Poetry Guide
The best new poetry for children
Introduced by
Michael Rosen

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk
the children’s book magazine online

Cover illustration from A Poem for Every Autumn Day edited by Allie Esiri, illustration by Zanna Goldhawk, published by Macmillan Children’s Books
Welcome

Hello and welcome to this special Books for Keeps poetry supplement, published to coincide with National Poetry Day but, we hope, something that will be useful for much longer than that.

It is full of recommendations of children’s poetry to discover, plus some very special advice on ways to encourage poetry reading and writing amongst children – and probably adults too. A special thank you to all those who have contributed, and we also want to take this opportunity to say thank you to the following poets, so active in schools and libraries, who do so much every day to inspire a love of poetry.

Welcome

Liz Brownlee
www.poetlizbrownlee.co.uk

James Carter
www.jamescarterpoet.co.uk

Dean Atta
www.sites.google.com/site/deanatta

Joseph Coelho
www.thepoetryofjosephcoelho.com

Brian Moses
www.briannmoses.co.uk

Roger Stevens
www.poetryzone.co.uk/roger-stevens/

Karl Nova
www.karlnovaworld.wordpress.com

Rachel Rooney
www.rachelrooneypoet.com

Michaela Morgan
www.michaelamorgan.com

Matt Goodfellow
www.authorsalouduk.co.uk/speaker/matt-goodfellow

Paul Cookson
www.paulcooksonpoet.co.uk

Neal Zetter
www.cccpworkshops.co.uk/neal-zetter

Joshua Seigal
www.joshuaseigal.co.uk

A F Harrold
www.afharroldkids.com

Laura Mucha
www.lauramucha.com

Kate Wakeling
www.katewakeling.co.uk

Chrissie Gittins
www.chrissiegittins.co.uk

Sophie Herxheimer
www.sophieherxheimer.com

Sue Hardy-Dawson
www.clic.org.uk/poetryline/poets/hardy-dawson-sue

Sarah Crossan
www.sarahcrossan.com

Simon Mole
www.simonmole.com

Dom Conlon
www.domconlon.com

Ruth Awolola
www.clic.org.uk/poetryline/poets/awolola-ruth

Coral Rumble
www.coralrumble.co.uk

Kwame Alexander
www.kwamealexander.com
Poetry: a word from Michael Rosen

An introduction from the man who has brought poetry into the lives of so many children.

I’ve spent pretty well the whole of my life immersed in poetry so I come to this matter in a pretty biased way! That said, I’ve also seen how poetry can light up the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds. Why is this? How does poetry have this magic?

First, to clear the decks: what is poetry? Before the last decades of the 19th century this was a fairly easy question to answer because in most cultures a poem was taken to be something that followed certain fixed rules: rhyme schemes, fixed rhythms and the like. Then ‘modernism’ came along and poets all over the world experimented with new kinds of form: free verse, prose poem, monologues, cut-ups, montages, lists and much more. We have today reached a point where all we can say is that a poem is a poem when enough people agree that it’s a poem! This means that it may include all the old pre-19th century characteristics, or any of the new ones too such as: compression, pithiness, making a point in a proverbial, suggestive, implied, musical or figurative way (that’s metaphor, simile and personification).

So now we get near to how it does its magic. In everyday speech, we may well use any or all of these features at some time or another. The point about poetry is that it scoops them up and uses them in a concentrated way for the moment of the poem. Poems that we find attractive have a way of seeming better than our everyday speech or everyday thoughts because they’ve said something in a way that is both familiar and new to us. As some have said, poetry makes the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar! It ‘estranges’ what we know well by getting us to see things in a new way, and it tells us about strange things so that we can become familiar with them.

This means that poetry has a special place in adults’ relationships with children whether that be in the context of education, home or leisure. What poetry talks about and how it talks means that it takes children into new ways of looking, listening, tasting, touching and smelling; new ways of thinking; and new ways of expressing themselves through language. Poetry also has the power of interpreting the world and finding interesting, exciting and sensual ways of doing it so we hand on the power of interpretation with each poem. And it offers children new landscapes, real or imaginary, inner or outer, scientific or metaphysical.

The world of children’s poetry has in the last few years opened up hugely. When I was at school in the 1950s, it was limited to very few poets - the old (and very great) nonsense poets: Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and Hilaire Belloc, along with some humorous set pieces by A.A.Milne. Alongside this, we were given a strong set of poems by Walter de la Mare and Robert Louis Stevenson. We were mostly unaware of the burgeoning of voices coming out of the USA - people like Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg and a bit later, Eve Merriam and Mary Ann Hoberman.

Because of my parents’ own interests, I was lucky to inherit these voices too so when my own first collection came out in 1974 (Mind Your Own Business) full of these voices - a word I take from the great Geoffrey Summerfield collections from the 1960s (Voices and Junior Voices, Penguin Education) and which were themselves full of a huge variety of poetry from all over the world.

The world of CLPE has helped put new poetry on the map. Each year, they publish a short list in the CLiPPA (CLPE Poetry Award) and give an award to a winning collection and anyone wanting to ‘harvest’ the best poetry for children that has come out in the last 30 years need go no further than these short lists and winners. All details on the CLPE website.

There are many poetry websites and online performances of poetry and it’s worth spending time surfing the net to find what you think might suit you or the children you’re working with. Put “poetry” or “poems” or a poet’s name in the search engine and you will get to poems in a matter of seconds. Over at YouTube many of us video ourselves reading our own poems. Again, put a given poet’s name in the search engine and see what comes up. Similarly, follow up poets’ websites which are full of their poems, writing ideas, videos and poetry audio.

Talking of audio, one resource that you may well find particularly useful is the National Poetry Archive, both the adult and children’s section. There are hundreds of audio versions of poems read by the poets themselves. Part of the power of poetry is the way much of it (not all) lives in the ‘world of the ear’. It’s great to connect children to this and to show them how easy and attractive it is to read and perform poems so that they live in the air and in our bodies and minds.

