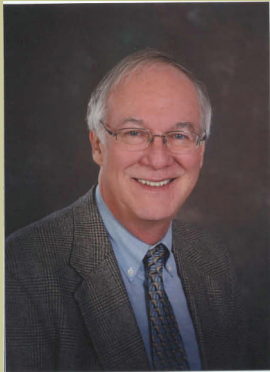




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David L. Harrison has written over seventy books and numerous articles. His writing has been translated, anthologized and presented on stage, television, radio, cassette, and CD-ROM. David has been a musician, scientist, editor, and businessman. He holds degrees from the following universities: Drury, Emory, and Missouri State. David is Poet Laureate of Drury University.

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Fluency Fun—Kids Love the Sound of Words

Ann Porter Gifford, PhD.

An Interview with David L. Harrison

"When I think of David Harrison I recall fondly the first time I heard him share his work with a group of school children. It was at the Southeast Missouri Children's and Young Adults' Literature Festival where he was presenting in one room while Walter Dean Meyers and Jane Yolen were having students enthralled in two other rooms. My obligations as co-chair of the conference had not permitted me to hear any of the speakers, but when I heard all the laughter coming from David's room, I felt compelled to slip in the backdoor and listen. This is a man who could teach all of us ideas on how to get students to read fluently. He very cleverly demonstrated how a poem should sound. First he read one of his poems in a monotone, and then he read it with that wonderful animated voice that was so rich and full of expression that the students kept begging him to read more. He successfully had the audience reading his poems with expression and enthusiasm. I don't think a child left this presentation without the understanding that we are to make the material we read come to life and express the voice of the writer.

David has contributed much to the cause of literacy, not only in Missouri where he has won the Missouri State Literacy Award, but also nationwide where his 'Sky High on Reading' won the International Reading Association Community Involvement Award. Because my students and I find David's books so much fun, I wanted to share this talented writer with your readers."

ANN:

With the legislation of No Child Left Behind stressing phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, I have been searching for new material to use in developing young readers' fluency. I found your book *The Animal's Song*, where you used the literacy device of onomatopoeia, to be very effective for young children to use in choral reading. I also found both your *Farmer's Garden* and *Farmer's Dog Goes to the Forest* the perfect books to use with early readers or for reluctant readers in older grades. Did you have these special groups of children in mind when you wrote these books? I found the students selected *Redbird* and *Worm* as their favorite poems to share with other classes. Would you share a favorite poem from these books? Did you have students vote on these selections as you did in *Connecting Dots*?

DAVID:

Educators must think in terms, methods, and systems that have labels: phonics, fluency, vocabulary. Authors think: reader, reader, reader. How can I entice my reader to giggle? Think? Feel? Turn the page? Like teachers, authors learn theory and practice what works. The books you mention are examples of putting what works into practice. Kids love the sound of words. *The Animals' Song* gives them a book of familiar sounds with playful twists:

Cranky old goose

Who honked and hissed

Honk honk

Hissity hiss,

Stretched her neck

And looked like this!

Hissity hissity hiss.

The *Farmer's Dog* books follow a two-voice format to encourage emerging readers to work with a partner. Again, this is partly theory but mostly writing what works.

**Squirrel, Squirrel,
what's the matter?**

*I'm so mad
it makes me chatter!*

**Why are you chattering
in a tree?**

*That nosy fox
was sniffing me!*

**After he leaves,
what will you do?**

*Maybe I'll eat
a nut or two.*

I did not ask readers to vote on the stanzas for the *Farmer's Dog* books. I read plenty of them to young audiences and judged from their reactions which ones seemed to capture their interest. Many teachers have used the books to entice their students to add stanzas of their own. I have examples in my files of stanzas that are quite creative!

ANN:

I think the only book that you have written in the last 20 years that I don't have in my personal collection is *The Mouse Was Out to Recess*. I must get my (continued on page 2)

Fluency Fun (continued from page 1)

own copy since I, along with other patrons, have almost worn out the library copy. My favorite poem is the two-voice poem *Have It Your Own Way*. Since this teaches a common grammatical error in a humorous way, I always share it with my students each semester. Would you please share it with us and explain how and why you wrote this book?

