
▲ CONCEPTS & THEMES

Wondrous Words: Young Children's Rewritings of Prose and Poetry

Shelby A. Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath

Patricia MacLachlan's (1993) astonishing story, *Baby*, is the tale of a young girl searching for words—*wondrous words*—words to express, words to comfort, words to swirl into her own life and surround her with the power of language. Much of the comfort and power she eventually finds comes from the recommended poetry of a school librarian who sweeps her arm toward the library shelves and says "In this room, in these books, there is the power of a hundred hurricanes. Wondrous words."

This piece centers on the power of words—in this case, words from literature—that have woven themselves into the lives of my two daughters, Lindsey and Ashley. The work stems from a long-term case study of their response to literature that centers on how, when, where, and why my children use the "wondrous words" of text to enhance, enjoy, and express their own verbal and written repertoires. In our earlier book (Wolf & Heath, 1992), we focused on the children's *verbal* and *dramatic* responses to literature, showing how they wove literary language into their day-to-day conversations and playful enactments. But as Virginia Woolf (1925) suggests, "Life wells up and alters and adds. Even things in a book-case change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered" (p. 217).

In the years since our book was published, the shape of the children's response to literature has continued to evolve, well up, alter, and add. Thus, in addition to providing a brief background on the children in their younger years, here we emphasize the children's response to literature as they became writers of prose and poetry in elementary school.

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Rewriting What You Read

Before we begin our discussion of Lindsey's and Ashley's writing, it's important to place them (and ourselves) in relationship with how authors view the connections between writing and reading. Katherine Paterson (1986a) states, "Those who know me best will testify that I am far more of a reader than I am a writer" (pp. 76-77). Odd words for a prolific writer who has produced some of the most highly acclaimed children's literature of our time. Yet, her testimony matches that of other authors, who claim to be readers first and foremost. Natalie Babbitt (1987) acknowledged her debt to Joseph Campbell. Virginia Hamilton (1987) was influenced by the sociological writing of W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham. E.B. White (1977) tipped his hat to Thoreau, while Katherine Paterson (1986b) gave more than a substantial nod to Frances Hodgson Burnett. Professional writers often pay tribute to exemplars of the craft both as fonts of inspiration and as sources of critical analysis. Authors read widely and analyze what they read, allowing these reflections to help shape their own portfolios of writing. So it is, or at least can be, with children.

Literary texts are thick with possibilities; those of ordinary language are thin by comparison.

However, in the current trend of writing process classrooms, young authors are encouraged to write about life experiences and the life of their individual imaginations. "Write what you know" is the advice often given to novice writers, encouraging them to take what they *know about life* and put it on paper. Yet, professional writers seem to suggest alternative advice: "Rewrite what you read," implying that writers are often inspired by what they *know about literature*. As Annie Dillard (1989) explains, "The writer studies literature, not the world. . . . He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write" (p. 68).

While "Write what you know" centers reflective powers on personal writing, "Rewrite what you read" places analytic emphasis on the writing of others and its possible translation into personal authorship. However, as Freedman (1993) notes, "The difference between a Tolstoy and you or me is not the amount of fiction we have read" (p. 238). Good writers have important things they want to say and many of these stem from their own life experience and creative imagination. Still, we argue that they will be better equipped to say these things if they are given multiple opportunities to read, discuss, and lean on established texts in creating and recreating their own forms of authorship. In the following sections, we will outline how Lindsey and Ashley first used the words from written text in their talk and then expanded their repertoires to rewrite what they had read in their own prose and poetry. While Lindsey is featured as a writer of prose and Ashley is the poet, both girls utilize multiple genres to express their ideas.

Rewriting Prose

Words in prose raise the ante on language, calling for heightened formality, varied intonation, and precise vocabulary. Both Lindsey and Ashley learned early the power of language to draw in adults. When Lindsey said she was going to "devour" her breakfast, she was sharing a word from *Snow White* (Grimm Brothers, 1974) that we had discussed the day before. When she cut her knees she asked for "sticking plaster," a remedy prescribed in Potter's (1906) *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*. As the girls played with words and tried them out in conversation, they not only gained an understanding of literary words and phrases, but they lured adults into their conversations and games.

As she grew older, Lindsey used what she knew about the efficacy of literary language in everyday life and applied it to her writing. In the construction of her initial prose, she often used literary language to make her writing "pretty." Letters, in particular, were occasions for elaborate and metaphorical compliments. On Mother's Day, Lindsey dictated the following to her father to write on a bright piece of orange construction paper that served as a greeting card:

Dear Mommy,

I love you. Your voice is like snowflakes falling like feathers from the sky.

Happy Mommy's Day! (5/87, 5;6 years).

