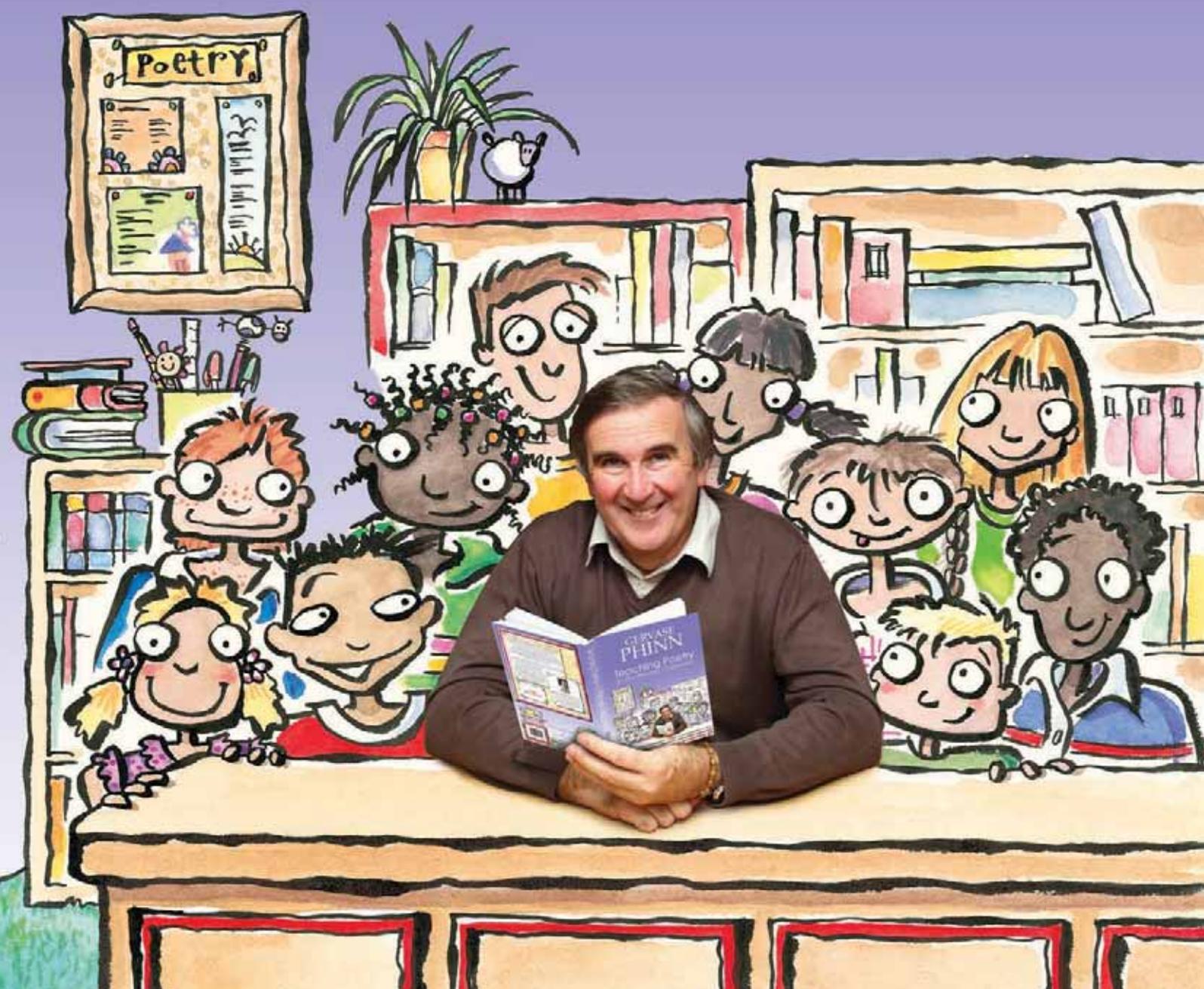


GERVASE PHINN

Teaching Poetry in the Primary Classroom



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Crown House Publishing Limited
www.crownhouse.co.uk – www.crownhousepublishing.com

First published by
Crown House Publishing Ltd
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk
and
Crown House Publishing Company LLC
6 Trowbridge Drive, Suite 5, Bethel, CT 06801, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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Pg 14-16 © 1994, Gervase Phinn, first published in *Got You, Pirate!* compiled by John Foster (OUP), 1994.

