



# Novels in Verse: Encouraging Reluctant Readers

Grades  
3–6

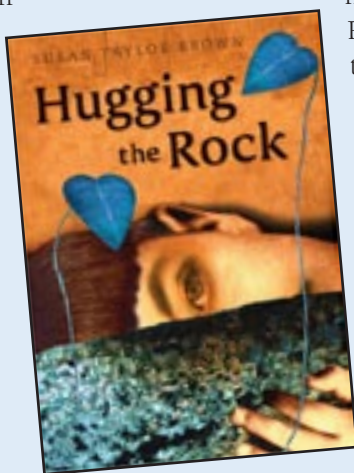
by | Andrea Tarr

Over the years librarians have noticed considerable variety in the types of novels being offered to elementary and middle school children. The diary-type novels, such as Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Candie Moonshower's *The Legend of Zoey*, Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands* and the preponderance of historical fiction written in journal form are often among the most popularly requested genres in public libraries. Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game*, a puzzle-novel and Sharon Creech's *Replay*, which takes on elements of a play, are also quite popular with readers. However, over the past several years, novels told in verse compose a captivating variety of the books kids love to read. This genre proves itself quite accessible to a wide variety of readers, but it is particularly attractive to reluctant readers simply because often each page contains fewer words than a typical novel might and, in many cases, the vocabulary is not challenging, yet the rhythms and emotions of life are clearly evident.

The nature of most verse novels is to be short, something on the order of a novella, or short novel. Powerful narratives combine with rich, moving poetry to invite readers to become acquainted with various narrators. While changing perspectives are presented, these shorter books, filled with evocative verse, often can serve as a valuable introduction to poetry. Verse novels cover a wide variety of themes: some are particularly spirited, whereas others, taut and tender, can be poignant and heartwarming. Below are several of examples of novels told in verse; some are intended for lower-grade elemen-

tary school students; others will appeal to students in upper elementary school.

*Hugging the Rock* by Susan Taylor Brown is a presentation of a series of free verse poems that shed light on a dysfunctional family. The short poems, offered by Rachel, whose mother has left home, indicate the difficulty that both Rachel and her father experience due to their loss. It is not only Rachel's growing awareness of her mother's emotional difficulties that is at the center of this lyrical story, but Rachel's understanding that her father, "the rock," is there for her, having been the parent who has always cherished her. As Rachel hopes that her mother will return, her emotional health and grades suffer, but she ultimately learns, with her father's loving guidance, how to cope and manage without her mother. We become acquainted with a valiant



Rachel, whose strength only increases as she learns to appreciate the power of her relationship with her father. This is a poignant, bittersweet tale of the bond between fathers and daughters.

Susan Taylor Brown helps the reader to understand her reasons for writing *Hugging the Rock* by offering information about her own life, which compelled her to write the book. An important key to writing poetry is set forth in a student guide to poetry entitled, *Gonna Bake Me a Rainbow Poem*, written by Peter Sears. Several chapters from this informative guide are sure to shed light on the writing process, including "Language and Punctuation," "Choosing a Subject," and "Making a Statement." Brown, whose novel mirrors thoughts she herself had as a child, is comfortable with her subject, using a good deal of vernacular in her

novel. Both topics are mined in these chapters of *Gonna Bake Me a Rainbow Poem*, a thorough step-by-step guidebook. All poems are written by poetry students who try their hands at assorted topics.

Suggest the following to students: Choose a subject area that you are familiar with and write. You might begin by describing something common, then move on to describe what you like about something that is especially important to you. Describe its taste, its look, its feel. Choose your subject, follow these steps and write all the ways this thing matters to you. Change the structure and words. Experiment. You can find many ways to express all this in your poem.

Jennifer Bryant's *Pieces of Georgia* is a lovely look at a blossoming artist, Georgia, whose observations are kept in a journal given to her by a caring counselor, who has labeled Georgia an "at risk" student. Initially unsure of what to write, Georgia fills the journal with heartfelt questions and statements directed to her mother, who has passed away some six years earlier. As Georgia celebrates her thirteenth birthday, she receives an anonymous gift: a membership to the local museum. Throughout these free verse journal entries, the reader becomes a witness to Georgia's growth and development. Georgia grieves for her mother, struggles through school, reaches out to her less-than-communicative father, and demonstrates genuine love and concern in her friendship with another troubled girl. This spare tale of love and growth chronicles quiet and observant Georgia's interest in art, as she learns about various artists, particularly the Wyeths. The author also presents Georgia as an empathetic, understanding individual. Bryant gives Georgia a chance to affect changes in her somewhat broken life.

