

Profile: Lilian Moore

Joan I. Glazer

"Poems should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects," says Lilian Moore, the 1985 recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. "When people asked Robert Frost—as they did by the hundreds—what he meant by 'But I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep/ And miles to go before I sleep,' he always turned the question aside with a joke. Maybe he couldn't answer it, and maybe he was glad that the lines exploded in so many different colors in so many people's minds."

Lilian Moore's poems have exploded in the minds of children and adults alike, causing them to visualize wind "wrinkling" the water, or sense something, "slinkety-sly," coming down the stairs. Her works of poetry include *I Feel the Same Way*, *I Thought I Heard the City*, *Sam's Place*, *See My Lovely Poison Ivy*, *Think of Shadows*, and *Something New Begins*. She has also authored many picture books and compiled several collections of poems for children.

She was living in New York when her first book of poems was published, but laughs when the idea of her being a "city person" is questioned. "I started out with a flower pot, then I had a window box, then I had a back yard, then I came here. So I've always wanted things that grow, and the light of the sky in the country." "Here" is a farm in Kerhonkson, New York, where she and her husband, Sam Reavin, live, and which is the setting for *Sam's Place*. It was also the setting for this interview. The visitor can step out the back door to where deer approached the house, see the chestnut tree and what now remains of the old apple orchard, look across the pond, see those aspects of nature which were observed so carefully and written about so lovingly.

What does Ms. Moore see as the outstanding characteristic of her work? "I try to tell the truth." It is the truth of accurate observations, without sentimentality. "The equivalent of doing research for a book when you're writing about a willow, let's say, as I did in 'Yellow Willow,' is to live with that willow the whole year round. I watched those willows, and they're all kinds of yellow—spring yellow, summer yellow-green. But it took me some time to realize that they were yellow all through the winter too, that those "brassy boughs" do stay yellow. Now, Sam was a terrific help, because I was always asking questions about how things grew, how the land changed, checking to see if I was precise—telling the truth." Does she see any of her writing as being fantasy, or is it all the real world and how she perceives it? "Well, this is a poem of mine I happen to like," she responds. "Is this real or is it fantasy?"

Mural on Second Avenue

Someone
stood here
tall on a ladder,
dreaming
to the slap of a
wet brush,

painting
on the blank
unwindowed wall of
this old house.

Now the wall is a
field of wild grass,
bending to a wind.

A unicorn's grazing there
beside a zebra.

A giraffe is nibbling a
tree top
and in a sky of
eye-blinking
blue

A horse is flying.
All
right at home in the
neighborhood.¹

She continues. "One day, when I walked down Second Avenue, I saw a wall which had been painted. And what was on it was a pond with a duck on it, and a tree. I was very much taken with the idea that in the city somebody wanted to paint this kind of dream. When I tried to write a poem that told exactly what I saw, it was klunky. It didn't work. I didn't capture what I thought the painter felt or what I felt when I saw the wall. A flying horse and a unicorn were necessary. I don't know whether that answers your question or not. To get the truth of how I felt, and the truth of what I saw, I had to have some magic, the same magic that person had while painting what to me was a dead duck."

The "truth of how I felt" permeates the writing of Ms. Moore. Some poems, such as "Mural on Second Avenue" and the ones in *Sam's Place*, reflect her experiences as an adult. Others, such as many of those in *I Feel the Same Way*, recall memories of her childhood. She describes the way she always felt when looking at the sea, her feeling in the fog as if it were wrapping her up, her memories of walking to and from school in the third grade on days so cold that she blew "dragon smoke" with her breath. When a poem is completed, she has a different feeling about the subject. "Once I have the poem done, I don't feel the same intensity." Is that a disappointment? "Oh, no. There are other ways of looking."

"When I'm writing a poem," Ms. Moore says, "I feel as if I'm working all the time. I think I wrote 'Until I Saw the Sea' on the subway on the way to work." She concentrates on the imagery she's seeking and on the play of words—"I like the *echo* of words more than rhyme"—until she has the poem under control. "I once wrote a poem while at the dentist's. I withdrew completely into myself, with a real absorption, trying to solve a problem. Much testing and revising seems to be done in my head when I'm working on a poem. "As I'm working on a version I've done, I read the poem to myself but not aloud. I hear it. I hear everything that's wrong with a line inside my head. You know the most autobiographical poem I ever wrote? That's a little lighthearted one in *See My Lovely Poison Ivy*. It's very apt.

I Left My Head

I left my head
somewhere
today.
Put it down for
just
a minute.
Under the
table?
On a chair?
Wish I were
able
to say
where.
Everything I need
is
in it!²

That's my head! I could never use a computer, but don't tell anybody that. I love polishing. I can do a line twenty-five times trying to get it right. I edit my own things constantly.

"I believe that editing is a kind of sculpture. If there's a line with a bump in it and you have a sense of form, you smooth it and give it shape. When I was an editor, I was able to help people do that with their manuscripts. I was able to do that with my own stories. And possibly that's what happens with my poetry.

