Children’s Literature Reviews

2017 Notable Poetry Books for Children

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In this column, we feature some of our favorite poetry titles published in 2017 for children.

Our favorite poetry books published in 2017 for children include collections about groundbreaking events and people in history, picturebooks celebrating the gentleness of simple verse, and compilations about the wonders of nature. Most notably in these books, the poet took center stage, as much of the poetry published last year for children paid homage to the bards of the present and past. Classic poems by renowned writers are illustrated anew to provide fresh insight, parodied with honor and inspiration, and incorporated into new verse, threading powerful ruminations of the past along with reflections on our world today.

Keep a Pocket in Your Poem: Classic Poems and Playful Parodies
Written and selected by J. Patrick Lewis
Illustrated by Johanna Wright

Honoring the poems beloved across generations, former US Children’s Poet Laureate J. Patrick Lewis pens his own versions of them—parodies that “echo [the classic poem] by tweaking and twisting to make it new.” Maintaining the original poem’s style or subject matter, Lewis juxtaposes his poem with its source counterpart on double-page spreads. We encounter Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” with Lewis’s “Stopping by Fridge on a Hungry Evening,” Emily Dickinson’s “Hope is the thing with feathers” with “Grief is the thing with tissues,” and Langston Hughes’s “Winter Sweetness” with “Winter Warmth.” While parodies, Lewis’s poems span a range of tone and mood, with some flipping the emotions conveyed in the original and others mirroring them. Johanna Wright’s colorful and lighthearted mixed-media drawings support the playful tribute of the textual compilation. An introduction by Lewis encourages readers to try writing poetic parodies as well: “You might just find, in the beginning, that this is a terrific way to jumpstart your writing; and in the end, you’ll have a poem that will honor the original poet.” (GE)
Round
Written by Joyce Sidman
Illustrated by Taeun Yoo
ISBN 978-0-544-38761-4

Roundness permeates every page of award-winning nature poet Joyce Sidman’s latest work. The reader experiences the seasonal shifts of the earth’s annual revolution around the sun, the rotation of the earth as we move from day to night, and the process by which things become round over time: rocks erode into their roundness while mushrooms swell and blueberries bud and ripen. The poem is conveyed by a young girl of Asian heritage who explores the natural world. Sometimes her adventures are solitary, sometimes she is accompanied by her pets, and at other times, she partners with her father. Sidman captures nature’s diversity in a seamless simplicity across the page turns, and Yoo’s mixed-media illustrations provide a wide range of round items for young readers to search for and pore over. The book concludes with the comforting roundness of a human hug. Sidman’s back matter offers a more extended exploration of roundness, titled “Why are so many things in nature round?” This book

Fresh-Picked Poetry: A Day at the Farmers’ Market
Written by Michelle Schaub
Illustrated by Amy Huntington

“[R]ainbow carrots,/herb bouquets,/heaps of berries,/sample trays.” Michelle Schaub’s lyrical poems evoke the full sensory experience of visiting a farmers’ market in the city. Arranged in order from early morning to the day’s end, the poems capture the energy of the crowd, the decision-making involved in picking the finest produce, and the sense of community created around farmed food. Schaub’s short poems are as fresh as the food she celebrates, best seen in her use of questions in the poem “Is it Ripe?”, “Summer Checklist” written in checklist form, and “Wild Dreams in Two Voices.” Amy Huntington’s illustrations—crafted with watercolor, graphite, ink, and digital elements—create the feeling of wandering around the farmers’ market where speckled eggshells and local loot are valued treasures. The illustrations include a recurring racially and ethnically diverse cast of characters, particularly a boy and a girl

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who befriend one another along the way. Readers will wish they, too, were standing alongside the characters waiting for fresh-squeezed lemonade or watermelon slices, wondering what unexpected simple pleasures await them at the next vendor. Fresh-picked reasons to spend a day at the market are included in the back. (KEC)

Out of Wonder: Poems Celebrating Poets
Written by Kwame Alexander with Chris Colderley and Marjory Wentworth
Illustrated by Ekua Holmes

By adopting the styles and rhythms of 20 famed poets, Kwame Alexander, along with Chris Colderley and Marjory Wentworth, have crafted a collection of original poems that invite the question: What does poetry give us? The answer: a richer and more wide-awake life. Full of grace and gratitude, the tribute poems that emulate the works of such poet legends as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes collectively remind us of the myriad ways that poems are small but powerful. Full of feeling, the colorful, mixed-media illustrations by Ekua Holmes mirror the spirit of celebration and wonder that the poems evoke. The collection includes a heartfelt and autobiographical preface written by Kwame Alexander and a detailed “About the Poets” section as back matter. As explained in the preface, the title of the book, Out of Wonder, comes from a quote by the poet Lucille Clifton: “Poems come out of wonder, not out of knowing” (p. iv). Readers will find themselves both mesmerized by the pages and eager to take to the page themselves, ready to explore where their poetic imaginations take them. (KEC)

