

Poetry to the Rescue – Teachers’ Notes

The author

Steven Herrick is a poet and author for children and young adults. He has written fifteen books and has pioneered the verse-novel genre for young adults in Australia. He has performed his work in many countries over the past seventeen years, including New Zealand, USA, UK, Canada, Vietnam and Singapore. His verse-novels have been released internationally in the USA and UK, and are soon to be released in Italy and the Netherlands.

His books have been shortlisted for, and won, numerous literary awards, including:

- 2005 NSW Premier’s Literary Award for young adult literature for **by the river**.
- 2005 Honour Book – Australian Children’s Book Council Book of the Year (Older Readers) for **by the river**
- 2006 Book of the Year – Australian Speech Pathologists Award for **Naked Bunyip Dancing** (Upper primary Children)
- 2004 Honour Book – Australian Children’s Book Council Book of the Year (Younger Readers) for **Do-wrong Ron**
- 2003 Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Shortlist (Younger Readers) for **Tom Jones saves the world**
- 2000 NSW Premier’s Literary Award for children’s literature for **the spangled drongo**

His two latest books are **lonesome howl** – a verse-novel for young adults: and **Naked Bunyip Dancing** – a verse-novel for children.

Before the author/poet visit

Class discussion

A few weeks prior to the visit, start discussing with class, general attitudes to poetry, touching on issues such as:

- Subject matter - is a poem more likely to be about a person or an object (river, tree, flower) What do you think poems should be about? List ideas on whiteboard? Vote on most popular topic. You never know – the poet may take requests?
- Does it rhyme?
- Is poetry always/sometimes/never funny?
- Do you know any poets? Ever met a poet? If you have – what does he/she look like? If you haven’t met a poet – what do you think they’ll look like? List description on the whiteboard. All drawings welcomed by the poet!!
- Can poetry tell a story? Or is poetry always just a single poem about one thing?
- List on the whiteboard any poems or poets that the students know of? Let students bring poems into class before visit and read the best ones? Vote on favourites.

A week or two before the visit, with students read the first twenty pages of one of Steven’s verse-novels – either **Do-wrong Ron** (Allen & Unwin 2003) or **Naked Bunyip Dancing** (Allen & Unwin 2005). Discuss with students, asking a few questions:

- Is this the sort of poetry you expected? What’s similar? What’s different?
- Is this poetry, or a story? Can it be both? Who is telling the story? Can you have a story told by more than one character?

Do-wrong Ron

This verse-novel won Honour Book in the Children’s Book Council Book of the Year Awards 2004. It tells the story of a young boy, Ron, who tries to do the right thing, but somehow, it seems to always turn out wrong.

But when Ron plans a musical welcome to Isabelle’s nana, anything just might happen. A funny, touching story about a do-wrong boy whose heart is in the right place.

- In this verse-novel, why do you think the last line of the previous poem is the title of the next poem?
- Who is your favourite character?
- Why does Charlie, the guinea-pig, speak in translation? Does any student have the inclination to read a Charlie poem in guinea-pig-speak?
- Does setting the story in a small country town have any significance? How does it help/hinder the story?

- The novel is about what's "right and wrong". Does the book answer this question? How? Is it the "right" answer?

Naked Bunyip Dancing

This verse-novel was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards 2006 and a Notable Book in the CBCA Book of the Year Awards 2006. It's about a year in the life of Class 6C who have a new teacher, Mr Carey. Inspired by his unique teaching methods, they plan a special school concert – one nobody will forget.

- How many people are telling this story? Why has the author chosen so many characters to tell the story? Does it help the story?
- It's a pretty unusual title? Where does it come from? Can any student come up with a better title? List the best five titles? Vote?
- Which character is your favourite? Write a few paragraphs explaining your reason for picking him/her?
- Would you like to have Mr Carey as a teacher?
- Class 6C organize their own concert. Could your Class do a similar thing – what would you choose to do? Who would you take as your "role-model"? Can you do an in-class concert based on the characters of the novel?
- How are the adults portayed in this novel? Do they seem real, believable? Is there a character in **Naked Bunyip Dancing** who reminds you of someone in **Do-wrong Ron**?

After the author/poet visit:

A few simple discussion points.

