

The aim of this teaching guide is to suggest ways of working with the poems in *Something Beginning With P*. It is laid out in themes. Compiled by experienced teachers, the guide is meant to be a taster rather than exhaustive, with suggestions which we hope will be useful for work with all the poems in the anthology. We have made a deliberate attempt to provide a diversity of voices and approaches. Poems chosen are the personal choices of the contributors and reflect very clearly the many themes and variety of reading which may be found in a single poem. The themes chosen are only a fraction of those contained within this rich collection of newly commissioned poems. Additions will be made to this guide from time to time – check the O'Brien website www.obrien.ie/schools.

Above all, we hope that you enjoy the poetry in this anthology, its surprises and delights, its touching and tender evocations of feelings and emotions and its playful and musical language.

Jane O'Hanlon

INTRODUCTION

Seamus Cashman

*My barn having burned to the ground,
I can now see the moon.*

Japanese haiku

As with any good collection, each poem here is, first and foremost, an island of delights set within the book to discover and enjoy, be it a classic and simple nursery rhyme from a poet as complex and erudite as Thomas Kinsella; a lyrical gem from Desmond O'Grady; a txt message sonnet from Paula Meehan; a magical rhythmic chant from Máighréad Medbh; a topsy-turvy fantasy in sound from Áine Ní Ghlinn; a hymn to artists by Gabriel Fitzmaurice; a portrait of a joy-rider by Rita Ann Higgins; a dreamscape by Mary O'Malley, and many more treasures.

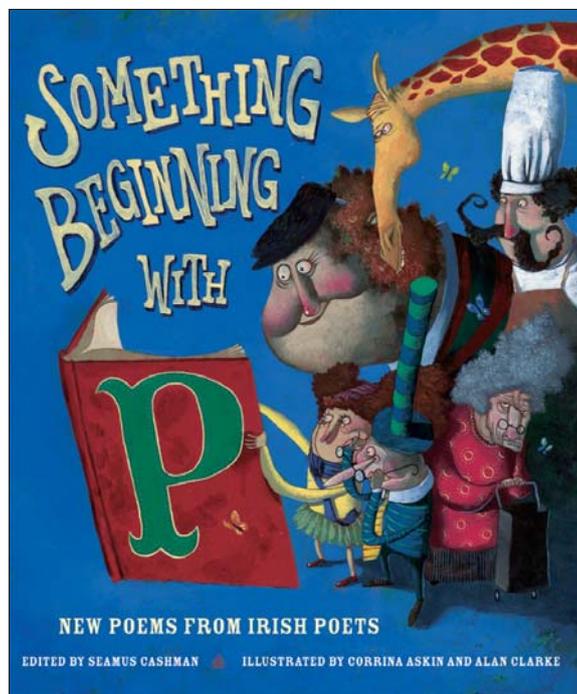
However, this is also a collection with a sequential shape and structure designed to create a coherent and effective anthology. The

O'BRIEN

TEACHING GUIDE

Edited by

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Something Beginning With P

Edited by Seamus Cashman

Illustrated by Corrina Askin and Alan Clarke

THEMES AND CONTRIBUTORS

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| Feelings | Tom Conaty |
| Interesting Characters | Irene Barber |
| Cultural Diversity | Liz Morris |
| Nature | Enda Wyley |
| History | Seamus Cashman |
| Family | Enda Wyley |
| Nonsense/Word Play | Irene Barber |
| Festivals | Liz Morris |
| Fantasy/Other World | Jane O'Hanlon |
| Spirituality | Seamus Cashman |
| Seeing the Illustrations | Kieran Griffin |
| Thematic Index | Seamus Cashman |

RTE EDUCATION
CONNECTING WITH
SCHOOLS

arrangement creates a wave-like undercurrent of movement, of changing subjects, forms, and moods. There is an ebb and flow in the complementary and contrasting poems, on related and yet seemingly disparate themes – including family, relationships, the famine, bullying, child labour, love, hate, dancing, and cats!