Ten of the Best! That’s easy, I thought. How wrong I was! Looking in dismay at the mountain of books I’d pulled from my bookcases, I wondered how on earth I was going to whittle them down to ten. It is very probable that I have chosen the ten books now that I would not have chosen another day. Was this one the best from Roger McGough or Michael Rosen? Where were some of my very favourite books by Charles Causley, Jack Prelutsky, Shel Silverstein, Jackie Kay…? But a choice had to be made. Inevitably there are collections from classic writers, but you don’t become a classic unless you’re among the best so I make no apologies for that. Inevitably too, that meant many new and younger writers were overlooked - this time.

We asked poet Valerie Bloom to pick out ten of the best poetry books for children, books that will start a lifelong love of poetry.

**A Great Big Cuddle**
Michael Rosen, illustrated by Chris Riddell, Books, 978-1406343199, £14.99 hbk

Reading this book made me wish my children were still toddlers. Every poem just fizzes with fun, and Chris Riddell’s illustrations are a joy as always. This pairing of these two former Children’s Laureates is a winning formula if ever there was one. Kids will giggle with the Wiggly Wiggly Pigs, bounce to the rhythm of Tippy-Tappy and have a great time imitating the animal noises in We Can. There’s no need for added instructions. Even the most unadventurous adult will know how to read these poems to young ones because the poems tell how they want or rather need to be read. It takes the genius of Michael Rosen to write poems like these.

**Poetry Pie**
Roger McGough, Puffin, 978-0141356860, £6.99 pbk

As usual, Roger McGough’s poems dance off the page with word play, wit and wisdom. His trademark humorous observations are sure to enchant children and the child in all of us. Some of these are laugh out loud pieces, like the hilarious Elephants and Pears, but there is also enough to meditate on. The message of hope and encouragement in Tomorrow has your name on it any child will cherish. And any adult will identify with the sentiments, especially in the last line of the penultimate verse.

He has included his own unique line drawings and children are sure to keep coming back for another slice of this poetry pie!

**Rising Stars: New Young Voices in Poetry**
Ruth Awolola, Victoria Adukwei Bulley, Abigail Cook, Jay Hulme and Amina Jama, illus Riya Chowdhury, Elanor Chuah and Joe Manners, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959374, £6.99 pbk

This is a book of poems by five young poets, each with eight poems in the collection. It is an exciting and inspiring collection of talented voices and I’m sure we’ll be hearing a lot more from them in the future. The poems are accessible without being overly simplistic, complex issues are dealt with in a way that encourages conversations and many young readers will find in these pieces, echoes of their own experiences. It’s refreshing to see issues handled with such skill and finesse and sensitivity as in Ruth Awolola’s Mainly About Aliens, and in her beautiful poem On Forgetting That I Am a Tree.

**Werewolf Club Rules and Other Poems**
Joseph Coelho, Francis Lincoln, 978-1847804525, £6.99 pbk

Containing 50 poems, Werewolf Club Rules is a beautiful collection from an inspired young poet. He uses language like an enchanter, casting a spell around the reader with the vivid word pictures of places and people such as Miss Flotsam who’s the kind of teacher every child would wish to have. One poem was just a little too close for comfort. Dada’s Stories told how the poet’s grandfather slept with his pets and squashed them in his sleep. I’m sure I’m not the only one who will find that these pieces have some resonance with personal experience as the truth of the poems rings loud and clear.

Valerie Bloom began writing poetry in primary school. She trained as a teacher in Jamaica and came to England in the 1970s. She has written and edited a number of poetry books in English and Jamaican patois and published children’s novels Surprising Joy and The Tribe. Published poetry includes The World is Sweet (2002); Hot Like Fire (2002); Whoop an’ Shout (2003); Let Me Touch the Sky (2008); Jaws and Claws and Things with Wings (2013); Mighty Mountains, Swirling Seas (2015).
Give the Ball to the Poet
Ed. Georgie Horrel, Aisha Spencer and Morag Styles, illus Jane Ray, Commonwealth Education Trust, 978-1909931008
This anthology brings together many well-known and loved Caribbean voices like Derek Walcott, Olive Senior, Grace Nichols, Benjamin Zephaniah, John Agard and James Berry, and introduces some vibrant new voices, including the 2014 Forward Prize winner Kei Miller. The collection emphasises the music in the languages of the Caribbean and the range of poems include the light and lyrical, the thought-provoking, serious and moving. The human struggles, conflicts, and achievements are here celebrated through the theme of sport and includes some outstanding poetry that will delight older children, parents and teachers.

Poems to perform
Julia Donaldson, illus Clare Melinsky, Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1447243397, £6.99 pbk
For a while, learning poetry by heart had been a largely lost art in this country, but the proliferation of performance poets and the Poetry Archive’s Poetry By Heart initiative have gone some way to reviving this art and ensured that more and more children are being encouraged to learn and perform poems. Poems to Perform, collected by Julia Donaldson is a timely and welcome publication. There are classical entries by Edward Lear, W H Auden etc. but also work by contemporary writers including Julia herself, all of which provide ample material for memorisation and performance. Illustrated with exquisite lino-cuts by Clare Melinsky, this is a book not just for children, but anyone who loves great poetry.

The Language of Cat
Rachel Rooney, illus Ellie Jenkins, Francis Lincoln
This is a delicious collection of wonderfully inventive poems. There seems to be a surprise on every page and there’s no predicting what will come next, each piece is sparkling and fresh and new. You’ll not be able to resist turning the pages to find out what the next offering is. Enjoy the unexpected secret in the Russian Doll, the food for thought served up by She Said and the humorous ending of Three Monkeys. One of my favourite pieces, and there are quite a few, is the deceptively simple, but so clever shape poem, O the Wonderful Shape of an O. As Carol Ann Duffy says on the cover, ‘A box of delights’.

Under the Moon and Over the Sea
Here is a book that pulsates with the rhythms and sounds of the Caribbean, invitingly show-casing the food, the songs, the language and proverbs, the flora and fauna, the music and games – the whole life of the Islands. The poems are divided into five sections, each unusually illustrated by a different artist, which could have resulted in a clash of styles, but somehow seems to work, appropriately underlining the diversity both in the region and in the poems themselves. This collection is not just for poetry lessons but can be a valuable addition to social, cultural and geography curriculums as well.

