

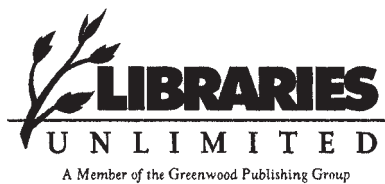
# POETRY PEOPLE



# POETRY PEOPLE

A Practical Guide to Children's Poets

Sylvia M. Vardell



A Member of the Greenwood Publishing Group

Westport, Connecticut • London

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Vardell, Sylvia M.

Poetry people : a practical guide to children's poets / Sylvia M. Vardell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59158-443-8 (alk. paper)

1. Children's poetry, American—Bio-bibliography—Dictionaries. 2. Children's poetry, American—History and criticism. 3. American poetry—20th century—Bio-bibliography—Dictionaries. 4. Poets, American—20th century—Biography—Dictionaries. I. Title.

PS309.C48V37 2007

811'.6099282-dc22 2007003329

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 2007 by Sylvia M. Vardell

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007003329

ISBN-13: 978-1-59158-443-8

First published in 2007

Libraries Unlimited, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

A Member of the Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

[www.lu.com](http://www.lu.com)

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

---

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>The Poet Profiles</b>	
Arnold Adoff	1
Francisco Xavier Alarcón	3
Kathi Appelt	6
Brod Bagert	8
Calef Brown	11
Deborah Chandra	13
John Ciardi	15
Kalli Dakos	17
Rebecca Kai Dotlich	20
Barbara Juster Esbensen	22
Aileen Fisher	24
Paul Fleischman	26
Ralph Fletcher	29
Douglas Florian	31
Helen Frost	34

Kristine O'Connell George	36
Nikki Giovanni	38
Joan Bransfield Graham	41
Eloise Greenfield	43
Nikki Grimes	46
Monica Gunning	49
Avis Harley	51
David L. Harrison	53
Georgia Heard	55
Juan Felipe Herrera	57
Anna Grossnickle Hines	59
Mary Ann Hoberman	61
Sara Holbrook	63
Lee Bennett Hopkins	65
Paul B. Janeczko	67
Bobbi Katz	70
X. J. Kennedy	72
Karla Kuskin	74
Dennis Lee	77
Constance Levy	79
J. Patrick Lewis	81
Myra Cohn Livingston	83
Michio Mado	85
David McCord	87
Eve Merriam	89
Lilian Moore	92
Pat Mora	94
Lillian Morrison	97
Naomi Shihab Nye	99
Mary O'Neill	102

José-Luis Orozco	104
Jack Prelutsky	107
Alice Schertle	110
Carol Diggory Shields	113
Joyce Sidman	115
Diane Siebert	117
Shel Silverstein	119
Marilyn Singer	121
Charles R. Smith, Jr.	123
Gary Soto	125
Joyce Carol Thomas	127
Judith Viorst	129
Carole Boston Weatherford	131
Nancy Willard	133
Janet S. Wong	135
Valerie Worth	137
Jane Yolen	140
<b>More Poets</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Awards for Poetry for Young People</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Calendar of Poet Birthdays</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>Poet Promotion Activities</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>How to Share Poetry</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Poet Biographies, Autobiographies and Memoirs</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Popular Poetry Web Sites</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>Poetry Anthologies</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>Poems about Libraries and Reading</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>Poetry Practices Checklist</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>169</b>



# Acknowledgments

---

I am so grateful for the support of many people in bringing this project from idea to reality. My heartfelt thanks to the graduate students and graduate assistants who diligently assisted with research and bibliographic support: Mu-Chia Chen, Margie Daniels, Sarah Gosselink, Barbara Katz, Lola Ellen Buchanan, and Ann Sloan; my understanding editor at Libraries Unlimited, Sharon Coatney; and my supportive family: my endlessly patient husband, Russell Vardell, encouraging children, Alex and Emily, and helpful mom, Ingrid Mergeler. I'd also like to thank the poets themselves, many of whom responded to requests for additional information and input with such kindness and enthusiasm. Lee Bennett Hopkins and Marilyn Singer were particularly generous in answering every query throughout this journey. Thank you all.



# Introduction

---

*Next to being a great poet is the power of understanding one.*  
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

We are experiencing a renaissance in children’s poetry publishing in recent years with greater interest in poets, poetry books, poetry jams and slams, poetry Web sites, National Poetry Month, etc. What is it about life’s big and little moments that calls for a poem? On greeting cards. In a toast at a wedding. At moments of great happiness or deep sadness. Poems are short and full of interesting language, but it is the emotion or experience in a nutshell that gives poetry its power.