A Song about Myself:
A Poem by John Keats
Illustrated by Chris Raschka

Take the linguistic playfulness of a celebrated 19th-century Romantic poet, add the vibrant and whimsical illustrations of a Caldecott medalist, and you get a picturebook interpretation of nonsense poetry at its finest. Chris Raschka’s artistic tribute to John Keats’s verse celebrates the inspiration, self-reflection, and journey behind the poem. Originally penned as part of a letter to his younger sister and divided into four parts, Keats’s “A Song about Myself” reveals his fearlessness with language with such lines as “In spite/Of the might/Of the Maid/Not afraid/Of his Granny-good—/He often would/Hurlyburly/Get up early/And go/By hook or crook/To the
brook.” The text, inspired by Keats’s expeditions throughout Scotland, also speaks metaphorically about a journey of self-discovery. Lines such as “He took/An ink stand/In his hand/And a Pen/Big as ten/In the other./And away/In a Pother/He ran” also serve as poetic commentary on the writing process. With his signature brushstrokes of bold color, Raschka paints scenes that are energetic, compelling, and mischievous, pulling a thick line through the center of the entire book to serve sometimes as a road, sometimes a divider, always an arrowlike path compelling both reader and narrator forward with the journey. An “Illustrator’s Note” provides information about Raschka’s understanding of Keats’s art. (GE)

Feel the Beat: Dance Poems that Zing from Salsa to Swing
Written by Marilyn Singer
Illustrated by Kristi Valiant

People all over the world dance. Celebrate the diversity of styles with this approachable text for transitional readers. Singer launches the celebration with one of her famed reverso poems (where the words that read down are reversed and read up in the second rendition) with the titles, “All Over the
World/Dancing Is Joy” and “Joy Is Dancing/All Over the World.” This is followed by 15 others on full-page spreads featuring dances from merengue to waltz, and Bhangra to polka, in both words and pictures. The poems are written in a variety of forms and structures, some rhyming, others free verse. Each poem works to mimic the beat of the social dance, and a CD of Singer reading her poems is included, with original music by Jonathon Roberts. This collection provides a strong sense of the rhythmic cadence of the poetry. The beats built into the poems encourage re-reading and build the confidence of young readers. Valiant’s art, which was drawn and painted in Photoshop, contains color and movement and captures a cultural scene of each dance. For curious readers, there are “Notes about the Dances” in the back matter that build context—the where, when, and (sometimes) how the dances are performed. (MWK)

Cricket in the Thicket: Poems about Bugs
Written by Carol Murray
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet

“Working, while the world is sleeping/tugging, lugging, running, creeping/three small letters, that is all./A-N-T, together, crawl!” (p. 8). The world of insects has never been more inviting. Murray surveys 27 different types in individual poems that use playful rhythm and rhyme to convey information about a range of insects from the cricket to the dragonfly to the dung beetle. Each poem is complemented by a one- to three-sentence secondary text, offset in a cream-colored box that deepens readers’ knowledge of the insect’s life cycle or role within an ecosystem. Sweet’s collage illustrations capture Murray’s playful mood as they support and convey conceptual understanding rather than provide exact scientific representation. This wonderful collection could be matched with Paul Fleischman’s Newbery Medal-winning Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices (1988), illustrated by Eric Beddows, or Paul Janeczko’s Firefly July: A Year of Very Short Poems (2014), also illustrated by Melissa Sweet. (MAC)

That Is My Dream!: A Picture Book of Langston Hughes’s “Dream Variation”
Written by Langston Hughes
Illustrated by Daniel Miyares

Langston Hughes’s powerful “Dream Variation,” originally published in 1924, is interpreted through resonating gouache illustrations by Daniel Miyares. The poem, a timeless expression of hope and a yearning for simple freedoms, reverberates with innocence, all the while tinged with pain caused by systemic social disparities: “To fling my arms wide/In some place of the sun,/To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done.” Miyares renders a
Bravo!: Poems about Amazing Hispanics
Written by Margarita Engle
Illustrated by Rafael López

