

Poetry Out Loud

By Paul Washburn



Ann Arbor youth poet Molly Raynor performs an original piece.

It was a true meeting of diverse minds; PhD's slammed poetry with teens, while high school teachers shared lesson plans with graduate students. This year's Making American Literatures session, held the first week in August at the University of Michigan, focused on "slam poetry," a dynamic and powerful style of performance poetry. MAL's director, U of M professor Anne Ruggles Gere, invited Jeff Kass, a creative writing teacher from Pioneer High School, to help create a workshop that would involve high school students and educators learning together.

What resulted was an experience that combined teachers from the Metro-Detroit area, U of M professors and graduate students, professional performance poets like Ayodele and Al Letson, and youth poets from as far away as California and Arizona in a one-week slam poetry workshop.

Many teachers explained that they felt out of touch with the youth culture that seems to be so much a part of slam poetry. Some teachers said they felt outdated, and were intimidated by the brash urban reality of hip-hop, and the slick, youthful appearance of its performers. While a vast majority of teachers grew up without ever hearing hip-hop on the radio, and would probably not buy a Tupac album to groove to, they were eager to immerse themselves in this culture so they could find ways to reach their students. The slam poetry movement is deeply rooted in the rhythms and expressions of hip-hop culture, and many teachers saw in slam an opportunity to turn kids on to poetry using the connection to hip-hop as an on-ramp. This desire to know more about what the kids were drawn to acted as a catalyst for the constructive teacher/student relationships that developed during the week.

"We know that hip-hop exists, but how can we use it in our classrooms?" When we asked some of the youth poets this question, they looked at us warily, their gazes seeming to ask, "Is this some kind of trick? Are they going to test us on

That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something that you've understood all your life, but it in a new way.

-Doris Lessing

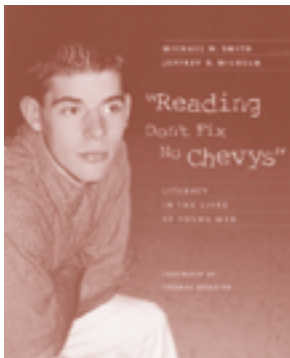
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Visiting poet Bassey talks about what inspires her work.



Professional Book Review

By Sylvia Bailey



Reading Don't Fix No Chevys
By Jeff Wilhelm and
Michael Smith,
Heinemann, 2002,
224 pp.

“A variety of research shows that boys learn to read later than girls and never catch up. They trail girls on almost every literacy measure in every country and culture from which data are available.” This revelation, included in Jeff Wilhelm’s *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*, may come as a surprise to many educators, particularly to those of sixth through twelfth grade boys, when the disparity becomes most pronounced.

How can adolescent boys be motivated in the classroom? This was the question driving Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm, educational researchers and authors of *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Loves of Young Men*.

Smith and Wilhelm used case studies to research a diverse group of male high school and middle school students in three different states. Extensive interviews and subject journals revealed that young men enjoyed activities where they felt a sense of control, felt challenged, yet demonstrated a high level of competence, and received immediate feedback. Computer games, the authors contend, possess many of these characteristics – interesting, but manageable problems, clearly defined difficulty levels and steady feedback to the player. The young men also emphasized time and again the importance of a social component to their activities

Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys offers useful recommendations to teachers trying to reach this often-disenchanted group of students. Smith and Wilhelm advocate an inquiry-based approach, “structuring units around critical questions so that the students’ reading and writing can be in service of genuine inquiry.” Begin with a question (generated by students whenever possible) and ask students to seek and explore a variety of resources and viewpoints. Students will later provide evidence or some artifact to demonstrate their learning. According to the authors, this approach best satisfies the task requirements of young men, and allows for individual expression. The bottom line seems to be that adolescent boys need to feel valued. To be engaged in learning, their voices must be heard.

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Poetry

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this? Teachers don’t really want to know what *we* think, do they?” After they were convinced we weren’t hiding any No. 2 pencils behind our backs, they gushed with ideas. And these were not wild, self-serving ideas like “Everyone-skip-class-and-listen-to-rap day,” but rather thoughtful and often painfully insightful views about pedagogical topics like classroom community, effective use of resources, and student/teacher relationships.

