Marilyn Singer is the 2015 winner of the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award, joining a distinguished group of poets that NCTE has recognized since 1977. She has published over 100 books for children and young adults in different genres, including 30 poetry collections (with several more in progress or forthcoming in 2016). Her work tackles a wide variety of topics—US presidents, animals, astronomy, meteorology, celebrations—and poetic formats—triolets, cinquains, villanelles, and sonnets. She even created her own poetic format, the reverso. Her work has won numerous awards and has been placed on many notable book lists. We were fortunate to interview her and hear about her writing quirks (e.g., printing her poems on yellow legal pads), her creative process (writing anywhere—coffee shops, parks, doctors’ offices, the subway), and her evolution as a writer. We invite you to learn more about Marilyn Singer, a fascinating and talented poet who is always learning and growing in her craft.

When we talked with Singer, she recalled her excitement about receiving the NCTE award. She knew the award recipient would be announced at the Books for Children Luncheon in Washington, DC, but she had managed to put it out of her head and was having brunch with her husband Steve in New York when the news came, via email, from her friend and neighbor, Jacqueline Woodson, who had just finished her keynote address at the luncheon. Singer described her reaction: “I immediately burst out crying. It’s the one award I really, really hoped to win someday. Poetry is and always has been my favorite thing to write. I feel deeply honored by the award—and by the company I’m in, which includes many of my favorite poets.”

Thinking back on the kinds of early literacy experiences that are important in building future readers and writers, Singer shared some examples of her beginning reading and writing encounters. She was surrounded by positive literacy role models. Her parents read poetry and sang popular “songs of the day” to her, so she developed a love for both poetry and lyrics. Her grandmother also contributed to her literacy development by telling her “wonderful stories every night at bedtime.” Singer remarked, “I learned a lot about the power of words from her.” Encouraged by these positive experiences, Singer started writing poetry in first grade and continued throughout elementary school, high school, and college. She is quick to acknowledge the role that teachers played in nurturing her confidence as a writer, revealing that one teacher submitted her poems to literary magazines and they were published. Consequently, she believed that she “could get published as a grown-up, too.”

After college, Singer became a high school English teacher. Though she continued to write, it wasn’t until she left teaching that she realized she wanted to be a writer. Her first published book was a picture book, The Dog Who Insisted He Wasn’t (Dutton, 1976). Her first poetry collection came in the 1980s “when Judith Whipple, then at Macmillan, accepted Turtle in July” (1989).
As noted earlier, Singer enjoys writing across genres, but she is particularly drawn to writing poetry. She painted several wonderful images about the appeal of poetry. “Like a great photograph, a great poem can capture a moment in time. It is evocative. It can have an element of surprise, of mystery. It can make you slow down and think. It can be silly and make you laugh.” She added, “I like its musicality and its succinctness—a poet can capture a story, a character, a state of being with just a few words.”

Comparing the difference in writing poetry versus prose, she comments that she loves to play with words and feels poetry allows that in a way that prose doesn’t. Further, she maintains, “with poetry, if I think I’ve gotten it right, I want to hug myself.”

Singer’s writing inspiration originates from many sources. While she admits that animals and nature are strong lures, she mentions other subjects of interest, including dancing, weather, time zones, presidents, mythology, fairy tales, and human behavior. Many writers also inspire her “for their poetry and also for their versatility,” and she lists Shakespeare, Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Browning, Basho, Anne Sexton, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Marilyn Nelson as just a few of her favorites. Reminding us that lyrics played an important role in her early literacy experiences, she noted that she is equally inspired by the words of lyricists such as Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim, Dorothy Fields, and Johnny Mercer.

Beyond writing inspiration, Singer derives writing support from a strong network of friends and colleagues. All writers need to feel comfortable and confident to share their work and receive feedback, and Singer feels fortunate to have several good friends and excellent poets—Kristine O’Connell George, Rebecca Dotlich, Joyce Sidman, and Betsy Franco—who have served as mentors and provided critiques of her work. Her editors have also provided valuable input, as she remarks, “In all of the books I wrote for her, the late and truly great Janet Schulman at Knopf was ruthless about which poems worked and which didn’t—and I really appreciated it.”

