Poetry in motion? Reality versus rhetoric in Australian children’s poetry

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Abstract

Poetry is a literary niche that generates passionate advocacy in both children’s and adult literature; yet it is the tenet of this paper that in Australia there is a disconnect between this advocacy and corresponding low levels of traditional print publishing, especially in relation to poetry for children and young adults. This apparent gap also leads me to ask a related question; how many young people truly connect with or have knowledge of the literary lore of poetry? Practitioners and lovers of poetry will no doubt concur with the view that the profile and value of both traditional and contemporary poetry from Australia and all countries and cultures is something worthy of being championed. In order to achieve effective sponsorship and valuing of the genre, however, I argue that we need to target funding for creators and publishers in ways that encourage publication, improve knowledge of poetry in schools and teacher education and stimulate poetry’s appeal in popular culture. It seems logical to suggest that if communities and individuals are to be encouraged to value poetry as adults, then encouraging the appreciation and enjoyment of poetry in the younger years is crucial.

*Author’s Note: While the focus of this paper is on children’s poetry, many of the issues raised pertain equally to poetry in general as a genre.

Keywords

Children’s literature, poetry, publishing, education, funding, anthologies.

Firstly, let me foreground my interest in poetry. I am a writer, poet and editor with a number of trade and education publishers in the children’s verse and poetry genre; advocacy for literacy and creative arts education is a significant focus of my life as a teacher and educator. I have therefore taken great interest in what appears to be an upsurge of poetry events and activities in the programs and discourse of writers’ centre blogs, literary websites and in the general discourse of both Australian and international
literary fraternities. In Australia, this increased activity has synergy with the Australian Poetry Centre’s metamorphosis into Australian Poetry and the combined efforts of passionate individuals and organisations as such as The Wheeler Centre, If Books Australia, the Australian Society of Authors and various regional and state literature groups and event organisers.

While this increase in poetry’s profile is heartening for those who practice and enjoy the poetic, I am concerned that it perpetuates a fictional stereotype; that being the image of the independent writer / poet financially and creatively sustained by the practicing of their craft. While some might imagine and wish this scenario were true, I can’t help but question if the enticing image of poets ‘getting up and reciting three-minute poems to a rapturous audience’ (Baker 2010:16) fits the reality for those struggling to achieve recognition, remuneration and publication in their poetic niche, particularly children’s poets.

Recognition is a constant battle for those in children’s literature and I have become increasingly aware of how ‘lack of appreciation can lead to feelings of artistic insecurity’ (Carthew 2010). It could certainly be argued that creating a successful children’s book (defined here as a publication with first print run sales of at least 4000+ and available in established bookshops) is one of the more difficult tasks in publishing.

In addition, my personal experience with publishers’ response to the consideration of children’s poetry manuscripts (echoed in anecdotal conversations with author colleagues and children’s poets) points to poetry, and especially children’s poetry, being one of the harder areas in which to achieve publication. I suggest that this situation highlights the dichotomy between the literary community’s championing of the importance of poetry as a genre, and publishers’ lack of commitment to publishing in the genre. One example of this ‘championing’ is the proliferation of contemporary poetry prizes (with over fifty recently noted on the Australian Poetry Centre’s (2011a) website), yet this positive promotion and profile contrasts with a view that mainstream publishers and booksellers are unwilling to support poetry with corresponding enthusiasm. Australian independent poetry publisher Brandl & Schlesinger comment:

Publishing poetry, as everyone knows, is not a profit making proposition, even with the kind support of the Australia Council, yet …it makes a cultural contribution to our society. The print runs are too small to cover costs, often rarely over 500 and booksellers, with few exceptions, do not like to stock contemporary Australian poetry. (n.d.)

