Poetic Possibilities: A Conversation with WordSong Editor Rebecca Davis on the Beauty and Passion of Poetry

Jennifer D. Turner

This interview features a discussion with Rebecca Davis, senior editor at WordSong, that celebrates the beauty, power, and possibility of poetry.

In this issue, I explore the wonder and magic of poetry with Rebecca Davis, senior editor at WordSong. In 1991, WordSong, the only imprint in the United States specifically devoted to publishing poetry for children, was launched by Highlights, publisher of the beloved magazine Highlights for Children, in tandem with their Boyds Mills Press imprint. Clay Winters, President of Boyds Mills Press, told Publishers Weekly at the time, “We want to be known as a center for poetry. We feel this is an important contribution to children’s literature” (Schnol, 1990, n.p.). Dr. Bernice E. Cullinan, longtime NCTE member and founder of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, was the founding Editor in Chief for WordSong (Strickland & Galda, 2003). Dr. Cullinan ran the imprint for most of its history, publishing collections of poems selected by children—including A Jar of Tiny Stars: Poems by NCTE Award-Winning Poets (Cullinan, 1995), I Heard a Bluebird Sing: Children Select Their Favorite Poems by Aileen Fisher, NCTE Award-Winning Poet (Cullinan, 2002), and Another Jar of Tiny Stars: Poems by More NCTE Award-Winning Poets (Cullinan & Wooten, 2010)—and working with poets that WordSong still publishes to this day, including Jane Yolen, Lee Bennett Hopkins, and Rebecca Kai Dotlich.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on August 9, 2016, and has been edited for publication.

Jennifer D. Turner (JDT): Thank you so much for taking time to talk with me about WordSong and the wonderful poetry published by this unique imprint. Tell me, what led you to come to WordSong and accept a position as senior editor?

Rebecca Davis (RD): I’ve been editing children’s books for about 25 years. Early in my career, I discovered that I really, really loved poetry. I loved language, I loved the sound of language, and I tried to publish as much poetry as I could. I worked for fairly large publishing houses, and poetry, of course, doesn’t sell that well, so it was not easy to publish a lot of it. When the opportunity came up to work for WordSong and to actually publish poetry as one of the main parts of my job, it was like a dream come true.

JDT: How many poetry books does WordSong publish each year?

RD: We aim to publish 2 to 4 books a year. And actually in 2017, we’re doing 3 books, then in 2018, we’re doing 4. So we’re right where we want to be.

JDT: I’m curious to know some of your favorite poetry collections that WordSong has published.

RD: A Jar of Tiny Stars (Cullinan, 1995) and Another Jar of Tiny Stars (Cullinan & Wooten, 2010) are among my favorite WordSong anthologies. They are collections of poems by NCTE award-winning poets that were selected by children. I also love Becoming Billie Holiday
I think that poems can get to the heart of a matter because poets talk about things in as few words as possible, so it becomes very, very intense.
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kinds of different poetry forms. We want to expose children to that range. And then I hope that the subject matter and the way that the poems are written will hook children. Also, I’ve always been an editor who believes it’s great to include challenging vocabulary as long as it’s clear in context, because that’s the way that we grow and stretch our vocabularies. I love it when interesting and complicated and less common words are included in poems and picturebooks.

JDT: Do you have any examples of interesting poetic vocabulary that come to mind?

RD: One example comes from Jumping Off Library Shelves: A Book of Poems (Hopkins, 2015), which is a collection of poems about libraries and what makes them special. J. Patrick Lewis has a poem in that collection called “Internet Explorer” that begins “On your desk sits the vagabond tutor; / SS Library serves as your ship. / If you wander the world by computer, / How far you can travel by chip.” So vagabond is probably a fairly challenging word for children, but especially combined with the illustration, I think that there’s enough context to support it and that it’s an example of delicious and challenging language.

In addition to the value of a rich vocabulary, I think that giving children nonfiction information through poetry is important. Jane Yolen did quite a bit of research for Thunder Underground (Yolen, 2017). The original collection that Jane sent me included mostly poems about underground animals, plant roots, and seeds, and I wanted a greater expanse. I thought it would be really fascinating to explore everything underground and to go literally deeper. So in the end, Jane did extensive research to write poems about everything from earth’s tectonic plates to volcanoes to subways to the whole range of everything that is under our feet. We don’t usually think about what’s under our feet, but there’s so much actually there. We edited the poems as you normally would—for language, for meaning, etc. And then, as with any nonfiction book, we sent the manuscript to an expert who reviewed the poems and then later the art and who raised questions and provided information. Then Jane took into account what the expert said and revised her poems accordingly; the illustrator had to make some changes, too.

JDT: Your comments bring up a question about the author–illustrator relationship. How do authors and illustrators work together on poetic collections, and in this particular case, how did illustrator Josée Masse work with Jane Yolen on Thunder Underground?