The collection is in three parts titled: '... with my little I...' (pp9-46) '... I spy ...' (pp47-94) and '... something beginning ...' (pp95-150). These section titles were suggested by Brendan Kennelly's play-poem, *Words Are Such Silly Things*, based on the I Spy game. This offered an ideal starting point and became, from the day it arrived, the choice to begin the anthology. It is a very simple fun poem, involving the discovery of words – their spellings, sounds and meanings. And serendipity generously offered us a final poem when Tony Curtis sent in *P is for Poetry*, the last line telling us to go 'back to the start'...

The three sections in a broad sense progress from easier to more difficult poems, although not poem by poem. Section one is easier, whilst the third section contains weightier subjects and more difficult language. However, within each section are simple as well as more complex poems, and readers can be introduced to a cross-section of poems from all three sections as desired.

The sequencing of poems is simple, imaginative and subjective and provides a suggested approach to the way in which the anthology might be used in the classroom. For the teacher, being aware of the underlying structure can prove helpful in exploring connections between poems and groups of poems, and between poem and illustration.

Each section has a celebratory opening poem, and a poem to close the section and move into the next one. For section one, Kennelly's opening poem celebrates childhood discoveries; at the end of the section, after the tension between Patrick Cotter's *Is This What I Get For?*

and Larry O'Loughlin's simple and questioning *Sad*, rest and calm are restored with Pat Ingoldsby's 'perfectly still' sea.

Opening the second section, Gabriel Fitzmaurice celebrates the artist in *An t-Amhránaí* which also reflects the pride children have in being children, leading perfectly into this section of the anthology. To close the section Seamus Heaney's *A Keen for the Coins* is a light-hearted lament for a past these children did not know but which will instantly connect to the present, a merging of past and present in the reader's mind.

The final section opens up to the world – that adult place childhood will grow into, already hinted at by Dennis O'Driscoll in *Mornsong*. The book closes with *P is for Poetry*, returning to language, words, playfulness and sending the reader forward to start again.

Strong relationships or differences between poems on facing pages, have been explored by the illustrators who add powerful visuals which connect and expand the written text. For example, a glance at pp58-59 reveals a visually humorous matching of the poets' portraits of a dreaming schoolboy and a skin-head, one a leisurely, detailed narrative, the other a smart, epigrammatic, short poem.

In section three, we are brought inside the home in *House Proud* and *Poem for a Baby*. Home, happiness, family and pride are some of the connections here. *Poem for a Baby* leads us to the boy-and-girl challenge in *Bordeaux Macho*; home connects to neighbours, and the family activity of drying the dishes. *On Water* introduces parents with children and the concept of care and protection and the fears that arise in ordinary life, like a day at the beach. This is reflected and contrasted with the sheer pleasure of youth and parenthood as a mother watches her BMX-mad child risking life and limb.

The next spread moves by contrast from happiness, joy and pride in family to those same qualities and emotions touched by tragedy, expressed through the poet's observations of beauty and change reflected in the landscape. Moya Canon's *Script* connects with Chris Agee's recollection of his daughter and the 'brevity and softness' of her life. The seal pup too leaves a fleeting mark, 'a double line of prints', in the soft sand, 'a perfect cursive script' to be washed away by the waves.

The natural world of *Script* allows the introduction of three lighter poems, *Tree*, *Bee-chasing* and *Homework with Her Cat*, all three connecting children and home. *Homework* brings us into history in *My Day*, a famine-time family tale. This, in turn, contrasts with *The Violet Maker*, and develops into a series of work-related poems: *Yarn*, *In the Bakery*, *Slipstream*, *Sculpture Yard* (a kind of hobo poem), and *The Sleeping Sailor*.

In this structure, subject matter takes precedence, with poetic form, narrative, lyrical, formal and informal rhyming, and free verse all dancing happily together throughout the anthology.



