

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Multicultural mishmash

by [William Jay Smith](#)

Review of *The New Oxford Book of Children's Verse*, edited by Neil Philip

These days when children, if not blasting one another with shotguns in schoolyards, are glued to the television where every type of adult entertainment is available to them, it is becoming more and more difficult to differentiate between adult literature and literature written specifically for or directed to children. With children treated almost everywhere as adults, how can one have an anthology like this one that proclaims itself a “collection of ‘children’s verse?’” That term, the editor Neil Philip immediately recognizes, covers a multitude of sins. “I have taken it to mean,” he writes,

verse written for children, or with them prominently in mind, or published for them with the explicit endorsement of the author. . . . The problem is essentially one of definition. What is children’s poetry, and how does it differ from poetry in general? This anthology is itself a full answer to this difficult question, but it is not an easy answer to summarize.

Some may argue that “the very notion of poetry for children is nonsense. . . . There is only poetry, good or bad.” Yet there is a “recognizable tradition that is at once separate from and intermingled with a larger poetic tradition, but it has its own landmarks and its own rhetoric,” and it is this tradition, from its beginning in the eighteenth century down to the present, that this book attempts to trace.

For many, this tradition, after Blake, Lear, Lewis Carroll, and Christina Rossetti, reached its peak in a lost golden age when a succession of poets from Robert Louis Stevenson and Eugene Field to A. A. Milne and Eleanor Farjeon, attuned to the child’s viewpoint, captured in traditional forms the essence of childhood. It is this golden age that the first half of this volume clearly presents. For others these poets are “poets of the nursery, irrelevant to the modern world: comforting, sentimental and drenched in nostalgia.” What children today require is “something shorter and snappier: what Spike Milligan has proudly termed ‘silly verse for kids.’” Although Philip claims to find this sort of verse empty as well as silly, “offering instant gratification but no sustenance,” the second half of his anthology is filled with it.

Philip holds that, like most postmodernist writers in other modes, today’s children’s poets “have deconstructed the rhetoric of children’s poetry.” The result is a new-found formal freedom: the use of free verse, the arrangement of poetry in patterns on the page, the writing of concrete poetry (the first modern example of which is Lewis Carroll’s “The Mouse’s Tale” from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*). But more typical of modern children’s poetry, in his view, is a thriving tradition of performance poetry, poetry in which the “printed words are not so much a blueprint for performance as the performance is an expression of the text.” In such poetry one often confronts “the

impossibility of confining the free voice in the strait-jacket of type.”

It is certainly true that children’s poetry has always been written to be read aloud, and it may well be that “the performance qualities of many modern writers extend rather than disrupt the tradition.” Philip is eager to represent in full the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary writing for children, ranging from African American and Aborigine to Caribbean and Black British to New Zealander and Canadian, that he sees as extending this tradition. Here is the conclusion of “Poetry Jump-Up” by John Agard, a Guyanese poet:

Words feelin hot hot hot  
big words feelin hot hot hot  
lil words feelin hot hot hot  
even sad words can’t help  
tappin dey toe  
to de riddum of de poetry band  
Dis is poetry carnival  
dis is poetry bacchanal  
so come on everybody  
join de celebration  
all you need is plenty perspiration  
an a little inspiration  
plenty perspiration  
an a little inspiration

There is indeed very little inspiration here. Nor is there much more in “Taking the Plunge,” by the English poet John Mole, which ends like this:

Knock me down with a sparrow’s feather,  
How about us going out together?

Groovy, t’riffic, brill and smashing,  
Me ’n’ you, we could start things splashing.

Watcha cocky, tara, see ya,  
Meet me for a coke in the cafeteria.

Halleluja and Amen,  
If you like this poem you can read it again.

One wonders how many young readers will want to accept this invitation. We have learned from rap and poetry slams, which may seem immediately satisfying to any number of young people, that what comes off the page is only what is there in the first place, no matter how skillful the performer.

Philip is so intent on identifying every individual voice and its individual English that in the index of authors he lists poets as English, Irish, Scottish, Jamaican, African American, Asian American, Native American—Creek, Australian. All this leads to some peculiar juxtapositions: below Ciardi, John (American) comes Cisneros, Sandra (Hispanic American). One wonders why an Italo-American is not identified as such. Italian-dialect poems, once very much in vogue in collections for young people, are now thought to be in bad taste, but Black-dialect poems like those

of Sonia Sanchez are given a prominent place:

cain't nobody tell me any different  
i'm ugly anybody with sense can see.  
but, one day i hope somebody will stop me

and say  
looka here, a pretty little black girl lookin' just  
like me.

