

Laura Backes Interview with David L. Harrison
for *Children's Book Insider*, August 14, 2008

1) Your newest poetry collection is about pirates. Do you think it's important for collections to be built around a central theme or idea?

DH: Before attempting *Pirates*, I read a number of authoritative texts. Both the foreword and back matter in the book provide facts about real pirates. The poems grew from the research and portray pirates who prowled the seas from the late 17th century into the 18th. The effort was to create literature for young readers, but I hope that teachers and students will find it a ready supplement for classroom units about pirates.

Poems that support the curriculum reinforce lessons and introduce new perspectives. Such collections also model how students can create their own poems, which adds a valuable writing component.

Themes are attractive for leisure reading too. If a young person is into a particular subject, he or she probably will prefer poems that don't keep wandering off the path.

Poets also benefit from selecting a topic and sticking with it. Once the muse finds a groove, related poems flow more smoothly when the poet can work within a central theme.

2) Can you please talk a bit about how you work poetic language into books like *Glaciers: Nature's Icy Caps*? Do you think that particular writing style makes the information more accessible to young readers?

DH: *Glaciers*, the last of seven titles in my nonfiction science series, *Earthworks*, was a Bank Street College Best Books of the Year selection and has been placed on state lists for trade science books.

My goal for the series was to explain basic principals of earth science to young readers (K-3 or so) as clearly and simply as possible, using 700 words per book. I framed the prose in short lines with natural breaks, much the way we present poetry. The advantage for the reader is that these natural breaks emphasize the rhythms of our language.

Reviewers have commented on the "free verse feel" of the *Earthworks* series. Some call the prose elegant. I love it when they talk like that!

3) You said you just finished a chapter on poetry for the IRA text. Is there anything from that chapter that you'd like to mention that would be helpful to aspiring poets?

DH: The book comes out in 2009 and is entitled *Invitation to Read: Children's Literature in the Reading Program*. You can tell that teachers are the intended audience, but one of the issues I stress is that poets work very hard to craft their work and young readers (and their teachers) should learn to appreciate the poem rather than (as former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins says) torture a confession out of it. Here's a passage from that chapter:

"Poets savor the taste and smell of words and love similes that bring together surprising comparisons to make a point. Every word carries in its genes – when used in the right way, the right time, the right place – the potential to stir the human spirit. A poem is proof that someone tried to get it right."

Here's a quote from an essay called "The Relationship Between Authors and Young Readers," which appeared last year in *Dragon Lode*, an IRA juried journal.

"Most of us who write for young people learn on the job. Apprentices in a complex, demanding industry, we stumble through manuscript after manuscript until eventually an editor gives us that long dreamed of first big break; or we lose heart and wander off to do something else with our lives. (My own apprenticeship lasted through 97 months and 152 submissions.) Those who become writers discover that to reach our readers we must first convince a tough crowd of critics -- assistant editors, editors, editorial directors, marketing people, sales people, publishers, librarians, teachers, book store buyers, and parents – that this time we got it right."

4) When writing poetry, is it essential that writers study and use classic poem formats and meters, or can they just go with what feels right for each poem?

DH: It is important for a poet to know and understand the fundamentals of poetry. Unless one is going to teach poetry, it may not be necessary to become an authority on the subject, but a practicing poet certainly needs to be familiar with the tools of the trade.

Some emerging writers attempt to bluff their way into print by writing without first putting in the time and energy to learn about their craft. The "write now, learn later" approach rarely produces much of value. The reader will respect the poem about as much as the poet does. There are plenty of books available that present and explain the basics of writing poetry.

Studies show that young readers prefer contemporary poetry. They like rhyme, rhythm, and metaphors. They choose poems about animals, people, and experiences they can relate to. They love humor. They don't care much for haikus and they really hate poems that preach to them. To reach today's children, poets don't have to wow them with classic formats. They do need to understand their audience. Whether a poet chooses verse or free verse, the most important ingredient is the young reader's voice whispering in the poet's ear. One young fan wrote, "Good one, DH!" That's all I needed to hear.

5) Nonfiction seems to be a growing area in children's books, and you've successfully combined nonfiction topics with poetry several times now. Is the industry more open to unusual formats for nonfiction, and do you think new writers would be as successful in getting their work published?

DH: That's an interesting question. To the first part, I agree that nonfiction books seem more important than ever for recreational reading as well as curricula-related assignments. I'd guess that more new information surfaces in a day than in a decade not so long ago. Reference books are partly out of date by the time they are printed. School librarians check publication dates and weed out many of their nonfiction books more than ten or twelve years old.

Using poetry in the classroom is being discovered by a growing number of teachers not only for its value in developing reading and spelling skills but as a tool for teaching lessons across the curricula. Many teachers now ask students to write nonfiction poems to sum up what they have learned in science, math, music or other units they have been studying.

When you put these elements together, what you get is an opportunity to write more nonfiction, themed poetry, or at least poetry based on nonfiction information. Writers (new or otherwise) who have a particular skill or knowledge might find editors receptive to nonfiction poems that would catch the attention of teachers and librarians.

Having said all that, poets must still follow the cardinal rule of never letting their work become too didactic. Young people like to learn naturally. Spooning up information because it's "good" for them goes down about like any other unwelcome medicine.

6) Finally, if you have any additional thoughts on your own work, or words of advice for aspiring writers, please add them.

DH: Don't try to do everything at once. Teachers face the same dilemma. When they are required to have students write too many assignments too quickly, they run the risk of reinforcing bad habits along with the good.

I think it's better to write one thing well than ten poorly. Pick a genre that intrigues you and stick with that long enough to get the heft of it. If you like short stories, try picture books. If you want to reach older children, write a few chapter books. Still too young? Try one or two young adult books.

Find your level of highest interest and settle in to develop skill in that format. Want to be a poet? Do it, but don't rush. When I made that decision, I wrote nothing but poems for three years. By then I had accumulated one hundred poems, read quite a bit on the subject, and experimented with numerous forms.

Today my work reflects many of the lessons learned during those three years. *Somebody Catch My Homework* is in verse and the theme is school. *Connecting Dots* (based on memories) is told in verse and free verse. *Wild Country* is about animals and nature; it's in free verse. *Bugs, poems about creeping things*, is told in short, mostly humorous poems. *Pirates* is strongly based on nonfiction. Next year I'll have two new collections of poetry. One features poems for two voices while the other is a group of short, humorous poems about a family vacation.

Laura, I appreciate the opportunity to appear with you again. Thanks very much.