DAVID:

It's one of my favorites too. Sooner or later we are all expected to learn the basic rules of our language. For some, it's more of a challenge, especially if "proper" English isn't spoken at home. When the going gets tough, the tough try to find enough humor in the situation to relieve the stress. Hopefully, this poem provides a handy tool for such occasions.

Have It Your Own Way Poem for Two Voices

Isabelle:

Me and Sally are pals!

Teacher:

Sally and I are pals.

Isabelle:

I didn't know you knew her!

Teacher:

I don't

Isabelle:

Then why did you say,
"Me and Sally are pals?"

Teacher:

Sally and I are pals.

Isabelle:

You said it again!
You said,
"Me and Sally are pals!"

Teacher:

Sally and I are pals!

Isabelle:

Have it your own way.
You and her are pals.
But I don't believe it,
And Sally won't neither!

ANN:

I found using your poem "My Book," from *Somebody Catch My Homework* to be very effective for choral reading. I generally divide my class in half with one group reading the first stanza and the second group reading the next stanza and then the last two stanzas are read in unison. The students are especially excited when I tell them where they could also find this poem. Will you please share your special poem and one of its unusual locations?

DAVID:

One of my proudest moments occurred when "My Book," a poem from *Somebody Catch My Homework*, was chosen to become part of the new Children's Garden at the Burton Barr Central Library in Phoenix. The poem was sandblasted into the sidewalk in the garden. I was flown to Phoenix to read "My Book" and participate in the grand opening ceremony. I figure that's pretty close to having your words set in stone! Here's the poem:

MY BOOK

From *Somebody Catch My Homework*

I did it!

I did it!

Come and look

At what I've done!

I read a book!

When someone wrote it

Long ago

For me to read,

How did he know

That this was the book

I'd take from the shelf

And lie on the floor

And read by myself?

I really read it!

Just like that!

Word by word,

From first to last!

I'm sleeping with

This book in bed,

This first FIRST book

I've ever read!

ANN:

Another poem I enjoy using for choral

reading is from your book *The Alligator in the Closet*. It is where Claire is telling about everything disgusting about having a new baby around the house. I take this poem and make it possible for 15 students to have a speaking part. I let each student tell one of the "yucky" things about having the new baby in the house. I hope you don't mind me taking this liberty with your poem but it is wonderful to aid students in reading fluently because they generally can identify with this poem. It aids in teaching the concept that we want to read smoothly and with expression. When young children read these lines they do it with so much feeling because they are so familiar with this. I have the students read the last two lines in unison. This always proves to be a winning poem as do all the others in this book. May we share this poem with our readers?

DAVID:

I am glad to hear that children are enjoying this poem and book. I must admit, even at my age I still enjoy being silly now and then. Reading and humor seem to be good for all of us regardless of our age. Hope you hear some giggles as the students read this poem orally.

BABY STUFF

Diapers in the bathtub

Stroller in the hall

Highchair in the kitchen

Spinach on the wall

Drool on the tables

Crackers on the floor

Playpen by the sofa

Gate across the door

Cookies in the cushions

Bottles on the chairs

Teething rings and rattles

And ointment everywhere

Jars of yucky peaches

You wouldn't want to touch

Jammies, booties, blankets

A hundred times too much

Every seat is sticky

I recommend you stand

The baby stuff at our house

Is totally out of hand.

(continued on page 3)

Fluency Fun (continued from page 2)

ANN:

I assume that *Miss Grubb Super Sub* did not demand as much research or extensive rewrites as your scientifically-based books did. However, I found it a very effective book to use at the beginning of the school year to show students the many different writing forms they may use to communicate their ideas. Have you heard from other teachers how they use both this and *Connecting Dots* in their writing programs?

DAVID:

Before tackling Miss Grubb I visited an area school, interviewed several staff members (including the custodian, cook, nurse, and librarian), and made notes about their routines. What could a spirited substitute teacher like Miss Grubb do to make her students' day as rewarding as possible? She could count on staff members to make her lessons more meaningful.

It might surprise students and teachers to know how hard it was to write the story. Each word in every sentence was challenged by my editors at Random House. I don't work with anyone more dedicated to creating books that hold the child's attention and guide his/her efforts to become a good reader. I helped write the authors' guidelines for other books in the series, and a letter from me to parents appears inside the cover of each title. What I'm hearing so far is that Miss Grubb's approach is finding an appreciative audience. If the book continues to do well, there might be a new Miss Grubb adventure one of these days.