The impact of images is clear when reading *Pieces of Georgia*. Bryant has included several images that stand out. Imagery plays a role in poetry and, because Bryant focuses on a young girl's interest in art, imagery becomes an even more significant ingredient in Bryant's work. The lovely images of young Georgia listening to her father's

recollections of her mother are central to this story. Sue Young features several key pointers on imagery, similes, and metaphors in her *Writing with Style (A Scholastic Guide)*. Georgia's lively description of an important friendship here is strengthened by Bryant's use of similes. Students can glean from Young's chapter "You May Use the Poet's Tools" the importance of images, similes and metaphors. Students can develop word pictures using various similes and metaphors when comparing ideas.



Sharon Creech's *Heartbeat* is a look at twelve-year-old Annie who, above all else, enjoys running. However, she likes to run alone or with her pal, Max, and has no plans to join the track team. The rhythm of running seems to make sense to Annie, who is experiencing many new developments during the past year. Her aging grandfather, a former champion runner, is troubled by forgetfulness; Max seems moody all the time; her mother's pregnancy, though thrilling to Annie, is another big change. Challenged by her

teacher's creative assignment: to draw a single apple each day for 100 days, Annie begins the slow process of self-discovery. This rich, involving search, woven into the many fibers of Annie's life, takes on the similarly subtle changes that Annie's apple drawings reflect. While we follow Annie's everyday rhythm, we appreciate her strength, her passion, and her thoughtful nature. Free-spirited and resourceful, Annie searches for her own inimitable way of moving along to the rhythms in her life. The author has given us a glowing creation and invites us to carefully absorb and appreciate Annie's life in this elegant, masterful, glowing novel.

*Immersed in Verse* by Allen Wolf is a grand introduction into the many aspects of poetry writing. The chapter called "Observations & Explosions" focuses on the poet's observations, the power of words, and the many forms of poetry we recognize. Creech has selected a great many details in *Heartbeat*, including her repetition of "thump-thump" (her sound for feet on the ground and her heartbeat) that are examples of Wolf's suggestion to have "an ear for language." Those who appreciate

poetry and/or wish to write poetry will do well to acquaint themselves with Wolf's encouraging, informative, and lively guide.

Craig Crist-Evans's verse novel, *North of Everything* tells the story of an unnamed boy whose family relocates from Miami, Florida to Montpelier, Vermont. They work the land in Vermont, embracing a more simple life and becoming closer to nature. The family, unaccustomed to changing seasons, remarks on how quickly time passes as their first year moves along and they grow content with their labors, milking, painting, clearing, and cutting. A new addition, a baby sister, comes into the family's life and for a brief time, all is right in their hard-working farm life. However, a sudden, dramatic change in the father's health threatens to alter the family forever. The author's portrayal of the family's adjustment to the seasons, their farm, their harsh news, and the growth in their own lives offers us a remarkable opportunity to share in this melancholy but vivid and vital venture through love and loss. The author's eloquent, compelling multi-layered story and the theme of journey and self-discovery are offered in this very accessible novel in verse.

*Knock on a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry* written by X. J. and Dorothy Kennedy is an excellent look at various aspects of poetry. The authors cover many types of poems as well as various methods of using language in several poems. Their chapter titled "Beats that Repeat" touches on rhythm and how we see, feel, and hear it. Rhythm is in the seasons; in the day and night. Craig Crist-Evans book, *North of Everything* illustrates some of the lovely repeating language that the Kennedys indicate as rhythm. For example, the repetition of "here north of everything" which begins Crist-Evans's look at his new home in spring in Vermont, also begins a portion of his comments on summer, fall, and winter, concluding once again with this same line, "here north of everything" to let the reader know the nameless boy's understanding of one season leading into another. The several parts of Kennedys' book, serving as a look at what poems do, such as "Make You Smile," "Tell Stories," and the portions of the book that touch on images, word music, and word play, in addition to the final section of this book, which deals with various types

of poems—such as haiku and limerick—certainly are a great aid to a young poet.