RD: Usually the illustrator and author don’t have direct contact. When authors write, they often have very strong visual images in their heads, and they can’t help that. Yet as an editor, I think illustrators can create a much stronger, more powerful book and better imagery if they have the creative freedom to do whatever they want based on the words, rather than feeling like there’s an author staring over their shoulder saying, “That’s not the way I saw it” or “That’s not right.” So usually an editor is the conduit between the author and the illustrator. As editor, I give illustrators feedback for revising their sketches; at the same time, I always show authors the illustrations and get their feedback. After all, I want them to be happy with the book, too.

JDT: The process certainly seems to work well. In Fresh Delicious (Latham, 2016), for example, the illustrations are so captivating and vibrant and perfectly complement the poetry.

RD: Yes. Editors always start with the words, so Irene Latham sent in the manuscript, and she and I worked on it. The poetry has to be the...
backbone, then illustrations build on top of the words. Once we edited the poems and we had a final manuscript, then I searched for an illustrator. Part of the fun of editing is trying to figure out what style of art and what kind of illustrator is going to best fit a particular manuscript.

For Fresh Delicious, the illustrator had to have a strong sense of imagination, because you need that for poems that describe cucumbers as a fleet of green submarines in a wicker sea! I wanted somebody who was going to really capture that imagery and light fire in children’s imaginations. I also wanted bold, simple, brightly colored illustrations with a lot of energy because I felt like fruits and vegetables as a subject could be a turn-off to children. Many kids don’t really like fruits and vegetables, including one of my own two children. So I thought if the illustrator could lure kids in with bright colors and bold, simple shapes with lots and lots of energy, it would help them get past the idea that this is a collection about fruits and vegetables. I want kids to read this book because the poems themselves are so imaginative, and they show children how we can see the world in so many different ways. That’s actually what I think poetry does best.

JDT: I agree. But I think kids might miss the imaginative possibilities of poetry, even when they have opportunities to read it in school. When I read poetry in school, I was always trying to figure out rhyme schemes or analyzing poetic devices. Sometimes kids are exposed to a very linear, analytical approach to reading poetry in schools, and I think we should move away from that approach toward one that helps them to find the beauty and the creative power that poetry holds.

RD: I completely agree with you. I actually didn’t realize that I loved poetry until I was an editor. Growing up, I, too, felt like poetry had to be taken apart, had to be analyzed, because of the way it was taught. I think that when teaching poetry, it’s really important to just read it. Kids are learning language, they’re naturally interested in language, and if you give them poems with beautiful, powerful language that rhymes, or has rhythm, or just has really vivid metaphors, I think it speaks to them. They respond to it, and they love it. I’ve heard of teachers who read a poem right after lunch as a way to settle the class down and give them something joyous before diving into work again. It would be wonderful if we could raise kids to think that poetry is beautiful and is meant for them as opposed to thinking that poetry is not for them because it’s hard and challenging.

JDT: I’ve also found that some children experience the beauty of poetry not by reading it, but by writing it. What advice would you give to children who want to write poetry?

RD: Well, I think the first step is read, read, read. Reading lots of poetry helps writing poetry become less intimidating. Young poets can also begin with forms of poetry that are easier to play with, then work up to more challenging forms. Haiku, for example, doesn’t have to rhyme; it’s just a matter of counting syllables and trying to come up with a very strong, concentrated image. Similarly, acrostic poems are accessible, since kids have a lot of freedom in them; they only need to focus on a subject and work from a single letter for each line. And mask poems can be really fun because the writer is pretending to be an object or animal instead of a person. This can be a fun way to explore different points of view, which I think is important, especially these days.

JDT: I wanted to pick up on a comment you made about exploring different points of view using poetry. Could you elaborate?

RD: In Grumbles from the Town: Mother-Goose Voices with a Twist (Yolen & Dotlich, 2016), Jane Yolen and Rebecca Kai Dotlich each write a poem about a Mother Goose rhyme but from the point of view of a different character. Previously, Jane and Rebecca did this in a poetic collection called Grumbles from the Forest: Fairy-Tale Voices with a Twist (Yolen & Dotlich, 2013). One of the things I love about both books is that the poems literally represent different points of view.

For example, in Grumbles from the Forest, The Princess and the Pea fairy tale is told
through two poems—one from the point of view of the princess and one from the point of view of the pea. In *Grumbles from the Town*, Jack and Jill’s story is described through two mask poems—one from the point of view of the hill and one from the point of view of the pail that Jack and Jill carried up the hill. I love that they’ve taken a story or a fairy tale that every body knows, and then they’re twisting it or shedding new light on it by writing from the point of view of a character or an object that may have a very minor role in the story. I mean, who thinks about Jack and Jill’s pail? By giving that character its own voice and its own story, these authors make children think about the original tale in different ways.

