

PERSPECTIVES

David McCord

Boston, Massachusetts

David A. Dillon

This column is designed to provide perspectives on language arts education from beyond the traditional boundaries of the field; that is, from non-educational yet related fields such as linguistics, anthropology, electronic media, literature, psychology, fine arts. In short, it provides perspectives from persons who are scholars in the study of communication or experts whose profession is communicating effectively. Whenever one considers effective or expert communication, one naturally thinks of poetry—language use at its apex. A representative from that field whose views on poetry and children are presented in this column is David McCord, recipient of NCTE's first Excellence in Poetry for Children award which he received at the annual convention in New York City in November.

Poetry, Children, and the Encounter Between the Two

Mr. McCord was born in New York City, grew up on a ranch in southern Oregon, graduated with highest honors from Lincoln High School in Portland in 1917, and has lived in Boston since he came there to attend Harvard, class of 1921. He is an essayist whose work has appeared widely; also a painter of watercolors. Yet he is first and foremost a poet for both adults and children. His books of poetry for children include *Far and Few* (1952), *Take Sky* (1962), *All Day Long* (1966), *Every Time I Climb a Tree* (1967), *For Me To Say* (1970), *Pen, Paper and Poem* (1971), *Mr. Bidery's Spidery Garden* (1972), *Away and Ago* (1974), and *The Star in the Pail* (nominated for the 1976 National Book Award). He is represented in more than three hundred anthologies in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. His collected poems for children, *One at a Time*, illustrated by Henry B. Kane, were published by Little, Brown and Co. in October 1977.

David McCord's poetry for children captures the essence of many common childhood experiences (a visit to the doctor or dentist, Christmas Eve, children's tea parties, the loss of a pet); particularly children's encounters with nature (climbing a tree, finding a sea shell on the beach, watching the sun go down, observing the behavior of animals, noting subtle changes in the seasons). Nature abounds in McCord's poetry and the reader is treated to a sensual feast of sights, sounds, and touch, captured as a result of the poet's careful observation of common things which many of us fail to notice colors, speeds, sizes, textures, shapes. The language of McCord's poetry is characterized by rhythm, rhyme, and a playful use of words—very similar, in fact, to the language usage of young children. Finally, McCord's wit makes his poetry a delight to read.

Poetry in General

Perspectives:

Why does man create poetry or read it or listen to it? What does it, or at least should it, do for us and to us?

Mr. McCord:

I don't know why man creates it and reads it or listens to it except that good poetry has a certain, not always definable ability to charm us. This is not the basic reason why poetry is what it is; but it does have to possess at least a fractional power to charm, just as good music does. First of all, though, it has to capture us. We look at something that's beautiful or strange, no matter what it is, and we see in it what we want to look at. We don't know why we want to look at it; or, if it's a song, why we want to listen to it; or, if it's a combination of sight and sound and thought as poetry is, why we want to see and hear it, savor it, and gratefully put it away in the back of our mind.

It's hard for me to say why man creates poetry. I suppose it's a kind of primitive urge in him to attempt to add his own small stitch to the infinite weave of the world. This is the oldest form of art: The art of creating form from something unformed—as simple as kneading bread. Nowadays, you can pass a pizza parlor and watch a man with bare arms making pizza. That's quite an art. There's a kind of poetry in the way he spins an enormous circle of dough until it flattens to the absolute right thinness.

Perspectives:

What you are talking about could possibly be interpreted by some to refer to hobbies or leisure time activities. That term "leisure time" strikes me as far too casual a term for activities such as these, whether someone is writing poetry or painting or making ceramics or doing macramé, which is popular nowadays. "Leisure time" seems almost to imply time-killing even though these activities are an important means of self-expression for individuals, perhaps the only means in their daily lives. It seems to be something you can step back from afterwards and say, "There's part of me in that."

