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Read a poem a day in April

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As a hyper first-time mom, I limited my oldest child's exposure to refined sugar. He celebrated early birthdays with zucchini muffins. Ice cream was a rare treat. I had him brainwashed to believe sugary cereals in brightly colored boxes at the grocery were "yucky." He happily ate his Cheerios.

Then the day came when I picked him up from preschool and he was breathless to tell me what he'd learned. "Mom!" he said, "Froot Loops aren't yucky at all!"

I've had a similar revelation. Even though I majored in English and French literature, for years I hated poetry. My heart sank every time one of my professors insisted on pausing, however slightly, on that first section of the textbook. The section with "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and the plodding stanzas of Joyce Kilmer. For me, poetry ranked with Brussels sprouts and opera. It was probably good for you and you *should* like it, but what a chore.

Try living poets

About eight years ago, I took a creative writing class from the indomitable Cathy Smith Bowers. She's a poet. Although most of her students wanted to learn about writing fiction, she made us read and write poetry, too. There was a good deal of whining. She would have none of it. One assignment was to find a poem published in a periodical and written by someone still alive. I found "He Asks Her to Pin Her Panties to the Line" by Lynn McMahon in the Atlantic Monthly. It describes a squabble over lingerie on the wash line between a woman and her lover.

It was funny. It was clever. It was not yucky at all.

Since that time, I've written hundreds of poems. In my job as an editor of the Kakalak poetry anthologies, I've read more than 3,000 in the past three years. I'm here to tell you, if you're not reading poetry, you're missing out. With all due respect to Shakespeare, when was the last time you read a poem written by someone who hasn't been dead for 392 years? When was the last time you read a poem because you wanted to?

Where poetry goes to die

Former poet laureate Billy Collins says, "I think that high school is where the poetry gets beaten out of you. High school is where poetry goes to die." And no wonder. Few experiences are more excruciating than receiving a rhyming blurb of inscrutable language and being asked to discern its Great Meaning. Shall we diagram sentences while we're at it?

Today's poetry provides vivid accounts of daily life. Poems about having a Bee Gees song stuck in your head, being duped by a Hooter's waitress, 2 a.m. goings-on at a Waffle House, even the breeding habits of chipmunks. Poetry addresses every aspect of life as we know it.

The scholar and poet Edward Hirsch notes that all civilizations have had poetry. Ours should not be the one to drop the ball.

There's no reason we should. Poetry is the ideal art form for today's multitasking society. You can read a poem in five minutes. Send one in an e-mail, text one on your phone, carry a poem in your pocket. Not so for "War and Peace." April is National Poetry Month, and I invite you to celebrate.

A few years ago, South Carolina poet Jayne Jaudon Ferrer wanted to convince her brother and brother-in-law that there were poems out there even they would like. So she e-mailed them a poem a day for the month of April. Now she sends poems to people all over the world. Sign up for her poem a day for a month by sending an e-mail with "subscribe" in the subject to poetryparade@yahoo.com. The Academy of American Poets offers a similar service at www.poets.org.

North Carolina poet Allan Wolf has written a fun, accessible book aimed at middle and high school students called "Immersed in Verse." For younger kids, check out the first-ever Children's Poet Laureate, Jack Prelutsky.

Charlotte has our own share of excellent poetry resources. Main Street Rag's quarterly journal features poetry, and they host many readings and contests. Iodine is a semiannual poetry journal. Thrift Press publishes poetry chapbooks and the excellent, (but not poetic) moonshine review. The Pedestal Magazine is a fine monthly e-zine.

Speaking soul to soul

The best poems are as immediate as the story your dearest friend *has to* tell you. Newspapers give us the group experience; poetry speaks soul to soul.

Just as your favorite country song is my earsplitting caterwauling, you won't like every poem you read. But there are six, or 15 or 452 poems out there that will speak to you.

Give poetry a chance. Read a poem a day for National Poetry Month. Chances are you'll find a sweet, colorful revelation that's even better than Froot Loops.

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