Plum
Tony Mitton, illustrator Peter Bailey, Scholastic Press, 978-1903015858, £5.99 pbk
Tony Mitton’s debut collection has been an enduring favourite with children and has rightfully become a classic, in the tradition of English lyric children’s poetry. Plum is composed of 49 heterogenous poems, narrative, lyrical, longer poems and snapshots, contemporary and traditional; poems to suit every mood – quirky, fantastical, thoughtful like Child from the Future or just joyfully silly such as Mrs. Bhattacharya’s Chapati Zap Machine. Tony Mitton’s extraordinary use of language is captivating, skilfully drawing the reader into the book, so that if you don’t heed the WARNING. KEEP OUT in Forbidden Poem, you’ll find yourself, as in Secret Passage, trapped inside long after the book is shut.

I Like That Stuff
Morag Styles, illustrators Joanne Smith and Bernard Georges, Cambridge University Press, 978-0521276375
My copy of this book is well thumbed and though published so many years ago, still gives so much pleasure for the fact that it was such a trail-blazer. As well as the usual well-known names, there are less well known but equally brilliant poets. There are poems from many different cultures – Afro-Caribbean, Asian, African, European, American … in different forms, from haiku to free verse, traditional and modern. In short there’s something here for everyone. Sadly, this little gem may no longer be in print but it’s one to treasure if you do own a copy.
Grow your own class of poets

A to-do list longer than The Iliad and no poetry lessons planned for next week? There is still time to change the world! Poet and poetry-instigator Simon Mole tells you how with this step-by-step guide.

When asked how best to encourage children to write poetry, a common and creditable answer is to start first with them reading and listening to poetry. Options range from simply reading your class one poem a day, to wallpapering the whole room in poems that the children have chosen.

I absolutely support this approach, but I do find it relies on a teacher having confidence and experience with poetry to begin with, or the time and inclination to develop those things.

Tight budgets and COVID19 restrictions also mean the option of having a visiting poet into school is increasingly unlikely. So as National Poetry Day encourages everyone to ‘see it like a poet’, how can we get children inspired by poetry quickly, in a way that stays with them?

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For me the most important part of the National Poetry Day theme of VISION, is for children to see that they themselves are poets. With this in mind I want to suggest we try flipping the conventional approach on its head; perhaps one way to help children enjoy reading poetry is actually to have them write a poem first. Before they even realise that they’ve written one. If this sounds tricky, it doesn’t have to be!

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Step one: the warm up

We’ll get into the specifics of it shortly, but first – get the kids (and yourself) warmed up with a couple of games. Sounds obvious, but the main aim here is to have fun. At the same time as doing this you can easily seed the content and build the core ‘skills’ children will need to write their poem. When I say skills, to some degree I mean attitude – and specifically, letting go of the feeling that they must always get it right. In writing terms this means ‘training’ kids to abandon their internal editors in the early stages of the writing process.

There are loads of options for games and activities that encourage this, have a look at this, which is one of my favourites: ‘Yes and’

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cninAGtPKsF

Step two: magic writing prompts

Once you have taken the time to build an atmosphere that supports creative risks (and silliness!), most classes will write astonishing amounts of high-quality poetry in very short spaces of time. So, onto the magic trick! Like many poet-educators, the key tool that I favour to get great writing quickly is a carefully crafted series of writing prompts.

Here is a popular example of the approach, where young poets can turn their favourite word into a ‘character poem’ in about 10 minutes.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3FZyXF8obU

As in the above video, the first prompt will usually be something super simple that they can fill in by noting down a version of an idea or sentence they said in the warm up. Getting those first words on the page is such a crucial step.

Using a sequence of prompts in a tightly timed way like this (often billed as a game or challenge where children can only write for a maximum of 1 or 2 minutes on each question) sparks children to quickly generate sensory descriptive language or ‘poetic content’ of another kind. The ‘trick’ being that by the time kids are actually asked to ‘write a poem’ they basically already have. Your sequence of questions functions as a scaffold that once removed will leave behind a poem – or at least the heart or the start of one.

As you’ll see in this step by step guide to writing an ode, example answers to each prompt are crucial too.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7bmeqJ_wXM

If you’re going to create your own prompt sequence, definitely try it as a writer before you ask anyone else to.

Step three: write it down

Once students have got some interesting notes down most will be happy to invest time ‘arranging’ or ‘sorting’ those notes into an order which they think will sound good. Which is of course also known as *stage whisper* writing a poem.

I believe the approach works because it differentiates naturally – there is a structure/template that will lead to something that is recognisably a poem with even minimal input, but there is also space for more confident writers to leave that template completely if they want to. This example even encourages that at points, as well as leaving a clearly mapped route for those writers who prefer to follow the guidelines more closely.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv_2cNae0hF

Investing this time up front in ‘having fun’ without any particular curriculum focus, will pay off in so many ways. Firstly, it will be much easier to return to the piece they have written and support them to use specific devices or techniques, or target particular curriculum areas – especially if you can illustrate how doing so will improve further a piece of writing they are already proud of.

Crucially, and returning to my opening point, this energy and connection can be carried forwards into reading and analysing poems by other writers. They are poets now, poetry is one of their ‘things’, time to read some!

During lockdown, I started offering free weekly online poetry workshops using exactly these techniques I suggest above, and I was blown away by the response. We had kids joining from Beckenham to Barbados and the weeks went past, I realised the little creative community we were growing was having a big impact on the children and families involved.

As well as becoming increasingly confident writers and performers, I saw them become poets in a deeper meaningful sense that will stay with them. Looking closely and creatively at the world, sharing thoughts and feelings, listening to others. These ‘poetry skills’ are part of a mindset that they can carry with them beyond those brief moments of actually putting pen to paper.

More young poets can only be a good a thing for the rest of us too - surely the more people who think carefully and creatively about the world and their place in it, the better that world will be. So, wishing you a fun and creative National Poetry Day – let’s change the world, one poem at a time!

Simon’s online poetry workshops for children and families now take place twice a month, more information here: www.patreon.com/SimonMole

Teachers can find video resources here:

www.youtube.com/c/poemsforkids_Simon

And download a free lesson plan here:

www.simonmole.com/free-poetry-resources
Poetry for You: the best new poetry books, recommended by leading editors of children’s poetry

2020 for all its challenges has been a year of poetry, something that has really cheered all of us at Books for Keeps. As everyone enjoys the celebrations for National Poetry Day, we asked the poetry editors who are behind the upsurge in children’s poetry to tell us about the new collections coming this autumn and into spring 2021.