While quantitative figures of poetry publishing in either children’s or adult genres in Australia are difficult to obtain, my own experience, echoing Brandl & Schlesinger’s perspective is that children’s poetry books nestle in a neglected backwater and are possibly only saved from drying up completely by the passionate efforts of dedicated educators, literary practitioners, small presses and an ever diminishing number of
specialty bookshops or library suppliers. The Australian Society of Authors advice on *Writing for the Poetry Market* (Purcell 2009) reinforces the bleak picture:

The situation has also been harmed by the penchant for publishers to embrace economic rationalism, and abandon their commitment to areas now considered unprofitable - ie. poetry. Recently, even prize-winning poets with a book or two in the marketplace have had difficulty placing subsequent manuscripts (p. 5).

It is therefore worth reflecting on Michael Benton’s pertinent question, ‘How do we know that poetry is a neglected art?’ (1978:112). Benton’s question implies poetry has been previously ‘successful’. Looking back, there can be no disputing the influence of literacy figures such as Edward Lear, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carol, Michael Rosen, Dr Suess, Spike Milligan, Roald Dahl and Australasian legends such Max Fatchen, C.J. Dennis, May Gibbs, Dame Mary Gilmore, Henry Lawson, Colin Thiele, Michael Dugan, and Margaret Mahy. These authors and many others have had a significant impact on the literary psyche of children and adults alike, with their work being incorporated into courses studying both literature and writing technique.

But where are the new and emerging poetic voices? And how many Australian children’s poets would Australian children be able to name, let alone their teachers or their parents?

It could be argued that one reason for this is that marketing machines of major publishers and outlet franchises favours distribution practices that support the tried and tested appeal of familiar international names such as Roald Dahl or Dr Seuss. My regular activity of scouring children’s poetry sections in Australian bookstores and retail outlets more often than not reveals a focus on the works of popular overseas poets and anthologists. Even though many of these authors are among my personal favourites, it nevertheless raises the question; does this apparent scarcity of contemporary and emerging Australian children’s poets and anthologists on the shelves point to a lack of commitment to Australian voices?

While part of a much larger debate, such a question certainly adds weight to the suggestion that the answer in Australia and New Zealand is synchronous with market forces aligned with profit and multi-national distribution networks. This claim is central to concerns about product dumping in the recent parallel imports debate and fears that a focus on overseas products ‘can make it much harder for new talent to come through’ (Earls 2008:3). It also seems reasonable to suggest that the recent trend to celebrity publishing and movie tie-ins, no doubt influenced by the attraction of profit, is making literary-oriented genres such as poetry increasingly difficult to justify in Australian publishing proposals and acquisitions. This trend is arguably another factor adding further to poetry’s demise in publishing lists and not just in Australia. In a recent interview, American poet and anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins notes the decline of poetry anthologies:
Anthologies of poetry for children have seen a dramatic decrease ...and certain publishers who once published collections simply will not take on additional anthologies (Hopkins, cited in Vardell 2011).

Similarly in Australia, a study by University of Queensland Press poetry editor Bronwyn Lea, ‘uncovered a fall of more than 40 per cent in the number of poetry books published’ (Lea, cited in Neil 2007). Discussing reasons for poetry decline in the USA, Hopkins goes on to say that permission costs, a trend to celebrity publishing and lack of commitment are all contributing to poetry’s lack of list profile; and ‘for a collection to work it has to have a strong backing from the house’(Hopkins, cited in Vardell 2011). Is this implied lack of backing based on a lack of faith in poetry’s market appeal? A basic chicken and egg argument could be raised as an answer ie: marketing can and does create appeal with suitable business will and prioritisation; a look around an airport book shop or retail chain book department clearly demonstrates that principle. Having said that, I am certainly not advocating a form of simple popularism, but rather I am suggesting that one of the fundamental challenges for poetry advocates both in and outside of publishing houses is to explore ways of encouraging publishers to take on new poetry projects, take risks, publish new voices and to support those voices with due regard.

Contrasting the idea of the decline of poetry publishing however — is the notion of a revival, creating a situation identified by McCooey as paradoxical, where poetry is both ‘thriving and merely surviving’ (2005:24).

