taste. “If half a dozen of my poems are remembered,” he says, “I will be very fortunate indeed, and if none are remembered, it will not be for want of trying.” He agrees with poet Donald Hall (1990) that too many adult poets lack ambition. “The same is true for children’s poets. We should wake up every day with the conviction that we are going to write great poetry. Will we succeed? Almost certainly not, but when was that ever the point? Trying is everything,” Lewis says.

The hallmark of a J. Patrick Lewis poetry collection would include certain characteristics. Lewis himself says that his poetry is known for its “variety; a certain degree of technical virtuosity (I dearly hope); and the ability to bring to the reader that occasional ‘ah-ha’ moment that transports him or her beyond the page. If those characteristics are salted with a bit of humor now and then, I won’t mind.” Certainly, even a quick perusal of the poems written by Lewis would reveal those characteristics.

As hard as it may have been to be a published poet a decade or so ago, Lewis claims that almost certainly the odds of getting published today are much longer than they were. “Poetry, in my opinion, is literature’s less loved stepchild,” he says. “Unlike so many other countries, America does not nurture poetry and poets, who are considered a breed apart. Those who dare to travel through that gate should not abandon all hope, but they should realize that the attention for their work is never going to be more than marginal.”

Lewis expresses great satisfaction in being singled out for the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children since it provides “validation” for his long years of writing poetry and instills

“the sense that what one has written has reached the common reader,” he says. In typical Lewis fashion, he coins his own words to express his feelings. “I’m deeply honored and billiandrously capodoctical (!) to the committee for its infinite generosity and wisdom, er, kindness.”

Write on, Pat, write on. The world of children’s poetry is richer for the words you have coined and the topics you’ve explored.

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Selected Titles by J. Patrick Lewis

- (1988). *A hippopotamusn’t: And other animal poems*. New York: Dial.
- (1988). *The tsar and the amazing cow*. New York: Dial.
- (1992). *Moonbow of Mr. B. Bones*. New York: Knopf.
- (1994). *The Christmas of the reddle moon*. New York: Dial.
- (1994). *The fat cats at sea*. New York: Knopf.
- (1998). *Doodle dandies: Poems that take shape*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- (1999). *Black swam/white crow*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- (2000). *Isabella Abnormella and the very, very finicky queen of trouble*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.
- (2001). *The shoe tree of Chagrin*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.
- (2003). *Freedom like sunlight: Praisesongs for Black Americans*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.
- (2003). *The last resort*. New York: Jonathan Cape.
- (2003). *Swan song: Poems of extinction*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.
- (2006). *Once upon a tomb: Gravely humorous verses*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.
- (2007). *Big is big and little little: A book of contrasts*. New York: Holiday House.
- (2007). *The brothers’ war: Civil War voices in verse*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic.

(2008). *The world’s greatest: Poems*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

(2009). *Countdown to summer: A poem for every day of the school year*. New York:

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(2009). *Spot the plot! A riddle book of book riddles*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

(2009). *The underwear salesman and other jobs for better or verse*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

(2010). *Gulls hold up the sky*. La Jolla, CA: Laughing Fire Press.

(2010). *Skywriting: Poems in flight*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.

Collaborations from J. Patrick Lewis

Lewis, J. P., & Janeczko, P. B. (2006). *Wing nuts: Screwy haiku*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Lewis, J. P., & Janeczko, P. B. (2008). *Birds on a wire: A renga ‘round the town*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press/ Wordsong.

Awards Won by J. Patrick Lewis

Children’s Book of the Year, Ohioana Library Association, 1989, for *The Tsar and the Amazing Cow*; individual artist grant for adult poetry, Ohio Arts Council, 1989; Kentucky Bluegrass Award nomination, 1991, for *A Hippopotamusn’t*; notable book designation, American Library Association—*The Moonbow of Mr. B. Bones* (1992), *Black Swan/White Crow* (1995), *Freedom like Sunlight* (2002); *Parents* magazine honor book award, 1994, for *The Fat-Cats at Sea*; Kentucky Bluegrass Award, 1996, for *The Christmas of the Reddle Moon*; Hoosier Book Award nomination, 1998, for *Doodle Dandies*; Coretta Scott King Award nomination, 2000, for *Freedom like Sunlight*; *Storytelling World* honor book, 2000, for *Isabella Abnormella*; Golden Kite Award, Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, 2001, for *The Shoe Tree of Chagrin*; Gold Book Award, National Association of Parent Publishers, and *New York Times* Ten Best Illustrated Books of the Year listee, both 2002, and Raggazi Honor award, Bologna Book Festival, 2003, all for *The Last Resort*; Henry Bergh Children’s Book Award for Poetry, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2003, and Golden Lamp Book of the Year Award, Association of Publishers, 2004, all for *Swan Song*; Alice Louise Wood Memorial Prize, Ohioana Awards, 2004, for lifetime achievement in children’s literature.

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