The story of *Snow White* (Grimm Brothers, 1974) opens with the lines, "Once in the middle of winter, when snowflakes were falling like feathers from the sky, a Queen sat sewing by a window. . . ." Lindsey had requested this story so often that it was not surprising that a piece of this text had worked its way into her own text. When I complimented her beautiful letter, she commented, "Yeah, it's pretty, huh?" Taking up writing gave her more play even than her usual spoken adaptations of literary texts. She had, like the authors she knew, chosen the out-of-the-ordinary word or phrase to do more than just "say" her ideas.

*Just as caterpillars turn into butterflies and
ugly ducklings into swans, young writers
can transform their beginning talents
into more accomplished prose.*

When Lindsey was young, especially in the period between first and third grades, the predominant source for her prose writing was the fairy tale. Her stories were filled with beautiful princesses, gallant princes, and evil witches. She borrowed heavily from typical plot structures that begin with "Once upon a time . . ." and end with ". . . happily ever after." Her heroines all had fabulous female names (like Una and Arora) and equally exquisite attire. Short, stereotypical phrases—like "dark forest" and "shining castle"—appeared in her writing. Thus, surface forms and features of the genre created a support system for

her own writing. But in the third grade, in relation to a class unit on the fairy tale that included some fractured fairy tales like Scieszka's (1989) *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* and Yolen's (1981) *Sleeping Ugly*, she began to veer away from predictable plots and language limited to the borrowing of names and brief phrases. She saw potential in combining traditional tales with fractured forms to create her own plot and borrowed larger chunks of language. She wrote her own tale of *Sleeping Ugly*, the story of an atypical princess who was so ugly that mirrors were never allowed in her presence.

Sleeping Ugly

Once there was a king and queen who lived in a golden castle of great beauty, but they had no children. Finally, they had a daughter. They had a splendid feast and they invited all the fairies to court except the eldest fairy because she was a wicked witch.

When it was time to give the wishes, the eldest fairy stormed in and said, "I curse the child!" Her voice sounded like stones falling from a cliff. "She shall be ugly and when she is fifteen she shall look into a mirror and die!"

After the wicked witch left, the youngest fairy said, "She shall not die, but just faint for 100 years. However, I cannot change the ugliness. My little wand cannot overpower the eldest fairy." So the king broke all the mirrors in the castle.

As the ugly princess grew up, it was very hard because everybody in the court teased her. Yet, the servants in the castle loved her as they would their own daughter.

Time went by and the ugly princess turned fifteen and she decided that she would explore the castle. She went into a tower and there she saw an old woman putting clips into her hair while staring into an odd square of glass that reflected the old woman's face.

The ugly princess said, "May I try?" She took a clip, and when she stepped before the mirror, she saw her horrible face and fell in a faint to the floor. The witch laughed and said, "I've got you now!"

Soon, however, the little fairy came and picked up the princess and laid her on a little bed where she slept for a hundred years. But the wicked witch's magic was so powerful that everyone in the castle fell asleep too.

At the end of the hundred years, an unattractive prince was riding by on a disgusting-looking horse, when he chanced to see a torn-up flag fluttering from the tip of a distant tower.

Then he stopped and remembered a story he had heard when he was only a boy about an ugly princess. Since he hadn't had any luck with beautiful princesses during his journey, he decided to try an ugly one.

He went into the quiet castle. His footsteps echoed in the halls. Nothing stirred. He felt like the walls were holding their breath. Then he saw a tiny stairway and climbed it to the tower room. When he entered the room, he saw the Sleeping Ugly. He bent to kiss her, but then he stopped and said, "Should I be doing this?" But then he decided even though she was ugly on the outside, she was probably very beautiful on the inside.

He kissed her and she woke up. They were married in a beautiful green meadow with daisies all around. They had two ugly children and they lived happily ever after in a castle without mirrors for the rest of their lives (3/92, 9/4 years).

Lindsey knew well that literary language could evoke images and emotions far beyond the capacity of ordinary language. Literary texts are thick with possibilities; those of ordinary language are thin by comparison. Between "once upon a time" and "happily ever after," the words of a story describe a world where life is often more formal and elegant. Thus, in Lindsey's literary rendition there is "a golden castle of great beauty" where servants love an ugly princess "as they would their own daughter" though witches "storm in" with voices that sound "like stones falling from a cliff" and later scream "I've got you now!"

Just as the prince's footsteps echo in the halls, there are echoes of heard voices throughout this text—voices from stories with which Lindsey was quite familiar: Jane Yolen's (1981) original *Sleeping Ugly* provided the title and central idea, while Trina Schart Hyman's retelling of Grimm's (1977) *The Sleeping Beauty* provided the plot structure and larger chunks of language. In fact, the whole section of the prince's arrival has strong parallels to Hyman's text, with some words directly repeated:

Lindsey's Text	Hyman's (1977) Text
Then he stopped and <u>remembered a story</u> he had heard when he was only a boy about an ugly princess . . .	<i>The Prince <u>remembered the old story</u> from his childhood tales . . .</i>
He went into the quiet castle. <u>His footsteps echoed</u> in the halls. Nothing stirred. He felt like the walls were holding their breath.	<i>He went on farther, passing through forgotten rooms and dusty halls. <u>His footsteps echoed</u> through the silence, and it was all so still that he could hear his own heart beating.</i>

When Lindsey was a young child, Hyman's retelling had been one of her favorites. We had read it together multiple times and she had created costumes and enacted whole scenes from the story on myriad occasions. She had often leaned on the story's language to create her dramas, and the same was true in her writing. Still, leaning on another's language did not mean that her own voice lacked strength. The metaphor of the walls holding their breath was her creation and added to the silent suspense of the scene.

