



Spellbound: The Art of Teaching Poetry

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Review of

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The introduction to *Spellbound: The Art of Teaching Poetry* includes a poem by a middle-schooler in which the writer's mother says "you like poetry cuz it's easy, simple / you're lazy, she says"; in response, the writer asks "how is it easy – / to express a thought a feeling / in such few words and phrases" (xi)? The anthology responds to the student writer's dubious mother with reminders that poetry not only *works* as an educational tool, but requires work itself. In twenty-seven essays from a star roster of poets and teachers, *Spellbound* makes a case for poetry as a vehicle for learning historical analysis, communication skills, emotional intelligence and social justice.

Editor Matthew Burgess writes that *Spellbound* was born of "a desire to discover, gather and share some of the newer strategies and approaches that writer-teachers have been developing in recent years" (xv). Individual essays provide lesson plans and prompts based on one or more "mentor texts," a great deal of which are poems by contemporary poets from diverse backgrounds, often accompanied by examples of real work produced by students. Burgess encourages teachers to share these "model poems" with their class: "for some young writers, the published poem can feel remote or intimidating. But when you read a poem that an actual student wrote in response—*someone just like you*—suddenly a light goes on and the energy quickens" (xvi).

The essays are collected roughly in order of grade level, from elementary school (or earlier) to graduate school, though many if not most of the lessons can be adapted to suit a wide range of skill levels and ages. Among the essayists are some relatively new names alongside prominent writers like Melissa Febos, Dorothea Lasky, Tiphonie Yanique, and Rosamond S. King. Most contributors have backgrounds teaching diverse populations and grade levels: Alex Cuff teaches at the Academy for Young Writers, Sarah Dohrmann has been Teachers & Writers Collaborative's writer-in-residence for over a decade, Tine Cane is the founder and director of Writers-in-the-Schools, RI, and Peter Markus

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is the senior writer at InsideOut Literary Arts in Detroit. Burgess himself is a poet-in-residence for New York City schools since 2001, a contributing editor for *Teachers & Writers Magazine*, an associate professor at Brooklyn College, and the author of three children's books.

The anthology begins with Erika Luckert's "What is a Poem?", a lesson plan in which students are invited to define (or redefine) poetry as a genre and a medium. From there, we move on to Tiphonie Yanique's spectacular essay on Jericho Brown, finding a voice, and the challenges of perspective. Susan Karwoska's "The Lune Link" marries formal constraints with analysis of historical photographs; Aracelis Germany's "Ode to This Body Singing" uses Yusef Komunyakaa's "Anodyne" as a model poem to invite self-reflection, followed by Emily Moore's self-portrait lesson based on poems by Adam Zagajewski, Chen Chen, and Ishle Yi Park. Peter Markus writes about introducing the concept of metaphor through pictures of the moon and Chris Cander provides an inkblot-inspired lesson plan. Many of these early essays are clearly geared towards introductions to poetry or younger classrooms, and focus on making students comfortable with writing and sharing poetry, as well as introducing basic concepts.

Essays gradually adopt more nuanced methods and topics: in Caron Levis' "A Dramatic reVISION", the focus is on teaching students how to edit and revise their work. Joanna Fuhrman and Stefania Heim both write about ekphrastic poetry, with the former eschewing the idea of having students find "their" voice in favor of taking on a more empathetic project and the latter asks "how can you get your own language to give rise, *in someone else's mind*, to what you see" (192)? Michael Morse introduces and builds upon the elegy, Tina Cane further complicates the relationship between literature and history through her lesson plan on letter-writing, and Cait Weiss Orcutt uses multi-media projects like Bianca Stone's poetry comics to allow teen students to "play" with their poems.

Beyond the project of using poetry to elucidate other subjects, the later essays also invite teachers to use poetry as a means to explore and incite political conversations: Alex Cuff asks her students: "how do poets write liberatory futures into being? How do poets use language to disrupt an unjust world" (144)? At the college level, Melissa Febos brings nonfiction sensibilities to the page in her lesson plan inspired by Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* and Jennifer Firestone uses Harryette Mullen's *Trimnings* alongside fashion advertisements to teach "Poetry as Feminist Critique."