Lea’s (2007) comprehensive analysis of poetry publishing in Australia reflects this contrasting viewpoint. Lea identifies a significant reduction in the number titles published over the period 1993-2000, evidenced by a reduction of ‘about 100 titles’ (2007:250); this however was juxtaposed with a strong sense of ‘resurgence of poetry’ (2007:251). Lea indicates that this resurgence is fostered by the belief in poetry by self-publishers and emergence of small presses with a committment to the genre.

In discussing pockets of publishing industry belief in poetry, McCooey (2005) draws attention to the strategic positioning of passionate and committed poet-publishers in the small presses and literary journals such as Salt, Black Pepper, Meanjin, and Blue Dog; a situation interpreted as a dedicated literary vanguard fighting the reality of larger trade publishers, such as Angus and Robertson, Penguin and Heinemann dropping poetry and even established poets from their lists. Placing this viewpoint in an international as well as academic context, a recent Varsity College review of ‘Poetry and Childhood’ (Whiteley, Joy & Styles 2011) also notes that increasing ‘academic interest is combined with growing enthusiasm among poets and fans of children’s poetry’ (Griffin 2011).

Citing an example of poetic proactivity, Griffin observes that in the UK, ‘ex-Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen has gone to considerable effort to keep poetry alive in a world where the way we read is constantly changing’. The effect of a similar laureate scheme (Australia Council for the Arts 2009) to be fashioned as part of the recent Australian
Children’s Literature Alliance initiative will be interesting to watch. Griffin’s enthusiastic hope for the future of children’s poetry, however, is also tempered with a reality check that notes a decline in the way that students and teachers perceive poetry in UK schools:

A UKLA survey of 1200 British primary schools found that 22 percent of teachers could not name a single poet and only 3 per cent reported that they had read poetry aloud to a class (Griffin 2011).

In Australia similar concerns are being raised. David Campbell, in a recent Age Newspaper article; In a Land of Sweeping Plains, Poetry is Hardly Thriving, raises questions about contemporary Australia’s lack of interest in poetry, while drawing attention to education’s role, claiming that ‘some blame generations of teachers for being afraid of verse’ (2011:11). Kelly likewise reinforces the pivotal nature of inspiring educative experiences, saying that in the past ‘some children enjoyed their teacher’s passion for poetry, while others were at the mercy of their teacher’s indifference’ (2005:129).

Both Campbell’s and Kelly’s observations of variation in teacher knowledge and passion for poetry highlights the importance of a much broader pedagogical discussion about the role of education and teachers in nurturing and developing student interests such as poetry. A point taken up by Ashley Capes and Graham Nunn (2010):

In too many Australian schools, poetry seems to be either optional in curriculum, ignored by teachers altogether, or misrepresented by a narrow field of focus. Perhaps worse than this, when poetry is presented in a classroom, it is often explored with a cold, analytical emphasis that does much to close off a reader’s interaction.

If we accept these assertions the question is; how do we improve the situation? Initiatives such as poet laureate schemes, artists-in-schools programs and the push to re-affirm the value and role teacher librarians in literacy and literature education, (Gillespie, International Association of School Librarianship & School Library Association of Queensland 2010) are all part of the pro-active nurturing tapestry that has the potential to influence poetry’s profile and public appeal. The establishment of Australian Poetry is a particularly exciting development and signposts the importance of strong and vibrant advocacy not just in education, but in the broader community. Launched in 2011, Australian Poetry is:

A merger between the Australian Poetry Centre and Poets Union based in NSW. It is the peak industry body for poetry in this country, based at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne, with a charter to promote and support Australian poets and poetry locally, regionally, nationally and internationally (Australian Poetry 2011a).

