



From the Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Poetry for Children

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[Margaret Mallett](#) [3]

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Poetry, what language makes and memory holds, is children's direct way into literature. Iona and Peter Opie say 'it is probably a fact that every one of us could recite a string of nursery rhymes before we knew the meaning of the words that formed them'. Rhythmic verses, old and new, are chanted by the young long before they can read. Nursery rhymes are now recognised as pre-school literacy. However, when in their Preface to **The Oxford Book of Children's Verse** the Opies say that their concern is 'to make available in one place the classics of children's poetry', so that 'the writing of verse for the young can be appreciated as an art form', they reveal some recurrent questions. Is children's poetry the same as children's verse? What distinguishes poems deliberately written for children from poetry children have discovered and adopted for themselves? 'The more pure the poetry,' say the Opies, 'the more difficult it can be to say for whom the poet is writing'. What kind of a distinction lies in 'classic' and 'pure'? Neil Philip claims there is a recognisable tradition of children's verse 'with its own landmarks and its own rhetoric'. Modern poetry for children comes in a wide variety of books 'for fun'. Properly to appraise any selection we need to see what is left out, but this is difficult if we lack some perspective of the scene as a whole. Now Morag Styles, whose reputation in this field is well-established, offers a substantial 'Introduction' to 300 years of 'anything and everything that could be called poetry for children' with a view to confronting some of the recurrent questions about this literature. By privileging children as readers, and setting authors and poems in their social and historical contexts, she contrasts pre-twentieth century childhood arcadias with the urban reality encountered by contemporary children 'on the street', and shows how adult constructions of childhood are 'varied, contradictory and subject to change'. The last chapter shows how much our 'tradition' has been enriched by others. As the arrangement of the book is more thematic than strictly chronological, there are some repetitions in the details. Nevertheless, important ideas are aired for the first time, with accompanying evidence. Styles' central theme is that the so-called 'canon' of poetry seen as appropriate for children in the context of their education consists of poems written for adults and taught as 'the best'. Kipling's 'If', for example, was voted the most popular poem in English on a National Day of Poetry; Keats' 'Odes' have been in anthologies and examination papers from generation to generation. Anthologists not only please themselves, but also become both historians and critics in their notes and prefaces. Before the late 20th century, poets, especially women, writing in English directly for children are only half as likely to be chosen. In Morag Styles' view, the selectors 'share the same prejudices, and,

indeed, feed off one another's choices', with the result that 'great' poetry continues to marginalize the work of those whose concern is to address a young audience. Styles gives the poetic giants their due, notably the Romantics, who so changed the prevalent attitude to children in their time. Burns, Cowper, Clare and many others are 'read into' this display of the extraordinary riches of a poetic literature that brings together childhood and landscape. Blake stands out above the rest, as he never did in his lifetime, by virtue of his understanding that, when poetry is joined with art, children aesthetically 'live out' the virtues they read about. An important revelation comes from a foregrounding of a significant number of the women poets whose voices were allowed to be heard only when they wrote hymns, lullabies and poems for a child audience, offering the gentler aspects of nature and nurture. Styles links their distinctive 'nursery' verse with the earlier work of Jane Johnson (1706-59), whose stories and poems for her own children have been recently discovered and declared important, and, later, with the acknowledged verses of Christina Rossetti, whose 'lightness', once dismissed, is now seen as 'nursery verse of the highest order'. One wonders what else in this domain will turn up to surprise us. Styles' lifetime of professional contact with children and their poetry gives her views a distinctive strength and passion. Robert Louis Stevenson is the only poet to have a chapter all to himself because he 'captured as faithfully as it is possible for an adult to do, what it feels like to be a child'. She compares poems by Stevenson and Michael Rosen, both radicals who 'had mixed feelings about the "literary establishment" of their own time'. In a generously illustrated chapter about comic poetry she explores its varied history, then given her own readings of Carroll and Lear to link the English sense of verbal humour with its roots in subversion and the moral seriousness of laughter. There are sensitive tributes to Causley and Hughes, but more direct engagement with the popular poetry which over the last twenty years, has restored different aspects of the oral tradition and given children's poetry back to children. Without a doubt, Michael Rosen and his contemporaries have made active children readers of poetry in ways that outpace the critics who characterize their work as 'urchin', 'populist', and 'accessible'. Readers are persuaded that their own voices are being heard, more in the tradition of **I Saw Esau** than of the **Oxford Books of Verse**. Rosen's familiarity with modern transmissions and his discreetly concealed scholarship let him come closer to his audience than has ever been possible. Over the years, he and his contemporaries have owed much to Morag Styles for championing their intent to put children, memorably, in touch with themselves.

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