

Q/A with Nile Stanley  
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Q

What was the inspiration for bugs?

A

The 4-H Club when I was in fourth grade. At least that was when I decided to collect insects in an organized way. My earlier efforts consisted of fruit jars swarming with small, puzzled creatures – scorpions, crickets, centipedes, roaches -- that crossed my path. For my 4-H Club project I really wanted to raise a calf or a pig but we didn't farm. Insects came in a distant second but I soon fell in love with the world of "bugs" and recycled many of my father's cigar boxes with my prizes. Today at the ripe old age of post-third grade I still love small creatures. Now I collect them with a pen instead of a pin. I write about things I like. Sooner or later *bugs* was inevitable.

Q

Which is better in your opinion for children to start writing rhymed or free verse?

A

The question doesn't seem to occur to kids. Some adults get fussy about their differences on the subject: "Free verse is easier and leaves children free to express themselves!" "Children are marinated in meters and rhythms from the womb on. Their favorite poems are verse!" When I'm in the classroom, it rarely occurs to me to specify how students should express themselves. I model both kinds of poems and move on to what I think are meatier issues. Some student poems come out roughly in verse while other children write prose, which we praise as an approximation of free verse. My motto is to do what feels good. My own first poems, as a child of five or six, came out in couplets and triplets. What did I know?

Q

How does an aspiring poet get published, a book contract?

A

Aspire for a long time. Nothing in this world is slower than the progress from dream to book. This is a tough business. Anyone who wants in can expect to pay dues in the form of endless efforts that garner an unending supply of rejection slips. If it were easy to write poetry at a professional level, there would be more published poets. The good news is that writing a poem is its own reward. Let's say you write 100 poems in three years, which is what I did, and after each one you celebrate a strong personal sense of accomplishment, which I did. That's a pretty good reward. Besides, when people ask what you are working on, and you say, "I'm writing poetry," they think that's very cool. Raise your eyebrow and keep

writing. In the meantime, try the magazine markets until you start having some success. Publishing a book of poems before you've been published elsewhere is difficult.

Q

Who are your influences?

A

I don't have a good answer to that. It seems to me that we keep changing throughout life, so much that it's even hard to remember why we thought the way we did ten years ago. We absorb lessons, good or bad, from daily experiences. Family members die. Babies are born. We change jobs. Maybe that's a way of saying that life is my influence. I'm me now for only a while. Next year I'll be different in various ways and my writing will reflect who I am then.

Q

What are you reading these days?

A

Currently or lately: *Odyssey to Excellence* (James Slezak), *The New Read-Aloud Handbook* (Jim Trelease), *John Adams* (David McCullough), *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.* (Charles Simic), *Poetry* (October 2007), *The Art of Drowning* (Billy Collins), *A Brief History of Time* (Stephen Hawking), and *Lean Mean Thirteen* (Janet Evanovich).