Moreover, she has received “great advice from the brilliant Jane Yolen” and has had “long phone conversations about poetry (and the state of publishing) with Lee Bennett Hopkins, wonderful poet and anthologist.”

Describing her creative process, Singer stresses the power of observation and reflection. She reveals, “I like to walk around and think about what interests me.” So, she might observe interesting animal behavior in parks, zoos, and natural places, or she might consider human behavior when wandering along city streets and school yards. All the while, she is busy making mental notes and writing down ideas. As one example she reveals, “I was watching the snow monkeys at the Central Park Zoo and wondering why they thrive in cold climates when most monkeys live in warm ones. That led to making a list of animals surviving in tough habitats, which in turn resulted in my book of poems, A Strange Place to Call Home” (2012). Another project grew from her musings about superhero movies. She wondered what happened to “B-list superheroes who couldn’t find jobs.” The end result was The Superheroes Employment Agency (2012). Finally, Singer is studying social dance and taking dance lessons with her husband. This interest or “study” grew into a “book of poems about these dances—in the rhythms of the dances—to be published by Dial.”

But, not all ideas for poetry collections grow out of her own observation and reflection. On occasion, her editors suggest topics. One such suggestion was “poems about the presidents, which led to Rutherford B., Who Was He?” (2013). That, in turn, has led to a forthcoming book of poems about all of their first ladies.

Once an idea for a collection is in place, Singer reveals that sometimes she immediately begins writing poems. “I’ve been known to call my husband and other folks and send them stuff hot off the page or read them the latest over the phone.” During the process, she receives helpful input from her editors that shape the project. She mentions that “they always help me home in on which poems should and shouldn’t go in a book. A Stick Is an Excellent Thing [2012] started out as poems about all kinds of games—indoor and outdoor—until my editor, Lynne Polvino, suggested that I focus entirely on outdoor play.”
The research and preparation she completes for writing is shaped by the project. Sometimes it is more of a thought process as Singer considers what moves or puzzles her. Other times, the preparation resembles more traditional research. She states, “For the presidents and first ladies, I read many articles and books and watched documentaries.” She also consults experts to obtain information and to check her facts. She described one unforgettable series of interviews in preparation for the New Year’s poems in [the forthcoming] Every Month’s a New Year (Lee & Low). She explained, “I got in touch with people from all over the world about their traditions. For example, I had a two-hour conversation about Muharram and Islam with the wonderful writer, Sumbal Ali-Karamali. Uma Krishnaswami, another terrific author, was most helpful. I exchanged emails with a lawyer and with the former Chilean ambassador to the U.N. about We Tripantu, the Mapuche New Year; with a Maori librarian in New Zealand about Matariki; with a First Secretary in Press, Cultural, and Educational Affairs at the Royal Thai Embassy of Canada about Songkran; and with many others. I had them all vet the poems, too, and then I revised accordingly.”

As demonstrated by several of the preceding examples, many of Singer’s poetry collections are nonfiction. This seems logical to her now, given her love of poetry and her keen interest in many content areas. However, Singer began writing nonfiction poems when an idea for a prose project was not working. She originally envisioned Turtle in July (1989) “as a prose picturebook in which a grandmother and child walked around a pond commenting on the critters that lived in it. The manuscript never worked.” Then one day in July, she visited the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and observed a turtle; using all her senses, she heard it saying, “Hot/Heavy hot/Heavy hot hangs/Thick sticky/Icky . . .” This prompted her to write a poem in the turtle’s voice. She liked the end result, and so she “decided to write a bunch of poems in the voices of animals, which entailed spending time observing the animals and trying to get in their skin, as it were.” She thinks of all of her “informative poems as a kind of bridge between fiction and nonfiction.”

As noted in the introduction, Singer created her own poetic format, the reverso. She first used this format in a short poem about her cat found in the back of Mirror Mirror (2010):

A cat Incomplete:
without A chair
a chair: without
Incomplete. a cat.

Singer explains that “reversos work well for narrative stories, particularly fairy tales, which reflect two different characters (i.e., the Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood; Aladdin and the genie) or one character’s conflicted POV (Cinderella before and at the ball; Richard Nixon, in Rutherford B., Who Was He?, who brought to mind the only reverso in the collection).” In terms of the process for writing a reverso, Singer shares the basic steps she uses.

