

Literacy Tip:

by Barbara Alpert

How Can We Instill a Love for Language?

I began writing this article on Dr. Seuss's birthday, a day when it just seems right to celebrate the wonder of words! It's especially important in the lower grades, when the "work" of learning to read requires lots of repetition of letters and sounds as well as the stringing together of those sounds to make words. What these phonics drills don't teach our kids is the deliciousness of language, the joy of rolling words off your tongue and taking pleasure in how they sound when you put them together.

In Rita Golden Gelman's wonderful kids' book, *More Spaghetti I Say*, the text invites a young reader to luxuriate in rhyme and repetition. When talking about her beloved spaghetti, the girl monkey says: "I love it, I love it, I love it, I do," and the boy monkey asks, "More than me?" She replies, "More than you!" If ever a book was born to be read aloud, that one is—and so are so many more.

It's fun to read *The Cat in the Hat* or *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, and it can be even more fun to have it read to you. These books are terrific for building fluency and speed in a budding reader, and they're also good for helping kids learn about word families, those groups of words that end in the same sound. Word families help teach spelling, too, but without the "hard work."

Poetry gives students a chance to experience a broader range of vocabulary, and you can point this out to your tutee using your preferred examples. For younger students, you might want to read from Jack Prelutsky, one of the funniest and most agile rhymers being published today. A recent work of his, *Behold the Bold Umbrellaphant*, celebrates mythical creatures that are part animal and part inanimate object, in poems that use imaginative combinations of words to intrigue and delight readers.

Another great choice to share is Walter Dean Myers, a Harlem writer who has published in many formats but whose poetry wins awards whenever he brings out a new volume. Recent winners include *Jazz* (about which one reviewer wrote: "Not only do the poems celebrate the heritage of jazz, but they also evoke and recreate the experience of

the music itself. They beg to be read aloud with a sense of rhythm, passion, and yes, even improvisation.”) and *Here in Harlem*, a powerful collection of first-person poems in the voices of people from the neighborhood. The fictional stories are accompanied by great black-and-white photographs of real people, and the impact of each personal account is remarkable. Each poem is a snapshot of a particular character's life, told in that character's distinctive voice. Together, the voices reflect the community of Harlem, which in the 1930s and 1940s was the epicenter of African American culture.

And if you're working with a student who is learning English, why not ask your student to read aloud a poem in his or her native language, and then you read the same poem in an English translation? There are many great works available in dual-language editions—here, for example, is one of the beautiful poems of Pablo Neruda:

Ode To Enchanted Light

Under the trees light
has dropped from the top of the sky,
light
like a green
latticework of branches,
shining
on every leaf,
drifting down like clean
white sand.

A cicada sends
its sawing song
high into the empty air.

The world is
a glass overflowing
with water.

Oda a la luz encantada

La luz bajo los árboles,
la luz del alto cielo.
La luz
verde
enramada
que fulgura
en la hoja

y cae como fresca
arena blanca.

Una cigarra eleva
su son de aserradero
sobre la transparencia.

Es una copa llena
de agua
el mundo.

If you're working with a student who is studying Shakespeare or even the *Iliad*, consider using a video or audio recording of some of the great speeches and talking about how poetry is written to be read aloud, not to oneself. In the voices of fine actors, what may seem obscure and without meaning on the page may come to vivid life for your tutee—and perhaps launch a lifelong love for this genre.

If your student revels in horror stories, why not talk about Edgar Allan Poe and share a few verses of “The Raven” (with its marvelous alliteration and rhythm)? If your student is wondering what life choices he or she should make, you could read the classic Robert Frost poem, “The Road Not Taken,” together (“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”) Any of these famous poems could lead to some very interesting conversations!

April is National Poetry month, but if we can get our students to celebrate the joy of poetry all year long, we'll be giving them a gift that will last all their lives!