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# Poetry Is Poetry Is Poetry

Angela Sorby

Marquette University, [angela.sorby@marquette.edu](mailto:angela.sorby@marquette.edu)

# *Poetry Is Poetry Is Poetry*

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*Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry*,  
by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2007.

Joseph T. Thomas's *Poetry's Playground* is a lively excursion into relatively uncharted territory. In five eclectic chapters, he maps—or begins to map—the ways that children's poetry might be taken seriously as a subfield of mainstream (i.e., adult) American poetry. As he points out, most prior studies of twentieth-century American children's poetry have been undertaken by children's literature specialists, who have not always drawn on the much broader archive of literary and critical work available to scholars of adult poetry. Of course, the insularity cuts both ways; critics working on Robert Frost, for example, have been slow to consider his cultural position as a children's poet. *Poetry's Playground*, then, dissolves boundaries between two scholarly camps—children's literature and adult poetry—that have coexisted, not so much at war with one another as in a state of unproductive ignorance. This book will appeal to a wide audience of readers, including those who study children's literature as well as those engaged with reading, writing, or teaching American poetry.

Thomas's study constructs a critical vocabulary of terms—"official school poetry," "playground poetry," and "domesticated playground poetry"—that are useful because they connote the multiple social functions of the genre. He begins his study with a seminal moment in American literary history: Robert Frost's performance of "The Gift Outright" at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. According to Thomas, the moment marked a shift that elevated Frost as the premier official school poet. By tracing textbook editions, he shows how Frost was privileged over social progressives like Carl Sandburg and Gwendolyn Brooks. This shift was facilitated by New Critical ideologies that valorized text over voice, complexity over simplicity, and universalism over localism. Frost's long (indeed, ongoing) run as a children's poet was thus the product of adult issues, both in literary criticism and in politics.

Thomas continues his deft blend of children's and adult literary history in his analysis of Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*. In the early 1960s, a debate raged in American poetry between what Harvey Shapiro called

the “raw” and the “cooked” schools: should a poem reflect first-thought, best-thought Frank O’Hara passion, or should it be a well-wrought piece of John Hollander craftsmanship? In *The Bat-Poet*, a children’s book, Jarrell imagines straddling and complicating the gap between authenticity (raw) and artifice (cooked). This chapter showcases Thomas’s close reading skills as the text is carefully unpacked; he ultimately demonstrates how Jarrell produced both a delightful children’s poem and a meditation on wider debates.

In his third chapter, Thomas introduces the category of playground poetry as a vital counterpoint to official school poetry, exploring the oral tradition of often-profaned children’s rhymes such as “Joy to the World, the teacher’s dead/We barbecued her head” (54). He concludes—appropriately if perhaps predictably—that these verses reflect Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, in which hierarchies are symbolically inverted in ways that question (but seldom truly threaten) the status quo. This chapter is compelling partly because it underlines the popular success of at least one kind of poetry: to wit, a poetry that engages the whole body, not just the eye; that is flexible enough to allow for improvisation; and that, above all, retains its sense of play.

Chapter four is crucial because it pulls the logic of playground poetry into the literary realm, adding some needed continuity as Thomas examines the work of domesticated playground poets such as Theodore Roethke and John Ciardi. Through their subversive rhymes and respect for the dark side of childhood, these poets paved the way for smash-hit children’s poets such as Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky. While Thomas admires Roethke, he suggests that a poet such as Silverstein drains off the subversive energy of the playground, replacing it with an “adult-controlled” substitute (82). I wonder, though, if the borders between adult-controlled rhymes and playground poetry are really so rigid and if playground poetry is really so autonomous. After all, nursery rhymes have heterogeneous origins, some stemming from print culture, some from adult political feuds, and only a few from the sui generis world of children. Ultimately, too, a vision of porousness (how long before Silverstein shows up, corrupted, on the playground?), while not fully articulated here, serves Thomas’s own thesis best. On the other hand, even when Thomas’s taxonomies seem reductive, they add shape to a canon that is just becoming visible and set the stage for later debates about authenticity and influence.

Thomas’s final chapter is a fascinating exploration of visual poetry. Here he most thoroughly integrates adults’ and children’s literary

history—assisted, perhaps, by the already-marginal status of *all* visual poetry. Readers unfamiliar with the rich tradition of children's and adults' visual poetry will be intrigued by the many works that are reproduced (and brilliantly analyzed) here. However, not all visual poetry is equally engaged with its avant-garde tradition. Thomas cuts children's poets such as Sharon Creech no slack, which shows his fundamental respect for his subject. Too often, children's visual poetry is written by people who know nothing of its history—making a case, then, for the necessity of studies such as *Poetry's Playground*.

Children's poetry, for better or perhaps for worse, has evaded the self-conscious canon-formation that embalms so much adult verse. At the same time, canons have emerged willy-nilly, and it behooves critics to mark them—if only to better question their assumptions. I found Thomas's coda to be especially helpful because it works to describe the canon as it stands, even offering—in a set of appendices—hard numbers about which poets have appeared where, and which poems represent them. These data are indispensable, especially since *Poetry's Playground* will surely become a touchstone for scholars of children's poetry.

Will it also be a foundational text for scholars of American poetry more broadly? It ought to be: as Thomas abundantly shows, American poetry impoverishes itself when it fails to see the whole picture, sequestering itself in categories (raw/cooked, youth/adult, oral/written). This leads me to one small complaint: I wish that the chapters were more fully woven into a whole argument. I can see possible connections, for instance, between domesticated playground poetry and visual poetry, but these remain less than fully articulated. However, I think this flaw stems from one of the book's strengths: it is breaking ground and juxtaposing ideas that have not previously fit together. So, of course, there will be gaps. Moreover, in an age of exhaustive and exhausting critical doorstops it is heartening to encounter a scholarly book that can say so much in fewer than two hundred pages.

Children's poetry is part of the landscape of our literary culture, and Thomas brilliantly illuminates its role as a living tradition that draws strength from the anarchic realm of children's play as well as from the more mature literary establishment. *Poetry's Playground* is both a study complete unto itself and an exciting invitation to other scholars; there is much work to do as we integrate the fields of adults' and children's poetry, to the benefit of both.