Teens love nothing more than to speak their minds, and they all have voice with value. The students loved being the experts, and shared from the heart, even catching themselves saying things they never thought they would say, especially in front of teachers. Before we knew it, we had lists of hip-hop resources to use compiled by kids themselves, and mental tattoos of achingly honest conversations that affirmed these young people were a force to be reckoned with.

It was a powerful experience to see how inspiring the youth poets were to the teachers. Their bravery and creativity were on display daily as they read from their work, and this prompted many of us to take part in the fun. Watching the slam on Friday was quite an experience. Poets of all ages and levels of experience read side by side, creating and performing on common ground.

Paul Washburn is a M.A. student in English and Education at the University of Michigan School of Education.

Poetry Slam Resources

For information about the Making American Literatures series:
www.owp.soe.umich.edu

For more information on slam poetry:
www.poetryslam.com

The United States of Poetry (1996 Television Documentary), Uni/Mercury/Polygram, ASIN: B000001EJP.

Books

Poetry Slam: the Competitive Art of Performance Poetry
by Gary Mex Glazner (Editor), Manic D Press, 2000, 237 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0916397661.

Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe
by Miguel Algarin (Editor), Bob Holman (Editor), and Nicole Blackman (Contributor), Owllet, 1994, 514 pp., \$18.00, ISBN: 0805032576.

Burning Down the House: Selected Poems from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's National Poetry Slam Champions
by Roger Bonair-Agard, Stephen Colman, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, Alix Olson, Lynne Procope, Soft Skull Press, Inc., 2000, 186 pp., \$43.00, ISBN: 1887128484.

Close to Death
by Patricia Smith, Zoland Books, 1993, 119 pp., \$10.95, ISBN: 0944072356.

Crowdpleaser
by Marc Kelly Smith, Collage Press, 58 pp., ISBN: 0965152200.

Invitations and Celebrations

The Invitation

By Kristen Little and Kathleen Zerfas, Camp Instructors

“Quilting a Lifetime-Piece By Piece” is a work in progress by Ben Rogers, a fifth grade student who participated in the 2002 Summer Camp for Young Writers. At Camp we focused our time together on the theme of quilting. We discussed with the students how closely the art of quilting resembles the art of writing: how memories, like scraps of fabric, can be collected and stitched together by a skillful hand, creating something not only beautiful, but also comforting.

In this lesson, students were invited to focus on one swatch in an antique quilt. They were not told any information about the quilt other than its age and to whom it belonged. After a few minutes of quiet reflection on their swatch, they were to write. What, do you suppose, is the origin of this swatch? How did it come to be incorporated into the quilt?

Although the poem is not Ben’s original reflection from that lesson, he was inspired to write it during a free-write session later that day.

The Celebration

By Ben Rogers

Quilting A Lifetime Piece By Piece

A piece goes in, a perfect fit
The quilter is wise
Sometimes, our quilters make mistakes,
Some are permanent, some are painful
Yet still, some are loosely stitched and
Easily forgotten
Usually our quilts are masterpieces
Sometimes they will win 1st prize
But some are not winners
Those that are not winners may not be our futures
today
But will become our futures tomorrow

Author’s Note: This piece of poetry means the quilt and pieces are our life’s accomplishments and memories.

The quilter is you.

Ben Rogers is a fifth grader at Clarkston Elementary School.

The Invitation

By Jim Haugh with Mike Giles, Camp Instructors

Straight from Barry Lane’s *After the End* springs the concept of snapshots. Snapshots, as defined by the author, are those delicious nuggets of writing in which the writer slows the hands of time and allows the audience to savor rich sensory details.

To illustrate this, Lane leads us on a literary walking tour through *Maniac McGee’s* dilapidated house, complete with a kitchen-table centerpiece of “what appears to be the remains of an autopsy performed on a large bird, possibly a crow,” a track of peanut butter skied to the stove, and multitudes of repulsive, scurrying raisins. Our writing students reveled in the disgusting imagery.