Poetry is a rich literary tradition that has stood the test of time from nursery rhymes to classic epics and provides a shared experience that brings adults and children together—to read aloud, listen to, and talk about. It provides a social connection as well as a language experience that helps children move forward in their literacy development. Mem Fox, author and literacy expert, says, “Rhymers will be readers; it’s that simple. Experts in literacy and child development have discovered that if children know eight nursery rhymes by heart by the time they’re four years old, they’re usually among the best readers by the time they’re eight” (2001, p. 85). Poetry has value for any of us at any age, but for children who are growing in their knowledge of language and literature, poetry is essential for their developing minds and hearts.

Why is there such apathy or resistance when the topic of poetry comes up? Even the word “poetry” reminds many people of forced memorization, searching for hidden symbolism, or counting for meter. So many adults have had negative experiences with poetry in the past that it keeps them from sharing poetry with children. Children then grow into a similar dislike or apathy

for poetry. Findings from a recent study by the Poetry Foundation found that a lifelong love for poetry is most likely if cultivated early in childhood. How do we break the cycle of apathy and change negative attitudes? By getting to know new poets and their work.

The purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive introduction to a variety of wonderful poets writing for young people. The book focuses primarily on contemporary poets who are still actively writing today, including poets appropriate for children ages 5–12. The featured poets are known predominantly for specializing in writing poetry for children and they include major award winners, popular bestsellers, and multicultural voices.

There is one entry for each of the sixty-two poets featuring brief biographical information, highlighting selected poetry books and poems they've authored, showcasing awards won, noting related Web sites, connecting relevant fiction and nonfiction titles, linking with other poets and poetry, and providing suggestions for programming activities. Poetry books unfortunately go out of print so quickly, so many titles cited may no longer be in print. However, many individual poems highlighted will be available in current anthologies as well as in single collections of poetry. And the recommendations here are only a beginning once one discovers favorite poets and poetry to share. This book is intended to be a practical guide for librarians and others who want to capitalize on the growing celebration of National Poetry Month and Young People's Poetry Week (both in April), as well as other occasions that call for poetry. Typically, most adults are familiar with adult poets and rely on their rusty memories for the names of noteworthy poets: Robert Louis Stevenson, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, etc. But when it comes to knowing today's children's poets, many adults think of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, and then draw a blank. Most are probably not aware that there are so many poets writing for young people today. This guide offers enough material to feature a poet a week, if desired, focusing on current works and known standards that are very likely on the library's shelves right now.

Additional information is also provided to supplement the poet profiles. This includes a docket of poets to watch who are relatively new to the field, a roster of established fiction and nonfiction authors who also write poetry, and lists of verse novelists, anthologists, and classic poets from bygone eras. A catalog of awards for children's poetry is also provided, as is a roll call of helpful poetry Web sites, a list of poems about libraries and reading, a resource of poet biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, recommendations of must-have poetry anthologies, a poetry practices checklist, and tips for poet promotion activities. A calendar of poet birthdays month by month can assist with planning poetry celebrations, too. It is hoped that librarians, teachers, and others who serve children and young adults will find this a helpful resource for sharing more poetry with children in creative ways. We need to provide children with a bridge from the Mother Goose rhymes of preschool to the classic poems they will likely encounter in high school, college and beyond. How does that happen? By sharing these unique voices who are dedicated to writing poetry especially for children.

# Arnold Adoff

<http://www.arnoldadoff.com/>

## **ARNOLD ADOFF'S BIO**

Arnold Adoff was born on July 16, 1935, in New York City, and received his bachelor's degree from the City College of New York. He was a teacher in the New York City public school system and later served as a lecturer and consultant for several other federal projects and educational institutions. Throughout his career he has worked as a poet, anthologist, and writer of fiction and nonfiction and emerged as one of the first advocates of multiculturalism in American children's literature. In particular, he created several landmark anthologies of African American poetry for young people that are a staple of many library collections. Arnold Adoff was married to the distinguished children's book author Virginia Hamilton, and has a son, Jaime Adoff, who is also a writer and poet.

In 1988, Arnold Adoff became the eighth winner of the Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children given by the National Council of Teachers of English to honor a living American poet for his or her lifetime achievement in works for children ages 3–13. His individual poetry books have also received many other recognitions including citations as: *School Library Journal* Best Book, NCSS/CBC Notable Children's Trade Book, IRA Children's Choice, New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, Parents' Choice Award, ALA Notable Book, and ALA Best Books for Young Adults.