Gaby Morgan, editorial director, Macmillan Children’s Books

We are living in interesting times and poetry has been a source of great comfort and support to so many people – I have never seen so much poetry shared on social media and so many poems going viral. I was working on Poems to Save the World with Chris Riddell – the third of his exquisitely illustrated gift anthologies – as lockdown began, and the book evolved to fit the moment. It is filled with poems of hope and consolation and poems that speak of unity and togetherness from poets as varied as William Blake, Neil Gaiman, Roger McGough, Maggie Smith, Fiona Benson and Anne Sexton. Ana Sampson delivered the manuscript for She Will Soar: Bright, brave poems of freedom by women, a sister collection for the wonderful and much praised She Is Fierce: Brave, bold and beautiful poems by women, at the start of the year. We had no idea just how relevant an uplifting collection of poems about freedom, wanderlust and escape written by women would be this autumn. It includes poems from over 100 poets from the ancient world right up to the present day including Carol Ann Duffy, Nikita Gill, Salena Godden, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson and Grace Nichols. This beautiful book includes a biography of each poet at the back.

Allie Esiri has selected poems from her bestselling anthologies – A Poem for Every Night of the Year and A Poem for Every Day of the Year – to make four seasonal paperback volumes. They are beautiful and perfectly portable so that you can have exactly the right poem for any given day to hand. A Poem for Every Autumn Day published in August and A Poem for Every Winter Day publishes on the 29th of October.

Another highlight this year is Slam! You’re Gonna Wanna Hear This edited by Nikita Gill. This is a joyful celebration of the ground-breaking poets making their voices heard in the spoken word scene. With poets such as Raymond Antrobus, Sophia Thakur and Dean Atta guest starring alongside up-and-coming poets, this is the perfect introduction to the world of modern poetry for teens and up and there is a fantastic audio book too.

Paul Cookson’s latest collection Football 4 Every 1 fantastically funny poems for all footy fans! is illustrated by Martin Chatterton and includes 92 brilliant poems – one for every minute of the match plus one for half-time and one for extra time. This highly illustrated paperback book captures all of the emotions involved in following the beautiful game.

Next Spring I am really looking forward to publishing a beautiful paperback edition of Poems to Fall in Love With, poems about all kinds of love selected and illustrated by Chris Riddell. In February we have Shaping the World 40 Historical Heroes in Verse compiled by Liz Brownlee. This is a gorgeous, quirky gift hardback anthology of shape poems in the shape of world shapers! Each poem has a biography, quote and fascinating fact on the facing page. There are poems about Socrates, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Greta Thunberg, Nelson Mandela, Emmeline Pankhurst and Rosa Parks to name but a few.

Finally, don’t miss The Best Ever Book of Funny Poems chosen by Brian Moses coming in March and perfect for readers of 7+. This wonderfully funny anthology includes poems about pets, funny creatures, school, family, fantasy and fairy-tales, dinosaurs and dragons, space, and just plain silly poems.

Janetta Otter-Barry, Otter-Barry Books

2020 has been a year of brilliant poetry for all ages from Otter-Barry Books.

We started the year with Paul Cookson’s captivating There’s a Crocodile in the House. Paul pitched this collection to a KS1 audience though, like all poetry, it works for a wide age range. I love the mischief and jokes that mingle with the quieter poems – and a special feature is the ‘performance tips’ so teachers/librarians/parents can make the most of this highly interactive collection.

Another fantastic book with instructions for adult participation is Big Green Crocodile, by preschool practitioner Jane Newberry and Carolina Rabei. It’s a picture book of play rhymes and I love that these rhymes are completely original, yet tried and tested by the author, and that it’s easy to act them out with babies and toddlers. There are beautiful colour illustrations too.

I admire the diversity and inclusion of Justin Coe’s The Magic of Mums. There’s empathy and sensitivity in these poems about 46 different kinds of mum. Laughter and fun are hugely important and the mainly rhyming verse makes the poems very accessible, but there’s also a serious exploration of what it means to be a mother.

See It Like a Poet
We are thrilled to publish Belonging Street by Mandy Coe. These are poems with a big heart. I love the way Mandy's eye for detail picks out the comedy and quirks of family life, while her love of nature and concern for the environment shine through, helping the reader see the world afresh. Puzzles, riddles and wordplay provide an extra dimension. This is poetry of immense craft and skill, a joy to share.

We have one exciting debut collection this year, Laura Mucha’s fabulous Dear Ugly Sisters. Funny, edgy, very contemporary and often surprising, these poems have a distinctive voice, often in the first person, incorporating shape poems, visual surprises on the page and endings with a twist. Laura captures moments of questioning, explores feelings, fairy tale, science and nature. This is a wide-ranging collection from a poet to watch.

And so to the publication of The Girl Who Became a Tree by Joseph Coelho. It’s the first time we’ve published a YA verse novel and it’s been an empowering journey, working closely with the poet. From first manuscript we knew we had something truly original and special and the finished book, with darkly evocative pictures by Kate Milner, shows the power of a story told in poems. Using a variety of different forms, the poet unpeels the outer layers of Daphne’s grief over the loss of her father, switching between the contemporary girl and the Daphne of Greek myth. With a mix of fantasy and real life and unforgettable characters, including the forest itself, Daphne journeys towards understanding, hope and renewal. This book shows a poet reaching new heights with his verse.

And finally, heading towards Christmas, two wonderful treasures of poetry and illustration. In Crocodile Tears, publishing 8 October, poetry legend Roger McGough presents a deceptively simple yet profound picture book, with animator Greg McLeod, about the crocodile who leaves the jungle for the bright lights of London but soon longs for home. Witty, dark, funny and touching, the story is told in rhyming four line verses and poems in the form of letters to Mother. Brilliant!

And lastly, those gems of early childhood, nursery rhymes. The Jackie Morris Book of Classic Nursery Rhymes contains 40 familiar and lesser known rhymes brought to beautiful life through the amazing pictures of Jackie Morris. This is poetry for everyone, 0-90, and Jackie’s mission is to help these precious rhymes become known and loved by families today, to be passed on through the generations.