FEELINGS

Tom Conaty

We feel because we are human. We love, we hate. We are joyful, we are sad. We rejoice, we are envious ... Big feelings, big emotions are part of all of us and their expression is critical to the healthy development of the child. Many poems in this collection are charged with particular emotions. There is the piercing loss of a child in Chris Agee's *Alpine Interlude*; the loss of a strange and beautiful woman in Noel Monahan's *Amen Woman*; feelings of wonderment and awe in Tom Mac Intyre's *An Bhóin Dé* and Rita Kelly's *Heron*; delicacy and breathless strength in equal measure in Ann Egan's *Song of Cuhtahlata*, *Lost Cherokee Mother*; forthright anger in *When I Am Angry* by Jo Slade and playfulness in *Pangur Bán's Revenge* by Iggy McGovern.

The theme of isolation is played differently. The splendid isolation of *Me in a Tree* by Julie O'Callaghan contrasts with the solitary figure in Enda Wyley's *Bullying*

and Pádraig Daly's *Leaving for a Nursing Home*. And there are many more to choose from. Pick one.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

- Read the poem silently.
- Read it quietly.
- Read it aloud. Pick different voices.
- Give each child a line from the poem.
- Sound it out in sequence; try slow delivery, then fast delivery.
- Mix up the sequence. Sound out all the lines together.
- Do any single words or phrases jump out?
- Have each child pick a phrase and then say their phrases together.

READ FOR RHYTHM

- Where would you put the stresses?
- Read the shape of the poem and have the children draw it on the blackboard.

READ FOR MEANING

- What is being said?
- What is the tone of the poem?

SOUNDS AND FEELINGS

- What was the trigger for the poem? Where did it come from?
- What are the dominant feelings/emotions?
- What are you feeling?
- What would you ask or say to the poet if s/he were here?

ACTIVITIES

- Interview: Have the children make up questions and the teacher and other children respond to the questions as if they are the poet.

GAME: RUMI'S GUEST HOUSE

(The house that opens the door to all feelings and emotions, welcomes them in, acknowledges them, protects them, feeds them, lets them stay around for a while, opens the door and then lets them go.)

- Simulate the guest-house layout on the floor. There are many rooms: one for sorrow, one for joy, one each for anger, envy, despair, loneliness, excitement and so on.
- Ask the children to list other possible rooms.
- Did you ever occupy one of these rooms? Remember the story of what it was like.

- Then all the guests meet for breakfast and they recount their stories.
- Where did the guests come from?
- Where are they going?

MOVEMENT

- How do the emotions of the poem travel?
- Do they have light or heavy steps? Are they slow or fast?
- At what level do they travel – high, normal or low?
- Is the body posture open or closed?

MUSIC

- Through music, explore the movement within each feeling.
- What music makes you feel a particular emotion?
- Ask the children to bring in a selection of music. Listen to a piece; what was the composer feeling?

LITERATURE

- Have volunteers relate the ways in which particular stories and novels moved them.

ART

If you can feel it when you read it you may feel it more deeply when you paint it ...

- Have the children mix colours that suggest moods (mood pictures).

GAME

Play 'Guess the Emotion' (see SPHE p71).

BODY MAP

- Trace a life-size cardboard copy of each child. Pin them to the wall.
- What do your eyes want to see/your ears want to hear?
- Where are your feet leading you (where are you going in life)?
- What feelings are in your heart?
- What touches you?
- Children could collage images on to the body maps in response to these stimuli. (This work can literally embody the child's feelings, hopes and expectations.)
- Try having the children make a newsprint collage (see Media Studies below).

MEDIA STUDIES (SPHE P75)

- Newsprint: Collect images – these to be carefully selected by the children – from newspapers and magazines



depicting various emotions.

- Form the class into groups. Each group takes a picture, discusses it and responds to the following questions:
 - What is happening?
 - What feeling/emotion is present?
 - What makes you think that?
- Look closely at expressions, body postures and movement. (This can also be tried out in movement and drama.)
- If you could put words into the mouths of the characters, what would they say?
- A conversation poem might follow – this can be a single utterance.

