Poetry Writing with Novels in Verse

Inspire students to write their own poetry with Angela Johnson’s *The Other Side* and Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*. By Dean Schneider

From reading book reviews and talking with colleagues, I know that not everyone is a fan of novels in verse. I am, though, at least of ones that are sensitively and poetically written and don’t read like reshaped prose. Lines in a good verse novel are, to borrow from Nikki Giovanni’s poem “Poetry,” “pure energy / horizontally contained.” They are direct lines to the minds and hearts of the characters and, ultimately, to the minds and hearts of readers. They have an immediacy that speaks to young readers. And, important for me as a middle-school English teacher who does all he can to promote reading, verse novels are often the books that turn kids on to reading—and writing poems of their own.

Introducing Verse Novels in the Classroom

Middle-school students often think that they don’t like poetry, usually because their previous encounters with it in the classroom haven’t been engaging. So, before I teach poetry, I always tell students, “Give it a chance. I pride myself in teaching poetry well, and you will write some good stuff.” Then I read a novel in verse with them, using a very informal, readers’-theater approach: we put our desks in a circle, I hand out the books, and we read. If it’s a novel told in multiple voices, I ask for volunteers to read each part. If it’s a novel told by one narrator, we take turns reading aloud, or I simply read aloud several poems each day. I want the students to hear the book’s language, get a sense of the voices behind the lines, listen to the poems’ rhythms, and allow themselves to be pulled into a story that isn’t told in prose.

My two favorite novels in verse for middle-school students are Angela Johnson’s *The Other Side: Shorter Poems* and Karen Hesse’s Newbery Medal–winning *Out of the Dust*. These are excellent books for reading aloud together and for teaching students to write poems of their own.

The Other Side

Johnson’s *The Other Side* is the story of a 14-year-old girl’s journey back to her hometown of Shorter, Alabama, a tiny town that is about to be torn down to make room for a dog track. “Come see your past before it’s all / dust, baby,” Grandmama tells the narrator, and in all of the poems in the novel, Johnson describes the people, places, and events of one moment in time, opening the door for young readers and writers to do the same. In her opening poem, “Preface,” Johnson writes, “My poetry doesn’t sing the song of the sonnets, but then / I sing a different kind of music— / which is what it’s all about anyway.” We can help students sing their own different kinds of music through the verse novels we read with them.

My approach to teaching poetry writing with verse novels is simple. As we begin reading, I briefly point out examples of the form’s typical style and structure: mostly short lines, spare language, and minimal punctuation. Once students have read many poems and see how each tells a small story, I suggest first lines from the poems to inspire their
own writing. For example, Johnson's poem "Crazy" was a big hit with my students. Her poem begins, "You'd have to be / crazy / to want to live / your life in . . ." Students did their own riffs on those opening lines.

"Gymnastics"
You'd have to be crazy
To want to
Spend hours at a
Dirty gym
Sore
Sweaty
And tired
You'd have to be crazy
To want to have
Chalky
Dry
Ripped
Skin on your
Hands and knees
Or fall
Off the bars
Into the pit
Onto the 4-inchers
Into the vault
Or down the middle of a beam
Every day
You'd have to be crazy
To want to be
Teased or
Yelled at
And yelled at again
For four hours straight
You'd have to be crazy
—Caroline, grade 7

Other first lines from The Other Side that I've used to suggest students' writing include "Every day after school I used to"; "It's hard growing up in a family that"; and "My grandma says." I usually give students a choice of two or three possibilities.

Out of the Dust

Out of the Dust is the story of 14-year-old Billie Jo Kelby, who is living in the midst of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma and is learning to survive a family tragedy, along with tough economic hardship. Her earnest voice rings true, and Hesse does an admirable job of bringing Billie Jo and her times alive in a truly affecting story.

One poem from Out of the Dust, "Boxes," begins, "In my closet are two boxes, / the gatherings of my life." Students can begin their poems "In my closet/desk drawer/scrapbook/trophy case," and so on, and create a list poem like Hesse's. "Thanksgiving List" is an accessible model for a list poem about things we're thankful for. Johnson's "Hiding Place" contains the line, "Every day after school I," and Hesse's "Dreams" begins with similar lines: "Each day after class lets out, / each morning before it begins."

A good idea, for either poem, is to have students write poems about what they do after school or in the morning before school. One of my colleagues got great results with Hesse's opening poem, "Beginning: August 1920," by asking students to write poems about their own beginnings, going to their parents for help with the stories surrounding their births. My favorite poem from Out of the Dust is "On the Road with Arley," with the opening lines, "Here's the way I figure it."
place in the world is at the piano.” I love getting students to reflect on their own places in the world at this point in their lives.

**Sharing the Poems**

After the poems are written, I ask the students to divide themselves into groups of three or four and read their own poems aloud. These small-group readings are not editing sessions. I want the students to listen to their own voices and feel free to self-correct their first drafts when they hear things that don’t sound right. Then I ask for volunteers to read aloud to the whole class. Not only does this provide another opportunity for students to hear their own voices but it also lets other students recognize the range of topics and possibilities among their peers. Sometimes students will realize that they didn’t reach as far as they might have and ask to take their poems home to rework them.

**Evaluating the Poems**

Evaluating students’ poetry isn’t easy. I mostly grade poems as I grade everything else: some students work harder and put more time into their writing, and that should be recognized. Their work is usually reflected in the level of detail: the attention to line breaks, the lines that have been stripped of all unnecessary words, the consistency of the punctuation, and a strong voice. I look for the best poems first so that I can get a sense of what was possible within a given group of students, and then I grade accordingly. Every now and then, a poem will have a flash of originality, a vivid image, or a well-turned phrase that makes me, the teacher, proud to have been part of the alchemy.

In our current world of teaching to the test, pushing for higher standards, and helping students prepare for college, many students are not getting the chance to practice creative writing. I do not teach a creative-writing class; it’s a regular middle-school English class but one in which the books we read suggest all manner of creative writings. I’m always on the lookout for ways that our readings can suggest student-writing exercises in poetry, memoir, description, dialogue, monologue, and short stories. There is nothing I enjoy more about being an English teacher than the free-flowing intersection of reading, writing, thinking, and imagining that this approach to poetry writing represents.

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