Illustrations © Christine Jopling, www.christinejopling.uksite.biz

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available
from the British Library.

10-digit ISBN 184590130-4
13-digit ISBN 978-184590130-1

LCCN 2008936754

Printed and bound in the UK by
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Contents

1	Creating the Environment	1
2	Reading Poetry with Infants	5
3	Writing Poetry with Infants	19
4	Some Starting Points for Poetry with Juniors	27
5	Miniature Poems	41
6	Patterned Poems	43
7	Limericks	53
8	Clerihews	59
9	Alphabet Poems	61
10	Acrostic Poems	65
11	Concrete Poems	69
12	Riddles	73
13	Ballads	79
14	Cautionary Verse	85
15	Conversation Poems	91
16	Poems from Other Cultures	97
17	Poems from Experience	99
18	Poems from the Environment.....	103

19	Poems from Poems	107
20	Poems from Photographs and Paintings	111
21	A Poetry Project: Myths and Legends	119
22	Poems of Praise	127
23	Poets in School	131
24	Learning Poetry	135
25	Endpiece.....	141
	<i>Twelve Edited Anthologies of Poetry</i>	141
	<i>Twelve Individual Poetry Collections</i>	144
	<i>About the Author</i>	149
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	149

Chapter 1

Creating the Environment

‘I’m very good at poetry you know.’

The speaker, with all the honesty, enthusiasm and confidence of an eight year old, was called Helen. I met her on my visit to an infant school to look at the range of writing undertaken by the children.

‘Would you like to see my poems?’ she continued.

‘I would love to,’ I replied.

She smiled. ‘I’ll fetch my portfolio.’

Helen was right—she was good at poetry. Her folder of poems contained a colourful description of the local canal: *straight and long like the dark green stalk of a tall tulip*; a holiday memory featuring her father *who growled and grunted, sighed and shouted when the car would not start*; rhyming verse about the supermarket where the shelves were full of *packets of sugar and cans of beans, Bananas and apples and tangerines, Carrots and onions, potatoes and greens*, and the thoughts of a Roman soldier, *cold and alone and away from home*. I asked if I could make a copy of her latest poem.

‘If you wait a minute,’ she said, ‘I’ll give you a print out.’

Here is her lively descriptive verse:

From the school window
I can see where a mole has been burrowing.
The field is lumpy with little brown hills of soil.
Down below where it’s dark and damp,
He digs and digs with big flat paws,
Looking for a juicy worm.

‘Do you write poetry?’ Helen asked, handing me a copy of her poem.

‘Yes I do,’ I replied.

‘Do you get the rhythms?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the rhymes?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Do you illustrate your poems?’

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t.’

She smiled. ‘I do,’ she said, ‘I think it makes them look nicer on the page.’

‘And why are you so good at writing poetry?’ I asked.

She sighed. 'Oh, I don't really know. I like to read them. We have lots of poetry books in our classroom. Our teacher likes poems and she reads a poem to us every day after she's marked the register and we always write a poem when we do our topic.'

With this kind of environment and encouragement it should come as no surprise that Helen is such an accomplished poet. Helen's teacher is an enthusiast and her passion for poetry is infectious. Listed below are some of the things she does to keep herself well-informed and to encourage her pupils to enjoy, appreciate and understand the poetry she presents to them.

- 1 Provides a wide selection of good, appropriate poetry anthologies in the book corner of the classroom. This collection includes pop-up books, nursery rhymes, modern and traditional anthologies, scripts and poems for reading aloud, verse on tape, poetry posters and cards.
- 2 Reads a wide selection of poems to the children over the year: poems that make the children laugh, think and feel sad, poems with strong rhythms and gentle lyrics, verse from Africa, Asia, Australia and the US, as well as from the British Isles.
- 3 Allows some time for the children to browse among the poetry and reading books and for them to read poems quietly, listen to them on tape and read the poems of other children.
- 4 Collects the children's poems—some hand-written and illustrated, others word-processed—in a class anthology.
- 5 Encourages the children to keep a special book for writing in their favourite poems.
- 6 Collects together her own favourite poems in a folder and compiles a list, which she adds to regularly, of poetry suitable for the children.
- 7 Encourages the children to keep a special folder (the portfolio) of their own poems.
- 8 Reads a short, entertaining or challenging poem each day. Sometimes she encourages the pupils to talk about the poem but on other occasions nothing is said—the children just enjoy the experience.
- 9 Integrates poetry into the topic work the children undertake.
- 10 Uses poems for handwriting practice.
- 11 Encourages the children to perform their own poems and published verse in the classroom and at assembly.
- 12 Enters children for poetry competitions.
- 13 Encourages children to learn poems by heart.