Although Lindsey's earlier stories did not provide insight into the motivations and intentions behind character decisions, with the tale of *Sleeping Ugly* Lindsey began to create characters who questioned their situations. This goes far beyond what is typically asked in the genre of Western fairy tales (Zipes, 1987). For example, it is rare for a prince to hesitate over his love for the princess. Love in fairy tales occurs as a bolt of lightning—instantaneous and unquestioned.

Lindsey's Text	Hyman's (1977) Text
When he entered the room, he saw the Sleeping Ugly. He bent to kiss her, but then he stopped and said, "Should I be doing this?" But then he decided even though she was ugly on the outside, she was probably very beautiful on the inside.	<i>There she lay, amidst the dust and the cobwebs, looking so shining and beautiful and merry that he could not believe what he saw.</i>
He kissed her and she woke up.	<i>His heart was so full of love that he knelt down beside her and gave her a kiss.</i>

But in Lindsey's story, perhaps because of the specific characteristics of the princess involved, the prince stops to think, "Should I be doing this?" In Hyman's text and in most fairy tales, it is beauty that inspires love—flawless, stereotypical beauty. But with this element gone, the prince must search his heart to find a different kind of radiance—one of character, not surface forms. This scene in her story is particularly reminiscent of multiple conversations we had had over the years in which we discussed how real partnerships are formed and what constitutes lasting relationships. Thus, Lindsey's text echoes past texts, both on and off the page.

Ashley and Lindsey are part of the network of literature, and they cite, revise and elaborate on text to make social meaning.

Tolkien (cited in Cairney, 1989) reminds us that there is only one cauldron of stories and each of us takes his or her own dipperful in creating our own. Lindsey's early brews consisted predominantly of fairy tale ingredients, but this changed as she grew older. As her reading at home and school shifted, she experimented with new genres—imaginary fantasies, historical fiction, and tales of more modern times. In the fifth grade, she began to write prolifically, spurred by her teacher's twice-monthly assignment of book reports. These reports included a summary of the selected text as well as some analytic interpretation or personal response. The teacher also provided a variety of options for expression through art (such as dioramas and mobiles) and through multiple written genres (such as letters and newspaper articles). Lindsey often chose artistic expression for her reports: she made a diorama for E.B. White's (1945) *Stuart Little* with the mouse protagonist canoeing down a construction paper river in a cardboard boat, she made a large poster for Lowry's (1993) Newbery winner *The Giver*, and she made a board game for Patricia MacLachlan's (1993) book *Baby*.

This last book speaks of the power of "wondrous words" and it came to have particular import for Lindsey. She first heard it when I brought along an audiocassette of the story narrated by Claire Bloom on a family trip to the mountains. The combination of MacLachlan's words and Bloom's interpretation was startling in its beauty, but no one was more affected than Lindsey. She played the text later that night as she went to sleep and thereafter played it in her bedroom every night for a month. Ashley, too, listened to the text over and over again, for they share a bedroom as well as a similar affection for the comfort of the familiar as they drift off to sleep. Ashley got her the book for Christmas and during the following months Lindsey read *Baby* several times, and the words of the story began to slip into her own prose. Rather than choosing visual art for her book report interpretations, she began to write them, and MacLachlan's language came to have a major impact on her school assignments.

For example, when given an open-ended assignment to simply "write a story," she decided to use an illustration from Chris Van Allsburg's (1984) *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. The book is essentially a set of distinct pictures each with a title and a brief caption, but they are joined by an introductory frame story. Lindsey selected an illustration of a young woman asleep with an open book—a book from which mysterious vines grow up and over the pages. The title of the illustration is "Mr. Linden's Library" and the caption reads "He had warned her about the book but now it was too late." Lindsey wrote a story that wove Van Allsburg's illustrated and textual hints together with MacLachlan's emphasis on words. Her story begins:

Amy Satchel was at the young age of ten. She was a curious girl, and my next door neighbor. I am Samantha Witicor, and I was Amy's best friend until Mr. Linden moved into the vacant house across the dirt road. Mr. Linden was an elderly man with a white beard that hung down to about his Adam's apple. His white hair was piled on the top of his head like a wild bird's nest. He liked to walk with a hollowed out carved shot gun for a cane. He used it to help the problems with his back, as he always told Amy and I.

