The Poet

When her seventh-grade student's poem is "accepted" for publication by a suspect literary organization, a teacher struggles with whether—and how—to tell her the truth.

KAREN BROWN

Joy comes to me with a big, braces-filled smile, "Guess what?"

It is not a question. In the midst of taking attendance, I stop, look up.

"Chris and I were looking on this website, in math, you know, and we submitted a poem to this site called poetryspot.com*. We wrote it right there, together." She is still smiling, barely on the floor, bouncing on her toes. She shoves the poem at me. I scan it, my mind on the plan for the day. I smile. "It's nice," I say, without commitment.

Days later, she stands before me with an envelope. Bouncing, smiling her brace-grin; little plastic butterfly clips hold her short blonde hair. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"Remember I told you that Chris and I wrote a poem?" She waits impatiently for the nod. My stomach tightens. I begin to regret not spending more time and attention when she first showed me the poem. "Well, guess what?"

I could at this point answer the question, but I don't.

"They say it's good. They want to publish it in their book. In a book," she repeats as though I might not have understood, or, obviously, was not excited enough. "Here it is. And now I have to write this little writer's autobiography thing." She opens the envelope and shoves a paper at me with her poem and line upon line of her autobiography.

I look more carefully now. The poem is horrible. It is made up of about twelve two- or three-word rhyming lines. There was a mare/ over there," are two of the lines that catch, like puncture-weed, in the fabric of my mind. Then there is the autobiography, mostly about Chris, and how the poem was a partnership effort. And then there are the glossy pages advertising the book. Hardcover. Beautiful title and graphics. Only $49.50.

She is in the seventh grade, in my language arts class. She is a medium sort of kid. Medium height, medium attitude, medium smart. I remember her winter narrative about her new dad, her new brothers, how last year there weren't many Christmas presents, but this year one of her new brothers had given her a $20 gift certificate from Wal-Mart. "A gift from the heart," she wrote.

This is not my first experience with these "contests," and suddenly, after a long absence, Harrison comes to mind. He was a seventh-grader, too. A new boy—skinny, smart—he didn't fit in very well with the cowboy kids who made up most of the students in his class. Information about a poetry contest had been sent to us, and I had read all the contest materials. I had told all my students that year that it was a scam, that the company would want them to buy their high-priced book, but if they wanted to enter, they could. Harrison wrote a title-down poem entitled "Cool." It read, in its entirety:

Certainly
Out of the
Ordinary
Like being popular

Indeed, it was autobiographical. And his family, who shopped for clothes at the perpetual yard sale in the barn around the block, had bought the book. I copied the page, his page, from the book, and hung it on the wall. And vowed to never advertise such a scam again.

Further back in my mind, a friend at community college said that she had sent a poem in to “one of those poetry things just to be published.”

“I know it’s just a scam,” she said. “But I figured, so what, at least I’m published, and I can put it on my resume.” Her grandmother bought the book.

Back to the present, I begin to wonder in earnest what my duty here is. Should I tell Joy that it is a lie that they liked her poem, probably a lie that they had even read it? Should I go and tell her mother? Should I strangle the teacher who let them on the Internet, let them enter a poem and personal information—like a home address—for not warning them? I worry but do nothing except to broadcast my worry in the staff lunchroom.

The social studies teacher emails me a website about literary scams (http://windpub.org/literary.scams/scams.htm) and there I find poetryspot.com with an example of a poem they found to be worthy of publication.

One of my goals this year was to get my students to have that “ta-da” moment that they get in art when they show their work, or choir or band when they finish a concert, or in drama when they take the final bow. A publication moment. I did get nine student pieces published in local papers. Two other students wrote explanations of the writing scoring rubric that we send home to parents with the writing test results. I gave essays about what should change about the school to the principal who made it a point of talking with the student authors about their ideas. None of this recognition made any of these students smile in the way Joy smiled the day her piece was “accepted.”

Would I take responsibility for ruining her smile? I wonder for a weekend if I should let my cynicism, my pessimism, my reality, affect her new heart.

It is a Monday morning when I ask to talk to her and her friend. I take them to the conference room. My voice shakes a little at the end of my truth about companies like this, about the website, about how sorry I am.

Her friend looks at Joy and asks, “Do you know what she’s talking about?” Her brow is crinkled. I sigh.

“The poem that we sent,” Joy says to Chris. And to me she says, “I’m not buying the book anyway.” She shrugs.

When I say again that I’m sorry, she says through her braces, “It’s okay. I’d rather know the truth.” Perhaps I want them to be outraged at the company for using them, at the world for being unsafe and unfriendly, at the teacher who didn’t guide them, or at me because I told them the truth that hurts, but they walk down the hall to their first-period class. Their pace is normal, faster than mine. They are already chatting about something else.

Happy. The world has not changed.

I walk slowly. I am left with no satisfactory sense of resolution. I have told my truth, so afraid of the impact, but there is none. The world spins under me, with me.

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Any Tilt Will Lose
continued from page 13
arise? Well, on one occasion last year, I must admit that I let Auerbach fly out my classroom door. I allowed a student to get the best of me, and I imposed my opinion and shoved it down her throat. Not only was she humiliated, but also I was mortified and later apologized. Feeling an empty sense of failure, I immediately remembered my commitment to value my time and energy. Prompting a student to think about his behavior allows a time of reflection, quietness, and an opportunity for de-escalation. Asking someone a question demonstrates interest and caring. Requesting self-reflection displays a sense of concern instead of anger. I love both teaching and my students, and I hope to continue enacting the Auerbach philosophy in the future so that they never doubt my intentions.

As for John, he did revise the next piece. Perhaps it was because we established our roles that day—or how far our buttons could be pushed—but John became one of my more passionate and creative writers. He decided to work with me instead of fighting his sponsorship of literacy. We ended up playing the writing game together with no one scoring and no one losing. After all, I just wanted the best writing to emerge so that we all won together.

References

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