

Quiet Echoes from the Heart: Joyce Sidman and Her Poetry

This feature article highlights the poetry of Joyce Sidman, recipient of the 2013 NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award.

Joyce Sidman's poetry (*Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night*, 2010) envisions the majesty of often-overlooked creatures such as an owl, whose sweeping lordly presence forces the other inhabitants of the woods to bow down in fear and awe. Other poetic lines (*Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems*, 2005) share the tender surprises she discovers as a frozen pond thaws and life burgeons forth. In still other musings about nature (*Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow*, 2006), she urges readers to pay attention to the life hidden in a meadow. Then, showing her versatility and a keen sense of humor and knowledge of human nature (*This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness*, 2007), she sends forth notes of apology, some quickly accepted, others not. In her latest book (*What the Heart Knows: Chants, Charms, and Blessings*, 2013) she offers word talismans to guard against life's challenges, such as approaching darkness or the loss of a friend.

Few would argue about the uniqueness of the poetry written by Joyce Sidman, the seventeenth poet to be honored with the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award since 1977. She expertly pens lines that evoke a sense of place and the natural world. Even the titles of her poetry collections often summon sensory impressions for readers and listeners: *Just Us Two: Poems about Animal Dads* (Millbrook Press, 2000); *Eureka! Poems about Inventors* (Millbrook Press, 2002); *The World according to Dog: Poems and Teen Voices* (Houghton Mifflin,



2003); *Meow Ruff: A Story in Concrete Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006); *Red Sings from Treetops: A Year in Colors* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009); *Ubiquitous: Celebrating Nature's Survivors* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010); and *Swirl by Swirl: Spirals in Nature* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

Sidman, who now lives in Wayzata, Minnesota, is convinced that the places we are born and where we grow up “add a layer of resonance to our lives and our writing.” Since most of her own initial experiences of joy, sorrow, fear, mystery, and friendship occurred in places where she spent her formative years, such as her native Connecticut, and Maine and Pennsylvania where she spent summer vacations, “those landscapes hover in the back” of Sidman's mind and heart. They provide this poet with “image and metaphor—mysterious pine trees, waves against a rocky shore, meadows full of blueberry bushes and tumbledown stone walls,” she explains. “Our childhood experience of the world is a deep well that we keep turning to again and again in writing.”

Although Sidman acknowledges the inspiration she draws from nature—“the natural world, animals, color, the senses, dogs . . . all these things inspire me”—she has become certain that there is more to this poetic inspiration than what is found on its surface. “I think underneath it is a quest to discover joy and beauty—even if it means wading through darkness and fear—and then write about it as exactly as I can,” she claims.

Her ideas for poems have many different origins and necessitate being observant. “Poets have to be watchers, seeing the tiny details of their

surroundings so they can build poems with them,” she says. “So I look everywhere: examining this, considering that.” She is mindful of illustrator Ed Young’s assertion that although “ideas float around in the air, you can only ‘catch’ them if you are looking.” Often, Sidman’s writing ideas “marinate” for various amounts of time, she says, “until another idea collides with it, or until a phrase drops into my head—and I finally imagine a way forward into writing.” Then, once she has that spark of an idea, Sidman says she can “sit down and do the *other* work of writing: the pounding out, the endless revision, making sure every word, every line break, and every punctuation mark is just perfect.”

Still, as happens to even the most prolific writers, at times she experiences writer’s block. Seeking inspiration, Sidman says she reads a great deal, “usually other poetry or nature-related nonfiction.

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I research something that interests me.” But she also procrastinates, behaving in ways with which even the most inexperienced writer will be familiar. “I stare blankly out the window. I clean my desk,” she admits. “I pull out a bunch of wonderful thank-you notes from classroom kids, which

make me smile and remember their lively faces. I touch and hold rocks and shells on my desk. I look through old ideas and manuscripts. I read my own books to remind myself that I have gotten through these periods before.”

Despite her awareness that she will get past that temporary writer’s block and eventually fill those taunting blank pages with verse, Sidman has little tolerance for the absence of ideas when she settles in to work on a project. “I hate the blankness; for me, it is the worst part of writing,” she says. “Maybe blankness is the wrong word. It’s not exactly that you have no ideas; it’s that all the ideas you have seem boring or untenable. It’s a fear of writing something bad, I think. Ironically, the more accolades you get and the more awards you win,

the harder it gets to overcome this fear.” But having been in this position of seemingly having nothing to say before, Sidman waits it out. “Finally, I get so sick of dithering that I dive into something!” she exclaims with relief.