Thank you to all our fantastic poets and illustrators for the magic that happens when poetry and readers connect.

Hannah Rolls, editorial director Bloomsbury Children’s Books

2020 has been a brilliant year of poetry for us here at Bloomsbury. We started with Welcome to My Crazy Life by Joshua Seigal in January, which features poems on every topic from demon cats, to coffee monsters, to why you should NEVER forget your trousers. This is a must-have new collection from the winner of the 2020 Laugh Out Loud awards. Aimed at children aged 8+, this is perfect for anyone who still thinks poetry is boring. A word of warning: find a hankie before you attempt to read Barney, the last poem in this collection about a much-loved family dog. Watching Joshua reduce about half the Bloomsbury staff to tears at our last in-person sales presentation before lockdown was a personal highlight this year – a reminder of how powerful the books we publish can be.

Bright Bursts of Colour by Matt Goodfellow published in February and is his first book for Bloomsbury. There’s plenty of comedy to enjoy here (a slug who dresses up as a badger for instance) but Matt also has an outstanding ability to focus in on the things that really affect children: what it’s like to live half the week with Mum and half with Dad, or how it feels when a friend moves away, for example. With engaging illustrations from Aleksei Bitskoff, this is a collection to treasure.

The arrival of National Poetry Day in October always results in some poetry gems and this year is no different. In September we published two books which I think will become future classics. The first of these is The Book of Not Entirely Useful Advice by the inimitable A.F. Harrold, illustrated by picture book star Mini Grey. This is a riotous celebration of words and a modern take on cautionary tales – featuring advice on parrots, gravy, mathematics, castles (bouncy), spiders, vegetables (various), breakfast, cakes, and removing ducks from soup. Mini’s artwork compliments the silly fun perfectly, making this a collection that will delight readers of all ages.

Our other poetry book this autumn is an anthology: Fire Burn, Cauldron Bubble edited by Paul Cookson. This is a selection of poems on the theme of magic and includes work by a range of poets old and new – everyone from Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll and Tennyson to John Agard, Valerie Bloom and Benjamin Zephaniah. Dragons, wizards, wands, unicorns, magic carpets... you’ll find every kind of magic in this gorgeous hardback along with stunning illustrations by Eilidh Muldoon.
Martin West, director, Troika Books

In the past two years Troika has been working towards making our poetry books more eclectic, more challenging, and more sumptuous for the reader to enjoy. We think poetry is a literary gift and that the whole book should reflect this in cover presentation and interior design and format and production. So in our illustrated collections we’ve striven to find the right illustrator to suit the tone, nuance and imagination of the poet’s work.

In 2020 we published Dom Conlon’s quirky collection celebrating the imagination of the poet’s work. We’ve striven to find the right illustrator to suit the tone, nuance and design and format and production. So in our illustrated collections the whole book should reflect this in cover presentation and interior design for the reader to enjoy. We think poetry is a literary gift and that the poetry books are more eclectic, more challenging, and more sumptuous. In the past two years Troika has been working towards making our poetry books more eclectic, more challenging, and more sumptuous.

Viviane Schwarz who captures Dom’s lunar delight and infatuation dreamlike, inventive, and magical, Sue Hardy Dawson’s If I were Other than Myself, was published in April. It is beautifully illustrated by Sue herself, the soft gentle but always surprising images reflecting the language in Sue’s inimitable imagination.

Coral Rumble’s brilliant new collection, Riding a Lion, was published in August. Coral’s writing reflects on our ever-changing moods capturing a rich collage of experiences, emotions and thoughts and Emily Ford’s illustrations perfectly match the poetic exuberance and moods with their lightness, flightiness and unexpected imagery.

Shauna Darling Robertson’s first collection for children, Saturdays at the Imaginarium, was published in September. Shauna’s work celebrates creative thinking and encourages curiosity and reveals the pleasure of looking at things from a new perspective. Jude Wisdom’s illustrations evoke the characters and the worlds Shauna so inventively creates and adds an extra layer of pure imagination and surrealism to it all.

We are delighted to be releasing the first paperback edition of the widely praised and much lauded Firecrackers by Zaro Weil, illustrated by Jo Riddell. In October our Poetry Guide, A handbook for teachers and librarians, written by Bernard Young and Trevor Millum, will support the incredible efforts of school librarians, teachers and public librarians to teach and promote poetry to children.

Looking forward to spring 2021 we are very excited to be publishing, Little Light, a poetic novel by Coral Rumble. This is an inventve and evocative story of a young girl called Ava facing daily challenges in her life and how she overcomes them. In a seamless poetic narrative Coral creates a world peppered with utterly believable characters and feelings and highlights very sensitively the dilemmas and challenges some young people face as they grow up.

Emma Wright of Birmingham based independent The Emma Press, is excited about Bicki-Books.

We published Bicki-Books at the start of 2020. The Bicki-Books are a really unique series, with almost too many interesting things about them to describe. At first glance, they are little picture-books, about the size of a postcard. Each one contains a poem, spread out across pages and put into a picture-book format by the illustrator. But also, each one has a different illustrator, working in a very different style, from papercuts to colouring pencils to embroidery to digital collage. And they’re translated from Latvian!

So: they’re miniature, translated, beautifully-illustrated, poetry picture-books, and there are currently twelve of them (in Latvia there are 101, but we’re not quite there yet – The Emma Press published six last year and six this year). As a fun bit of background, they are the brainchild of Ruta Briede, a lecturer at the Art Academy of Latvia, as a way of sharing the classic poems of her childhood with her daughter. Many of the original books had gone out of print, so the Bicki-Books were a way of bringing these poems to a new generation of children – and now they are available to children in the UK too.

Everyone falls in love with the Bicki-Books when they see them and hold them in their hands – they’re an adorable size, and little children love sorting through them and poring over the detailed illustrations. They’re suitable for children aged 3+ because of the size and the artwork, but the poems themselves are pitched at slightly older children, so they work as gifts for 6+ too.

