

After having read your book of poetry, *Connecting Dots*, there were several urgent questions I wanted to ask.

Q First, where did you find the courage to be so honest and revealing about your personal life?

A Poets often use events in their lives for inspiration. Memory-based writing is easy because we all have memories, and hard because telling the truth about ourselves sometimes makes us uncomfortable. Writing *Connecting Dots* awakened all sorts of recollections. Honesty didn't always come easily, or on the first try.

Q This leads me into the next question, what will all of the people in the Springfield area think and feel when they recognize themselves in your poems? Do you fear being run out of town? Does your Mom and wife still think fondly of you?

A Memories are populated by family, friends, schoolmates, and strangers that turn up like uninvited guests. You can't exclude them from what happened. A writer can't omit people from a scene but he can, and does, choose which scenes to include in a book. A few people may recognize themselves in *Connecting Dots*, but I don't think they will mind. My wife and mother agreed that (as Huck Finn once said of Mr. Twain) mainly, I told the truth.

Q I know in your previous books of poetry you field-tested the poems on various students before you sent the final form to your publisher. Since these poems are very personal did you field test these poems and if so was it difficult for you to read them out loud to your audience?

A I frequently read poems from a book in progress during school visits. That's the only time I have direct access to my audience. Books are usually screened and purchased by the adults in children's lives. I was especially eager to kid-test *Connecting Dots* because of its unique nature. Would readers identify with poems that represent the span of a lifetime? Would a fifth grader relate to my first job, my awkward efforts at flirting, the birth of my daughter? Would a seventh grader care how it feels to become a grandparent? It seemed like a good idea to find out before publishing the book.

At first I felt self-conscious, reading some of the poems aloud. But kids were always empathetic and supportive. Many of their favorite poems included my later experiences. They liked knowing that I love my wife. In the poem that wishes them a good life, they thanked me and wished me a good life too. Never have so many kids read – and contributed to – a developing manuscript. At the largest school (PS86 in the Bronx)

teachers shared every poem with their classes. Students rated each one on a scale of one to four, and hundreds of them wrote comments. Such remarks as, “Funny one,

D.H.!” , “How sweet!” , and, “That was a bad dog for biting you!” reminded me that young people take poetry personally.

Q Your poems have been shared by your readers in a variety of ways. What are some of the most unusual ways that you have heard teachers or librarians display or use your poems?

A The rhythm in many of my poems echoes the music I played during my early years as a performer. There’s jazz in it, I think, and Dixieland; the occasional somber symphonic cadence. Certainly, there’s syncopation. That’s why poems should be read aloud. Poetry originated as a performing art, a composition to be read, sung, or danced. Some poetry lends itself to the stage.

I love it when students perform my poetry. Sometimes it amounts to a cultural exchange, like some sort of sister city program. My mid-western voice and background may seem, to a child of the city, to come from a distant place. A fifth grader in New York wondered what a gravel bar was.

A musician friend likes to set my poems to music. Four of us occasionally perform before student audiences. We call ourselves The Byron Biggers Band after my poem:

Here lie the bones of Byron Biggers,
Eaten alive by hungry chiggers,
So if you see poor Bryon twitch,
Scratch his bones ‘cause they still itch!

My poetry inspired Sandy Asher to write a play called *Somebody Catch My Homework* (after the title of my first book of poetry), which has already been performed on stages in several states.

Recently, one of my poems (“My Book”) was sandblasted into the sidewalk of the new Children’s Garden at the Burton Barr Library in Phoenix. I was there to unveil the poem and read it during the grand opening ceremony. Now I can brag about leaving a permanent record of my work. Although it’s not exactly set in stone, concrete is pretty close.

Q David, having read articles about your life's history I was surprised that I found some major areas of employment missing. I know you worked for Hallmark but I didn't see any poems about that period of your life. How did you decide which periods were important to include?

A The difference between an autobiography and a collection of memory-based poetry is that the poems don't describe a life; they project the essence of it. Each poem contributes to the whole. Connect enough dots, a sense of the person emerges. I began

by fashioning a list of moments that I recalled then arranging them chronologically. As the poems found their voices, I realized that most of them didn't address such matters as my careers in science, publishing, and business. They explored feelings: emotions that sprang from the past, some of them still intense and private. Understanding where the book was leading me helped establish guidelines for what did or did not serve the growing collection.

Q How many original poems did you write before you made the final selection? What made you decide which ones to select and which ones would not appear in your sixty-fifty book?

A *Connecting Dots* includes fifty-four poems. In the first one, I'm four; in the last, I'm sixty-six. During the fifteen months I took to write it, I tried more than one hundred poems. Some I discarded because they failed to move with the current. They felt, to me, more like rocks than water. Some failed because my wife, editor, or other readers challenged their value and I couldn't present a saving defense. And a few were cut after I read student comments, which provided a reality check during the final revisions.

Q My favorite poem comes from *Somebody Catch My Homework*. Although there were some very humorous poems in your *Connecting Dots* such as ---the one about dating and the dance-- I missed the humorous David. I found *Connecting the Dots* more thought provoking and a book I needed to read slowly to reflect and ponder. Will you continue in the more serious lines or will you return to the more light-hearted style that you did several year ago?

A I tend to alternate between humorous poetry (*Somebody Catch My Homework*, *The Boy Who Counted Stars*, *A Thousand Cousins*, *Alligator in the Closet*, *The Mouse Was Out at Recess*) and more reflective collections (*The Purchase of Small Secrets*, *Wild Country*, *Connecting Dots*). I'm an adult male in the lives of young readers. In real life, my behavior toward children is like that of most men, a testosterone-laced gumbo teasing, being serious, hugging, answering questions, teaching, and role modeling. Each of my poetry books would probably reflect the whole gamut were it not that readers like themes. For that reason I take turns reflecting the many faces of the prism we call adulthood.

Connecting Dots is intended to stimulate reflection. The book's purpose is to provide readers with glimpses into a life -- the experiences that helped shape it and the process of moving along the continuum from little to big, young to old. I present the book in three sections: ages 4-13, 14-19, and over 20. To further aid the reader's journey down my memory lane, I've added a line or two on each page to set the scene. I want to

encourage readers to write about their own experiences and, perhaps, visualize what may lie in their futures.

For the record, I've completed a manuscript of poems about the rain forest and plan to follow that with a return to humor.

Q What do we anticipate hearing from you in your next books? Will they take the form of poetry, fiction, factual, serious, humorous or a blend of all elements?

A You can count on all of the above. I have thirty books on my to-do list. The mix of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction will remain about the same. My normal six-day workweek includes two hours of writing each morning and five in the afternoon. Some books take three years to complete while others move along much faster. Sometimes I think I know how a chef must feel, starting the soufflé before the filet and hoping that everything turns out okay and on time.

Q I know authors don't like telling what they are working on for the future because they feel it might jinx it. Are you afraid to share your future book ideas with us? We promise not to let the secret out to anyone.

A As long as I have your word: The rain forest poems grew from a trip that fulfilled a lifelong dream -- boating the Amazon beyond the headwaters deep into the jungle. That experience, coupled with my background in biology, produced a collection that pleases me. I believe that the book (Boyd's Mills Press, yet untitled) will be very useful in the classroom as well as in personal libraries. Tentative publication date is 2006.

I'm also adding new titles each year to the Earth science series, Earthworks. So far the subjects include caves, rivers, volcanoes, oceans, and earthquakes. Upcoming titles include mountains and glaciers. I plan to write six or eight others. I'm finally using that minor in geology!