With an expanding Poetry in Education Program and a range of innovative programs designed to engage and build audiences; writers, poets and literary advocates from around Australia will be hoping that Australia Poetry will encourage publishers and distributors of
the poetic to invest in the genre. Essential to the success of poetry orientated education programs and initiatives is the belief ‘that for poetry to flourish in this country it needs to be taught and read from an early age’ (Australian Poetry 2011b), a notion central to overseas programs such as the Scottish Book Trust’s Writers in Schools program (Scottish Book Trust 2011). The value and benefits of exposure to poetry at an early age was demonstrated in a recent project with Eltham North Primary school in Victoria, where as guest poet and writer I was part of a program designed to raise awareness of poetry and stimulate interest in both poetry reading and writing. The children at the school were visited by poets and guided by their teachers to explore poetic forms, with the end result comprising not only the engagement with the poetic embedded in the learning experience, but the joy of a series of illustrated publications - *Building Bridges* (Eltham North Primary School 2010) - featuring examples of every child’s work:

**Imagination**

Imagination is sparkles  
It smells like the pages of a book  
It tastes like a sprinkle sandwich  
It sounds like the wind whistling in my ears  
It feels like flying  
It lives in my pencil drawings


Original verse created by children is also a focus in events such as the Ipswich Poetry Feast (2011) in Queensland, an event attracting substantial support from the local council, library, business, schools and community:

**Two Sticks and a Stretched Cowhide**

I go out in the open air, with  
Nothing but  
Two sticks and a stretched cowhide

A flick of the wrist, a twitch of the arm and a stick moves through the air.  
This just makes an ordinary sound,  
But. ..

When I make some more of those plain sounds, I put them in a special order.  
When I do that in the right way,  
Something else begins to slip out from under the sounds.  
Something in the rhythm that appeals to my whole,
There’s a wonderful, magical thing
And I feel
I am not alone.

Nature is with me, the grass, wind and trees
I feel them
Sway and rustle and blow,
As if in time to my
Two sticks and a stretched cowhide.
I have the world at my feet,
I have

My Drum.

(John Myers, ‘Two Sticks and a Stretched Cowhide’, [First Prize - Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network Award, 8-10 Years, 2010], in Ipswich Poetry Feast, 2011)

Such examples of engagement with word smithing from children provide hope for the future appeal of poetry— for those who read it and those who write it. Pro-active school and community programs also underline the importance of the educators who nurture creative risk taking and enjoyment of the form. Common sense tells us that children are the future creators, appreciators and consumers of artistic endeavours and these programs are the seeds from which ideas and understanding will grow. Kenneth Koch (1999) aptly describes the synergy between the educative and creative imperative:

Learning the language of poetry may be described as getting a “poetry base”. Once one has it, good things follow: one can read better, and, if one is a poet write better (1999:1).

This synergy is similarly highlighted in the advice to young poets provided by the late Michael Dugan, one of Australia’s most respected contemporary children’s poets:

**Letter to a Young Poet**

Love words,
play with them,
find the meanings of those you don’t know.
Learn to recognize
descriptive words,
reflective words—
all manner of words
for all manner of purposes.
Decide whether you like to write in rhyme
or in other forms.
Experiment,
invent words,
invent forms,
harness ideas,
fish for images
and metaphors.
Express your ideas
in words and forms
that suit you.
Find your own voice
even if it takes hard work
and many hours.
Traveling to a poem
is a journey to be enjoyed.

PS: I meant to start with this but decided to finish with it:
Read other poet’s poems, learn from them, and delight in them.

(Dugan, in Janeczko 2002:14-15)

While the propagation of poetry prizes, events and activities across age groups seems to be creating a sense of momentum in Australia, I suggest much more needs to be done at the product development and promotion end to help young readers and new audiences find delight in poetry. Well balanced educational programs need contemporary, regional and Australasian material as well as historical and culturally significant material from around the world.