We asked them to imagine they had a camcorder perched on their shoulder– a very special camcorder equipped with a high-powered zoom lens that could go from panoramic shots to the closest of close-ups. Amazingly, this technology could also capture sounds, smells, tastes and touches. They were asked to remember the overwhelming odor of Maniac’s living room and the paint “that peeled off like cornflakes when he ran his hand along one wall.”

Our young writers were invited to experiment with snapshots of their own; to slow the pace of their storytelling and, for the moment, let the details take over.

The Celebration

By Emily Griffin

Mrs. O’s real name was Mrs. Owen. She was short and plump, and had short, curly yellow hair that was graying. She was 54 with kind blue eyes and a warm smile. She often wore dresses, since she had been brought up that way. As you remember, it was spring so she wore short sleeves.

She was tending her garden– kneeling down with her sleeves pushed up higher than they already were, and her hair pulled into a knot. She was weeding, hoeing, and watering. When she had worked for a good half-hour, she heard the horses whinny for lunch. “Okay Harriet. Here comes lunch!” said Mrs. Owen, holding out a bag of oats.

Mrs. Owen realized she was hungry too, so she decided to have a picnic lunch. She was trying to decide where to go and then she thought of the high mossy green wall. Mrs. Owen made up her mind that the other side of the high wall was the perfect place for a picnic.

But what was on the other side of the wall? She’d just have to find out.

Emily Griffin is a sixth grader at Addams Middle School in Royal Oak.

from the
Target Audience

By Noel Pipkin



Money Hungry by Sharon G. Flake, Jump at the Sun, 2001, 187 pp., \$15.99, ISBN: 078680548X

Money Hungry is about a thirteen year-old girl, Raspberry, who lives in a low-income housing project. Although her family doesn't have much, Raspberry loves money. She hopes to one day help her mom pay for a house, and tries to find ways of making money to fulfill her dream. She gets into trouble at school for selling pencils and other supplies to fellow students, so she devises a system to get her friends to help her sell things. Raspberry and her friends also clean houses to earn money. Through this, she earns money that she saves under her bed. When her mom begins dating Zora's dad, Raspberry's friendship with her best friend is ruined. Zora's dad is a doctor and they have a better life than Raspberry and her mom. Zora doesn't approve of the relationship and quits talking to Raspberry. Things seem to be looking up when Raspberry and her mom eventually save up enough money to move to a better neighborhood, but when the owner finds out they are from the projects, he refuses to sell. After a legal battle for the home, strained relationships, and lost friendships, Raspberry learns that there is much more to happiness than money. This book was great because it was written from the point of view of a pre-teen and has lots of emotion to get the reader hooked. I highly recommend *Money Hungry*.

Noel Pipkin is a seventh grader at Avondale Middle School.

Summer Photo Gallery



Summer Invitational participants.



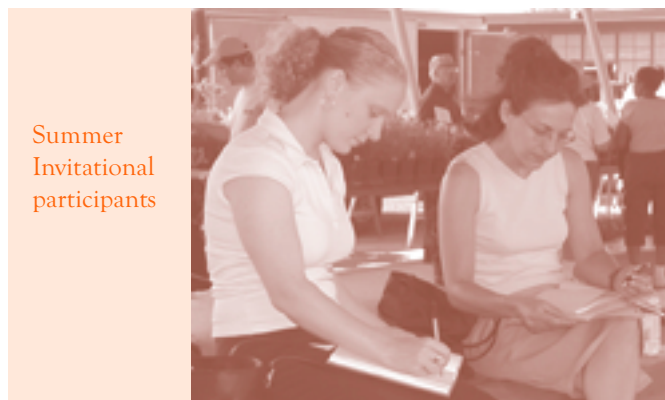
Teacher-consultant Sherri Masson talks about character mapping with Invitational participants.



Visiting Slam poet performs for teachers as part of the workshop.



Participants in the Summer Invitational engage in action research.