The Bicki-Books we published this year (numbers 7-12) feature translations by Kate Wakeling, author of CLiPPA-winning Moon Juice, Žanete Vevere Pasqualini and Kāja Straumanis, and the poems are wonderfully lively. For example, in Secret by Jazeps Osmanis – illustrated by Ingrīda Picule – a boy takes a long time to swear his mother to secrecy but ends up forgetting the big secret, and the illustrator has hidden a riddle throughout the illustrations.

A lot of people’s favourite is I want a little puppy dog by Ilmars Šlapins, illustrated by Darta Stafecka and translated by Kāja Straumanis. It stars a man who is desperate for a puppy and willing to go to any lengths to get one, including kidnapping, but in the end there’s a twist: he’s allergic. The poem is delightful, and the illustrations are extraordinary – incredibly intricate embroidery which was photographed for the book. It’s completely lovely.

You can buy them individually or in sets of six from The Emma Press website theemmapress.com/books – these chunky packets make a lovely gift for friends with children and are perfect stocking-fillers.

Books for Keeps National Poetry Day 2020 9
The year’s best poetry for children: the CLiPPA shortlist 2020

This year, National Poetry Day and the announcement of the shortlist for the CLiPPA (Centre for Literacy in Primary Poetry Education Poetry Award) coincided. Established in 2003, the CLiPPA is the UK’s only award for published poetry for children and has done huge amounts to champion children’s poetry. Previous winners include Steven Camden, Karl Nova, Kate Wakeling, Joseph Coelho, Michael Rosen, Rachel Rooney and Sarah Crossan.

This year’s shortlist reflects the extraordinary vitality of the UK’s poetry publishing for children in 2020. There are two books by the Emma Press, one from fellow independent Troika Books, one from Bloomsbury and a beautifully illustrated collection from Walker Books. The shortlist will be celebrated at a special Poetry Show coming live from the Cheltenham Literature Festival on Friday 9 October and open to all schools. Hear five poets perform from the shortlisted collections, watch author and illustrator Chris Riddell draw along and find out who has won the 2020 award, live! There will be news about how schools can be involved in the CLiPPA Shadowing Scheme too.

Find out more about the CLiPPA clpe.org.uk/poetryline/clippa

This year the judges are poets Valerie Bloom and Steven Camden, winner of the CLiPPA 2019, alongside Tracey Guiry, director of the Poetry Archive and Charlotte Hacking, Central Learning Programmes Leader at CLPE.

The judging appears to have been an enjoyable experience. Steven Camden, poet, winner of the 2019 CLiPPA commented: ‘I was pretty nervous going into the judging meeting because I felt really strongly about my choices. My favourites on the list really affected me and I was apprehensive about fighting their corner with people I didn’t really know. Within five minutes it was clear that those books that touched me had touched the other judges just as strongly and what followed was a gorgeous celebratory conversation of some truly stunning creations. What a treat and privilege.’

Here’s a look at the five books on this year’s shortlist.

Midnight Feasts. Tasty Poems chosen by A.F. Harrold, illustrated by Katy Riddell, Bloomsbury

Food is the one thing that unites us all – across time, nations and peoples. From chocolate, rice pudding and sandwiches to breakfast in bed, marmalade in the bath and the fruit of a mythical jelabi tree, in Midnight Feasts A.F. Harrold brings together a wonderful and diverse collection of poems to tickle your taste buds. Poets include Ian McMillan, Brian Patten, Choman Hardi, Imtiaz Dharker, William Carlos Williams, Salena Godden, Joseph Coelho, Sabrina Mahfouz, Lewis Carroll, W.S. Gilbert and A.E. Housman, as well as A.F. Harrold himself.

The CLiPPA judges say this is a delicious and quirky collection of poems, skilfully curated and perfectly paced. They loved loved the voice too and found the pictures are a perfect fit. ‘It felt like being woken up at night, and being allowed to stay up – a treat!’

Poems the Wind Blew In, Karmelo C. Iribarren, illustrated by Riya Chowdhury, translated from Spanish by Lawrence Schimel, The Emma Press.

These poems reveal the magic in small, everyday things: a plastic bag dreams of becoming a cloud, raindrops go on holiday to the sea, and hats fill up with thoughts. The book builds an immersive, tender world and encourages the reader to look at the world around them with delight and wonder. Poems the Wind Blew In won an English PEN Writers in Translation Award.

The judges said that this is a book to carry around with you, proof that poetry is ideas, thoughts and emotions captured in words. They liked the space given to the poems and the contrasts – the way there’s something sad next to a moment of lightness. ‘It shows that poetry doesn’t always have to be melancholy, it can just catch a slice of life.’

From the practical (how to mix a pancake or how to bird-watch) to the fanciful (how to scare monsters or how to be a snowflake), the poems share a sense of joy. Poets featured range from Kwame Alexander to Pat Mora to Allan Wolf. Soft, evocative illustrations will encourage readers to look at the world with an eye to its countless possibilities. The judges found this a wonderfully varied collection of poems that will speak directly to young children, full of beautiful examples of the craft of poetry. They loved the conversational tone, its variety and child-centredness. ‘It felt like meeting friends.’

Wain. LGBT Reimaginings of Scottish Folklore, Rachel Plummer, illustrated by Helene Boppert, The Emma Press

Wain is a collection of LGBT themed poetry for teens based on retellings of Scottish myths. The collection contains stories about kelpies, selkies, and the Loch Ness Monster, alongside perhaps lesser-known mythical people and creatures, such as wulvers, Ghillie Dhu, and the Cat Sith. These poems immerse readers in an enriching, diverse and enchanting vision of contemporary life.

The judges found the voice fresh and admired its take on something that could have felt archaic but is made to feel new. They commented on the music of the collection and the linked journey of the poems. ‘This inspired us to find out more about Scottish folklore.’

Cherry Moon, Zaro Weil, illustrated by Junli Song, ZaZaKids Books/ Troika Books

This poetry collection captures eye-popping moments, tender observations and whimsical reflections on the sheer joy of the natural world. It poses big questions about life with poems and other small gatherings of words; encouraging children of every age to explore the power, enchantment and sheer wonderfulness of nature.