Mr. McCord:

Yes, there's clearly a part of you in that poetry, or in that clay if you're working on a potter's wheel—which is rhyme unto itself—or in whatever you're doing. Anything you make, if you look at it as working in a craft, is surely some kind of poetry. I don't care what it is; but you can't relate it to what you call leisure time. Leisure time really means time to waste or kill. We have to learn that just to live is to acknowledge a kinship with poetry. There are many words for poetry; but the one important word for it is rhythm. We live poetry because we live in a world of rhythm. Everything is rhythm. The wind in the grass and the leaves of the trees and the flame that rises and falls; or the waves on the shore, a bird's call, a thunder shower, or anything you care about in nature is full of rhythm. Even an earthquake, for that matter. That's all part of poetry. But for the craftsman, I suppose that if one has read enough poetry and cares enough about the sound of it, one has an urge to try to write it.

Perspectives:

I believe that poetry is a basic human trait. It's something that we seem to do naturally with language. Of course, some individuals or groups have this trait developed to a greater extent than others. Chukovsky in his book *From Two to Five* presents a large collection of young children's naturally poetic speech, and Studs Terkel points out the natural poetry in the speech of many of the less educated, working class people he interviews. At any rate, I believe it is a basic human trait. Do you agree?

Mr. McCord:

Yes; and especially true of country people or maybe of people who live in a town that possesses one big industry. The workers speak the language of that industry and it is often quite colorful. But country people, farmers, first of all.

I'm reminded of something Auden once wrote about himself. He was perhaps fifteen years old and hadn't really thought much about poetry or even, as I recall, read very much of it. A schoolmate of his suggested that he write poetry. He did begin, and suddenly realized that he cared about words. He was an enthusiastic mineralogist who collected stones and was terribly upset one day when his aunt spoke about "iron pyrites" as "iron pirrits." It offended him that she should mispronounce a word so rich in sound. He realized, I think, right then what every poet knows instinctively: that "every word was once a poem," as Emerson says.

Auden reports in *The Dyer's Hand* that if he were testing out a young poet, he'd ask whether he or she likes to make lists of things. Almost all poets do. I know I do myself. Listing gets us quickly back to the use of, and dominion of, common words. This is probably why people in the country employ a natural speech which often runs to poetry. Which reminds me of an observation made by a male Maine native about an older woman: "the wild pastures were her nursery." That's a very beautiful line. Not many city people could manufacture its equal. It takes a countryman who lives through simple words with the simple, fluid poetry of nature. I'm talking about the wind in the grass and the hurrying clouds and this sort of thing rather than about the sound of feet dragging from exhaustion or the revving up of motors in the city.

If you listen to a rustic man's speech, it almost has a *flavor* to it, heightened by the vernacular, whether it's of the deep South or the state of Maine or Minnesota or Vermont. A word not connected much with poetry is that very word "flavor." When someone says something well, it adds a touch of flavor in your imagination just as something you eat will leave a sense of flavor on your palate.

Poetry for Children

Perspectives:

Should poetry for children have any special characteristics?

Mr. McCord:

Yes, I think it should have *one*: It must be written, first of all, just for yourself. There's always a question of how much didacticism you can put into a poem for children. You never write down to children. You can never look at children individually or in a group and say, "I know what you're thinking because I was your age once." You were their age once; but you haven't the faintest idea of how you then thought or the way you phrased what you thought. So you must write for yourself and, if you don't please yourself as a writer, you won't please children or grownups or anybody. Perhaps the first thing any artist has to learn is to please himself within the framework of whatever medium he's working in. So poems for children should be simple and should please the poet as he writes them. The teacher part of it should stay out of the way as much as possible. You are talking to children about something a child is familiar with, but also (perhaps) an aspect of it which the child has overlooked; or at least one which the child has viewed in a way quite different from the poet.

Perspectives:

What set of criteria should teachers (and even children) use in selecting poetry?

