

What is Poetry?



THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO READING &
WRITING POEMS

MICHAEL
ROSEN



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MICHAEL ROSEN



illustrated by Jill Calder



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FOR EMMA, ELSIE AND EMILE

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INTRODUCTION



Poetry belongs to all of us; everyone can read poems, make up poems, or share poems with others. Though we often talk about poetry being dense or difficult, poems are able to present complicated or challenging ideas in ways that we can carry around in our heads. They help us ask questions about the world, how we use words, and who we are.

This book talks about how to read, write, and listen to poetry. In the first chapter, I'll start by simply asking, What is poetry? I don't think I'll be answering that, though!

In chapter 2, I consider a more practical question: What can you do with a poem?

In chapter 3, I talk about the writing process behind some of my poems and my personal experience as a poet.

This leads me into chapter 4, where I offer a few ideas for starting poems of your own, and chapter 5,

where I've collected together tips on how to write and edit your poems.

Chapter 6 gives some useful technical pointers for looking at poems.

And the last chapter I'd like to keep a surprise. . . .

Finally, in the appendix, you'll find lots of different ways to go out and get involved in poetry — it might even be the best place to start! In fact, you can read this book in all kinds of ways: straight through, in bits, to and fro, rereading parts . . . or however you like.

I can't speak for all poets, but the main reason I write poems is that I hope they offer readers something to think about and talk about. They are a way of opening a conversation. I'd like this book to do the same — because, more than anything else, it's about enjoying poetry, and living with it and in it.

M. R.

WHAT IS POETRY?



A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem. But people don't always agree, and when they argue about it, they try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing. They say things like:

- ◆ a poem has to **rhyme**, or should have a particular **rhythm**;
- ◆ a poem should have **metaphors** and **similes** (I'll be talking about these later on);
- ◆ a poem should say something beautiful in an especially beautiful way;
- ◆ a poem should say something that surprises us;
- ◆ a poem should say something in a memorable way.

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One problem with this is that it's quite easy to find other kinds of writing that do some or all of these things: proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writings, and speeches. And another problem is that plenty of people have written what *they* say are poems but that have no rhymes or particular rhythms, metaphors or similes, or special, beautiful language.

So answering the question "What is poetry?" is not easy. One way around it is to ask another question: What can poetry DO?

So I've chosen some pieces of writing that writers and readers agree are poems, and I'm going to think about what they DO and what I'm doing in my mind as I read them.



WHAT CAN POETRY DO?
.....

Poetry
Can Suggest
Things



A Word Is Dead

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

Emily Dickinson (1830–86)

We often think of poems as things you find in books, but most of Emily Dickinson's poems weren't published when she was alive. She wrote them at home and put them in little packets, which her sister discovered after she died.

My first reaction when I read this poem is to ask questions: Can words die? What would a dead word be? When a word is said, how can that make it "begin to live"? What does it mean for a word to begin to live? And who is the "I" who says "I say"?

A six-line poem has gotten me asking a lot of questions. But there are no answers! When I read a story in the paper or watch the news on TV, quite often there are questions *and* answers. Let's imagine that this poem is a news item. We would be told just who it is going around claiming that words die when people say them. We would be told who the "I" is in "I say." And there's every chance that the person speaking would explain to us why saying a word will make it "begin to live."

Not here, though. Not in this poem. We're just

WHAT IS POETRY?

left hanging in midair, trying to figure all this out for ourselves. So, the poem has set us some problems, we've asked some questions, and it hasn't answered any of them!

I could be very annoyed by this. On the other hand, I might realize that it's just the way some poems are. And instead of being annoyed, I could wait and see. Maybe something will crop up a few days later when I'm out and about, and I will think to myself, *That word seemed to come alive when it was said.*

And then the poem will work itself out as the days go by.

I'm going to use one word to cover everything I've said here: **suggestive**. I think a lot of poems are suggestive. They make suggestions — nothing more, nothing less. They suggest feelings, thoughts, problems, and ideas. And they don't try to give answers. They leave us to do a lot of figuring out.

WHAT CAN POETRY DO?
.....

Poetry
Can Give an
Impression



From a Railway Carriage

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;
And charging along like troops in a battle,
All through the meadows the horses and cattle:
All of the sights of the hill and the plain
Fly as thick as driving rain;
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,
Painted stations whistle by.

Here is a child who clammers and scrambles,
All by himself and gathering brambles;
Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;
And there is the green for stringing the daisies!
Here is a cart run away in the road
Lumping along with man and load;
And here is a mill and there is a river:
Each a glimpse and gone for ever!

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94)

WHAT IS POETRY?

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote novels — you probably know or have heard of *Treasure Island* — but he also wrote a book of poems about his childhood, and this is one of them.



