

THE POET'S CORNER

Laugh More

Janet Wong



“THANK YOU for being willing to make a fool of yourself,” a boy at an international school in Asia wrote in a note to me after I visited his school via Zoom. This was during the pandemic, and I had tried especially hard to entertain the students, wiggling like a worm and flapping like a bat (to Rose Cappelli’s engaging movement poem “Can You Wiggle Like a Worm?”). I aimed to provide moments of levity both to buoy their spirits and to keep them attentive. In between the funny poems, I shared serious poems about kindness, respect, and inclusion (and science and math and social studies); I feel that sharing the funny poems periodically throughout the program was a helpful tool that kept the kids “with” me. When I am able to keep assembly presentations lively and funny—not necessarily laugh-out-loud funny, but at least smiles-and-giggles funny—the kids listen more carefully. They are more eager to hear the next poem or the next tidbit of learning. I’m sure that you have experienced this in your teaching, too.

But can we incorporate more humor into our everyday teaching practice—and still be taken seriously by our school community?

Humor Helps Students Learn

In *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*, Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas posit that the lack of levity among adults is due to the misconception that “humor simply has no place amid serious work.” They propose, however, that “a culture that balances serious work with levity and play can actually improve team performance . . . [p]layful cultures allow teams to thrive, even (and especially) when the stakes are high and times are hard.” Along these lines, an American Psychological Association (APA) story suggests that “humor produces psychological and physiological benefits that help

students learn.” When a professor of statistics used comedy and drama to introduce complex concepts, his students understood and retained the information more successfully than when concepts were presented in a traditional manner.

If you’re willing to take a chance on this idea and you want to start incorporating humor into your teaching, funny poems are a perfect way to do it. The most critical members of your school community might bristle if your main curricular texts are not “serious enough” for them, but reading a poem takes less than a minute, so it won’t be seen as impeding or replacing serious instruction. Multiple poems can be squeezed into five minutes that enliven and supplement your lessons in both the morning and afternoon. In addition to being entertaining on their own, many poems will lend themselves easily to embellishment through your use of voice, sound effects, visual cues, and props, which will make it a snap to transform a simple poetry break into a brilliant bit of theater. Here is a list of poetry books to get you started, no matter the time of day or topic.

Language Arts

Away with Words! Wise & Witty Poems for Language Lovers by Mary Ann Hoberman: These poems from A-Z sometimes address an explicit language arts topic (such as the entries for C (Contractions), E (Etymology), P (Punctuation), and Q (Quotation Marks)) while other poems (B (Belong), B (Bow), B (By)), simply provide examples of a topic (such as homophones).

Science

Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars: Space Poems and Paintings by Douglas Florian: Florian has many hilarious poems on science topics in his various collections, but this title is partic-

ularly relevant during this year of spectacular solar and space events. If your students were enthralled by the total eclipse in April and aurora borealis sightings in May—or if they are excited by the forthcoming launch of the Europa Clipper spacecraft to Jupiter and its moons (with Ada Limón's poem "In Praise of Mystery" engraved on it)—you can keep the excitement going with Florian's clever, pun-filled poems.

Math

Snowman – Cold = Puddle: Spring Equations by Laura Purdie Salas: This nature-themed collection of clever poems is usually recommended for its lyrical approach to science, but it serves as a great mentor text that will get kids playing with math (especially if you encourage them to think beyond natural phenomena when they write their own equations).

Social Studies

Rutherford B., Who Was He?: Poems About Our Presidents by Marilyn Singer: Singer's poems blend key facts about forty-three presidents with witty observations and anecdotes. President Obama is the last president featured in this collection; the obvious follow-up prompt would be for students to gather facts about the presidencies of Trump and Biden and write their own poems.

Music and/or P.E.