- 14 Invites writers into school to work with the children and share their experience of the process of writing—where their ideas come from, the research they have to undertake, how they draft and revise, proof-read and submit for publication.
- 15 Organises Book Weeks during which teachers, parents, writers and advisers visit the school to contribute to the various activities.
- 16 Mounts colourful and interesting displays of the children’s poetry in the classroom and along the corridors.
- 17 Shows children how real poets draft, redraft, alter, edit and refine their work.
- 18 Talks to the children about poetic techniques and devices: rhythm, rhyme, imagery, contrast, repetition, figures of speech, as they arise in the poems she reads to them and in the children’s own efforts.
- 19 Uses paintings, line drawings, photographs, drama and music as stimuli for the children’s poetic writing.
- 20 Encourages the children to write in a range of structures: snapshot poems, haiku, alphabet poems, concrete verse, acrostics, limericks, riddles, free and rhyming verse.
- 21 Keeps up with her reading of poetry by visiting the School Library Service HQ, being a member the Poetry Society, reading the reviews in *The School Librarian* and other journals and keeping in close and regular contact with local bookshops.

Providing this sort of rich and stimulating environment is essential if poetry is to flourish. In addition children need specific guidance and ideas to start them off. It is not enough to merely give children a topic and expect them to write a poem.

Over the years as a teacher, adviser, school inspector and visiting poet, I have worked with primary and infant school teachers and their pupils in an effort to give poetry a higher profile, promote its enjoyment and appreciation, and encourage the children to write a range of verse. The following suggestions are distilled from the work I have undertaken in schools.

Another approach is for the teacher to act as the scribe and the children to compose a class poem to which a refrain is added. For example, just before an infant school Harvest Festival the children wrote a class poem which they performed with great enthusiasm and confidence for parents on the day. The classroom was full of a variety of fruit and vegetables and this afforded a good opportunity to talk about the produce—the colours, smells, shapes, sizes and so on. I wrote a list of words on the blackboard to which children added some descriptions:

oranges	round and rubbery
apples	hard and red
bananas	bent and blotchy
pears	fat and juicy
potatoes	dusty and hard
cabbages	crunchy and green
carrots	pointed and smooth
onions	flaky and brown
beetroot	dark as the night

We went through each phrase to see if any rhymes appeared naturally or if children could suggest any. I added one of my own. The refrain was decided upon when Sophie, who had brought a large basket of vegetables, announced proudly that ‘Everything grows in my Grandpa’s garden’. We all thought this chorus would be ideal. Here is the finished poem:

GRANDPA’S GARDEN

Big fat onions, flaky and brown,
Cucumbers soft and green,
Knobbly potatoes, dusty and hard,
The biggest you have ever seen.

*Everything grows in Grandpa’s Garden,
Everything grows and grows!*

Long, thin carrots pointed and smooth,
Beetroot smooth and red,
Celery long and crunchy and green,
Cabbages as big as your head.

*Everything grows in Grandpa's Garden,
Everything grows and grows!*

Apples hard and munchy to eat,
Pears so juicy and round,
Bananas soft and blotchy and bent,
The longest that can be found.

