

POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

A Service of Poetry Foundation

contact: media@poetryfoundation.org



For release 12/16/08

(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “you’ll change one or some so that they can be in your poems.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

MICHAEL ROSEN

An interview with the Children’s Laureate of Britain.

By Bruce Black

Poetry Media Service

Few of his legions of fans were surprised when Michael Rosen was appointed the fifth Children’s Laureate of Britain—the first poet to win the honor. Adored for his tongue twisters, puns, rhymes, riddles, and nonsense verse, Rosen also subtly explores the emotional nuances of childhood, including its more serious subjects.

Bruce Black: It’s the first time a poet has been selected as children’s laureate. Why is this important?

Michael Rosen: I’m not sure that it’s terribly important, but it does feel like an affirmation for poetry in general. The laureateship is becoming a post that is trying to represent different sectors of the children’s book world. I thought it would get round to poetry one day, and I was a little surprised, but of course delighted, that it got there so soon.

BB: How does your post enable you to influence the attitudes of adults and children toward poetry?

MR: I’m not sure that it helps much more than before. That’s to say, I spend a lot of time and energy expressing my point of view about the reading of poetry by children and have always done so. A really good thing coming up, though, is that Booktrust [the charity that administers the laureateship] is devoting a Web page to what I’m calling “How to make a poetry-friendly classroom.” It’s an extension of what I’ve been banging on about for

some time. This time it will be a proper professional job, with the possibility of teachers exchanging views between each other.

BB: What's been your greatest pleasure so far as children's laureate?

MR: It's accelerated my thinking around using the Internet for the dissemination of ideas about children's books and the performance of poetry.

BB: How did you discover your own voice as a poet?

MR: Through reading D.H. Lawrence and Carl Sandburg in particular, but also the early pages of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. These were the voices that I was interested in at first. I then became fascinated by Gerard Manley Hopkins. However, there were the voices in my life from my parents, my brother, and the people at my schools in northwest London. These all contributed to how I wrote—and still do, of course.

BB: Did schooling impede or enhance your understanding of poetry . . . and your voice?

MR: In primary school I enjoyed what was called “choral speaking”—a kind of choir that got together in order to recite poems. I didn't like the poetry we did in lesson time. It always seemed so mournful and sad. At secondary school, something fizzed when a teacher in my second year introduced us to dramatic monologues—Browning, mostly. I thought that was brilliant. The next time I remember something good going on was when I did GCE [General Certificate of Education, a secondary-level academic qualification], as it was called then. For that, my father and I read *A Pageant of Modern Verse*, and it has poems in [it] by Lawrence, Housman, Hopkins, and others.

BB: Once you found your voice, how did you know it was suitable for children?

MR: I think that came about because the moment my first book was published, I was invited into schools, libraries, and children's book groups to read my poems. I quickly found out which ones interested them and which ones didn't. This was crucial.

BB: So when did you first realize you might write for children?

MR: When Pam Royds at Andre Deutsch said that a group of poems I had written could be published as a children's book. I had thought that they were “adult” but that children might like them. To tell the truth, I hadn't really thought it through. I lived in a house where “adult” poetry was repackaged in anthologies and radio broadcasts and given to children—poems by Dylan Thomas, James Stephens, Robert Graves, and the like. So perhaps I thought I was doing that—being an “adult” poet whose poems might be taken up by anthologists putting books together for schools.

BB: Is writing poetry for children different than writing for adults?

MR: I think adults who like poetry have tremendous staying power. They will read and reread poems because they enjoy the effort of untangling them. I think there is a tiny minority of children like that, but in general, poems for children have to sound interesting on a first reading.

BB: Do you have any suggestions for adults who want to help children learn to love poetry?

MR: Just read poems out loud to children. If you know any by heart, then say them at odd times, like when you're walking down the street or doing the washing up. Leave poetry books lying around the house. Take children to see poets reading their poems.

BB: Would you like to offer any words of encouragement for children who want to become poets?

MR: Read and read and read poetry. Keep a notebook for putting down ideas, thoughts, and "snippings." A snipping is where you see or hear something that you find interesting or odd. You snip it and put it in your notebook. One day, these will turn up in your poems, or you'll change one or some so that they can be in your poems.

Bruce Black is a writer and editor of children's books. His stories for children have appeared in *Cricket* and *Cobblestone* magazines. This article originally appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

© 2008 by Bruce Black. All rights reserved.