

## *Introduction*

**I**n my first years of teaching, I didn't do much with poetry. I didn't know how to approach it with students and I lacked confidence, despite the fact that it had been an important part of my own life during high school and college.

In 1983, retired teacher Darlene Anderson volunteered to come into my sixth grade classroom at Chinook Elementary School in Anchorage, Alaska to teach a poetry unit. She had only one condition, that I continue to teach poetry in future years. As she taught, I participated as a student, getting her feedback on my own writing while observing how she worked with children who turned in good and not-so-good poems.

The results of her ten hours in my classroom were amazing! Before my eyes, my students wrote poems that were, in my opinion, better than many I'd read by adults! Nearly all of the children had one or more poems published in *Pencils Full of Stars*, an anthology of student poetry published in the Anchorage School District. Four of them received the Margaret Mielke Memorial Award for Promising Young Poets, in a district with thousands of students!

At the end of the unit, we displayed our work and hosted a tea for parents and other guests. An assistant principal left the room in tears, the poetry had so touched her heart. Clearly, the writing was powerful!

The following year I taught 5th grade, and I was on my own. I'd made a promise to Darlene to continue to teach poetry. I attributed the results of the past year to her personality and giftedness. I wasn't at all certain I could teach poetry. Still, I had promised to try.

To my surprise, the results were again good! The basic, essential secret to getting good kids' poetry, I discovered, is good kids' poetry. When they hear it read, it somehow opens doors in

their imaginations. Adult poetry does not seem to have the same effect.

This book was compiled to give you tools to begin teaching free verse using techniques that have consistently worked for me, based on what I learned from Darlene Anderson. The poems in this book were written by my own students, in regular 4th, 5th and 6th grade classrooms. I encourage you to add poems written by *your* students as the years pass.

This book is *just* a starting place for you. Adapt and expand these techniques according to your own creative ideas and interests. Experiment with different topics and different forms. Encourage your gifted poets to expand their ideas and horizons. There's no upper limit to what is possible. If *your* time and energy is limited, however, you can use the lessons in this book to quickly generate publishable poetry.

At the end of the 1983 school year, Darlene wrote this poem to the Chinook sixth graders:

*Like miners in dark tunnels  
We came together to mine  
A treasure of words.  
There, where our lives crossed,  
We picked away at the rock  
Seeking color and sound.  
Sparkling syllables and similes  
Shone forth among the rubble,  
And we strung them together  
Like necklaces of precious gems.  
Now, traveling the separate paths  
Of our tomorrows, we can look to  
The treasure we mined at the intersection  
Of us and then,  
For it will sparkle forever  
And brighten all our darkest nights  
Like midnight rainbows.*

*Thank you, young friends. You wrote beautifully  
and my greatest wish is that you keep writing!*