Mr. McCord:

I don't think I can say, except that the poem should please the teacher as much as the child. The poem read to the child should be read by a teacher who knows there's something in the poem because it pleased him or her. The teacher shouldn't say, "Great grief! I've got to teach poetry today! What on earth shall I do? Well, here's a poem. I'll try this one." Teachers should have a firm background of poetry themselves; but lots of teachers unfortunately don't. Poetry, in fact, is often mild anathema to them. One reason for this is that children aren't read aloud to today as I was as a boy; and the teachers were not either. My grandmother, widow of a Presbyterian minister, read aloud most of the essential parts of the Old Testament to me twice before I was twelve. I first heard in her beautiful voice the rhythm of the King James version. She never said, "Now listen to the rhythm," but I heard it.

Perspectives:

What I had in mind when I asked the last question is the fact that there are a lot of poems that aren't of good quality in the first place. They don't provide the kind of experiences that would make children want to come back to them or back to any poetry again.

Mr. McCord:

If teachers read even one bad poem to children, unless it is for some specific purpose, they will do more harm with that one bad poem than they will do good with the other six acceptable ones which may follow. One bad poem will leave a taste twice as bad in the mouth. As a boy I dipped a spoon into a rotten egg once, and I remember it was almost a year before I could think of eating another egg. If you dip your mind into a bad poem, you're going to remember that one, for some strange reason, rather than any number of good ones. First rate anthologies help teachers screen the really good poems—the immediately pertinent poems. One of them is Nancy Larrick's *Piping Down the Valleys Wild*. *Rhyme Time* is another. There's an unusually beautiful one called *The Golden Journey* edited by Louise Bogan and William Jay Smith. Also that great big book, *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer. Likewise his *Fun and Nonsense*—especially that one. It's very important that teachers know anthologies like these.

Perspectives:

Does your inspiration for poems come from reflections of your own childhood or from observations of other children? I ask this question because one of the major things your children's poetry does for me as an adult is to recapture some of my own childhood, and it also gives me insight into the world of my own children.

Mr. McCord:

That's wonderfully kind of you to say, and it's nice just to think this may be so, for I do write my poems largely out of my own recollections or out of my own imagination. I firmly believe that no artist will ever achieve any kind of firm success who has totally lost touch with his or her own childhood. Marcel Marceau said to me once—and he didn't mean this in a derogatory sense—that I had the mind of a child. I felt this was a compliment because I know that he has the mind of a child. This doesn't mean you are a child doing childish things, but that you haven't forgotten your young years and that they have in you a certain control. If they didn't have a certain control in me, I couldn't possibly write for children. I look at the great writers and feel this way about them. Nabokov is dead. He had a total recall of his childhood and that kind of a mind. W. H. Hudson, the British naturalist, had it. Stevenson had it or he couldn't have written *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Whatever I'm doing in my poems, I try to make it seem as if I'm doing it right then and there with and for the children reading or being read to, rather than trying to *tell* them about it second hand. This I think is the secret to writing poems for children. I'm not talking *to* the child, I'm talking *with* the child or children. Let's say that writing children's poetry is actually *being* with children inside a poem.

Children's Prevailing Reaction to Poetry

Perspectives:

Children, even very young children, often have a negative reaction to poetry. This is, at least theoretically, unfortunate and unexpected since young children's language is often naturally poetic: e.g., "I'm barefoot all over" from Chukovsky, or "Look at those dead cars" (junkyard) and "I almost sharpened myself," which I myself heard children saying. There is a variety of possible reasons for this reaction, e.g., exposure to poor poetry or poetry too advanced for them, little exposure to poetry in the home, lack of reading ability, lack of knowledge about poetry and, hence, fear or hesitation on the part of the teacher. To which of these factors, or any others, would you attribute the general negative reaction?