Karen Hesse's *Witness* is a powerful series of poems that express what a variety of American citizens experience, as the Ku Klux Klan attempts to infiltrate their Northeastern town. Eleven various unforgettable voices represent their 1924 lives, speaking in distinct, fascinating voices. A black child, Leonora, and a Jewish child, Esther, are among the eleven representatives, which also includes a shopkeeper, a newspaper editor, a farmer, and a physician. As the "cast" speaks, it soon turns against itself as the KKK's "All-American" philosophy is initially accepted by some townsfolk. Hesse serves up glances at the outside world through her nods at Prohibition, the Leopold and Loeb case, and Leonora's letter to Helen Keller. Each voice is completely separate from the others, but the vivid sense that hatred and evil is slowly but surely moving in is inescapable. Hesse's lyrical novel leads us into this unforgettable era in which the citizens' voices, varying from the darkly pessimistic to the innocently optimistic, help us understand their insight and the impact that this troubled time had on America.

Myra Cohn Livingston's *Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry* is a sensible, helpful approach for poets trying their hands at poetry. The several segments of this guide are split into forms of poetry, figures of speech, and the importance of sound in poetry. A great deal of what Livingston offers applies to the unusual free verse that Karen Hesse employs in *Witness*. For example, one of Hesse's eleven characters uses metaphors in describing her father and her plight during an unforgettable time in 1924, as the Ku Klux Klan moved into Vermont. Leonora Sutter states that we were wringing grief; another comment is that Leonora feels that old rope of dread dragging up the ridge of her spine. Metaphors can work brilliantly in poetry, as Livingston's *Poem-Making* points out, specifically citing the lines of many a great poet, such as Langston Hughes's "Dreams" ("life is a broken-winged bird") and Wallace Stevens's "That Brave Man" ("the sun, that brave man"), illustrating the powerful, vivid pictures that metaphors offer.

A 1944 circus fire in Hartford, Connecticut



killed 167 people and injured some 500. Paul Janeczko tells this true story in verse, introducing us to this actual event in *Worlds Afire*. Twenty-nine eyewitnesses speak about their experiences, giving the story a sense of urgent immediacy and haunting realism. While some historical fiction novels may be large and, therefore, uninviting to some readers, Janeczko's coverage is a most accessible slice of history. The book is offered in three parts: introduction, the fire, and the aftermath. We sense the circus excitement and feel the anxiety and terror of the crowd. *Worlds Afire* is a spare, shocking story, but its poetry gives a voice to these individuals whose lives were unforgettably altered and to those who lost their lives.

*Writer's Express* will certainly prove an asset to many a young writer. This handbook written and compiled by Dave Kemper, Ruth Nathan, and Patrick Sebranek is a compendium of hints, ideas, and examples for budding writers. The passage on free verse included in the section on writing poems is one that will aid in this specific type of writing. Certainly these ideas are some that likely guided Janeczko when writing *Worlds Afire*. Janeczko said his wish with the book was to give a voice to the people whose lives were forever changed by the fire. As Kemper, Nathan, and Sebranek are careful to mention, poetry speaks to the heart, as well as the mind; their hint to collect thoughts surely comes through when reading a novel such as *Worlds Afire*.

*Soul Moon Soup* by Lindsay Lee Johnson is a volume of connected poems that tell the tale of a homeless family who get by going from one soup kitchen to another. We meet Phoebe Rose and her mother who have survived in homeless shelters until the day Phoebe Rose accidentally loses their only suitcase filled with all of their belongings—their only possession. Before long, Phoebe Rose is sent away, to live with a nurturing grandmother in the country while her mother attempts to make a new life in the city. While the mood of this novel shifts with several unhappy developments, we grow close to Phoebe Rose and her love and appreciation of art. Although the pieces of their lives are left somewhat uncertain as Phoebe Rose's mother gets a key to a room in the city, we are left with the hope-

ful feeling that they finally have a fresh start.

Poets such as William Blake and Walt Whitman have used free verse to express their thoughts, though the term “free verse” was not yet coined. As free verse grew in popularity throughout the twentieth century, more poets tried this style. e. e. cummings certainly became a master of this form. *A Child's Introduction to Poetry* by Michael Driscoll serves as a splendid introduction to free verse among other poetic forms. The book includes “Part One: The Rhymes and their Reason,” “Part Two: Poetry's Greats” and a CD that covers the entire volume. Driscoll's short explanation of free verse brings to mind some of the powerful passages included in Lindsay Lee Johnson's powerful *Soul Moon Soup*, particularly when discussing the unusual ways that e.e. cummings invented his poetic art.