Summer Invitational participants

Okay, can we stop now? Can we just stop? With the current avalanche of corporate scandals, it's about time to retire that tired and trite adage about schools needing to be operated more like businesses. Public schools and businesses serve different functions, and the mistaken efforts of some to force square pegs into round holes not only does a grave injustice to our nation's schools, it harms our kids. While business is single-minded in its effort to turn a profit, schools are engaged in a much broader range of consensus building that makes short-term profits or narrow-minded cost cutting strategies impractical.

Perhaps the flawed notion of school-as-business erupted out of the mistaken notion that that the free market can resolve all issues of accountability and can address waste as related to our kids' failure to learn. This evidenced by, of course, standardized tests and assessments. Somehow making our schools more like Enron or Tyco or WorldCom or even Arthur Andersen is supposed to make our schools more efficient. The model argues that school administrators should employ the same bottom-line yardstick as American Corporations, a particularly ugly prospect in light of recent scandals.

Unfortunately, this simple solution to a complex equation is too easy to be true. Schools, like corporations' books, can be cooked to disguise and mislead. If the savings and loan fiasco of a decade ago wasn't enough of an exclamation point, we need only look at the corporate calamities of the day. The principle of empowering an executive administrator with too much authority is as flawed in education as it is in industry. Unless you are an advocate of mismanagement and corruption, this cockamamie comparison of schools and businesses should receive a golden parachute, never to be heard of again.

With the current avalanche of corporate scandals, it's about time to retire that tired and trite adage about schools needing to be operated more like businesses.

The failing of the school-as-business paradigm also centers on the difference between shareholders and stakeholders. Businesses have shareholders while schools have stakeholders. A shareholder has limited responsibility for the actions of the company. While the shareholder has a vote, he or she is not the decision-maker. The goal of the shareholder is simple: to make money. When the stock fails to make money, the shareholder unloads it and moves on to the next investment. Stakeholders cannot divorce themselves from public schools. Taxes, property values, their kids, neighbors' kids, community education, senior citizen programs, and a host of other interactions between schools and communities prevent stakeholders from dumping their commitment to an unsatisfying school district.

A corporation is designed to grow. A school is designed to serve. The two are not synonymous. The failure of public education demands more attention, not resignation, from stakeholders.

Should schools then become places where financial accountability is not an issue? Clearly not. In fact, public schools have always been conscious and attentive to those stakeholders who demand that educational institutions hold the line on spending.

Unfortunately, our schools have become even more politically, socially, and economically segregated. Over the past decade, some education policy-makers have stopped listening and have taken to shouting each other down or using schools as a political punching bag. Lines are being drawn to divide as just as they were drawn for the decades preceding the 1967. There is a clear danger in this acrimony. Rather than factions shouting each other down, we ought to listen to each other for a reason to rally around the public education.

Perhaps the most important place to start listening would be with those most directly and immediately affected—our students themselves. When kids are asked what kinds of schools work for them they tend to answer frankly and honestly. If the sample of kids quizzed is sufficient, the reliability of the polling will be increased. At a recent conference on the campus of the University of Michigan, students were asked to grade their schools. One of the students from the school that won the Governor's Cup for having the highest number of students pass Michigan's high stakes MEAP test, assigned a grade of only a C. The student conceded that individual teachers earned higher grades but the school in general and in the majority of his classes failed to engage him meaningful ways. Students complained about education that was modeled after the production line and industry.

Teachers could play an essential role in this discussion. Teachers themselves for a variety of reasons have had their voices marginalized. Often times, the blame should focus on the teachers themselves. Closing their doors to the maelstrom that engulfs education is irresponsible. At times all teachers have shared in this culpability. Here is a chance to begin to reclaim their proper voice in the national dialogue over education policy.

By conducting inquiry in their classrooms and by publishing the results of their study, teachers will honor not only their own voices but the voices of their students as well. Inquiry will test the validity of the student voices in Ann Arbor, and publication will provide footing for teachers who want to reform in the context of the national debate in education.

Perhaps our schools need to be less of certain of answers and more honoring the questions our lives demand us to investigate. Certainty discourages debate. Democracy embraces it. Schools should be less about answers and more about talk.