TV IMAGES: LOOK AT ADVERTISING

- Videorecord an advertisement and then follow the sequence of activities as above in the Media Studies section.
- What are the actors trying to do in the piece?
- Are they concerned with how we feel? Why? Give examples.
- What words are being used?

- An 'ad' poem might follow.

RETURNING TO THE POEM

The Communal Poem (an approach where children support each other to write a poem without a sense of isolation):

- Take a sad feeling. Name the context.
 - Ask children for phrases and images. Record each one on the blackboard as it is given: eg 'old books lie at home'; 'can't sleep no more'; 'teachers giving homework'; and so on.
- 1 Read the list in the order given.
 - 2 In groups, allow children to switch a few (2) lines and read out their version to the class (allow 15 mins for this).
 - 3 Then let groups switch up to 5 lines and add in link words between the lines (15 mins).

(Note that the same situation/context can evoke different feelings. Different characters act and feel differently. Write the poem from a different perspective.)

This avoids the 'Write a poem for me' approach which can be daunting for children. It also avoids the formulaic approach which can be too directive.

Note: Warm-up work has to take place first



before children can be expected to begin writing.

WRITING POEMS

Try some automatic writing (5-10 mins) – this is where the child writes freely without interruption.

- 1 Name the feeling, eg anger. The child starts to write and doesn't stop until the teacher says the 10 minutes are up.
- 2 Volunteers read what they have written.
- 3 They select one or two phrases or images which they like.
- 4 These become the starting point or cornerstone of a poem on anger. (Note: always begin with short poems first.)
- 5 Try another emotion and another context.

BRING IT HOME

Learning a poem by heart is taking a poem to your heart ...

(These thoughts are based on a cross-curricular approach as outlined in the fifth and sixth class teachers' *Resource Materials for Relationship and Sexuality Education* for the Social Personal and Health Education Programme at primary level.)

INTERESTING CHARACTERS

Irene Barber

Angel Boy and Skinhead (pp58-59)

- Give the pupils an opportunity to examine both illustrations prior to reading the poems. Encourage them to speculate about the two personalities. Record their views. Then read both poems, discuss them and see if the pupils agree with their earlier views. Do they think both illustrations are by the same illustrator? Why? Consult the back of the book to find out more about the illustrator, Alan Clarke.
- Discussion points: Why does Angel Boy feel he has to pretend to be normal? If you met him what would you like to ask him? What do you think he is really like? Did Skinhead make a wise choice in shaving his head and buying Docs?
- Which of the two, if either, would you be most likely to befriend?
- Draw a comic strip for the poem *Skinhead* which shows how life was for him before, during and after his haircut.

Bordeaux Macho (p100) and Anto's Inferno (p119)

- Read both poems a few times. Pierre and Anto both want to be seen as hard men. What is the difference between them?
- What was Anto's crime and what was his punishment?
- Which of the two poets, in your opinion, has a more mature perception of the situations that the boys find themselves in?
- The title *Anto's Inferno* is a take on the famous poem, *Dante's Inferno*. The *Inferno* is the first section of a longer work entitled *The Divine Comedy* and in it the poet Dante describes a journey through Hell. He is helped by a lady called Beatrice. It is agreed that Beatrice was based on an actual person, a friend of Dante when he was young. In 1274, when he was nine, he was introduced to her and when she died in 1290 he was very upset. Note the reference to Beatrice in the last line of *Anto's Inferno*. What do you think it means?
- Begin your own poem like this: 'It wasn't until our ... (name of some relation)' and continue. Try to recount a change of behaviour in some member of the household that had a domino effect on other members, eg a diet, a new 'toy', a new year's resolution. Do not worry about making it rhyme, just try to make it hold our attention.

Other poems about unusual characters: *Miracle Boy* by Catherine Phil MacCarthy and *Amen Woman* by Noel Monahan.