The judges found it meditative and beautifully paced. They very much like the way Zaro Weil presents snapshots of the natural world and her use of form. ‘This is lovely to revisit and read again.’
Women faced certain bars to writing and publishing throughout history, and women who were not white, middle or upper class, heterosexual or helpfully connected had even more stacked against them. Leisure, learning and liberty are key ingredients for any artist, and all have been in shorter supply for women than men throughout history. Even aristocratic women were usually afforded a rudimentary education compared to their brothers, and none at all in the highfalutin subjects considered ‘proper’ literary subjects: the classics, theology or blood-drenched battle histories. More recently, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Sharon Olds was rejected from an American literary magazine for writing about her children: ‘If you wish to write about this sort of subject, may we suggest the Ladies’ Home Journal’, theyacidly suggested.

The role of women was to play muse, not poet. Any who dared pick up a pen themselves faced ridicule, and eighteenth century mothers fretted that their bookish daughters would repel suitors. Women faced condemnation because, in straying into the male arena of literature, it was assumed that they were neglecting their key duties as housewives and mothers. Anne Bradstreet, the ‘first poet’ of America, had to pretend that her naughty brother-in-law published her work without her knowledge, and he was at pains to include a preface insisting that Anne went without sleep to write rather than slacking in her domestic duties. I found a lot of beautiful nocturnal poems written by women from times past – and couldn’t help but wonder whether this was the only sliver of time they had to themselves, when their large families were finally asleep. It was even more shocking for women to promote their own work… so thrusting! So unseemly!

The job description of the wild and free artist popularised by the Romantics, tramping off to rugged and solitary places, was inaccessible to their female contemporaries. It was difficult to pursue such a path when your corsets conspired against you, you needed a chaperone to cross the road, and nobody had yet invented hiking boots. In the Victorian era, many women, particularly of the middle and upper classes, were almost cloistered in the home. I feel this constraint shows in the melancholy and often morbid notes of much women’s poetry from the period.

Women did write, and women did publish. Through the centuries they resorted to all sorts of stratagems, and took advantage where they found it. Hannah More, born in 1745, funded her literary career with an annual pension from the man who jilted her after a long engagement. Her independence – and freedom from continuous years of childbearing and rearing – enabled her to become a noted philanthropist and lady of letters. Some published anonymously, others under male or gender neutral pseudonyms. But often, even if they enjoyed great acclam during their lifetimes, they were forgotten or fell from fashion afterwards. We know that Sappho was hailed as the ‘Tenth Muse of the ancient world, but we have only scraps of her writing now. (It has been suggested that a pope ordered her ‘scandalous’ poetry burnt, but scholars suggest that, in fact, it just wasn’t considered worthy of preservation; a familiar fate for women’s work.) Aemilia Lanyer, who wrote a daring epic poem that imagined the crucifixion from the point of view of Pontius Pilate’s wife in 1611, was all but forgotten by scholars until she was put forward as a potential model for the ‘Dark Lady’ of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

No wonder women writers longed to spread their wings. And, in verse, they did. From the first African American poet, Phillis Wheatley, to civil rights activists and stars of the Harlem Renaissance such as Georgia Douglas Johnson and Anne Spencer, they wrote uplifting and inspirational poetry. From women as diverse as the reclusive Emily Dickinson and the inimitable Amy Lowell, who tirelessly promoted the cause of poetry, come poems that shout and shimmy with the delights of freedom. Suffragettes including Emily Wilding Davison and Charlotte Perkins Gilman write passionately about throwing open the door to a new world for women. It’s a pleasure and privilege to collect their words and bring them – I hope – to some new readers, alongside those of some today’s brightest writing stars.
It’s time to grow your own poem

Kate Clanchy has been teaching people to write poetry for more than twenty years, with extraordinary and inspiring results – take a look at the poetry she shares on Twitter or published in her book, **England: Poems from a School** which features the work of young poets from a single school, the Oxford Spires Academy, a state comprehensive on the outskirts of Oxford. None of those she works with were confident to start with, but every one finished up with a poem they were proud of, a poem that only they could have written – their own poem.

Kate’s big secret as explained in her new book **How to Grow Your Own Poem** is a simple one: is to share other poems. She believes poetry is like singing or dancing and the best way to learn is to follow someone else. In her book, Kate shares the poems she has found provoke the richest responses, the exercises that help to shape those responses into new poems, and the advice that most often helps new writers build their own writing practice. In this extract, she explains why it is time to give yourself permission to write, and why now is the time to join the poetry conversation.

‘Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.’

So said the great American poet and essayist Audre Lorde, contrasting poetry with novel writing. She should be right – yet most beginning writers still start on novels. Despite being so accessible, poetry has a difficult reputation. It is seen as more elevated than prose, and harder. Poets are often thought of as special people, eccentric, super talented, and marked from birth. It’s all very intimidating.

If you feel stymied by these ideas, or by the anxiety that your thoughts are not original enough or your experiences not spiritual enough to belong in a poem, here is a thought. For most people over most of time, poetry hasn’t consisted of single poems by named (male, white, dead) poets in books. Mostly, poetry has consisted of stories and chants handed down and exchanged among working people going about their daily lives. Mostly, poetry hasn’t had a single author, or been written down, but has been recited, sung, shared, adapted and passed on as seemed useful. And, though all societies have a special place for talented poets, most people over most time would at some point in their lives have made up a few lines of poetry, in the same way that they would have added a note to a work song, or danced a new step at a wedding. Those lines would probably have been in answer to someone else’s lines – the way rap artists still riff off one another. Poetry, in short, until very recently, was a varied, noisy, general conversation, not a silent solo art form.

It’s easier to join in a conversation than it is to make a speech, just as it is easier to open your mouth to sing if you are in a choir, or to dance in a group. Most art forms support beginners by sharing. No one expects a prima ballerina or opera diva to train entirely alone and walk fully formed on the stage – but we do have those expectations of poetry. If you can put those expectations aside, you may well feel more free to write.

Rather than setting out to be ‘a poet’, try allowing yourself to join in the poetry conversation. We all retain that ancient capacity to answer a poem with another one: it’s much easier and more natural than writing an essay about a poem. All you have to do is let yourself read a poem and allow answering thoughts to form in your mind. The news is: a writer is a person who writes, and a poet is someone writing a poem – you.