Connecting Dots was another kind of effort and much more demanding for me. Because the poems are based on memories of my life and cover the years from three to 65, I went to considerable effort to test drive each poem before deciding whether to keep it or vote it off the island. Kids had a lot of clout in this one. I went through thousands of votes and comments contributed by boys and girls whose teachers agreed to read the manuscript and let them discuss the poems. Facing all those youthful and candid comments was an experience! In the end, I discarded or rewrote many poems because of student votes and comments. I

think the book is stronger because I know that the surviving poems passed the acid test: kids liked them. I know of some college teachers who are finding *Dots* helpful for their own students.

ANN:

In your presentations at state, regional, and national conferences, I know that you are frequently asked to speak about poetry. But in 2004 you wrote a Scholastic Guide Book: *Writing Stories, Fantastic Fiction From Start to Finish*. What made you write that book, and what are the responses you have received from teachers?

DAVID:

I began my writing career as a story writer and have published dozens of fiction books. I wrote *Writing Stories* with upper elementary and middle school students in mind, but I told my editor that the book felt right for just about any age, including adult. *Writing Stories* sells at the rate of 4,000 copies per month, and I have indeed heard from adults as well as students who are finding the personal approach of the book helpful. For example, one mother said that she bought the book for her son but discovered that it helped her get her own writing back on track.

I chose to write *Stories* in first person because it makes me feel closer to the reader. If we're going to share the writing experience together, I need the freedom to tease and encourage along the way. One of these days I'd like to do a similar guide to writing poetry.

ANN:

I know that you have recently completed your third book about caves. How did you become so interested in this subject? Did you explore many caves when you were growing up?

DAVID:

I remember when I was four years old riding on my dad's shoulders into a cave not far from where I live today. Later I explored caves with friends. A prized possession is a bear skull that I found in a cave when I was twelve. The bear probably died soon after the end of the last ice age 10,000 years ago. I grew up collecting fossils and minerals and eventually minored in geology at Drury University. I had a fellowship in entomol-

ogy at the University of Arkansas but wound up going to Emory in Atlanta and becoming a parasitologist.

Reilly & Lee published *The World of American Caves* in 1973. I wrote the text for young adults. Boyds Mills Press published *CAVES, Mysteries Beneath Our Feet*, in 2001. That one, which is for young readers, became the first title in my Earthworks series and has been selected for state reading lists in Michigan and Arizona. In 2002, it became a Society of School Librarians International Honor Book for Science. *Cave Detectives* (Chronicle, 2007) is written with grades 4-6 in mind. It's about Riverbluff Cave in Missouri, which turns out to be one of the oldest ice age caves discovered on the North American continent. This latest book reports on real science as it unfolds. I wrote it to help young readers understand that science is a messy business that moves forward through a series of theories and challenges and efforts to establish validity.

ANN:

Now I see how your early cave explorations and your formal education influences your science books. I also know that you have been a professional trombonist and private music teacher. Do you think that music somehow factors into your writing?

DAVID:

We tend to speak in rhythms, whether we notice it or not. English is a language of stressed and unstressed syllables. Iambic meter is as comfortable a cadence today as it was in Shakespeare's time. Prose flows, or it should. A well-conceived sentence takes us where we're going over a series of syllables placed like helpful stepping stones.

I wrote short stories in the 60s, discovered picture books in the 70s, turned to poetry in the 80s, and returned to non-fiction in the 90s. Throughout the journey I've never lost the feeling that music is shorthand for music. That may not sound surprising for poetry but I think a beating pulse also informs good prose. That's music speaking.

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Arkansas Reading Association "Promoting Literacy in Arkansas for over 33 years!"

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Fluency Fun (continued from page 3)

Current Books in Print by David Harrison:

ANN:

Thanks for sharing your insightful ideas. I always look forward to hearing you share, read or tell about your books in person at conferences. I also welcome the opportunity to grin, laugh, or chuckle out loud as I read your newest humorous book of poetry.

DAVID:

I'm glad that you like my humorous poetry, Ann. A new collection is set for 2007. Stay tuned!

Dr. Ann Porter Gifford is Professor of Literacy at Southeast Missouri State University and is Past President of the Missouri State Council of the International Reading Association. Ann has had articles published in state, national and international journals.

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