

PROFILE: VALERIE WORTH

LEE BENNETT HOPKINS

At the annual convention in Seattle, Washington, in November, 1991, Valerie Worth will become the ninth recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, presented to a poet for an aggregate body of work. Her name is added to former honored poets David McCord (1977), Aileen Fisher (1978), Karla Kuskin (1979), Myra Cohn Livingston (1980), Eve Merriam (1981), John Ciardi (1982), Lilian Moore (1985), and Arnold Adoff (1988).

Valerie Worth, born October 29, 1933, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, grew up in nearby Swarthmore, where her father taught biology at Swarthmore College. In 1947, he joined the Rockefeller Foundation as a field biologist; and after 3 years in Tampa, Florida, where he did studies on typhus, a dramatic opportunity arose when he was asked to go to Bangalore, India, to study malaria.

Worth spent one year of high school in Bangalore, where she had many unusual experiences and made some interesting friends. Following that, she returned to the United States—back to Swarthmore, where she later graduated with a B.A. degree in English. At the college she met a fellow student, George Bahlke; they married shortly after graduation.

Valerie Worth's love of literature, especially poetry, was sparked by her parents. "Both my parents read poetry," she told me. "My father wrote poetry himself—poetry connected to the world of nature and biology. I well remember my mother reading to me, but it was her *choice* of reading that had great influence on my life. Her enthusiasm for fine literature and art was a force for me—a force that would last a lifetime.

"Although I loved reading poetry as a child, something in me felt unsatisfied, as if something more could be done with it. When I turned to writing, I tried to create what I wanted when I was a child—poetry that would reach more deeply into the world I saw around me." She wrote some poetry for adults, including poetry that appeared in magazines such as *Harper's*.

Then she turned to writing what she termed "small poems."

When her husband finished his Ph.D. degree at Yale University (where she worked in the promotion department of Yale University Press), they lived in Virginia, New Jersey, Vermont, and finally settled in Clinton, New York, where he began teaching at Kirkland College. Joining an informal writing group, Worth met Natalie Babbitt, the well-known, highly acclaimed author and illustrator, whose husband, Samuel Fisher Babbitt, served as the first president of Kirkland.

"I read some of my poems aloud to the group. When Natalie heard them, she said, 'I'd like to send your poems to Michael di Capua at Farrar, Straus & Giroux to look at.' The whole experience was a most fortuitous one." Shortly after her work reached di Capua, he offered to publish her first volume, *Small Poems*.

"This was a great time for me," she said. "I had been writing for a long time, and I wasn't publishing much." Knowing that an illustrator was being sought to do pictures for the collection, she asked Babbitt if *she* might have any interest in illustrating the book. "I'm so glad you asked me!" exclaimed Babbitt. Thus, the collaboration began; the team went on to work on four volumes together. "Natalie and I are very close friends," Worth says. "I had some input into the artwork in that I suggested some things to be drawn. Occasionally, I would send her a small magnet or a tiny copper bell I owned—objects that inspired the creation of the small poems."

Babbitt's meticulous black-and-white drawings perfectly complement the verse. Carefully placed images of frost on a windowpane, a beetle, a honeycomb, an old broom, or a spraying hose enhance the tone of the words.

Small Poems appeared in 1972, followed by *More Small Poems*, *Still More Small Poems*, and *Small Poems Again*. In 1987, *All the Small Poems* was published in paperback. Valerie Worth has given readers a total of 99 poems, the subjects ranging from an acorn to zinnias.

LANGUAGE ARTS

All of her poems are sharp, solid, eloquent evocations of ordinary objects; in them she brings new, dramatic life to the unexpected. Her crystal vision causes us to see the everyday world in fresh, insightful, larger-than-life ways:

On "Porches/ ... chairs sit still; ... /The watering can/Rusts among friends."

A lawnmower's ". . . head is too full/Of iron and oil/To know/What it throws/Away:/The lawn's whole/Crop of chopped/Soft, lDelicious/Green hay."

About an acorn that "fits perfectly/Into its shingled/Cup . . ." she muses, " I think no better/Invention or/Mechanical trick/Could ever/Be bought in a shop."