A Peek Into The Classroom

Writer Response Groups: What Role in the Writing Process?

By Brad Vornhort

I'll admit it. I've cheated at the writing workshop. I've done things differently than the books suggest. After all, I can recognize good student writing. More importantly, I thought, I can recognize what isn't good student writing and create a road map to get the student to my version of "good" as quickly as possible. I've sacrificed the writer for the sake of the writing. I've taught my kids to listen to me rather than themselves. They've written "A" work that parents and teachers love, and kids don't really give a hoot about. I'm going to stop this now. I'm going to get their voices back into my classroom, back into the writing workshop, and I'll start with meaningful writer response groups.

Why Use Writer Response Groups?

The list is a long one. Peter Elbow, it seems (in the modern pedagogical world) started it, and since then, teachers have added to it. And added, and added, and repeated. Pick up any book with the word "writing" in the title. Or the word "classroom". Or the word "school." Or "Craft." Or the mention of any type of genre. You'll find paragraphs, chapters at times, justifying response groups. Consequently only one reason seems worth mentioning here: the reason closest to my heart. It's Donald Murray's reason. In *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*, Murray speaks of his one rule for response groups. "I do not share my writing in process with anyone who does not make me want to write. When I get a response from the members of my writing community, I hurry back to my desk, excited by the problems, the possibilities, the strengths I have discovered. I have work to do and I am eager to get at it" (123). The right writer response group will make my students *want to write*.

What Doesn't Work

The problem is, the response groups going on in my classroom didn't make my students want to write. Or even talk about writing. Response groups are touchy constructions. The term itself is vague and allows for numerous interpretations. It allows for numerous meetings of students to take place under the guise of response groups when in reality these groups are a distorted version of what works. I've racked up a number of these versions. I want their stories to be heard.

As a student teacher, my cooperating teacher encouraged me to use response groups. I was given a detailed checklist (endorsed by the department) of what the final draft of a given assignment should look like. This final draft was due on Friday, so Wednesday, we thought, would be a nice time to give the checklist to the students and let it guide their response groups. Talk about it Wednesday, make any final adjustments, and turn the final in on Friday.

I came to understand that reading response groups come down to, and I am deeply convinced of this, constructing meaning.

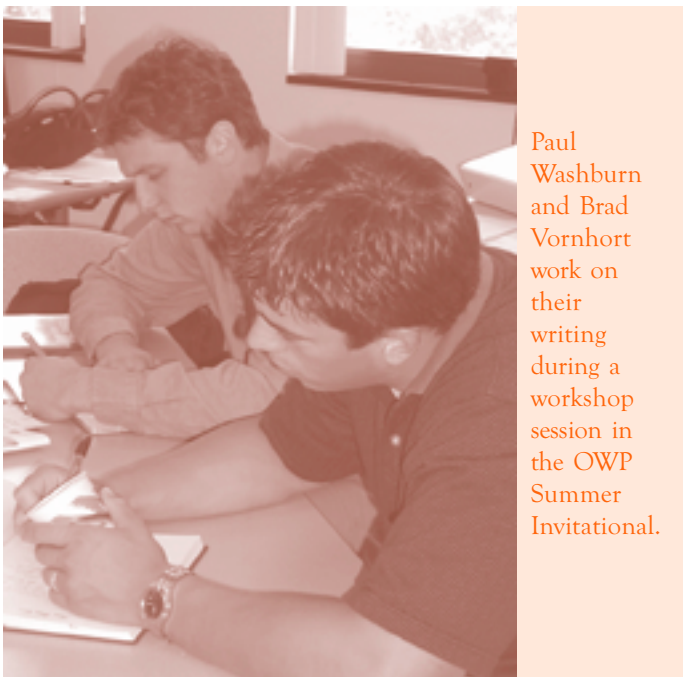
This reminds me of two years ago, when I built a deck on the back of my house. I spent weekends, for months, working on this deck with any member of my extended family who was willing to help. Finally it was finished. You could walk on it, lounge in the chairs on it. There was room for my grill; it worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and I loved it. I called my wife Natalie out to look at it.