*Everything grows in Grandpa's Garden,
Everything grows and grows!*



In talking about the poems they hear and read and in writing verse, older infants and juniors start to become more confident in attempting to use some poetic devices. They begin, quite naturally, to include similes, alliteration, repetition and vivid imagery into their writing and start experimenting with rhymes and refrains. In one infant school I worked with a group of seven year olds undertaking a history project. The children had been asked by their teacher to interview their grandparents about what life was like when they were young, to make some notes and carry out a little simple research. As part of the project I read a range of poems and stories about grannies and grandpas including:

- 'My Grannie' by June Crebbin in *The Puffin Book of Fantastic First Poems*, edited by June Crebbin, Puffin.
- 'My Grandpa' by Ian Souter, 'My Gran' by Moira Andrew, 'Grandma's Winter Warmer' by Mark Bones and 'Granny Granny Please Don't Comb My Hair' by Grace Nichols in *Family Poems*, compiled by Jennifer Curry, Scholastic.

Chapter 8

Clerihews

Poetry makes children feel happy, capable and creative.

Kenneth Koch, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams:
Teaching Children to Write*

A clerihew is a comic four-line verse, typically about a person named in one of the lines. Here are four of my own showing different rhyming patterns and a double clerihew:



Elizabeth said, 'I'm like a queen, (a)
In my new dress of vivid green.' (a)
Her brother Matt let out a scream, (a)
'You're a wee bit early for Halloween!' (a)



Our neighbour talking to my mum said: (a)
'So I gave her a piece of my mind.' (b)
To part with such a precious thing, (c)
She must be very kind. (b)



Mr Wilson wears a wig, (a)
But for his head it's rather big. (a)
In windy weather he was careless. (b)
Now Mr Wilson's head is hairless. (b)



'Do you want a smacked bottom my lad?' (a)
Asked my father in threatening voice. (b)
I'm not likely to say: 'Yes please, Dad.' (a)
I don't think I have the choice! (b)

(Published in *It Takes One to Know One*
by Gervase Phinn, Puffin)

Chapter 12

Riddles

Poetry is a matter of words. Poetry is a stringing together of words in a ripple and jingle and run of colours. Poetry is an interplay of images. Poetry is an iridescent suggestion of an idea. Poetry is all these things and still is something else.

D. H. Lawrence in *Introductions and Reviews*,
edited by N. H. Reeve and John Worthen

Riddles are words puzzles cleverly written and fun to solve. Here is a traditional riddle:

Four stiff standers,
Four dilly-danders,
Two lookers,
Two crookers
And a wig-wag.

As an introduction to riddles children might be asked to look at this anonymous poem which shows how words can have different meanings:

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN

Have you ever seen a sheet on a river bed?
Or a single hair on a hammer's head?
Has the foot of a mountain any toes?
And is there a pair of garden hose?

Does the needle ever wink its eye?
Why doesn't the wing of a building fly?
Can you tickle the ribs of a parasol?
Or open the trunk of a tree at all?

Are the teeth of rake ever going to bite?
Have the hands of a clock any left and right?
Can the garden plot be deep and dark?
And what is the sound of the birch's bark?

"With this book Gervase exuberantly, vividly and with great practicality reveals his philosophy of work and pleasure going hand in hand. He emphasises enthusiasm with joy, delight, wonder and fun permeating everything in developing both skills and knowledge."

**Chris Brown, Review Editor of *The School Librarian*
and former Primary Headteacher**

"... this helpful book provides an essential handbook for primary schools. No classroom should be without it."

**Chris Holifield, Director of the Poetry Book Society,
which runs the Children's Poetry Bookshelf**

*"I found *Teaching Poetry in the Primary Classroom* hugely readable and just the sort of book that every teacher should take with them on their next trip to the Yorkshire Dales or N.U.T. coach tour. Tons of ideas, plus plentiful laughs and gentle tears."*

**Peter Dixon, Poet,
Education Consultant**

As children progress through primary school they need to be exposed to a rich diet of poetry and encouraged to read, perform and write it themselves. In addition, children need specific guidance and ideas to start them writing their own poems.

Teaching Poetry in the Primary Classroom offers an accessible, practical and structured programme for the teaching of this sometimes neglected aspect of the English curriculum.



Professor Gervase Phinn taught in a range of schools for fourteen years before becoming an education adviser and school inspector. He is now a freelance lecturer, broadcaster, writer, and a consultant for The Open University. He is President of The School Library Association.

Education / Teaching Skills & Techniques / Primary & Middle
UK £19.99



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Illustration © Christine Jopling

ISBN 978-184590130-1



9 781845 901301