Today You Are My Favorite Poet

BY GEOF HEWITT

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. $17.00; 129 pages

INTERVIEW BY PATRICIA MCGONEGAL

Geof Hewitt, co-director of the National Writing Project in Vermont, has been teaching poetry writing to teenagers and publishing their work for 29 years. Geof, himself a poet with publication credits ranging from Harpers to Exquisite Corpse and performance venues as diverse as the Whitney Museum and the Honolulu Zoo, has collected his ideas about ways to help kids write poems in a new book, Today You Are My Favorite Poet: Writing Poems With Teenagers (Heinemann, 1998). Below, NWPV director Patricia McGonegal interviews Geof about his book and his teaching.

Tish McGonegal: Geof, in several places in this book, you either quote or make up a definition of poetry; there’s Sandburg’s on your first page, and at least two of your own. Is this a deliberate measure, meant to keep us unsure of what poetry is?

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Today You Are My Favorite Poet

curriculum, but have always felt intimidated by the form.

TM: Another exercise that tickled me: the reworking of a piece as a telegram:

Write a letter from the point of view of someone who is far away...

Rewrite the letter as a telegram where every word costs one dollar to send. What are the most important details?

Go back to the letter and the telegram and look for phrases that would work as the basis for an entire poem. (p. 15)

Have you written any telegraphic poems yourself?

GH: Yes. Haiku among them. Lots of wiseguy stuff, as well as serious haiku, e.g., “Between Hemingway/And Homer you’ll find my books/At better bookstores” and “Ancient icicle/You’ve been so hard all winter/Now sun brings your tears.”

TM: I love the tales you tell on yourself: you seem willing enough to report your dead-end lessons and other limitations. It reminds me of Ken Macrorie’s advice: a case study of what doesn’t work is much more interesting than a success story. Do you have other confessions?

GH: Old dogs should continue to teach themselves new tricks, and (ideally) also develop some limited acceptance of their own personality traits. Recently I visited a former student of mine, on the campus where he is now studying to become a music teacher. He told me that in his practice teaching, he finds himself using the same phrases of exasperation that his teachers used. “Oh no!” he commented. “I’m turning into my old teachers!” I’m sending him an essay I wrote two or three years ago when I (finally) realized the same propensity in myself. He’s only twenty! So he’s a good thirty years ahead of me.

TM: I learn from a phrase like “Suggesting a form often helps a writer find words.” Teaching is such a judgment call between form and freedom. How do you find a workable ratio when you are teaching about poetry?

GH: I just keep “mixing it up” from session to session, hoping to hit on ideas that work, at one time or another, for each student.

TM: You create a powerful metaphor to define form: “Form: another tumblers in the lock that may need a turn.” You model the use of metaphor so well. Again, a sense of balance seems necessary. But there is such a thing as metaphor overkill, agree?

GH: Yes! Poems written for the sake of metaphor are suspect, but when metaphor organically appears, voilà! It’s the difference between what seems spontaneous, necessary and that which seems fabricated. But all writers benefit from being reminded of metaphor as a tool, and sometimes poets have great success presenting one half of the metaphor as the poem’s title, then extending the other half as the poem’s body.

TM: In your “imitation vs. influence” section, you say, “It is almost impossible for a young writer not to be influenced in some way by the work of a favored author.” I was reminded of a demonstration by one of our teacher consultants, Peggy Sadler, called “Creating a Personal Anthology.” Peggy suggests students find poetry that speaks to who they are. Would you suggest this kind of collection?

GH: Sounds like a good idea. So is a collection or chapbook of tall tales or poems about baseball or animals or love. Some students respond to a reader’s recognition of themes in their work. A teacher might well inspire a student by saying, “Why don’t you put together a chapbook of your poems on this subject?” Chapbooks make great gifts!

TM: What are your thoughts on memorizing poetry? Have you ever assigned this type of thing? Do you do much yourself?

GH: No. But when I reread a favorite poem it sometimes “sticks,” and I’m glad to have it pasted somewhere inside my brain for spontaneous enjoyment when I’m driving or at a loss for something to say at a meeting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE CHART OF INFINITE VARIABLES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VOICE OF NARRATOR</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— First, second, third person</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Past, present, future tense</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Historical, present tense</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OBJECTS USED AS SYMBOLS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— What abound for sale, or what do people sometimes use as tools at the time implied by the poem?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SYMBOLIC RELATIONSHIP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Of these objects</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Elder, mother, son, father, loaves, footsteps, bookshelves,</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Descriptive forms, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PLACE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Describe, evoke, or imply</td>
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<td><strong>PERSON</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— First, second, third person</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TIME OF ACTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Past, present, future tense</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Historical, present tense</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Verb tense does not necessarily need to agree with the time of action</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>THE SENSES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— What someone is exposed to by the place, the objects, the time of action, the person in the poem?</td>
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TM: At one point you suggest cataloging “parts of speech” [underlining nouns, circle verbs...]. Is this a nod toward the “back to basics” people, or does it have inherent value on its own?

GH: Inherent value. Writers need to know the parts of speech and to analyze their work with a keen awareness of its nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Parts of speech revision is only one of several useful focusing tools that help in revising poetry (and prose).

TM: Likewise the chart of infinite variables (see previous page) makes me uncomfortable. Can’t you see that turning into a unit plan in the “wrong hands”? Maybe it should have a disclaimer attached to it: “Kids, don’t try to create this chart at home!”

GH: Anything useful can get into “the wrong hands” or be abused. The idea wheel (see below) merely makes visible a variety of random approaches to finding a topic. Can you see that turning into a unit plan in the “wrong hands”? The only “wrong hands” approach to the idea wheel I can imagine would be to force the student to write in response to what the wheel suggests. Of course, for some of us, a little forcing has occasionally brought great success, but I’m not a great fan of forcing.

TM: In your chapter on assessing and responding to student poetry, you are critical of the response “This makes me sad,” which you call an evaluation from “yesterday’s classrooms.” It sounds more like reader response to me, the kind of thing Peter Elbow uses with his students. Isn’t that another device that would [as Graves likes to say] “keep the students writing?”

GH: Sure. Graves also talks about “nudging” the student with open-ended questions that help the student set new goals. Subjective response or judgment (“This makes me sad,” “Good work!”) doesn’t give the writer much direction.

TM: Geoff, what is one thing you would like teachers to take with them from reading this?

GH: The notion of themselves as poets or, at least, as people who are willing, from time to time, to “fish for a poem” as they write. I expect ninety-five percent of what I write to be worthless; the five percent that I eventually fall in love with wouldn’t be written if I didn’t allow myself to be a terrible writer most of the time.

TM: Here’s your chance to have the last word: is there anything else you’d like to say about this book?

GH: Writing poems is my favorite and most restorative activity. It doesn’t matter so much whether a poem is “art” as it matters whether a poem is being written. It’s a powerful little act, writing poems, and we should let our students know about it!

Tish McGonegal is director of the National Writing Project in Vermont.