Mr. Linden was a bookworm, for that is what the littler children called him. If he did not have us to bother him, he would probably get lost in all the words in all his wondrous books. Mr. Linden would tell Amy and me stories of his travels all over the world. Some were scary and some were adventurous. But what we loved most was when he read us stories. Mr. Linden said we could read or borrow any story in his whole library except the tale called *The Book of Secrets*.

Because Lindsey, too, is a bookworm, she was able to braid together three texts—Van Allsburg's, MacLachlan's, and her own. The emphasis is on *reading* stories and the potential of literally losing oneself in books. Words in books are wondrous, secretive, and of course ultimately powerful. Just as Little Red Riding Hood is destined to disobey her mother's admonitions and go off the path, Amy, "a curious girl," is bound to disregard Mr. Linden's warning.

Indeed, Amy steals the book, which leads to dire consequences, as Sara is about to discover:

... When I rushed into Amy's room, she was sprawled across her bed. In the flickering candlelight I could see the book across her chest. It was open to the twenty-second page, to a story entitled "The Secret Garden." But it was not the story I knew, for twisted vines grew out of the pages. Mr. Linden entered the room and stood by me with tears glistening on his cheeks.

"There's only one way to save her. I have to take her place," said Mr. Linden in a shaking voice. Before we could stop him, he took a piece of the plant and rubbed it across his tear-stained cheeks. Suddenly, Mr. Linden started to shake. Then he fell to the ground, his cane breaking in two.

Amy sat up quickly. The book fell to the floor and vanished. She looked at Mr. Linden and burst into tears. The End

Lindsey introduced a fourth text, Burnett's (1910) *The Secret Garden*, but as she suggests, it was not the familiar story. Instead, it is intertextual play which allowed her to introduce a much more ominous tale. Although these references make obvious links to specific texts, a part of the power as well as the some-

what clichéd nature of Lindsey's writing comes from other textual sources. These sources are not named, but phrases like "flickering candlelight" and "tear-stained cheeks" are found in multiple texts. When we talked about her story, Lindsey could not name any specific citation for these phrases, but she explained, "They might have been borrowed 'cause sometimes I borrow without even thinking."

Still, her story was highly reflective as well as representative of current influences on her writing. And, true to the structure of many stories she knew, Lindsey offered an epilogue:

Epilogue

Mr. Linden was buried on July 1, 1904.

After his burial, I went into his house. The moving men were already packing up his belongings. I climbed the bookshelf ladder, trying not to slip. I looked up. The book was there! I reached up for it and pulled, but it was wedged inside the bookshelf and would not yield. So the secrets were locked inside the book forever.

I never discovered the hidden mystery of *The Book of Secrets*. (11/93, 11;0 years)

Although Sara never discovers the mystery of the book, Lindsey has discovered many. When she reaches for books, she is able to pull out words, phrases, and structures to support her own creations. Even more, in the writing of this particular story, she was able to create a new reputation for herself. Her classmates lauded this tale and thereafter called her "the writer."

As a writer, Lindsey sometimes wrote to other authors, and in the spring of fifth grade she worked on a class assignment to create a magazine on the topic of her choice. She chose to write about children's literature, and her magazine included a Peter Pan wonder story, an editorial on censorship in children's books, an interview with Trina Schart Hyman, and an advertisement for *Baby*. She wrote to MacLachlan, hoping to receive some information on her writing career:

Dear Ms. MacLachlan,

My name is Lindsey Marie Wolf and I'm eleven years old. I got the book *Baby* for Christmas. Actually, I got the audio cassette first and listened to it so many times, I fell in love with it and my sister bought the book for me so I could read it on my own. Since then, I've read it three times. I really love the book because of the language that you use. It makes me feel like I'm right there watching everything happen. Also, what I thought was funny is that I'm like Larkin's mom—I cry after anything sad (and sometimes when I'm happy!).

In school, I have to write a lot of stories and I use some of your language in my stories. For instance, one of my stories . . . [was titled] "Jurassic Park Comes to Niwot Elementary" (that's the school I go to). I used a part in your story where Ozzie snorts and Lalo said it's part of the family tradition. And in my other story "Mr. Linden's Library" I used your saying "wondrous words." I'm including this story as a present to you.

Right now, in school, we're making magazines and doing interview questions. My magazine is on children's literature, so I decided to write to you.

Would you be so kind to write me back and answer the questions on the next page. . . . Thanks for your time and more important, thanks for writing such captivating stories.

Sincerely,

Lindsey (3/94, 11;4 years)

Lindsey attached several interview questions, including "What made you want to become a writer?" "What gave you the idea for your book *Baby?*" and "Do you have any advice for a young person wanting to become a writer?" MacLachlan didn't write back, but Lindsey was unperturbed. I had explained that authors were extraordinarily busy people and Lindsey said, "She's probably busy writing another great book." In essence, Lindsey didn't really need advice from MacLachlan, for she had been given the gift of the author's wondrous words.