The essays range in length as well as detail, with some essays offering step-by-step instructions for guiding a class through a new form or concept while others are only a few pages long. For example, Todd Colby's "Beatbox and Other Experiments" is a list of prompts that spans three pages, while Dorothea Lasky gives ten pages of illustrations, mentor poems, and a numbered guide to writing poems inspired by tarot cards in "The Poem as Divination Tool." Thus, a reader in need of a quick lesson to fill some time at the end of a class will find *Spellbound* as useful as a teacher looking to build a curriculum.

A charming feature of *Spellbound* is the inclusion of poems written by students based on the lesson plans therein, the “model poems.” These poems are meant to be taught alongside the “mentor poems” to inspire students—specifically younger students—that they, too, can create meaningful poetry. But, for the reader or teacher, these poems are just as inspiring—who would not want to mimic the conditions which made third-grader Treshon write “Love is a Big Blue Cadillac”:

Love is a big blue Cadillac
that never runs
out of gas. It drives all night
down to Mississippi
to see his wife.
I watch them kiss.
when they kiss
the sun rises
like a gigantic cherry
turning the whole universe
red (55)

These model poems reflect a sensibility carried throughout the anthology: several essays include anecdotal evidence of the positive effects of utilizing poetry in the classroom. Tina Cane recounts her experience teaching pregnant and parenting teenagers at a specialized school, and the way blending poetry into her world history unit allowed ESL students to make “breakthroughs” (157). There is a recurring emphasis on building confidence through sharing poems in supportive, non-critical spaces. This, in turn, opens the classroom up to empathetic and creative discussion. Cait Weiss Orcutt writes, of her classes at the Salvation Army of Houston’s Young Adult Resource Center, that “because [my students] have made something out of a world that so often breaks things apart, we can discuss how art saves us, in its way, and what new possibilities and reinventions become possible when we refuse to keep things separate (writing vs. drawing, human vs. animal, lover vs. beloved) and instead, focus on making connections and communicating our shared and unique experiences on as many levels as possible” (141).

Perhaps the most significant contribution *Spellbound* is making to the field of teaching poetry is the emphasis on contemporary poets of color. Though a fair number of the selected mentor poems harken back to the canon—William Carlos Williams makes multiple appearances, and Charles Bukowski appears in the first essay—many more come from exciting contemporary voices like Chen Chen, Danez Smith, Bhanu Kapil, and t’ai freedom ford. If poetry is to be understood as a living art, it is vital that students are allowed to engage with contemporary poets, many of whom will bear more

resemblance to the American student than Williams or Bukowski. The lesson plans in *Spellbound* would work in any classroom, but a significant percentage of the essayists come from urban environments and schools. To that end, there are nods to texts that work in bilingual or Spanish-speaking classrooms—however, we could probably do with a few more such nods, or perhaps even a full essay on teaching poetry in a multilingual classroom.

Written in clear, approachable prose, *Spellbound* is an ideal resource for education students, new teachers, or experienced teachers looking to incorporate contemporary writers into their curriculum. However, since the anthology is more about crafting unique and challenging lesson plans than it is about the core components of a poetry unit, it does require that readers already have an interest in and basic knowledge of poetics.

Since it is not sectioned off into grade levels or separated by theme, the anthology does feel somewhat scattered in its scope. Furthermore, readers seeking an exercise for a specific grade level may find themselves overwhelmed by the options or disappointed in the lack of demarcated sections, and not every lesson plan would be adaptable to younger or older students. On the other hand, the openness of the book invites exploration, allowing readers to skip around without losing important context or thematic signifiers.

Poetry's place in academic curriculums is hindered, not helped, by outdated adherence to the canon. Readers are less and less likely to see themselves reflected in classic forms, and teachers are obliged to introduce new methods, new texts, and new rhetoric to the tradition. Burgess titled the anthology after the anonymous middle-school poem cited earlier, about the poet with the critical mother. The poem ends: "poetry is the simple *Spellbound* / for those too meager, and insignificant / to speak" (xii). And, reflecting this, the anthology follows a particular evolution through classrooms and forms: from the foundations of what a poem is to how a singular poem by a singular writer can speak on behalf of many.