Cuban American author Margarita Engle collaborates with Mexican-born artist Rafael López to create portraits in poetic and illustrative form, bringing to light stories of inspirational Hispanics who migrated to the United States from a variety of countries in the Caribbean and Central America. The social justice advocates’ stories are beautifully summarized and yet leave the reader wanting to know more. In “My River of Dreams,” about civil rights activist Julia De Burgos of Puerto Rico, the poem concludes, “even though I now live/in New York,/I still remember/my own childhood’s/beautiful river/of dreams.” These lines beg readers’ queries about her New York and her childhood and the river that was hers, as well as the rivers in their own experiences. Some of the 19 poem-stories written in first person address themes of courage, service, and exploration, with titles such as “Choosing Peace” and “The Magic of Words,” while others touch upon historical events, like the fight for equal rights, the success of the first woman pilot, and the quest for “Solving Medical Mysteries.” Engle has taken a vast amount of information and distilled the ideas, crafting short poems that ignite curiosity. López uses acrylic paints on wood, pen and ink, watercolor, construction paper, and Adobe Photoshop to bring the subjects to life and surrounds them with poignant symbols that highlight their accomplishments. Back matter, titled “Notes about the Lives,” shares an informational paragraph on the people celebrated. These poems help us envision a world where justice prevails. (MWK)

Thunder Underground
Written by Jane Yolen
Illustrated by Josée Masse

Entertaining and informative, the poems in Jane Yolen’s Thunder Underground pay homage to the
wonders of what is under our feet—the thunderous sounds beetles make, the growls and squeals of subways, and deeper still ancient cities, fossils, and even Earth’s magma. Yolen uses a variety of poetic forms, including haiku and ballad, that incorporate rhyming, assonance, varied use of white space, and thoughtful line breaks. The first poem in this collection, titled “Under,” invites readers to think about what is underground and urges us to understand the connection between what lies below us and knowledge itself. The final poem, also titled “Under,” reassures readers that “now you know, you’ve found, you care/what lies beneath/us everywhere” (p. 30). Through Yolen’s poems, we are reminded that we are bound to the Earth, all of its creatures, and one another. Josée Masse’s mixed-media illustrations offer a visual adventure, including colorful cross-sections of what lies underground. Notably, Masse chooses to feature a boy and girl of different races across most of the scenes in this poetic journey. Yolen offers notes on the poems as back matter, including agricultural, engineering, scientific, and her own personal connections to accompany each poem. (KEC)

Before he passed away in early 2016, acclaimed Chicano poet Francisco X. Alarcón invited us into his life, fusing the mythological origins of the days of the week with the everyday experiences of his childhood in this compendium of bilingual poems. Beginning with an author’s note, Alarcón traced the evolution of the seven-day week from ancient Mesopotamia to the Roman names used today. The poems appear on the next page, recounting what his family did on each day. Beginning with the Spanish text, each day’s poems are presented in pairs, with one brief poem introducing the day and connecting it to its underlying myth (“el primer día/de la semana fue/dedicado al Sol—/con familia alrededor/siempre hace sol/en domingo” and “the first day/of the week is/dedicated to the Sun—/with family around/it’s always sunny/on Sunday”), while the second poem details the family activities—
“cuando Abuelito cuenta/cómo un domingo conoció/a Abuelita en México/su cara entices reluce una sonrisa radiante como el Sol” and “when Grandpa tells how/one Sunday he first met/ Grandma in Mexico/Grandpa’s face/then shines with a smile/bright like the Sun”). Building upon the cyclical concepts of time and the indigenous cultures honored in the collection’s framework, Maya Christina Gonzalez surrounds the text with festive illustrations rendered in vibrant watercolor, gouache, and acrylic markers. Front matter includes Gonzalez’s illustrator’s note, explaining her deep admiration for Alarcón and this celebratory treasury of family and culture. (GE)

One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance
Written by Nikki Grimes
Illustrated by various artists

In a unique and novel collection, Nikki Grimes pays tribute to the brilliance of Harlem Renaissance writers while inspiring a new generation of poets. Grimes introduces readers to the newly created form of verse referred to as Golden Shovel, in which lines of poetry or entire poems are incorporated into new verse. The last word on each new line of poetry is taken, in order, from a previously written poem; reading down the right side of a stanza or full poem, one can reread the entire line as appropriated, or in some cases, the entire original poem. Grimes’s new poems, anchored in the poetry of the past, give voice to the very real contemporary challenges that young people, particularly African Americans, wrestle with today. Middle grade readers will find affirmation, hope, and community within and between the lines. Fifteen African American illustrators—including Pat Cummings, Jan Spivey Gilchrist, E. B. Lewis, Christopher Myers, Brian Pinkney, and Shadra Strickland—contribute artwork to this gorgeous collection, with styles ranging from watercolor to mixed media, the concrete to the abstract. Biographies of Harlem Renaissance poets and 21st-century illustrators are included in the back matter, in conversation with one another metaphorically across the century that separates them. The collection serves as a brilliant mentor text for young poets exploring the Golden Shovel form. (MAC)