**JDT:** Speaking of point of view, I wanted to get a better sense of the poetic landscape for children from your point of view as an editor. Are there specific trends or perhaps even innovations in children’s poetry that you’ve noticed over the last five years?

**RD:** This question is really interesting. When I first started working for WordSong, I did what we called the Poetry Landscape Project where I interviewed 14 people, including poets, editors, educators, agents, and librarians, about what was going on in children’s poetry. The three biggest trends that multiple people mentioned were: 1) themed collections, 2) humor, and 3) novels in verse. I did this project in 2012, and trends are still the same today. When poetry is published these days, it is in a themed collection. In the 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1980s, a collection of poems published for kids would often include poems on a variety of subjects, and there wouldn’t necessarily be a theme to pull it together; nowadays, most poetry collections have a theme. Humor has always been a popular trend in poetry, and I think it still is. And in recent years, novels in verse have been a growing category.

When we saw the Newbery Medal go to Kwame Alexander’s (2014) *The Crossover* and the Newbery Honor go to Jacqueline Woodson’s (2014) *Brown Girl Dreaming*, that’s showing a broad recognition—especially among librarians—of the high quality of novels in verse as well as an acceptance of novels in verse as a form. It’s taken years to build to this level, but I think there is a great interest in them now.

**JD:** This reminds me of an earlier conversation we had about WordSong’s unique philosophical stance toward novels in verse, given that it is the only imprint specifically dedicated to children’s poetry in the United States. What is WordSong’s stance toward novels in verse, and how is it different from other publishers’?

**RD:** I’ve heard different people talking about the same novel in verse, and one person will say, “That’s a novel in verse” and the other will say, “Well, that’s really prose broken into small, short lines.” I feel strongly that because WordSong is a poetry imprint, any novel in verse that we do has to be a collection of poems that happens to tell a story. Whereas you might have a novel in verse at another imprint that has a continuous storyline running through all the poems, at WordSong, I want each poem, if read separately outside of that novel in verse format, to have the strong impact and the structure that poems typically do. At WordSong, our novels in verse are more like separate poems that are strung together to tell the story, as opposed to a novel in verse where a single poem read alone might not make enough sense without the context of the others.

The novels in verse that WordSong publishes tend to be written by poets, so they’re already...
thinking in terms of a story in poems rather than a poetic story. For example, when Nikki Grimes first sent in *Garvey’s Choice*, it was entirely written in tankas and she had planned it that way from the start. Similarly, when Janice N. Harrington (2016) sent in the original manuscript for *Catching a Storyfish*, it was already a story told in individual poems, this time using a variety of forms. Her tale is about a natural-born storyteller who loses her voice—her ability and desire to tell stories—when she moves across the country and kids at her new school tease her about her accent. It’s a tale about losing and eventually finding yourself again in the face of great change.

For each of these books, as an editor, I’m not just editing for the story; I go back and look at every individual poem to make sure that it feels strong enough to stand alone, so that if a poem were taken out of the collection, it would still be powerful and readers could still relate to it.

**JDT:** As a busy WordSong editor, I’m sure that you are working on several projects. Can you tell me about them?

**RD:** Well, *Keep a Pocket in Your Poem: Classic Poems and Playful Parodies* (Lewis, 2017) pairs classics by the likes of Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson with takeoffs on those classics by J. Patrick Lewis; it is by turns hilarious and profound. *Read! Read! Read!* (VanDerwater, 2017) is a collection of poems that celebrates reading in all its forms, from reading the back of the cereal box to sports articles to maps and comics to books that change your life.

For 2018, we’re publishing *Crawly School for Bugs: Poems to Drive You Buggy* (Harrison, in press), which is a collection of poems about bugs, but it takes place in a school. The poems are about typical school experiences from the perspective of different kinds of bugs, so they’re based on information about science and nature, too. We’re also publishing the anthology *School People* selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins (in press), which is a collection of poems about the people you’ll meet at school, from crossing guard to teacher, lunch lady to librarian, principal to nurse.

Finally, we are publishing *I’m the Big One Now! Poems about Growing Up* (Singer, in press), a collection that celebrates learning new skills, having new experiences, and overcoming challenges. We also have another Lee Bennett Hopkins anthology called *A Bunch of Punctuation* (Hopkins, in press). Each poem gives readers a sense of why the punctuation mark is important and what it does, but at the same time the poems are playful, giving each punctuation mark its own personality and point of view. I think it’s going to be really fun.

**JDT:** I can’t wait to read these WordSong collections! Thank you so much for sharing your expertise and your passion for poetry with our *Language Arts* audience. Our conversation certainly deepened my appreciation for poetry.

**RD:** Thank you. It was lovely talking with you as well.

**References**


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Jennifer D. Turner, NCTE member since 2015, is an associate professor in the College of Education at University of Maryland, College Park. She can be contacted at jdtturner@umd.edu.

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