"How do you like it?" I asked. "What do you think I should change about it?"

Wisely, she said she loved it just the way it was. Regardless of what she said, I wasn't going to change it. The plans had been drawn up, the nails were in the boards. I had crafted this deck the way I felt it should be.

Response groups don't work at the end of the writing process. Most of our students have become too attached to their pieces to be willing to change them. I would have been furious with Natalie had she insisted on change. I had grown to like the deck the way it was. The suggestion of change, from the woman most dear to me, would have fallen on angry ears.

So I went to the textbooks. The ones that have things laid out so clearly all a teacher must do is photocopy and hand out. They asked students to evaluate other students' writing. One in particular, as a matter of fact, in 163 word section, used a form of the word *evaluate* 8 times. These texts were asking



Paul Washburn and Brad Vornhort work on their writing during a workshop session in the OWP Summer Invitational.

students to evaluate one another's writing. This is no easy task. Teachers struggle with it daily. In this type of a writer's group students are asked to talk constructively with peers about what is "wrong" with their paper, and how they may go about "fixing" it. Studies have shown that students, in the long run, usually come to resent this kind of input from their peers—even if they know those peers are justified in giving it. Response groups that are meant to "fix" are usually unproductive. Students see through this all too easily. Many, who know how valuable their time is, will find a way around this type of writer's group. Why sit through 60 minutes of response group when a 5 minute conference with the teacher could tell you what is "wrong" with your paper?



Young writers from the 2002 Summer Camp find inspiration at Waterford's Farmer's Market.

I knew, at this point, to do writer response groups early and often. I knew they couldn't be about editing, or evaluation, or "fixing." I came to understand that response groups come down to, and I am deeply convicted about this, constructing meaning.

Response groups, for me, had evolved. I abandoned all pre-made resources and created my own guidelines. I wanted students to talk about writing, not talk about what is good writing. For two years, I gave handouts to my kids. They were brief, they never mentioned the idea of evaluation. They gave students questions to answer, or sentence stems to finish. They helped them map out what a fifteen minute conversation about a piece of writing would sound like. And, alas, they prevented real conversation. The structure, any structure, seemed too restrictive.

So I've come to abandon handouts when it comes to writer's groups. I've come to realize that looking at writer's groups as any sort of a classroom practice meant that I was looking at my students mostly as students and only partially as writers.

I've also come to look for moments of greatness within response groups, not great response groups. I'm reminded of Jimmy, who was taking 10th grade Language Arts for the third time. In the midst of a response group, when he knew I was within earshot, he told his group, "It's interesting how this metaphor works. It makes the piece more effective." OK, Jimmy didn't make a whole lot of meaning there, but he used the word metaphor, and he used it correctly. Response groups are complicated constructions.

Today, I've come to believe this about writer response groups:

- They must make writers want to write
- They must be done early and often in the writing workshop
- They are about constructing meaning, never about fixing
- They are about genuine talk, not carrying out a pre-made discussion
- They're meant for writers, not for students
- They're beautiful at times, as teachers, we must train ourselves to see them when they are.

For teachers, August marks the New Year. I celebrate it, and I have resolution: I resolve to quit cheating on the writing workshop. I eagerly await the time when I can soften my voice and listen to theirs.

Brad Vornhort teaches English at Clarkston High School.

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Do you have a piece written that is burning a hole in your computer? Or an idea that you want to run by someone? Publish in **élan**!

Contact Laura Roop at laurroop@umich.edu to arrange for submission or conference.

National Writing Project Annual Meeting

November 21-23, 2002 Atlanta, Georgia

NCTE Annual Conference

“Celebrating the Languages and Literacies of Our Lives”

November 21-23, 2002 Atlanta, Georgia

Professional Writers Group

February 12, March 12, April 9, May 7, 2003

6:30-9:00 PM Seaholm High School, Room G108

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March 8-11, 2003 Grand Rapids, Michigan

Events & Activities



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