"Do you know who helps the most?" she asks. "Other poets. When I need a response, I turn to my friends—Judith Thurman, or Eve Merriam. I would ask Valerie Worth if she lived closer. We know each other only through letters. Poets help each other wonderfully. For instance, we'd been through a severe dry spell here and the line came to me, 'Roots have forgotten the taste of rain.' I told a poet friend, 'I'm really stuck on this line. I can't go forward.' She said, 'Why don't you back into it?' I said, 'Of course!' And that's what I did, backed into it. It worked as the last line of 'Dry Spell.' That's how poets help one another—by listening seriously and taking seriously the problems in structuring a poem." It is on this level that Ms. Moore responds to the poetry of her son Jonathan, a published adult poet. Sharing a poem of his about the growth, both plant and animal, in the pond, she says, "It speaks to me, not as son to mother, but as poet to poet."

Ms. Moore has been a teacher and a reading specialist, and was the editor at Scholastic who established the Arrow Book Club. As a child she was a voracious reader. She would go to the library, leave with an armful of books, and have read two of them before she got home. She simply assumed that she would be a writer when she grew up, and often created stories which she would tell to friends. With utter confidence in the loyalty of her audience, she would stop midway through the tale and announce that it was "to be continued tomorrow."

When her son was young, she wrote many light verses. "Feet that wear shoes can walk and have fun/ Feet that wear sneakers want only to run," was inspired by her three year old with his first pair of sneakers. Jean Karl suggested that she collect some of the verses for a book. When she started writing the book, she found herself tapping her own childhood memories, rather than writing exclusively about the experiences of her son or other children whom she had observed.

She describes herself as being conscious of the limited experience of children and wanting her poetry to be accessible. However, if a poem works, she does not "censor" it, hoping that someone will help the child to "take in" the poem, or that the poem may become a "deposit" that the child can draw upon. She suggests that teachers not "bear down too hard" on a poem. They should begin with children's experience, then present the poem. Looking at "Recess" from *Think of Shadows*, Ms. Moore says she believes that children who have observed their own shadows on the playground can then be encouraged to talk about "scribbling their shadows on the school yard," and can deal with such figurative language as "till a cloud moving across the morning sun wipes out all scribbles like a giant eraser." She says ruefully that her poem "Telling Time" may be becoming old-fashioned, and an unfamiliar experience, for children with digital watches. They may not know what was meant when she wrote that "time ... ticks, whispers, rings."

Ms. Moore does see her work evolving. Talking again of *Think of Shadows*, she comments, "I decided that although this book was aimed for the young school child, whatever I put in it, whatever idea or language or imagery I needed, I was going to include, not fight. To me a poem is like a balloon on a string. What you get out of it depends on how tall you are, how long the string is. Something there for everyone!"

The need to make books and poetry available to children has motivated many of Ms. Moore's activities. She was delighted with her task at Scholastic of setting up a paperback book club, for she was able to select good books and bring them to children inexpensively. "The whole process of learning to read comes from reading. After all, you can't learn to swim in a bathtub." Her own picture books have been widely translated, particularly the Little Raccoon books.

The most recent request for publication rights, however, has been refused. Ms. Moore's letter to the South African publisher concluded with a succinct statement of her reasons for refusal: "It has always been a source of deepest pleasure to me to know how much children have loved these books. Some day, when apartheid is only a terrible memory, when all children can freely have access to these books, I should be proud and happy to have you publish them."

The Russian translations of the Little Raccoon books sold over 375,000 copies. In 1967, when Ms. Moore was in the Soviet Union, she made a special request of the editors she met. What she really wanted was to meet Kornei Chukovsky, the noted Russian author, editor, translator, and critic. As well as writing for children himself, he had observed and recorded young children's own uses of language. Ms. Moore had read his book, *From Two to Five*, and it spoke to her own interest in the speech and expressions of children.

"To hear young children as they explore experiences—everything being observed and responded to for the first time—well, it's like the morning of the world," she marvels. The editors arranged a visit, and she was driven to Peredelkino to meet Chukovsky. He was then eighty-five years old, "a tall, vital, handsome man with a mane of white hair." She told him about her son, who when quite young, looked at the new moon and cried out, "Look! The moon is broke!" Chukovsky was going to write it down, but there was no need for that. It was already in his book—a young Russian child had said the same thing.

Then he turned to her and said that he'd been told she wrote poetry for children. "Tell me one."

After what she describes as feeling like a child being asked to recite, and after recovering from a "moment of total amnesia," she said this poem for him.

Until I Saw the Sea

Until I saw the sea
I did not know
that wind
could wrinkle water so.

I never knew
that sun
could splinter a whole sea of blue.

Nor
did I know before
a sea breathes in and out
upon a shore.³

"Beautiful," he said, and kissed her on the cheek.

The NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children is our kiss on Lilian Moore's cheek, and as we read her poetry, we too say, "Beautiful!"

Bibliography

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Poem Time is Now
You Look, Too
Poets Notice Everything
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 2. Reprinted with permission. From *See My Lovely Poison Ivy*. Atheneum, 1975.
 3. Reprinted with permission. From *I Feel the Same Way*. Atheneum, 1967.