This kind of thing Philip considers part of a “more boisterous, less reflective street-smart poetry” in which the focus is “on the rhythms of speech not the patterns of prosody, on school, not home.”

“Much of the best American children’s verse is scarcely known in Britain,” Philip correctly contends, “and the poets themselves represented only by a few hackneyed anthology pieces. Yet since Eugene Field and James Whitcomb Riley America has consistently produced children’s poetry of great energy and invention.” He sets out to correct this situation by reprinting wonderful pieces by Theodore Roethke, Langston Hughes, Karla Kushkin, Eve Merriam, and Aileen Fisher. May Swenson’s “The Centaur” is here, as is e.e. cummings’s “maggie and milly and molly and may,” along with Ogden Nash’s “Adventures of Isabel.” He comes up with little-known pieces like “I am Cherry Alive” by Delmore Schwartz. Elizabeth Bishop’s “Manners (For a Child of 1918)” is here, a beautiful poem in the simplest language:

My grandfather said to me  
as we sat on the wagon seat,  
“Be sure to remember to always  
speak to everyone you meet.”

Here also is X. J. Kennedy’s “Lighting a Fire,” which is sure to catch any small child’s attention:

One quick scratch  
Of a kitchen match  
And giant flames unzip!

How do they store  
So huge a roar  
In such a tiny tip?

For all Philip’s effort to set the record straight on American children’s verse, he leaves great gaps. Davis McCord is represented by his well-known, and to my mind pedestrian, “Five Chants” with only one of his shorter, more significant, lyrics. The greatest disappointment is to find Elizabeth Madox Roberts, who was undoubtedly the greatest children’s poet of the midcentury, represented by two poems that have been frequently reprinted and none of her other lyrics that give such an unforgettable picture of growing up in the rural South. There are welcome selections of American wit and humor from John Ciardi and Richard Wilbur but little of American nonsense. Jack Prelutsky is here, but there is no Shel Silverstein and no Dr. Seuss, who, whatever else he is, certainly qualifies as the American performance poet *par excellence*.

In the middle of a multicultural mishmash, Philip calls attention to two poets who have worked

within the accepted tradition of children's poetry and yet have produced work that he believes can take its place beside the top achievements in the field: Charles Causley and Ted Hughes. Causley is a poet who strives to capture that sense of wonder that we find in Blake and de la Mare, but Hughes has none of this freshness. The poetry in Hughes's prize-winning volumes that Philip finds "harsh, funny, urgent, potent" I find flat and predictable, as in the final lines of "Rooks love excitement:"

Were they shouting at me? What did they  
fear?  
It sounded  
More like a packed football stadium, at the  
shock  
of a longed-for goal—  
A sudden upfling of everything, a surfing  
cheer.

What Neil Philip has really given us in these pages is a collection of poems for a televised multiracial classroom, where the camera can zoom in on bright faces of all colors and shapes and where each student is allowed a sound bite with his or her voice with its special local lilt and its individual approach to both English and poetry. Philip's hero, the teacher Michael Rosen, oversees the entire scene with his poem "Eddie and the Birthday," which is all about a two-year-old who wants his birthday to go on and on. It is not funny at all, but I can see how, when read with the proper mimicry and inflections, it might reduce kids to stitches. Another teacher, Brian Morse, who contributes a lengthy, tedious piece to this collection, describes its effect on his classroom: "Perhaps it's dangerous to quote children's reactions, but my class of six- and seven-year-olds are still demanding rereadings of 'Eddie and the Birthday,' 'Eddie and the Nappy' (in fact all the baby-Eddie poems) and 'Chocolate Cake' six months after they heard them, and greeting me 'Nappy nappy, nappy' in the morning." Rosen's skill, Morse writes, is "to put children in touch with themselves."

Many of the poems in this collection will indeed put children in touch with themselves, and, like "Eddie and the Birthday," send them into peals of laughter about baby Eddie, but they are unlikely to bring them within reach of adult perceptions and thoughts and lead them to that treasure house of English poetry, which should, with proper guidance, be their legacy. Members of my generation committed to memory any number of the great poems in the first half of this anthology; we had them "by heart," which meant in a sense that we had digested a kind of encapsulated passion that would remain with us for a lifetime. It is shocking that so few of the poems of the second half of the century included here seem to offer young readers anything like that.

**William Jay Smith** is the author of *The Girl in Glass: Love Poems* (Brooks & Co.) and *The Spectra Hoax* (Story Line Press).

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