As Audre Lorde says, poetry can happen anywhere but, Kate says, it helps to have:

**A Place:** Set aside a writing place. A particular chair with your laptop or corner of your desk will do, so long as you feel secure there.

**A Time:** Make a writing date and mark it in your diary, whether it’s a half-hour first thing in the morning, or a Saturday afternoon.

**A Folder:** Value your poems in a tangible way: have a special folder or notebook for your work, or at the very least a special file on your computer.

If you keep waiting for inspiration, the time for writing won’t arrive. If you give yourself a time to join in the poetry conversation, a place to do so, permission and a prompt to answer, your poem will come too.

**How to Grow Your Own Poem** by Kate Clanchy is out now, published by Picador, 978-1529024692, £14.99 pbk.
Listen out for:
The Children’s Poetry Archive

‘Hearing a poet reading his or her work remains uniquely illuminating. It helps us to understand the work as well as helping us to enjoy it. Writers have a particular right to their own work and we are taken to a deeper level of understanding by hearing how they speak it. This is a powerful source of insight, understanding and enjoyment to all lovers of literature and a valuable resource for students of any age.’ The Poetry Archive

Poetry doesn’t just live in books – it lives in the sounds that words make. When we read poems out loud we breathe life into them and we can picture them in our imagination. The Children’s Poetry Archive is a place where you can listen to poems read out loud. You will find poems read by the poets who wrote them as well as poems which other people have recorded.

Designed with the younger use in mind, it is a place where they can explore poetry in their own time and at their own pace, engendering a love for poetry which will last them a lifetime.

You can search by looking for your favourite poem, or by having a look through the list of poets (listed alphabetically, from Adham Smart to Wes Magee). There are great interviews on the site too with poets including James Berry, Jackie Kay and Brian Moses amongst others.

And you can search by collection, for example, the new CLiPPA Collection, which features poems by previous winners of the CLiPPA, Steven Camden, Grace Nichols, John Agard and Rachel Rooney and Roger McGough amongst others.

Plus, you’ll find lots of advice and help. Why not try these tips for example, on the best way for children to listen to a poem.

Time to Listen
Like a piece of music, a poem needs to be lifted off the page, to be spoken and heard. For young children, much of the pleasure is in a poem’s sound, while older children often don’t mind if they don’t fully understand a poem that they hear.

Most poems are best encountered first by hearing. The more we listen to poetry, the more we become tuned in to the way meaning is conveyed through sound.

In your own time
Don’t rush children into making a prescribed response to a poem. Ensure they have time to get inside it and to respond in their own way.

TIP: Remember that poetry is a ‘slow’ art form. Some poems need time to unfold their meaning. Poetry seeds you plant now may bear fruit many years from now.

Wait for the poet
Read the poem, listen to performances by other readers – and only then listen to the poet. Discuss how the mood and meaning have changed.

Picture this
Get children to close their eyes and imagine the scene as you read. You could model this with a different poem first, telling them what you see after each line. Eventually, children could draw or write about their scene.

Hear that
Read a poem that conjures a soundscape. Ask children to notice all the different sounds it describes. They could try creating, and then recording, ‘the soundtrack of the poem’.

Let children experience and reflect on something before you introduce the poem about it.

No ‘Likes’
Avoid the question, did you like that poem? (Though children may tell you anyway, especially if they didn’t!) Instead, encourage them to think about what they heard, saw and felt.

All join in!
As you keep reading a poem, encourage them to start joining in – especially if there’s a refrain, repeated line, or obvious end-rhyme.

I know the feeling
Collect some poems on a theme. Before reading any, discuss the theme and ask children to write down their thoughts or feelings about it. Read the poems, then ask children to choose one line or phrase which best fits own idea or feeling about it. Then ask them which one challenges their ideas?

Name that poem
Read a poem without giving away the title, then ask children to suggest some possibilities. Reveal the actual title and compare the children’s suggestions. How does each change the meaning of the poem?

Listening corner
For poems with strong imagery, children can decide on a series of images and create illustrations or a storyboard.
Joseph Coelho chooses a poem that unsettles and thrills.


The Listeners by Walter De La Mare is such an effortlessly creepy poem and one I return to again and again, it’s as much about what is not said as what is said. The fact that we never get to know who The Listeners are, we only have the assurance that they are present and ‘listening’. This poem is a masterclass in scene setting with its ‘Moonlit door’ and solo bird flying ‘up out of the turret’. We, the readers, are immediately transported to a monochrome horror setting where ‘phantom listeners’ lurk. The regular rhyme lulls us into a dreaded certainty that all is not as it should be, that there is no escape for the poem’s traveller protagonist who is destined to knock on a door due to some bargained compulsion… ‘tell them I came, and no one answered.’ He calls out seemingly aware of the ghostly beings that hear him and in addressing them leaving us with the feeling that his journey is far from over, that as he rides off and out of the poem, disaster surely awaits him.

This poem has long been a reminder to me of the unsettling power of horror and the thrill that a creepy text can bring.

The Listeners is one of the poems featured on The Poetry Archive where it is read by Maurice Riordan.

poetryarchive.org/poem/listeners

Desert Island Poems

Joseph Coelho chooses a poem that unsettles and thrills.


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The anthologist’s must-have anthology poem

Allie Esiri is the award-winning anthologist behind best-selling collections A Poem for Every Day of the Year and A Poem for Every Night of the Year.

Out now in paperback is A Poem for Every Autumn Day, a gorgeous seasonal collection which graces the cover of this Books for Keeps Poetry Special.

But which poem would she say most deserves a place in anthologies? We asked her. ‘Of all poems, well it’s an impossible task, but it would be hard not to include Shakespeare’s most famous sonnet and the best-known love poem in the English language. The Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge described Shakespeare as ‘myriad-minded’ for his ability to hold several ideas in play at once. His fellow poet John Keats later described a similar ability of the dramatist to surrender any opinions of his own to his vision of the world as it is, even to the point of uncertainty and confusion, which he called ‘negative capability’. Both of these virtues are present in spades throughout Sonnet 18, in which the speaker declares that the charm of a beautiful day in summer pales in comparison to the almost unimaginable magnificence of his beloved. Read it aloud. It’s a wonder.’

Shall I compare thee to a Summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And Summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
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