A key issue for all concerned may lie in convincing Australian publishers that children’s and young adult poetry can be attractive to the market and consequently a worthwhile investment. Australian author and children’s poet Lorraine Marwood’s achievement in winning the 2010 Prime Minister’s Literary Award [Children’s Fiction] for her verse novel ‘Star Jumps’ (Marwood 2010) is a strong indication that literary interest can compliment and stimulate market interest in poetic forms. As reported by Clark:

Ms Gillard acknowledged the important role books played in our creative culture, saying so often books gave life to other artforms, such as film, theatre, dance and opera. ‘[...] She said new book sales stood at $2.5 billion per annum, and 84 per cent of Australians were regular readers, including one in five who read poetry. (2010: np)

Such optimistic reporting of ‘reading interest’ seems strangely juxtaposed with the scarcity of poetry titles emanating from our major Australian publishers. Lea remarks:

It is important to note that the majority of poetry books are presently being published by small presses (including self-publishers) that often do not have
sufficient access to resources, distribution and marketing to have their books noticed by readers. (2007:251)

Poetry slams, e-zines, festivals, workshops and writers blogs would appear to both creating and perpetuating an air of confidence about poetry, which is of course a good thing. The reality however is arguably less optimistic, leading to Lea’s observation that ‘the situation for developing and established poets remains [my emphasis] impoverished’ (2007:251).

Writers in all genres are increasingly part of a global market and as such need to be internationally competitive and entrepreneurial; it seems, however, that the juxtaposition of positive promotion of poetry prizes, events and workshops against poor levels of mainstream publishing support is becoming even more noticeable as we move to an increasingly open market, with distribution networks of overseas products increasingly gaining market share. It could be argued that in order to foster and maintain our creative future, aspiring and existing Australian poets and publishers need a subsidy scheme molded in fashion of the NZ Translation Program (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2010) in order to provide publishing incentives.

On the other hand, it could also be argued that the propping up of any genre flies in the face of self-sufficiency and the natural selection processes of market forces.

The global resonance of this view is highlighted by Canadian arts commentator Michael Lista’s (2011) call for ‘a culling’ of the overabundance in literary output and subsidy. In relation to Australian children’s poetry however, I see little evidence of ‘overabundant’ publication subsidy, yet what does exist could certainly be argued as a crucial for encouraging some artists to practice their craft. A recent report into the effectiveness of subsidy from the Australia Council by Mclean, Poland & van den Berg notes, ‘There is little doubt that Literature Board subsidies play a vital role in sustaining the publication of Australian poetry’ (2010: 27). Furthermore, the report cites Giramondo publisher Ivor Indyk:

But it’s the individual collections that mark out the stages of a career and that are essential to the poet’s development … and they are fundamentally uneconomical without a subsidy. So, in poetry, the relationship between the subsidy and the career is absolute and direct. (Indyk cited in Mclean, Poland & van den Berg 2010:27)

I suggest that there would be little disagreement with the view that arts funding schemes administered through the Australia Council and Australian State Governments and Territories are extremely competitive and as a consequence hard to obtain. Grants, however, are about targeted priorities and it is worth noting this year’s Government of Western Australia (2011) website statement for their Publishing Assistance Program that ‘applications supporting poetry are encouraged’.
Discussion on this topic would be enhanced with greater access to industry facts and figures. Nielsen Bookscan and RMIT’s School of Media and Communication’s project to statistically map retail book sales in Australia from 2002-2011 should provide a clearer view of book industry statistics:

It will provide year by year information and cross-year comparison for the top 500 books sold over the period, the top 250 books in each of the three level 1 categories (fiction, non fiction, children’s/young adult), as well as the top 100 books in each of a number of other nominated categories (AustLit 2011).

Poetry, however, is difficult to track, as publication of individual poems occurs in such a broad a range of forums including magazines, newspapers, anthologies and increasingly in non-remunerated online blogs, zines, e-zines, websites and a multitude of non-traditional forums.

It will be informative in this context to see if data relating to these new media outlets can be meaningfully quantified. Regardless of facts and figures, the key point here is that publishers need to be supported to promote a variety of literary genres the market place, as publishers are still a vital part of the ‘career landscape’ for authors and creators in all genres. Traditionally publishing’s end product is publication — and that, in all its modern day variations, is both a potential income stream and a way of providing artists with a public profile. Publication therefore performs a vital function in the personal career aspirations of creators as well as being a means of distributing information, artistic and literary ideas to the broader community. It is therefore essential that schemes to assist publication by Australian publishers and artists be continued and extended.