Ashley, too, leaned on the words and structures offered by other stories in her own writing, and by the second grade she had high ambitions to become a writer, among other things, explaining, "I want to be an Olympic skier, an ichthyologist, and a writer." As a young writer, she was often encouraged by her teachers to follow the prose structures of established authors. She wrote a story about an insect named "Buggy" who didn't like his name, leaning on Henkes' (1991) story of a young mouse named *Chrysanthemum* who worried over her name as well. In another assignment, her teacher read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1969) and asked the children to choose a new animal about which to write their stories. Some children chose dogs, some cats, and some dinosaurs, but Ashley chose a literary character—an ugly duckling. Following the basic story pattern established by Carle, Ashley had her duckling eat his way through so many tasty treats that he got a stomach ache. This discomfort, among other things, however, was soon to change:

The next day was Sunday again. The duckling ate through one nice trout and he felt much better. Now he was not hungry anymore and he was not a duckling anymore. He was a beautiful swan. (5/94, 8;5 years)

This entire section of her story is borrowed from Carle, with the exception of a few substituted words (such as "trout" for "green leaf"), while transformation of the duckling to a swan is borrowed from Hans Christian Andersen (1979). Both authors tell us that in nature as well as in stories miraculous changes occur. And just as caterpillars turn into butterflies and ugly ducklings into swans, young writers can transform their beginning talents into more accomplished prose.

Rewriting Poetry

While prose slipped into my children's language in words and small phrases and only later came in larger chunks that leaned heavily on structure, poetry came in larger pieces from the start. Chukovsky (1963) explains that young children's repetitions in poetry lend a song-like rhythm to their renditions and are used to express strong emotion. He further suggests that "Under the influence of beautiful word sequences, shaped by a pliable musical rhythm and richly melodic rhymes, the child playfully, without the least effort, strengthens his vocabulary and his sense of the structure of his native

language" (p. 87). Rhyme is a common feature in children's poetry, while rhythm is a requirement. There is much freedom within the form, but the boundaries offer a supportive structure for the expression of playful sounds, images, and feelings.

By the age of four, Ashley was able to recognize and reproduce numerous poems, yet she was also interested in rewriting rhyme, and her creations were often compilations of the many poems she had heard in text. For example, one day while reading the Ahlbergs' (1986) text of *The Jolly Postman*, Ashley created her own poem. We were reading the witch's advertisement for "Hobgoblin Supplies Ltd©," which includes all the necessities of witchhood. Ashley asked me if I would like a song and selected the advertisement for "Little Boy Pie Mix—for those unexpected visitors when the cupboard is bare." The text is accompanied by an illustration of a witch bringing a smiling-faced pie to her fellow witches seated at table. To the side is a box of the mix which features a little boy standing expectantly in a bowl and underneath are written the words "Finest natural ingredients. No preservatives." Ashley sang:

Pease porridge hot
 Pease porridge cold
 Bake me a cake as fast as you can.
 Roll it and pat it and put it in the baker.
 And put it in the baker for a Mickey Cake! (3/90, 4;3 years)

Ashley's creation brought together three poems about food: one about porridge ("Pease Porridge Hot" is a Mother Goose rhyme) and two about cake (Mother Goose's "Pat a Cake" and Sendak's, 1970, *In the Night Kitchen*). The resulting feast of "little boy pie mix" brought forth images of other nursery rhyme food as well as Sendak's illustration of Mickey, who was baked in a cake. Like Sendak's bakers, Ashley mixed the ingredients from her store of poetry, creating her own concoction.

Ashley's love of rhyme combined with her need to reshape texts to match her own rhythms. While Lindsey seldom created her own poetry or sang the poems she knew, Ashley filled the house with her songs. Ashley was the poet and the comic, substituting words and blending rhymes while Lindsey worked on her prose. The children also had fewer opportunities to write poetry in school, but when they did, they were often assigned a specific form, such as a haiku or a limerick. Sometimes they were asked to imitate the styles of certain poets, such as when Ashley was asked to write "Jack Prelutsky poems." Preferring books of poetry from an early age and fascinated with the decoding aspect of reading in first grade, Ashley spent hours meticulously copying the narrative poetry of Dr. Seuss. It was a task that I would never have suggested, but Ashley often chose to sit at the computer carefully typing in the words directly from his texts. She has completely recopied versions of *Hop on Pop* (1963), *Green Eggs and Ham* (1968), and *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). She continued this habit well into the second grade when she received Vera B. Williams' (1993) book *Scooter*, in which the female protagonist expresses herself in acrostic poetry. Though the book was quite a bit longer than a Dr. Seuss text, Ashley began a computer file for copying the poetry.