She reminds us that "Dinosaurs/Do not count/ Because/They are all/Deada ... But they/Still walk/ About heavily/In everybody's/Head."

In a library we can "... listen to the/Silent twitter/Of a billion/Tiny busy/Black words."

Amoebas, anteaters, tractors, and telephone poles—each subject springs, rings to new heights via her perfect creations.

"I write about what is vivid, exciting, magical to me—about the way I see things now, or how I viewed them as a child—or a combination of both child/adult feelings. I write about things that strike a chord in me, be it a lawnmower or a kaleidoscope or coat hangers. I have strong responses to what finds its way into my work.

"It has always seemed to me that any tree or flower, any living creature, even any old board or brick or bottle possesses a mysterious poetry of its own, a poetry still wordless, formless, inaudible, but asking to be translated into words and images and sounds—to be expressed as a poem. Perhaps it could be said that written poetry is simply a way of revealing and celebrating the essentially poetic nature of the world itself."

Although a great deal of time and care goes into the making of each of her works, she states: "Some of my poems just spring up—full bloom! Others can take days, weeks, months. Usually ideas come first, *then* the poetry takes hold. It is a matter of thought, sound, imagery—all working together in balance to create the effect which I want to convey.

"Then there are times I *know* I am going in a wrong direction. Then I have to pull back—pull back strongly and start all over.

My aim is to focus clearly on a subject, pare down words so there can be nothing extraneous in any of my poems. 'Water Lily' (a verse containing 10 lines with a total of 20 words) was one such poem that just wouldn't work. After almost 100 variations everything fitted into place."

I asked Ms. Worth if she had any advice to offer children who want to write poetry. She told me: "I would say write poetry for the fun of it, for the joy of it, for the love of it. And especially for the love of the things you write about, whatever they may be—whether beautiful or ugly, grand or humble, birds of paradise or mosquitoes, stars or mud puddles: All are worthy of being written about if you feel a deep affection for them—or, indeed, if you feel strongly about them in any way at all.

"But never forget that the subject is as important as your feeling: The mud puddle itself is as important as your pleasure in looking at it or splashing through it. Never let the mud puddle get lost in the poetry—because, in many ways, the mud puddle *is* the poetry."

In addition to poetry, Worth has written three works of fiction: *Curlicues: The Fortunes of Two Pug Dogs* (1980), *Gypsy Gold* (1983), and *Fox Hill* (1986). Forthcoming projects include another, yet untitled volume of small poems and a volume of Christmas poems.

Mother of three grown children, Conrad, Catherine, and Margaret, Worth's days "are full of quiet, daily life"—gardening, observing the surroundings in her own back yard, doing volunteer work, and continuing her writing career. Upon receiving the news that she was selected as the 1991 NCTE Poetry Award recipient, she told me: "I feel highly honored, extremely grateful, and delighted to think that my way of seeing and writing about things has met with such a sympathetic response in others.

"When I turned to writing, I tried to create what I wanted when I was a child—poetry that would reach more deeply into the world I saw around me."

Excerpts from "Acorn," "Dinosaur," and "Lawnmower" are from *More Small Poems*, copyright 1976, by Valerie Worth. "Porches" is from *Small Poems*, copyright C 1972, by Valerie Worth. "Library" is from *Small Poems Again*, copyright C 1986, by Valerie Worth. All are reprinted with permission from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

PROFILE

"I take great pleasure in writing for its own sake; but knowing that my poetry has been able to extend beyond that and to please so many readers, children and adults alike, is an equally deep satisfaction.

"This award is both a wonderful vote of confidence and proof that poetry is not just a solitary pursuit, not just a rare flower blooming in isolation. but actually a very effective means of communication."

Small poems.

Small on black-and-white pages, perhaps.

But like fragile snowflakes, the mystery of a spider's spun web, or a tiny rock glistening near a river bed, Valerie Worth's poems contain enormous thoughts, evoke huge feelings. The NCTE Poetry Award Committee is proud to honor the work and world of Valerie Worth.

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Bibliography of Valerie Worth's Works

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Lee Bennett Hopkins is chair of the 1991 NCTE Poetry Award Committee and recently published the anthology, Happy Birthday, illustrated by Hilary Knight.