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## WHY **POETRY?**

**Lee Bennett Hopkins on why we must share poetry with our students**

By **Susan Knell**

**t**he International Literacy Association (ILA) Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award is given every three years to an up-and-coming author of children's and young adult poetry.

For those who know the award's namesake, Lee Bennett Hopkins, you know he and poetry go together like peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, and rock and roll. Hopkins is the beloved poet and anthologist of more than 200 poetry books, and he is even listed in *Guinness World Records* as "the world's most prolific anthologist of poetry for children."

Those of us who know him and his books, such as *All the World's a Stage* (Creative Editions) and *City I Love* (Abrams), already knew that. He's also been referred to as the "Pied Piper of Poetry." He is that and more.

## On the award

Hopkins believes that poetry has been overlooked in children’s literature for a long time and that it’s important to bring this genre deeper into the lives of children.

In the 1970s, the National Council of Teachers of English established the Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Hopkins was a recipient in 2009. The award is given to a poet for their aggregate body of work, so it has to be someone already well known. Back in the early 1990s, Hopkins spoke with Susan Mandel Glazer, a past president of the International Reading Association (now ILA), about establishing an award for a promising poet who had written no more than two books—and in 1995, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award was established. Through the years, several award recipients have gone on to become quite renowned, such as G. Neri, Deborah Chandra, and Guadalupe Garcia McCall.

I had the opportunity to serve on the Promising Poet Award committee twice, including the most recent year, 2016, when we chose *Dear Wandering Wildebeest: And Other Poems From the Water Hole* by Irene Latham (Millbrook).

## The man behind it

Last summer, I had the opportunity to interview Hopkins. (You can view my entire interview at [youtu.be/cFFhEh-UbU4](https://youtu.be/cFFhEh-UbU4).) It was a bit like interviewing your favorite actor who you’ve admired for years. Those of us who love books and authors understand what I mean. I have loved Lee Bennett Hopkins’s work since I started teaching elementary school in 1982, though he wasn’t aware until I finally professed my admiration at his home in Cape Coral, FL.

My real goal was to promote this award among ILA members and to also introduce Hopkins to younger members who may not yet be familiar with his work and what a powerful influence he

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has been and continues to be on poetry for young people.

Hopkins believes children have a natural affinity for poetry in their early years. He believes that in the middle and upper grades, however, the DAM approach to poetry is used—dissecting, analyzing, and forced memorization. Also, too often questions are asked such as “What does this word mean?” or “What does this phrase mean?” He told me his own poems have appeared in textbooks with questions posed to readers that not even *he* could answer.

Hopkins also encourages teachers to embrace today’s trends with music and lyrics. He mentioned the Broadway musical hit, *Hamilton*. All music is poetry, he says. Employ the lyrics and have children sing.

In talking to Hopkins, I referred to Regie Routman, who writes about teaching with a sense of urgency. He feels that as well, specifically encouraging teachers to find poetry about children’s lives. “If you lose a parent, there are poems to heal. There are poems to make you laugh, poems to make you cry. And that’s what good literature does,” he says, adding he believes we must give children the feeling that poetry works for them.

In my poetry files, I found an article Hopkins had written for *Instructor* magazine in the 1990s titled “Give Children Poetry!” He stressed the importance of teachers sharing poetry with their children. “What a wonderful gift that would be!....Remember that poetry must flow freely in our students’ lives; it should come to them as naturally as breathing, for nothing—*no thing*—can ring and rage through hearts

and minds as does this genre of literature....It can open up worlds to children they never thought possible. But most important, it can be a source of love and hope that children can carry with them the rest of their lives.”

Hopkins later sent me this poem that he wrote in 2008 titled “Why Poetry?” I think it completely explains why we must share it with our students.

*Why poetry?  
Why?  
Why sunsets?  
Why trees?  
Why birds?  
Why seas?  
Why you?  
Why me?  
Why friends?  
Why families?  
Why laugh?  
Why cry?  
Why hello?  
Why good-bye?  
Why poetry?*

*That’s why!* ■

## For More on ILA’s Awards

More information on the ILA Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award, and all of ILA’s award and grant opportunities, can be found at [literacyworldwide.org/about-us/awards-grants](http://literacyworldwide.org/about-us/awards-grants).