In Australia, traditional educational publishing outlets such as The School Magazine, published by The NSW Department of Education and Training, are also vital points of exposure for children’s poets; but recently even this historically significant distributor of literature into the lives of Australian school children ‘faces the threat of cutbacks’ (Gwyther 2010). Now more than 95 years old, The School Magazine has supported the talents of a huge range of award winning and internationally regarded writers, artists and poets including Colin Thiele, Patricia Wrightson, Doug Macleod, May Gibbs and Max Fatchen. If publishers and distributors of children’s poetry such The School Magazine disappear due to lack of funding or support, then so do opportunities for promoting poetry to children as our future readers and consumers.

Am I advocating artistic protectionism? Possibly, although I prefer to have it understood as a form of cultural and artistic investment that encourages Australian poetic talent to shine. I am not alone in this idea. Australia’s Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Director Brian Johns observes:
Publishing has declined, critical attention has declined, but there is a good deal of public interest in poetry. The reality is that poetry's like opera; it has to be subsidised. (Johns cited in Wyndham, 2006).

It is well understood that one of the key functions of Arts and Literature support bodies is to encourage new ventures. Without assistance from these bodies and in the shadow of diminishing support for poetry in the lists of major commercial publishers, it is my fear that we will watch children’s poetry in traditional print forms at least, placed on an endangered species list.

It is not, however, all gloom and doom;

There are significant rays of light evident in innovative activity focused on increasing the distribution and profile of Australian poetry for all ages. The commitment of independent poetry publishers, writer’s organisations, educators and parents who propagate poetry, combined with the emergence of exciting new ways of sharing creative work via digital media, online forums and journals, websites and apps etc all provide alternatives to traditional print publishing. This is in turn opening up opportunities within an expanding raft of distribution platforms.

It could certainly be argued that new technologies associated with contemporary ways of thinking about marketing and modes of distribution is creating a far more level playing field for emerging, as well as established voices; an argument driven by the empowering of individuals to ‘publish’ and to access broad audiences in ways previously unheard of. Whether these new outlets and forums can adequately provide the opportunity for any sort of livelihood or career path for poets remains to be seen. One thing is assured, however; digital and contemporary ways of sharing creative experience and output challenge creators, business, education and literary communities to re-conceptualise ‘publishing’ as much more than just paper based books.

As I head to the UK to join practitioners and advocates of children’s and young adult poetry at the 18th IBBY / NCRCL Poetry Conference (2011), I am buoyed by the energy evident in places such as Sedbergh Book Town where ‘Poetry takes centre stage ... highlighting the growing interest in reading and writing poetry’ (NAWE, 2011) and in organisations like Australian Poetry (2011b) with its marvelous array of programs, events, publications and prizes linked to local and global literary initiatives such as the city of Melbourne’s designation as one of the UNESCO Cities of Literature (2008). Recent visitors to Melbourne may have even experienced poems accompanied by art on trains, trams or installations (Moving Galleries: Melbourne Moving Through Art, 2007), another example of empowering and innovative ways of promoting the poetic.

As we move into the National Year of Reading 2012 in Australia (2011) with a range of programs and activities designed to focus attention on the importance of books, literacy and reading; Australian writers and poets of all ages can be encouraged by initiatives that
encourage the valuing of literature and poetry and with any luck, can find ways to have their words heard.

An excerpt from Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s speech at the 2010 Prime Minister’s Literary Awards provides a clear example of high profile advocacy extolling the value of Australian literature and why words and ideas matter:

I want every Australian to have the power of words and ideas at their command so that together we can “nudge the world a little.” That is why it is so important to celebrate Australian writing and also Australian publishing. And to ensure that in Australia, books and ideas always have a home (Gillard 2010).

My hope, albeit tempered by pragmatic concern about the commitment to children’s poetry in the commercial priorities of traditional publishing houses and distribution networks, is that publishers, arts funding organisations, educators and governments alike will match pro-active activity and rhetoric with publishing enterprise, programs and initiatives that encourage poetry written both for and by children.

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