- Did Steven's visit meet with your expectations? Are you more likely/less likely to read poetry now?
- Did the author look/sound/appear like the person who had written the verse-novels you read beforehand?
- Can you write a poem in the style of your favourite Steven Herrick poem that he performed during his visit. Read aloud to class? Vote on best? Send to poet?
- Were his poems realistic? Do you think they came from real-life incidents?
- He talked a lot about his family. Can anyone describe or draw his wife? Or one of his two sons?
- He talked a lot about events in his own life. Can you design a cover for his new book (make up your own Steven Herrick title) or can you design an author web-site?
- Write a letter to the author describing yourself, trying to convince him to write a poem about you!
- Authors are really busy...so why not write the poem yourself – send the best to the author.

The Poetry Workshop - Steven Herrick

Here is a list of simple "how-to" ideas for writing poems. I don't claim that these will make anyone the world's greatest poet, but, hopefully, they present a set of elementary starter-templates for poetry in the classroom.

What is necessary to accompany these ideas is for the teacher/school to have copies of my books from where the example poems originate. Yes, I'm trying to sell my own books. No, I won't email you copies of the poems in question. Anyone who is aware of the average salary of authors in Australia will understand why. Also, I happen to think my books will be useful teaching aids in the classroom.

Please remember, poetry is like every craft/artform – the first draft is just that – the secret to making it read well is in the editing. I've found the best form of editing is to read the draft aloud, over and over – if you stumble over the words, change them to the way you speak. Keep it simple and concise. Don't be afraid of doing lots of drafts. Equally, don't expect perfection – be content with a bright/original idea expressed clearly.

Enjoy the workshop...

A) The Refrain Poem

the anti-rhyme poem! Instead of rhyming at the end of each line, this poem starts each line with the same word – that way there's no argument of "Ms, I don't know how to start!". Build this poem slowly.

eg: Choose a subject – I have one called WALLS – start with the easy stuff

Walls are painted yellow

Walls hold up our house

Walls are where teachers hang our drawings

Then encourage them to “build” on each line – why are the walls painted yellow?

Walls are painted yellow because dad says it’s soothing.

What is another way of saying walls hold up a house?

Walls are floors standing up for themselves!

Yes, teachers hang things on walls, but what about when they’re frustrated?

Walls are what teachers bash their head against...

The secret to this poem is building on the simple lines and trying to see the subject in a slightly different, off-beat way. *Walls jump in front of drunken drivers!* Don’t be content with just saying the obvious – build on each line. Ask simple questions to encourage each student to explore why they chose to write something like “*Walls are painted lime green*” – there’s always an answer to that – “*Walls are painted lime-green because Dad couldn’t afford a good colour*”

And if you wish, once it’s written you can remove the word (“walls”) from every line and just get it to start every third line, with a little tinkering. Whatever sounds/reads best.

“Walls” from **Water Bombs (University of Qld Press)**

B) The monologue poem

This poem is really easy if you present a few suitable examples before the students start writing. (hint: “Water Bombs” (the Joe poems) or “Poetry, to the rescue” (the three-year-old cousin poem). The trick here is to give the person an age – the age becomes the determining factor. For example: Joe at 14 would sound very different to Joe at 94. The poem starts simply...

Joe at 9

My name is Joe,

or Joseph.

My mum calls me Joseph.

My brother calls me Josephine,

but not when my dad’s around...

The way to build on this poem is to encourage the students to write about their own life, in their own words. Encourage them to highlight positive or unusual things that happen in their family, or at school, or at the soccer/netball club.

“Joe at 9” from **Water Bombs (UQP)**

Class sets of Steven’s books

Steven’s books are available as class sets from his publishers at a substantial discount. You can also order books on a sale or return basis, prior to the author visit for students and teachers to purchase and get signed during the visit.

For Primary schools, Steven recommends:

Do-wrong Ron – Allen & Unwin

Naked Bunyip Dancing – Allen & Unwin

available (at a discount) from Kate Justelius-Wright at KateJ@allenandunwin.com

Poetry, to the rescue – University of Qld Press

my life my love my lasagne – University of Qld Press

love poems & leg-spinners – University of Qld Press

available (at a discount) from Rosie Chay at rosiec@uqp.uq.edu.au

Steven’s website: <http://www.acay.com.au/~sherrick>

Young Australia Workshop

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