## **ARNOLD ADOFF'S POETRY**

Arnold Adoff has created both well-regarded anthologies as well as distinctive collections of original poetry on a variety of topics. Adoff has edited at least eight major anthologies of poetry and stories by African American writers within his body of 30 or more works. Begin with two of these that are particularly engaging for children, *I am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans* first published in 1968 (reprinted by Simon & Schuster, 1997) and *My Black Me: A Beginning Book of Black Poetry* (Dutton, 1974). Children may recognize some of the most famous African American poets ever like Langston Hughes and enjoy encountering others who may be less familiar to them. These are names that are often hailed during Black History Month, so children can become familiar with Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, Lucille Clifton, Maya Angelou, and others through works that are selected specifically with young people in mind. Children can choose their favorite poem by one of these notable African American poets and look for a work of art by an African American

artist like Jacob Lawrence, Clementine Hunter, William H. Johnson, and others to accompany it. For one outstanding example, look for *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* with masterworks of poems and paintings selected by Belinda Rochelle (HarperCollins, 2001).

Besides these noteworthy anthologies and others, Adoff has also created original poetry that explores the role of race in ordinary family life, often mirroring the experiences of his own biracial family. Pair these two picture book poem collections for sharing: *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (HarperCollins, 1973), often credited as being the first children's book to feature an interracial family, and *All the Colors of the Race* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1982), told from the point of view of a child with a black mother and a white father. Compare and contrast the points raised in each poetry book using a Venn diagram to show similarities and differences. Follow up with the picture book, *Two Mrs. Gibsons* by Toyomi Igus and illustrated by Daryl Wells (Children's Book Press, 1996). In this story, a young girl lovingly describes her African American grandmother and Japanese American mother, both called "Mrs. Gibson."

Adoff has also created more poetry on other everyday topics, such as sports and food. These are poems that often help woo some of the boys who think they don't like poetry (although many boys are poetry-lovers already, of course). They are often surprised to find that poets have written about basketball or running, for example. Check out Adoff's collections, *I Am the Running Girl* (HarperCollins, 1979), *Sports Pages* (Lippincott, 1986), or *The Basket Counts* (Simon & Schuster, 2000). Encourage the student athletes to share their stories or perhaps prepare their own read aloud of their favorite sports poems. Invite coaches to post sports poems in the gym or to visit as guest readers of sports poetry. Food is the subject of two of Arnold Adoff's other books, *Eats* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1979) and *Chocolate Dreams* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1988). Of course these poems can accompany an edible break with food to match the poem.

Adoff's poetry is noted for its creative use of capitalization and punctuation much like the work of e e cummings. Sometimes called "shaped speech," this use of space on the page helps create a distinctive rhythm in his poetry, which Adoff manipulates purposefully. Children often respond to it because it looks like he is "breaking the rules." Look for *Street Music: City Poems* (HarperCollins, 1995) or *Touch the Poem* (Scholastic, 1996) for fun, accessible poems that are spread out across the page in ways that invite kids to imitate and experiment. Pair Adoff's work with the poems of Nikki Giovanni, a noted poet who also uses rhythm, text, and spacing in distinctive ways. For cross-cultural connections look for *The Animals* by Michio Mado (McElderry, 1992) and contrast Mado's and Adoff's use of descriptive phrases to create images. This is also an excellent opportunity for using magnetic poetry and encouraging children to manipulate and spread out words and phrases to create poems in Adoff's visual style.

# Francisco Xavier Alarcón

## FRANCISCO XAVIER ALARCÓN'S BIO

Francisco Alarcón was born on February 21, 1954, in Wilmington, California and grew up in both California and Mexico. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish and History from California State University, Long Beach, and a Master of Arts degree in contemporary Latin-American literature.

Alarcón has worked as a dishwasher, grape harvester, research assistant, summer youth counselor, translator, Spanish teacher, and a park ranger. He began writing poetry during his college years and draws upon his experiences in his neighborhood and from his heritage. Alarcón has received the American Book Award and several Pura Belpré Honor Awards, Parents' Choice awards, Tomás Rivera Mexican American award nominations, Américas Award Commendations, and American Library Association Notable citations, among others.

## FRANCISCO X. ALARCÓN'S POETRY

Francisco Alarcón has written poetry for both children and adults, including bilingual collections in Spanish and English. His best-known work for young people is probably his series of four books focusing on the four seasons of the year, called *The Magical Cycle of the Seasons* series each illustrated in colorful, playful scenes by artist Maya Christina Gonzalez. Although each book can stand on its own, they make a lovely set of verses in Spanish and English for sharing throughout the year:

**SPRING:** *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems/ Jitomates Resuenos y Otros Poemas de Primavera.* (Children's Book Press, 1997)

**SUMMER:** *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems/ Del Ombligo de la Luna y Otros Poemas de Verano.* (Children's Book Press, 1998)

**FALL:** *Angels Ride Bikes: And Other Fall Poems/ Los Angeles Andan en Bicicleta: Y Otros Poemas de Otoño.* (Children's Book Press, 1999)

**WINTER:** *Iguanas in the Snow/Iguanas en la nieve.* (Children's Book Press, 2001)

Each collection is full of autobiographical reminiscences that may prompt children to remember special moments in their own families or

neighborhoods. Invite children to bring in a family photo of a favorite activity and sort these photos by seasons: spring, summer, fall, or winter. Children can then find or write poems to match the activities or seasons and post these together.

