

## POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

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(ATTENTION EDITORS **CORRECTION**: This column ends with the words “always being just a little too short.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

POETRY, DAILY

Brenda Starr makes way for Rumi, Neruda, and Merwin.

By Mary Schmich

Poetry Media Service

I write a news column at the *Chicago Tribune*, and at the beginning of baseball season this year one of my editors phoned with a tough assignment, something, he said, that called for special skills.

Was I being asked to investigate a doping scandal? conduct an exclusive interview? throw out the first pitch?

“Can you write us a poem about opening day?” he asked.

He and I both knew that by “poem” he meant doggerel—silly verse written with a wink—and I obliged:

Yes, baseball’s back, at last, at last  
To bat away the blues  
The games arrive like sunshine  
In the bleepin’ gloomy news.

Blagojevich indicted!  
The economy’s a mess!  
Plus parking, potholes, crooks and crimes!  
We need some anti-stress!

—From *An Ode to Opening Day*

It ran on the front page, embroidered with old-fashioned bunting that signaled that rhyming verse, like baseball itself, was a relic of a quainter time.

I've always felt slightly sheepish about the pleasure I get from my occasional forays into doggerel. The enjoyment some columnists get from their political fulminations, I get from rhyming "spinach" and "Kucinich."

I feel only slightly less sheepish about how often I exploit the poems of real poets to make a serious point. Poetry and journalism are like peanut butter and baloney: coupling them is not to everyone's taste.

But I can't help myself. Poetry isn't just a way of writing, it's a way of thinking, and I've been thinking that way since at least sixth grade.

At Alexander School IV in Macon, Georgia, Miss Lois Birch, who seemed as old as God, made us memorize poems. The two I remember spring to mind as often as the faces of old friends. I keep them in my head the way you might keep worry beads in your pocket, reaching reflexively in times of stress for their meaning, rhythm, sound.

One is by John Masefield: "I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky, / And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by." The other is by [William Wordsworth](#):

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils.

Whenever I can, I sneak poems into my newspaper column.

After terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center, I instinctively flipped through my most dog-eared book of poems, [Wisława Szymborska](#)'s *View with a Grain of Sand*, and plucked a few verses from "Hatred":

See how efficient it still is,  
how it keeps itself in shape—  
our century's hatred.  
How easily it vaults the tallest obstacles.  
How rapidly it pounces, tracks us down.

Her poem gave my prose a power it wouldn't otherwise have had.

When [W.S. Merwin](#) won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, I used the occasion as an excuse to quote from "Rain Light," about a mother's death. I put a link to the entire poem in my column, and hundreds of readers sought it out.

I've bolstered my own summer musings with [Mary Oliver](#)'s "The Summer Day," whose last line electrocutes me every time I read it: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"

In autumn, I've quoted from [Pablo Neruda](#)'s "October Fullness," though it's about October as a time of life more than a time of year:

Little by little, and also in great leaps,  
life happened to me,  
and how insignificant this business is.

The response to the columns in which I quote good poems is always strong, which is another reason to feel sheepish: even with full attribution, I'm reaping credit for someone else's genius.

Poetry also creeps into *Brenda Starr*, the soap-opera comic strip I've written for 24 years. Our heroine, Brenda, quotes poetry and muses on it. Heroes and villains alike use it to woo her.

Recently, a mysterious, dashing man named Ringo, from the fictitious country of Kazookistan, dazzled her with verse:



Ringo didn't conquer Brenda, but he did seduce many comics readers who were grateful to discover Rumi and Hafiz.

Newspaper columns, comic strips, and poems may not seem like related literary forms, but they're less different than they look. In their own ways, each of them seeks the same thing: to make meaning in a space whose power lies in always being just a little too short.

Mary Schmich is a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* and writes the Brenda Starr comic strip. This essay first appeared in the September 2009 issue of *Poetry* magazine and is available at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Distributed by the Poetry Foundation.

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