Like most disciplined writers, Sidman follows a particular routine. On a workday, she rises early, eats breakfast, and takes her tea to her office, which is upstairs in a room that doubles as a guest bedroom. Children’s and adult poetry books, picture-books, nature guidebooks, and books by friends fill the bookshelves. “On the walls are mementos of big moments: my first published children’s poem, the call-back message my son scribbled when I sold my first book, my Newbery plaque,” she says. “I’ve got a bulletin board pinned with quotes I love, art my students have given me, and a big blue ribbon from the Minnesota State Fair (for being a Homegrown Author).” Not surprisingly, her desk is “full of natural objects—rounded stones, feathers, pine cones, and wasp’s nests (which sometimes put off our guests),” she says. “It’s cozy and filled with light.”

Nestled within this cozy niche, Sidman settles in to work “as long as my brain is sharp and I am accomplishing something (even if it’s only reading),” she says. “Once I feel I’ve lost my edge, I quit—usually late morning.” By then she and her dog Watson are both eager for a walk, and they head out into the woods near her home. (Readers can view some of Sidman’s photographs of nature scenes and catch glimpses of some of the scenery along the way at her website: <http://www.joycesidman.com/>). For Sidman, these walks aren’t really breaks. They actually become a sort of outdoor writing lab, since she claims that many of her “breakthrough” moments “occur on the woodland path: a phrase will come into my head that begins a poem, or I’ll see the outline of a book.”

She reserves time after lunch for other kinds of author work—writing interviews, preparing for teaching weeks (about 4–5 one-week local poetry residencies a year), updating her website, reviewing galleys, and submitting invoices. She doesn’t return to the writing she completed earlier in the day, leaving it alone until the next morning, since she says she likes “to get some distance from it, so it’s easier

to be objective.” Despite the particular challenges of writing and the need for discipline, Sidman can’t imagine not writing since “it’s so much a part of me.” Had she been unable to publish her work, she suspects that she’d “probably be teaching full-time, and working out my need to write and be creative in other ways.”

Budding poets would be wise to adhere to her strong suggestion to “Read lots of poetry! Experiment with different forms. . . . Instead of writing for some nameless child, write for yourself. Write for the child you were and still are.” Usually, if what you write pleases you, it will please others. She suggests showing your work to colleagues you trust. “Listen well. Then sort through what you sense is true in their criticism, and what is just a different way of seeing the world,” she says. “Be true to what you know in your heart.”

Sidman remembers fondly some of her own early experiences with poetry. She recalls writing poetry when she was in grade school, which she thinks must have been sparked by early experiences with reading and being taught poetry. But her freshman year in high school was the most formative for the poet-to-be. Her poetry-loving English teacher taught her students the classics, assigning biographical reports, and encouraging their own creative writing. Sidman was hooked by this approach. This teacher was her mentor throughout her four high school years, according to Sidman, “achieving saint-like status for her unfailing willingness to read my unfocused, angst-filled poems and find something positive in each one.” The two stayed in touch even beyond high school. “In one of those wonderful fortuitous quirks,” she says, “we became neighbors and members of the same writer’s group many years later. I dedicated my first published poetry book to her.”

Poetry is a natural avenue for self-expression for youngsters, Sidman says. Most of them are not only natural poets, but they also have plenty to say. “Poetry is just another kind of magic—turning one thing into another,” she maintains. “Kids only need a slight nudge to realize the power of metaphor and sensory detail. And so many things are waiting in their hearts to be expressed!” She urges reluctant

teachers to try reading a poem a day before class starts, and asking students what they liked. “What words stick in your mind? What surprised you? How did it make you feel? Which words did that?” Sidman is convinced that encouraging students to back up their comments with specific words/phrases from the poem will help them “start understanding how poetry works.” Teachers should even begin to write with their students, trying some of the writing prompts on Sidman’s website. According to Sidman, “Kids need to *write* poetry as well as *read* it, in order to truly understand its power. Have fun, and choose the poems that you love best as your writing models. Your students will catch your excitement.”

Sidman did not start out planning to write poetry for children. She recalls how Maurice Sendak once claimed he didn’t necessarily write for children, and then somebody told him that his writing was intended for children. “We writers spend the first years of our writing lives searching for our voice,” Sidman says. She herself began writing adult poetry, which she still writes occasionally. But things changed once she had her own children. “Something about the way they approached the world—the anticipation and wonder—infected me,” she says. “It changed my writing. Suddenly I wanted to be part of that sense of wonder. I wrote and wrote, and my poetry became children’s poetry.” Sidman wonders if her work might be “a hybrid . . . it’s not for kids like Jack Prelutsky’s poetry is—rollicking and funny. It’s quieter, more contemplative—perhaps for adults *and* kids. That said, I *love* the children’s literature community and feel so much more at home in it than I would in the adult lit world. It’s a kinder, gentler place.”