Pamela Porter's *Crazy Man* introduces us to a farm family that has fallen on hard times. We meet disillusioned twelve-year-old Emaline Bitterman, who is convalescing from a tragic accident at the hands of her father, which has left her with a permanent disability. Her father has left Emaline and her mother on their struggling farm. Emaline slowly recuperates. Her mother attempts to deal with their challenges and decides

to contact the local mental hospital to hire a man on to assist with farm chores. Angus, the hulking redheaded patient takes up residence with the Bittermans. Before long the town is divided over what to do about this “problem.” Angus lends not only a hand, but he shares his views and approaches to life to this needy family. While Pamela Porter's novel covers prejudice, conflicting emotions, and harsh farm life it also illuminates the importance of kindness, self-worth, loyalty, and loss. Just as Angus awakens Emaline to the glory of the Northern Lights, she becomes aware, as we do, of the power of friendship.

*Writing for Kids* by Carol Lea Benjamin offers many suggestions for creative people who may need encouragement in beginning their projects. The chapter entitled “The Writer's Notebook” stresses the importance of keeping collected writing in a safe place. The chapter called “Wonderful Words” stresses the importance of the words that writers select. Both of these chapters underline the impor-



tance of writers' preparedness and organization, as well as the need for listing ideas that inspire.

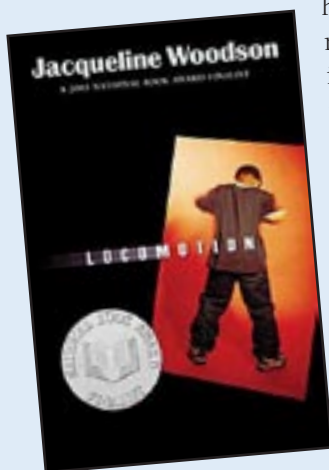
*Almost Forever* by Maria Testa is a tender, spare, verse novel that records a child's memories of her father's Vietnam experiences while he served in the military as a doctor. Their goodbyes, the ache of missing him, television news reports, and reading his daily letters home are related by the first grade narrator who longs for her father's return. In this lovely narrative, set in 1967, Testa brings us more than a glimpse of the worry, trepidation, anger, and sorrow this young girl feels. Readers can empathize with one family at the turning point in America's involvement with South Vietnam, learn about Americans' opinions about U.S. involvement there, and identify with the related fears in this powerfully moving achievement.

Jacqueline Woodson's *Locomotion* introduces Lonnie Collins Motion and his fifth grade assignment to write poetry. Lonnie is able to express his feelings about the loss of his parents, who died some four years earlier. His wonderful teacher, Ms. Marcus, encourages Lonnie to come to terms with his anger and grief. Lonnie has experienced some unbearable losses, and the fact that his younger sister is living in a separate foster home doesn't help matters. We meet fully realized characters, share in the healing, and develop a deeper appreciation for poetry as we take part in Lonnie's growth and emerging poetic voice. This is a powerful, triumphant novel that is heart-breaking, humorous, and hopeful.

Jacqueline Woodson's Web site includes comments about her own experiences and the way she remembers feeling at age eleven. *How to Write a Sentence* by Kathleen Christopher Null is a valuable aid to those beginning writers seeking organizational skills and ideas before they begin writing poetry. It includes a section inviting writers to write

a free verse poem about a feeling. Null stresses the importance of letting feelings flow and trying to convey these feelings in as few carefully chosen words as possible. While poetry is the topic of *Locomotion*, as Lonnie is studying poetry in school, it is also the way the book moves forward. From haiku, to sonnets then free verse, Lonnie expresses feelings that are moving, sad, and hopeful. The poetry in *Locomotion* serves a variety of purposes, but most importantly, its cathartic effect is particularly valuable.

Novels told in verse are undoubtedly a popular format. Whether written as a narrative describing personal experiences or an investigation into historic events, these novels can move a reader who likes poetry to consider topics previously untried. These effectively written, engrossing, and evocative verse novels can help interest readers who may shy away from longer novels.



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