Ashley was fascinated with the acrostic form and she made use of the form to prepare for the arrival of her best friend, Nate. Ashley and Nate have been friends since they were two years old and played with each other on a daily basis for three years. Since our families moved apart, they have written to each other faithfully—sending postcards, letters, and drawings. When Ashley heard the news that Nate and his mother were coming to visit, she was thrilled and immediately began making plans for all that they would do. She also began making welcoming gifts, the first of which was an acrostic poem:

Wow
Exciting
Lovely
Coming? Really?
Outstanding
Marvelous
Extra Special!

Nice
A great kid!
Terrific
Excellent friend! (6/94, 8;6 years)

In Ashley's acrostic, the words "Welcome Nate" become a jumping off place for her to express her feelings. In the word "Welcome" single exclamations of delight over the visit are interrupted in the middle with two one-word questions, "Coming? Really?" The sense of wonder and excitement is palpable. In the word "Nate" she describes her feelings about the boy himself—a boy of many qualities, including the fact that he's "a great kid" and an "excellent friend."

*Books offer children possibilities for social
interaction, dramatic renderings,
and written expression.*

Although Ashley did not write poetry often, when she did it was to express relationships with those she loved. Over the years, my husband, Kenny, and I have received many love poems; and we are most often the objects of her poetic expression. But when she was eight, we got a new puppy—a little golden retriever that Ashley named Rosie. Lindsey, wanting to participate in the naming and being constantly influenced by the fairy tales, has given her the full name of Rose Red, but we all call her Rosie. In the months prior to Rosie's arrival, Ashley and I had read Sendak's (1960) story *The Sign on Rosie's Door* as well as *Really Rosie* (1975), a book based on a video that combined scenes from the original Rosie story as well as stories from Sendak's (1962a–d) *Nutshell Li-*

brary. As a young man, Sendak had spent hours observing and making notes as well as sketches of a young girl, Rosie, as she led the neighborhood children in elaborate plays—plays in which she naturally appeared as the star (Sendak, 1993). Ashley loved the book and we read it a number of times, and later when I asked her how she decided on the name “Rosie” for our dog, she said, “Because I like the Maurice Sendak book and I like the thought of flowers.”

About a month after we got our puppy, I bought Ashley the audiocassette of *Really Rosie* with music by Carole King, and she played it multiple times. Although there are many songs on the tape, Ashley particularly loved the title song, in which Rosie belts out her astonishing stardom. Ashley decided to write her own “Really Rosie” poem and dedicate it to her dog. She asked me to type in Sendak’s original poem, and then she began substituting words and phrases that would best capture the character of her puppy:

I’m really Rosie.
I’m some swell pet.
You’d better believe me
I’m the best pup yet.
BE-LIEVE ME!
BE-LIEVE ME!
Golden hair everywhere
On the kitchen floor
Scratches, scratches, scratches on the door!
I’m Rosie galore!
BE-LIEVE ME!
BE-LIEVE ME!
I can sit
And stay and come and go
I can bark,
Bark, bark high and low
And I get
Mud on the rug each day
Hip Hip Hooray!
Three big cheers for Rosie today
No big dog can chase me away.
ROSIE!
BE-LIEVE ME!
BE-LIEVE ME!

(6/94, 8,7 years)

The poem is a near replica of the original Sendak piece—the form, the exact placement of the rhyme, and most certainly the theme of confident self joy. Ashley was also influenced by *Some Swell Pup or Are You Sure You Want a Dog?* (Sendak & Margolis, 1976). This story is a cautionary tale of two children with a new puppy, who find their dog’s antics more than they can handle. They react to the pup’s habit of peeing on rugs, chewing, and generally destroying their home with revulsion and harsh words. Ultimately their relationship with their puppy is saved by an adult dog who advises them that the puppy’s antics are normal and have to be treated with gentle words, not screams.

Ashley loved this book and in her poem she took the title *Some Swell Pup* and transformed it in her second line to "some swell pet," thus setting the stage for her upcoming rhyme. Still, the word "pup" was not forgotten; it was simply moved to the fourth line, where she was able to complete her verse. More important, Ashley used the book's theme to turn her own puppy's somewhat disturbing habits—shedding, scratching, barking, and leaving mud tracks—into a triumphant declaration ("Hip Hip Hooray!") of delightful habits. Because this poem was also a song, Ashley sang it throughout the day of its creation and for many days thereafter. The day she wrote it, in fact, I was up in my study working while Ash and Lindsey were out giving Rosie a bath. I could hear their voices belting out the words "BE-LIEVE ME!", and when I went to the window, they were both serenading a rather soapy Rosie with Ashley's new poem.

Lindsey had other social purposes in writing her own poetry. With an established reputation as "the writer" in her fifth grade class, Lindsey still wrote poetry only rarely. At the end of the year, however, she chose poetry as a way to make her writing stand out even more. Along with all the fifth graders in the school, Lindsey had been participating in the D.A.R.E. program. The acronym stands for Drug Abuse Resistance Education, and over a period of months a young policeman, Officer Scot, came with his dog to talk to the children about drugs. As the culminating activity, they were asked to write an essay about what they had learned. These essays were to be read aloud in class and the best one from each class picked to be read in front of friends and family at the D.A.R.E. graduation ceremony.