Mr. McCord:

You are quite right. Children do speak a very different and colorful language. I don't know why this is, beyond the observation that they haven't any restraints in this respect. Children have a feeling for rearranging language, so I'm not surprised they'd say "I'm barefoot all over." Any poet would be glad to have said this. Most children have a negative reaction to poetry, first, because they aren't aware that they are talking poetry in a certain headlong way, and, second, because the poetry given them is usually stereotyped unless they have an exceptional teacher. I realize that teachers of English have many things to learn as part of their training. Few of them have had an intensive course in poetry itself or in how to teach poetry to children. This is very sad because poetry for the teacher can be a most useful tool if you apply it

correctly in illustrating the better use of English and respect for the written word. They ought to read John Ciardi's *How Does a Poem Mean?*—about as sensible a textbook on the subject as there is. Much shorter and straight to the point is Auden's inaugural address at Oxford when he was elected professor of poetry—a student election, incidentally. Every teacher of English should read that. It says undidactically more about poetry and what poetry is than anything I know.

Well, we haven't talked about humor. Humor is one way of opening poetry to children. But you have to be sure that you're reading a poem of *genuine* humor, not of cooked-up humor. Likewise a poem of *perfection* in technique. A splendid source is Louis Untermeyer's *Fun and Nonsense*. Another is William Cole's *Oh, What Nonsense*.

One more trait important for poets is being an observer of nature. If you're going to write poetry of any kind, you have to be what Thomas Hardy calls a noticer. You have to notice *little* things. After you have met and evaluated a person, you should remember this and such about him that another will have missed. This is what Sherlock Holmes did. You must learn to observe minutiae. I don't know how else to express it. I can't tell you how you train yourself in that. You just have to be—or become—perpetually curious. You must perpetually want to know why something works and why this happens and that doesn't happen.

Perspectives:

I appreciate your difficulty in explaining this point. I'm sure there must be some sort of symbiotic relationship between composing and comprehending poetry. You've been speaking from the artist's or composer's viewpoint. In order to compose a poem, you have to be a careful observer of things. I'm sure, though, that when one reads poetry it is very helpful if one is already an observer himself; and if he's not, the reading of such poetry may help that person become a better observer.

Mr. McCord:

I'd like to think it would. I have a brief poem about different kinds of animals: the difference between a hare and a rabbit, a grouse and a pheasant, and so on. I try to put such differences into other kinds of poems and some readers appear to enjoy it. It was my upbringing in the Oregon woods that made me an observer of things; made me understand that botany runs to threes and fives in petals and leaves and that anatomy runs in twos and fours—two legs, four legs, two eyes, two ears, four spigots on a cow, and so on. To be brought up in the country is the greatest step forward you can make toward becoming a poet. What I mean is that it's the greatest incentive you can have because you were once right in the midst of nature; and nature is poetry all over.

Practical Suggestions for Dealing with Poetry and Children

Perspectives:

We've discussed the training of teachers briefly. What other steps could be taken to prepare them to deal with poetry and children? What efforts could they make on their own?

Mr. McCord:

They should have taken college courses in poetry available to them—courses offered by someone highly competent to talk about it. They need to get the feel of poetry and understand certain architectural things about it, such as its compressed or compressing quality. Good poetry always uses the minimum number of words without seeming to be minimum. I don't mean writing in verbal shorthand, but happily condensing. And condensing so well, that if you wrote about the same topic in prose, it wouldn't come through nearly so effectively. A child wouldn't remember it as well.

For good poetry *is* rememberable. Teachers should be trained or made to learn some poems by heart. So many teachers apparently don't have any poetry in their minds; and their children, of course, don't have any either, since they are never made to learn any. Kids should be able to say some poetry, and to say it just as easily as they can hum a song. And, above all, to say it *slowly*. If you see something in life which in turn suggests something great, you should have enough training in poetry so that you can capture its fuller sense of greatness.

Perspectives:

What role can parents play?