Each of Alarcón's picture book poetry collections is also worthy of sharing individually. In *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems/Jitomates Resuenos y Otros Poemas de Primavera*, for example, his work is full of food imagery. Bring in samples of tomatoes and chiles to taste alongside the poems that describe them. In addition, many of Alarcón's poems can be read aloud by two voices. One voice reads the poem in English, another person reads the Spanish version, first individually, then simultaneously. Just be sure each person starts his/her line at the same time for the simultaneous reading. Here's one example.

<i>Dew</i>	<i>El Rocio</i>
the fresh	el fresco
taste	sabor
of the night	de la noche

When sharing Alarcón's *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems/Del Ombligo de la Luna y Otros Poemas de Verano*, invite children to talk about family trips they have taken or visits with extended family members. Find similar books about family gatherings to share on this topic like *Bigmama's* (Greenwillow, 1991) by Donald Crews or *The Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant (Atheneum, 1985). Link with family poems by Arnold Adoff such as *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (HarperCollins, 2002) or Mary Ann Hoberman's poetry in *Fathers, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers: A Collection of Family Poems* (Joy Street, 1991).

In *Angels Ride Bikes/Los Angeles Andan en Bicicleta* Alarcón celebrates simple events of everyday life that occur in the fall like the first day of school. And with *Iguanas in the Snow/Iguanas en la Nieve* the focus is on playful winter activities, including writing poetry. Invite the children to chronicle their year with poems about their own life experiences, particularly as they begin the school year and plan for fall holiday celebrations with family. Bring in Mary Lankford's nonfiction books for more information about traditions and celebrations around the world, such as *Christmas USA* (HarperCollins, 2006), *Hopscotch Around the World* (HarperCollins, 1992), and *Birthdays Around the World* (HarperCollins, 2002).

In his book *Poems to Dream Together/Poemas Para Soñar Juntos* (Lee and Low, 2005), Alarcón focuses again on family and community through bilingual poems about dreams and goals. For example, one poem honors the work of César Chávez. Others spotlight education, ecology, or peace. In addition, several of Alarcón's collections include footnotes with explanations for unfamiliar terms in Spanish and English. Challenge children to translate some of their poems into languages other than English. Invite guest readers,

if needed, to read poems in other languages. Children may be surprised that many of Alarcón's poems rhyme in Spanish, but not in English. Why might that be? Talk with children about how translators must struggle with choosing only rhyming words to maintain the rhyme scheme, or sacrifice rhyme so that they can choose words that reflect the poem's meaning more closely. Follow up with poetry by other Latino and Latina poets who incorporate Spanish into their English poetry such as Gary Soto and Pat Mora.

# Kathi Appelt

<http://www.kathiappelt.com/>

## **KATHI APPELT'S BIO**

Kathi Appelt was born on July 6, 1954, in the front seat of her father's Ford. She grew up in Texas with two sisters, keeping a regular journal from a very young age. She is now married with two grown sons and draws much of her inspiration for writing from her own life experiences. She is also a teacher and mentor for other emerging authors and poets. Appelt is one of those rare authors who writes effectively for the very young as well as for the older teen. She has authored over 20 picture books for young people and half a dozen works for young adults. Although the language and phrasing of her picture books is often very lyrical, her poetry books are best suited to readers in the middle grades and above.

Kathi Appelt's work has been selected as an International Reading Association Teacher's Choice, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, a New York Public Library Best Book of 1996, an American Library Association Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers, and by the Texas Library Association for the TAYSHAS List, among others.

## **KATHI APPELT'S POETRY**

Kathi Appelt's poetry includes two collections with advice for aspiring poets: *Just People & Paper/Pen/Poem: A Young Writer's Way to Begin* (Absey & Co., 1997), *Poems from Homeroom: A Writer's Place to Start* (Holt, 2002). Each of these collections is divided into two sections, the first containing original free verse poems by Appelt herself and the second an exploration of the poem writing process along with strategies for writing original poetry. In particular, Appelt shares insider information on the crafting of each of her own poems and accompanies this with questions to prompt young readers to respond poetically themselves. She challenges readers to consider the motivation behind each poem and even invites them to experiment with different forms of poetry including the sestina, villanelle, and haiku. Each book is practical and pleasing, with a real heart for how young writers begin. Combine this pair with Paul Janeczko's *Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets* (Candlewick, 2002) which follows a similar format, but includes the voices and advice of many different poets, or link with Naomi Shihab Nye's compilation of poetry written by children, *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* (Greenwillow, 2000).