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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “emotional meaning to the world’s youngest poetry readers.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

THE BEE’S KNEES

The delightful verse of new Children’s Poet Laureate Mary Ann Hoberman has been a family favorite for decades.

By Michael Atkinson

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The best children’s poets look at the subjects most parents are terrified of introducing to their little children—death, for instance—and invite them, gracefully, to dance. Take, for instance, Mary Ann Hoberman’s “Mayfly,” a rather Williamseque lyric on mortality:

Think how fast a year flies by
A month flies by
A week flies by
Think how fast a day flies by
A Mayfly’s life lasts but a day
A single day
To live and die
A single day
How fast it goes
The day
The Mayfly
Both of those.
A Mayfly flies a single day
The daylight dies and darkness grows
A single day
How fast it flies
A Mayfly’s life
How fast it goes.

Hoberman, author of over 40 children's books and the new Children's Poet Laureate, is a consummate channeler of children's sensibilities. She is clearly a writer who takes children's verse very seriously—as well she might. Children's poetry requires precision tools, a childlike ear, a capacity for spirited irreverence, and a scrupulous lack of pretension. What's more, its intended readers have only their inner metronomes and innate sense of the absurd to inform how they react to a poem, not a wealth of experience or literary-cultural know-how, and their native antennae cannot be easily bamboozled.

Still, the grace and taste and wit of a good children's poem can provide a genuine frisson for those of us over 10. It is hard not to be taken with "Praying Mantis," the subject of which is "really not engaged in prayer." Instead, "That praying mantis that you see / Is really preying (with an e)," and thus, "With prey and preying both so endless / It tends to end up rather friendless." Or "X?," which bemoans the scarcity of X-words, and concludes "X-words do not get used a lot. / I knew one once / But I forgot."

The Llama Who Had No Pajama is a kind of best-of collection, stretching back five decades, of Hoberman's short lyrics. She sets off tsunamis of nonsense like "Permutations," at once a child's dose of linguistic chaos and a Dadaist dare for adults to read it aloud without getting head-shakingly lost. Here's the first of six reflective stanzas;

A flea flew by a bee. The bee
To flee the flea flew by a fly.
The fly flew high to flee the bee
Who flew to flee the flea who flew
To flee the fly who now flew by.

Born in 1930, Hoberman has remained a faithful New Englander her whole life, graduating from Smith College in 1951 and marrying artist-architect Norman Hoberman that same year. They set up shop in Greenwich and had four children; Mary Ann published her first picture book, *All My Shoes Come in Twos* (Little, Brown), in 1957, illustrated by Norman, as were her next three books. A half century later, Hoberman has accumulated five grandkids and virtually every award given to picture-book literature, including a National Book Award, the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, a Society of School Librarians International Best Book award, a National Parenting Publications Awards gold medal, and numerous laurels from magazines such as *Child* and *Parenting*.

It's a measure of Hoberman's writerly sensibility that her work has remained remarkably consistent in tone and craft, and her voice timelessly unfaddish; she knows that although the culture may change, children in the first half-dozen years of life don't really. She has never reneged on her role as an educator (Hoberman has taught continuously, on all levels), and her output has included scores of alphabet books, counting tales and sing-along tomes, and even a seminal and popular series of books of call-and-answer stories titled *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*.

But the short lyric is Hoberman's forte, and the punchy, effortless, game-playing, precisely scanned poems she wrote 35 years ago, such as "Alligator/Crocodile," don't age a whit:

The crocodile
Has a crooked smile.
The alligator's is straighter.

Or maybe it's the other way.
(With crocodiles it's hard to say.)

Perhaps the opposite is true.
(It's hard with alligators, too.)

But if I write what I just said,
The first way might be right instead.

And then again the second might
As easily be wrong or right.

Or right as wrong. Likewise the first.
In that case should they be reversed?

Whether she's writing about lonely pets or befuddled fauna or little kids still figuring out the world, Hoberman's poems are always fundamentally about the language, and about introducing its capacity for magic and puzzlement and emotional meaning to the world's youngest poetry readers.

Michael Atkinson is the author of six books, including a debut volume of poetry, *One Hundred Children Waiting for a Train* (Word Works). This article originally appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Mary Ann Hoberman, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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