When you read it, you can try tapping the rhythm just as you might when you hear a song. You can tap four times in each line of the poem. In the first line, for example, you can tap on “Fast” in “Faster,” “fair” in “fairies,” “fast” in the next “faster,” and “witch” in “witches.” If you say “TUM” for the tap and “tee” for the parts you don’t tap, it goes:

FASTer than **FAIR**ies, **FAST**er than **WITCH**es

TUM tee tee, **TUM** tee, **TUM** tee tee, **TUM** tee

I think Stevenson wrote to this rhythm because **he wanted the poem to sound like the thing he was writing about** — a train going along a track. And if you're on a train, you'll notice that there are times when your carriage has been moving at a steady pace and then suddenly the rhythm changes. Perhaps the poet wanted to show this (without telling us), because after the first five lines, the rhythm of the poem changes:

Fly as thick as driving rain

If you are tapping four TUMs to the line it goes:

FLY as **THICK** as **DRIV**ing **RAIN**

TUM tee **TUM** tee **TUM** tee **TUM**

If you are a musician, you will already know that there is something strange going on here. This line doesn't fit the rhythm. You are several "tees" short! If

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the taps were to come at exactly the same time as in the other lines, either you'd have to leave little pauses or you'd have to make each of the tapped words last a tiny bit longer. Either way, it sounds to me like a train when it slows down.

I call all this **giving an impression**. The poem gives the impression of something without saying that it is doing it. A lot of poems work like this, but they do it in different ways — not just with rhythms. For example, they might try to show what a stream or rush of thoughts feels like by using parts of sentences, broken-up phrases, and single words instead of whole sentences.

WHAT CAN POETRY DO?
.....

**Poetry
Can Play
with Words**



Waltzing Matilda

Once a jolly swagman¹ camped by a billabong²
Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy³ boiled:
“Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”

Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Down came a jumbuck⁴ to drink at that billabong.
Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee.
And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker bag:⁵
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Up rode the squatter,⁶ mounted on his thoroughbred.⁷
Down came the troopers,⁸ one, two, and three.
“Whose is that jumbuck you’ve got in your tucker bag?
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Up jumped the swagman and sprang into the billabong.
“You’ll never take me alive!” said he.
And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong:
“Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”

Banjo Paterson (1864–1941)

¹ **swagman** a traveling worker who worked on different sheep stations in the Australian countryside (or “the outback”)

² **billabong** a pool left behind when a river has changed course

³ **billy** a little can or pot you put on a fire to cook with

⁴ **jumbuck** a kind of sheep

⁵ **tucker bag** a food bag

⁶ **squatter** a well-off landowner, usually English in origin

⁷ **thoroughbred** a very good purebred horse

⁸ **troopers** mounted police

WHAT IS POETRY?

This is just about the most famous piece of writing to come from Australia. Some Australians call it their unofficial national anthem.

In the story, a traveling worker puts a sheep in his bag. He isn't really allowed to do that — the sheep seems to belong to a landowner. Rather than be captured (and imprisoned, or even sentenced to death?), the swagman drowns himself in the billabong. Then his ghost can be heard singing “Waltzing Matilda” to anyone who passes by.

Stealing animals that belong to others is called poaching. There's a long history of poaching songs, and most of them are on the side of the poachers, sympathizing with them as poor people who get food by stealing animals from rich landowners. Imagine how difficult life would be as a swagman, looking after someone else's animals while you're hungry or even starving. It makes me think of an old, old idea that animals are part of a “common treasury,” a resource for everyone — and it's not fair or right for

any one person to say they own them and to start fencing them in.

There's a mysterious phrase that I've never really understood at the heart of the song: "Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?" It only makes sense if there is a thing you can do that isn't just "waltzing" but "waltzing Matilda." You can, as the poem says, go "waltzing Matilda" with someone, just as you might, perhaps, say that you went "dancing Harry" with someone. Can we piece together what this strange phrase means just from the poem? Or do we have to look it up online or ask someone?

The first time we hear it, the swagman is waiting for his billy to boil. The second time, he sings it to the jumbuck just as he's shoving it into his tucker bag. The third time, the troopers and the squatter say it to him — and it's a command rather than a question. The fourth time, it's the ghost singing it to anyone passing by the billabong.

Can you think of a phrase that could replace

“Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?” and still more or less make sense? How about “Who’ll come along with me?” It makes sense, but it doesn’t give any idea of dancing. “Who’ll mess around with me?” or “Who’ll have fun with me?” would work quite well . . . but neither has the zip and swagger of “Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”

A whole song about a serious life-and-death conflict over work and food is given a comic touch with that one odd phrase. It’s used in different ways in the poem: for example, the troopers seem to use it to mean “we caught you.” A French policeman once said to me, “You will have to spend a good night in the cells if you don’t carry the right papers.” He meant the opposite of what he said: it wouldn’t be a good night at all. It’s the same with those troopers: the swagman wouldn’t end up “waltzing Matilda” in the police cells either.

And I don’t suppose meeting a ghost (if we believe in such things) would have you “waltzing Matilda”—or would it? Is that the fun of the whole song? We

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end up waltzing Matilda along with the ghost of a poacher, celebrating his cheekiness, his nerve, his determination never to be caught alive and humiliated with a prison sentence.

WHAT CAN POETRY DO?
.....

Poetry
Can Be
Symbolic