Lindsey sat down and wrote an essay that warned of the dangers of drugs, but she was dissatisfied and frustrated with how "ordinary" it was. She explained that if it was going to be a winner, she would have to come up with "something interesting, something that would catch people's attention." She asked Kenny, my husband, for help and after a long conversation they decided that she could write a poem built on the pattern established in "The House That Jack Built." In their discussion, they talked about the facts that she had learned in D.A.R.E., particularly the emotional consequences of drugs. She worked on the poem on and off for two weeks, thinking about the rhymes and creating couplets. When a good friend of ours came to visit, Lindsey read her the pieces she had and Paula, who has much experience in working with young writers, asked a number of questions that got Lindsey thinking about the order of her verses. They decided to try to have the verses build in intensity. The final result demonstrates the mounting progression of extensive drug habits.

Like the first and oft-repeated line of the Mother Goose rhyme, "This is the House That Jack Built," Lindsey's poem is entitled "These Are the Problems That Drugs Cause." The structure of the poem is ever-widening, with all of the verses repeated with the introduction of each new verse, and ending with the repetition of the title. The poem is too long to share in this form, but the following demonstrates all of the verses. However, in the original, the poem continually reverses itself and repeats the former verses with the addition of each new couplet:

These Are the Problems That Drugs Cause

These are the problems that drugs cause.

This is the body bruised and beaten,
That has the brain all burned and eaten.

These are the friendships torn and tossed,
This is the family sad and lost.

This is the schoolwork that's never done,
These are the sports that are never won.

This is the money that's never there,
This is the wallet that's always bare.

These are the crimes for which you get caught,
This is the jail in which you will rot.

These are the nightmares that dance in your head,
These are the sweet dreams that now have fled.

This is the death for which you are bound,
This is the graveyard in which you are found.

This is the love that's lost forever,
These are the bonds that you caused us to sever.

SO when you think you are so hot,
then stop and listen to Officer Scot. (5/94, 11;6 years)

In "The House That Jack Built" the poem builds line by line, but Lindsey chose to construct couplets. Yet, like the original, all her lines start with "This is . . ." or in the cases where she needs a plural, "These are . . ." The couplets stress the formal aspects of poetic language. Rather than "you'll rot in jail," the grammar is upended to accommodate the rhyme—"This is the jail in which you will rot." Most of the lines are Lindsey's, but she got particular help in two places. The "nightmares that dance in your head" and the "sweet dreams that now have fled" was a much discussed couplet. When Lindsey first created the rhyme, it was overlong and awkward and Paula helped her trim it to fit the pattern. Lindsey also explained that while she created the "love that's lost forever" line, she was stumped about how to finish it. Again, after much negotiation and exploration of possible end rhymes—"never, lever, endeavor, etc."—Paula suggested "sever" and actually gave her the ending line. Lindsey wasn't really sure what it meant to sever bonds, but after an explanation she felt that it fit the mood of her piece as well as completed the rhyme.

The one exception to the forward and backward flow of the poem is the last couplet. Lindsey created this rhyme early on and wanted to use it as the last verse. Paula had suggested eliminating this couplet because it took away from the universal quality of the poem by being more specific to Lindsey's

classroom situation. Lindsey, however, decided to keep it. To her mind, it added "just the right touch." It also took her audience into account, for her poem would be judged by her fellow classmates who had come to have great respect for the young policeman. He had often reminded them that drugs made teens feel cocky and "so hot," but they were to think about the facts they had learned and be willing to walk away. As it turned out, Lindsey was able to walk away with the award for the best "essay" in her class. Her classmates whooped and applauded when she finished reading, and then voted for her to read it again at the graduation ceremony.

Thus the girls' use of poetry, like prose, met specific social needs. For Ashley, poetry was a declaration of love—a jubilant celebration of relationships, while Lindsey used it to play with yet another genre, to make her writing unique, and to maintain her reputation as the fifth grade girl who could really write.

Conclusion

Margaret Meek (1988) explains that those "who know how to recognize bits and pieces of other texts in what they read find it is like the discovery of old friends in new places . . . They become 'insiders' in the network" (p. 22). One Thanksgiving when Lindsey bent over a pot of turkey giblets boiling in water, she whispered, "Bring me her lungs and liver as a token" (November, 1989, 7;0 years). She was quoting the wicked stepmother from *Snow White* (Grimm Brothers, 1974), and turned to give me a conspiratorial wink. And as Ashley rummaged in the fruit bowl to select her school snack, she shouted, "I need a great, *huge* orange for our great *huge* snack!" Though I failed to recognize the text, and worried that I might have missed some crucial preschool announcement, Lindsey laughed and said, "No, mom, she's just being the bear from Goldilocks!" Both girls chuckled at my naiveté (February 26, 1990, 7;3 and 4;2 years). Being an "insider in the network" includes inside humor, unspoken messages in winks and chuckles, and the multiple voices of the "here and now" and "once upon a time" meeting together to talk.