Modestly, Sidman stakes no claim for having invented the poetry/nonfiction combination that is the trademark of many of her books. Instead, she credits poet Alice Schertle’s book *Advice for a Frog* (HarperCollins, 1995) about odd and unusual

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animals as being groundbreaking in that respect. The poems evoke the distinct characteristics of the various animals, including a frog, and the nonfiction notes in the back of the book describe each animal more fully and scientifically. “Discovering this book was a watershed moment for me,” she says. “As soon as I read it, I knew I had to try something similar. For a long time, I’d wanted to write about pond creatures, and this was a way to do it!” Her Houghton Mifflin editor Ann Rider, who eventually accepted the book, wanted to place the notes on the same page as the poem in order to inform readers most fully, and Sidman agreed with her. “Yes, I suppose it was a risk,” she says. But the risk paid off, and “when the book was accepted warmly, we were both thrilled.”

How does Sidman work? She gathers “lots of stuff about the subject . . . photographs, books, quotes, snippets of poetry that inspire me. I read widely from all sources, taking down longhand research notes, and making lists of possible creatures to include.”

After she has a short stack of poems, she starts “thinking about putting them together in a book: How will it flow?

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Once she feels ready to start writing, she begins “with the first ‘voice’ that presents itself to me.” Then she begins “the long process of writing, rewriting, relooking, revising some more,” she says. Sidman generally writes directly on screen, but she likes to print out different drafts of poems “to see how they look on paper. I check and recheck my facts. I often contact scientists, who graciously answer my questions,” she says.

After she has a short stack of poems, she starts “thinking about putting them together in a book: How will it flow? What will be its structure, its arc? I put the poems in a three-ring binder so I can physically shift them around and see what works best. Then I fit the remaining poems into that structure. I try to work on a manuscript until I think it’s perfect before I send it [to the editor]. . . . There might be further revisions after she sees it, but I want her to see my full vision of the book,” she maintains.

Surprisingly, Sidman does not boast of any special science training beyond her high school

and college science courses. But she does possess an innate curiosity that compels her to learn more about topics. “I think of myself as a lifelong learner,” she says. She reads science articles, notices and takes photos of the natural world wherever she goes, and “I obsessively crosscheck my data,” she says. “I don’t rely on a copyeditor to make sure I’ve gotten it right. I gather lots of sources for each subject, and if there’s any doubt, I contact a scientist in the field and ask him/her to take a look at my text. I would be horrified to print something inaccurate. Fortunately, every illustrator I’ve ever worked with is dedicated to accuracy, and so is the team at Houghton Mifflin. That said, everyone makes mistakes, and I’m sure I’ll make one someday, if I haven’t already. But I take accuracy very seriously.”

Her forthcoming book, *Winter Bees and Other Poems of the Cold*, will feature poems about winter survival, “including creatures such as moose, garter snakes, tundra swans, and, of course, honeybees,” she says. Rick Allen, who illustrated *Dark Emperor*, is currently at work creating lush, snowy linocuts for this project. Sidman says she’s seen a few of them, and “they are gorgeous.” Sidman also has another picturebook in the works that will be illustrated by Caldecott Medal winner Beth Krommes. It is based on a poem she originally wrote for *What the Heart Knows* called “Invocation for Snow in Large Quantities.” “We decided it was too young for that book and needed a book of its own! Tentative title: *Slow and Delightful and White*,” according to Sidman.

Sidman’s books of poetry receive starred reviews, awards, and show up on various notable book lists. Two of the illustrators of her books have been recognized with Caldecott Honor Medals. Sidman notes, “My ‘good illustrator karma’ is due to my superb editor, Ann Rider. Few people outside the publishing industry realize that a book’s editor selects the illustrator and guides the marriage of text to art. I’ve had some input, but she is responsible for choosing the glorious illustrators who have brought my books to life.” Rider, in turn, credits Sidman’s writing in guiding her to make the right illustrator match: “Joyce’s imagery is original and powerful. I often see it with art right away—and that is

a sign to me that I might be the right editor for the book and be able to make the right match with the right illustrator.” In addition, Sidman marvels at the “superb” Houghton Mifflin design and production team, which “consistently produces beautiful books. I feel tremendously lucky,” she says.

Sidman recalls her first book with Rider—*Song of the Water Boatman*—and how her editor chose as illustrator an artist (Beckie Prange) whose woodcuts she’d noticed at a local gallery. “When she sent me samples of Beckie’s work, I was stunned: this was exactly the kind of art I’d hoped for—bold, detailed, respectful of the young audience,” Sidman says. Rider took an enormous risk—“two unknowns, creating a hybrid poetry/science book. But Ann has such solid intuition. She was right in her choices. She’s always right. It’s a little uncanny.”

While Rider may be uncannily perfect in her matchmaking between author and illustrator, Sidman herself has the knack of finding words and phrases that prompt readers to regard nature and other topics deeply and thoughtfully, noticing characteristics they may never have considered before. Perhaps it’s that keenly felt kinship with the natural world shared by Sidman in her poems that compels readers to see the ubiquitous wonders in their own daily lives.

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