Mr. McCord:

Parents can play one big role. They can habitually read good poetry aloud to their children and they can encourage and praise their children if their children write something themselves. Read good prose to them also. Read *Treasure Island*. Read aloud some of the children's classics: *The Land of Oz*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Narnia Chronicles*, *Red Fox*. That's what parents can do: read aloud to their children and *never* pooh-pooh a child's natural interest in poetry. So many parents today seem to think it's more important for their boys to play in the little league, for their girls to become swimmers or tennis champions. Most of TV is a deadening influence on mind and language, a crippling influence. Parents should ration TV time. A dominant education in TV is an iron-clad guarantee of a perpetual fifth grade mentality. A guarantee of perfection in jargon and Uno and the second-rate.

Perspectives:

Do you have any specific suggestions for teachers for introducing poetry, reading it, discussing it—in short, dealing with it in any way? For example, how analytical should one be in dealing with it; how does the writing of poetry by children fit in, and so on?

Mr. McCord:

I don't know how analytical one should be, but the teacher can say some basic things. If you're going to rhyme, rhyme with true rhymes. Don't rhyme outrageous rhymes and don't rhyme forced rhymes. So many children produce one good line and then try to rhyme something with it and the control rhyme throws them off. They should learn to reverse whatever they are saying and thus gain a fresh control rhyme. They should avoid rhyming singulars and plurals; *cat*, *rats*, for example. Robert Graves once wrote that a poet must learn to control "I's" and "s's." Make children hear—actually *hear*—the sound of a fine line or couplet or quatrain: "I wake to feel the fell of dark, not day." Haiku is interesting; but there is much too much of it taught in the lower grades today. Same with the cinquain.

Perspectives:

Let me ask you about getting poetry started. None of our composing comes from a vacuum. What kinds of things from a child's experiences might a teacher be able to capitalize on?

Mr. McCord:

I'm glad you asked that. One of the things I come across constantly in children's poetry when I visit classrooms is something like "Last Sunday we went on a picnic." I don't have to be told that the teacher said, "Now write about last Sunday when you went on a picnic." *Don't assign any subject for them!* Let their own individuality speak. As a result of an assignment, one or two will write pretty well, but the others will be pathetically lame about it, because the assigned subject isn't a subject they want to write about. So don't inhibit children unnaturally. Say "Write about something you have seen or heard about; or "Write about something you found, outdoors or indoors, that you like." That gives them a big choice. You can think up all kinds of general questions. "What do you think it would feel like to be certain animal? But be careful not to tell them an elephant or a mouse or some *specific* animal. Give them a subject that has the possibilities of enlargement within their own minds and not one limited by restrictions that you as a teacher impose on them. I admire the originality of a first-grader in Maine who wrote about one particular poem of mine: "Many of us are losing our teeth, so we like "Tooth Trouble."

Perspectives:

Do you mean that just a little bit of structure is best for getting poetry started?

Mr. McCord:

Yes. You can tell them, "Let's write your poem in four stanzas of four lines each in which you are going to rhyme the first and third lines and the second and fourth, or just the second and fourth." Give them all the time you possibly can.

Another thing a teacher has to do is first to read a good cross-section of poetry to his or her students. Take a week or two weeks for this. For example, some poetry that deals with the city, some that deals with the country. I remember a group of London slum children not liking my poem "This is My Rock." Every child in the country has a rock to go to sit on, or at least a quiet place in which to be alone. A city child doesn't have that. There's a poem I wrote called "Just Around the Corner" which deals with the notion that in a big city everything *seems* to happen just around the corner—just out of sight. A poem such as this should appeal to the urban child.

Also I would institute some simple little poetry prize for students, such as a book of verse—not mine, but an anthology.

I don't think a teacher should be too analytical, except to show children that good poems have pattern. Children should never be told just to write whatever comes into their heads and *not care about word choice, images, and so on*. Try to tell them, and make them believe, that writing a poem is one of the most wonderful kinds of discipline: discipline of language and discipline of speech. Loving poetry and caring about it, learning some of it by heart, and reading it all their lives will enrich their lives in ways they can't, as children, readily understand. Try to discover how to make this understood.

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