*The children did not simply copy what
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the world in which they lived.*

Ashley and Lindsey are part of the network of literature, and they cite, revise, and elaborate on text to make social meaning both in their talk as well as in their writing. By manipulating language, pulling out words and using or breaking the structure of multiple texts and recreating them into one, the girls received kudos for the original authorship so valued in our community. Heath (1983) explains that in the mainstream "children are trained to act as conversa-

tion partners and information-givers" (p. 249). Vital to this discussion is the acceptance and praise of the literary imagination. Children are encouraged to make up stories, use unusual vocabulary, and craft their language to make poetic points. Taylor (1983), who studied six mainstream families, made similar discoveries. The focus on literacy in these families supported the position that children, from a very early age, understand the purpose of print. More important, Taylor's work showed that "the most significant 'mode' of transmitting literacy styles and values occurs indirectly . . . through the continuously diffuse use of written language in the ongoing life of the family" (p. 7).

The amount of reading and the appreciation of literature can certainly be seen as an unusual occurrence in a time when TV, video, lessons, and extracurricular activities take up the lives of many children in professional families. My children also cited text from multiple sources, especially TV, but these sources often had literary origins. For example, one day when I went to the university to do some work, I took Ashley with me. She sat at my computer typing, while I organized books for my summer class and went over my lesson plans. She complained that she was hungry, but I told her she would simply have to wait—there was nothing to eat and we weren't going home just yet. After asking me verbally several times and receiving no satisfaction, she finally cleared the computer screen of her earlier work and wrote the following:

Dear Mom,

I am very, very, very, very, very, very hungry! Is there any food here? I am going to die if I don't have anything to eat!

ON PAIN OF DEATH

!

(June 25, 1994, 8;6 months)

The final line, which she highlighted in caps and in a different font, comes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when the prince warns the Montagues and Capulets to leave their fighting: "Once more, on pain of death, all men depart!" The girls had heard the line in the Zeffirelli film version, and I had repeated it several times thereafter when I wanted them to heed my warnings about particular household rules. Ashley could not name the reference, but the point of her using the quote was not to provide an accurate citation, but to place strong emphasis on her emotional and gustatory needs. Although this quote could be tracked back to literature, Ashley and Lindsey both were equally adept at other less literary quotes: Alicia Silverstone's clueless comments "Whatever!" and "As if . . ." and of course Jim Carey's "SMOKIN'". Still, literature held a prominent place in their speech and in their written texts, for books were a continual source of conversation, reflection, and rewriting.

For parents and teachers interested in helping their children expand their verbal and written repertoires, this story of Lindsey and Ashley demonstrates the innumerable ways in which books offer possibilities for social interaction, dramatic renderings, and written expression. Yet, it's critical to note the transformative quality of such possibilities. The children did not simply copy what they'd heard and read, but instead *changed* it to rewrite the words of text as well as the world in which they lived. And their world was expanded by adult commentary that challenged their analogies and creative propositions. Whether

working and playing with the children in a dramatic production or a piece of writing, adults offered support through costumes and props or added lines and explanations of vocabulary. More important than these concrete offerings, however, the support did not shy away from abstract questioning and criticism. The resultant narratives, whether on or off the page, emerged from long problem-solving discussions that focused not only on what characters do and say, but the intentions and motivations behind the actions and the words.

In her book *Baby*, Patricia MacLachlan (1993) writes of the power of wondrous words, the power of a hundred hurricanes packed in library shelves. Through multiple years of reading and discussion, Lindsey and Ashley, too, have learned this power. And it is a power that is well known in the literary world of established authors. Tom Feelings (1993) tells us that Maya Angelou was much influenced by the prose and poetry read to her by a friend of her grandmother. Angelou writes, "Most of the things I do now come out of what that understanding woman read to me and got me to reading as a child." The poem selected for Feelings' book is a tribute to the delicious use of words and is entitled *I Love the Look of Words*:

Popcorn leaps, popping from the floor
of a hot black skillet
and into my mouth.
Black words leap,
snapping from the white
page. Rushing into my eyes. Sliding
into my brain which gobbles them
the way my teeth and tongue
chomp the buttered popcorn.
When I have stopped reading,
ideas from the words stay stuck
in my mind, like the sweet
smell of butter perfuming my
fingers long after the popcorn
is finished.

I love the book and the look of words
the weight of ideas that popped into my mind
I love the tracks
of new thinking in my mind.

As young authorities on text, Lindsey and Ashley also had opportunities to feel "the weight of ideas" and "the tracks of new thinking." Moreover, they became continuous and continuing carriers of these texts as they included them in their talk and writing about the wonders and the ways of literary words in dialogue with everyday life.

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