• First find a story or subject about which I want to present two sides.
• Start with a few lines that can be flipped—kind of like finding an image that’s the core of a poem.

POETRY RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Poet Marilyn Singer recommends the following website resources for students, teachers, and parents:

• Ten Tips for Writing Poetry: http://marilynsinger.net/onwriting/ten-tips-for-writing-poetry/
• How to Read a Poem Aloud: http://marilynsinger.net/onwriting/how-to-read-a-poem-aloud/
• What Makes a Good Poem?: http://marilynsinger.net/onwriting/what-makes-a-good-poem/
• Build the poem from there.
• Use a lot of participles, infinitives, and single word sentences, as well as things that can be turned into questions and interjections.

The challenging part about writing a reverso is exemplified by a letter Singer received from an adult who said she’d tried to write such a poem. As Singer explained, “A reverso has two halves—the second half reverses the lines of the first, with changes only in punctuation and capitalization, but it has to say something completely different from the first half. My correspondent said she showed her attempt to her daughter, who replied, ‘Mom, that’s not a reverso, it’s a same-o.’” Singer uses this example when she describes “what not to do when writing a reverso.” As she emphasizes, I have to make “sure the lines make sense when reversed and also that I’m not writing a ‘same-o.’”

Interestingly, Singer has had to make one adaptation when writing reversos in comparison with other types of poetry. In general, she writes most of her poetry on yellow legal pads, but she explains, “I write the reversos on the computer so that I can move lines around. Writing a reverso is like creating, playing, and winning a game. Tricky, but also so satisfying!”

In terms of her evolution as a writer, Singer commented that her poetry in high school and college and beyond was serious, occasionally cynical, and at times overly complicated. Realizing that she could write for children was “a big step forward.” She emphasizes, “some of my poems for kids are quite sophisticated, but they’re not—at least I sure hope they’re not—pretentious.” She received some excellent advice years earlier when she was writing catalogue copy about avant-garde film. A respected filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, advised her to describe his films as if talking to an intelligent eight-year-old. Singer states, “I like to think that that’s what I’m doing with much of my poetry. Some of it is for younger kids and some for older. It can still have that sense of surprise, mystery, lyricism, etc. But it cannot be full of itself! To me, that’s evolution.”

Singer’s continued productivity and creativity are readily apparent when she is asked about her future work. Besides the collections about dance, first ladies, and New Year celebrations, she has a book in progress with the working title Big Kid Poems (Boyd Mills Press). She has finished a book of reversos based on the Greek myths called Echo Echo (Dial; illustrated by Joséé Masse), which will be available in 2016. She has also written “a musical (minus the music) entitled Little Miss Muffet, or What Came After” (Clarion; illustrated by David Litchfield). In addition to these poetry collections, she has several picturebooks that will be coming out, including two new ones about Tallulah, a young ballet student, and two rhymed works with the working titles, What Can You Do with an Apple? and What Can You Do with a Banana? (Abrams).

When asked for any final advice or thoughts she would like to share with teachers and students, she noted, “I always tell aspiring poets to read, read, read, and write, write, write. I also tell them to observe the world around them, using all of their senses, and to do so with wonder and humor. I advise them to listen to words and sentences and to pay attention to the kind of music they have.” Singer’s website offers many helpful resources for teachers, students, and parents. (See the sidebar on p. 52 for Singer’s recommended online resources.)

Finally, Singer emphasized the oral/aural nature of poetry, and she stressed that “appreciation starts with parents and then teachers reading poetry aloud to kids.” She feels that reading aloud “helps listeners not just understand the meaning, but allows them to hear the musicality, the punch of certain lines, and, of course, the poet’s voice.” She continues by offering the following suggestions. “After you read a poem aloud, feel free to talk about what it means to you and let your kids tell you what it means to them, but don’t overanalyze it. Enjoy the rhythm, the emotions, the humor, the pictures it creates, the element of surprise and mystery. That’s how I learned to love poetry, and how you can, too.” We agree!

To hear more from Marilyn Singer, check out the podcast, “Conversation Currents: A Talk with Marilyn Singer” at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts.
References

A Marilyn Singer Poetry Sampler

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