Going, Going, Gone!: And Other Silly Dilly Sports Songs by Alan Katz: As my colleague Sylvia Vardell has mentioned in several of our anthologies, poems that have a strong and regular rhythm often can be sung to familiar songs, and children love it when poems are shared in this way. This is the premise, too, of Alan Katz's best-known collections of poems. "Controlling Your Bowling" can be performed to the tune of "Yankee Doodle"; "All Fall Down" is a poem about football that can be sung to the tune of "Ring Around the Rosie" and shares its refrain. For a social studies connection for older students, you can share the gruesome historical facts about the bubonic plague that inspired the original song.

Lunch/Snack

Hard-Boiled Bugs for Breakfast: And Other Tasty Poems by Jack Prelutsky: Among the 100+ poems on many topics that you'll find in this book, only some are about food—but they are gems that will turn a rainy-day snacktime or lunchtime into a lively language arts session. Two of my favorites in this book

are "I Dove Into a Chocolate Lake" and "I've Always Loved Spaghetti." Consider sharing "I Baked a Cake of Sunlight" to set up a prewriting exercise in imagery that students can think about during recess.

Library/Research Skills

Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong: Our newest anthology of 100+ poems features "thimblethoughts" (little facts the size of a thimble) and "wonderfuzz" (tiny things that our main character, Clara, wonders about). This journal-style book encourages kids to wonder about topics and then to do a little research to find a tiny fact about that topic that they can record in a notebook (for deeper exploration later).

Here is a poem from *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*, where Clara explains what this "compendium" is about, complete with definitions of my made-up words "thimblethoughts" and "wonderfuzz."

THIS IS MY JOURNAL COMPENDIUM

by (me) Clara

In this journal compendium
I will write down things I know
even if they're just tiny little thoughts
the size of a fairy thimble

** THIMBLETHOUGHTS **

and I'll write down questions that pop into my head
even if they're just fuzzy wonderings

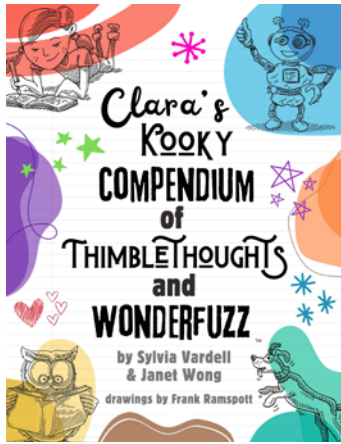
** WONDERFUZZ **

and I will also put in LOTS AND LOTS of poems
and super-neat drawings by my Uncle Frank
(who is the best artist I know).

If you're reading this
(and I know that YOU are reading this, Ms. Booker)
that is A - O K
because this is not a private diary-journal.
It's a C O M P E N D I U M !

It can be about ANYTHING you want.

© 2024 Janet S. Wong from *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz* by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books)



Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz contains ready-to-use writing prompts written by Clara's fourth grade teacher, Ms. Booker. These exercises can be given to students as classroom or homework exercises, with Clara's writing (free verse text written by me in the voice of Clara) then being offered as mentor texts to your students.

Many of the exercises in *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz* involve text selection by the student. When Clara finds poems online and in books that she likes, she helps remember them by printing or copying them, and then taping them into her notebook. Having each student choose poems that speak to them, to paste into their own notebook anthologies, is a surefire way to procure texts that will resonate.

Note: the poems that appear in this book actually are original and previously-unpublished works by 50+ poets and are simply "taped" into the book as if Clara found them elsewhere. Poets included in this anthology include Alma Flor Ada, Calef Brown, F. Isabel Campoy, Yangsook Choi, Margarita Engle, Douglas Florian, Irene Latham, Eileen Spinelli, Padma Venkatraman, Charles Waters, Allan Wolf, and many more.

SEL

One incidental benefit of incorporating humor more intentionally into the curriculum is that we and our students will benefit in terms of mental health; humor is a powerful tool when SEL is a priority. In a *Psychology Today* blog post entitled "You're Not Laughing Enough, and That's No Joke," a study suggests that the average four-year-old child laughs 300 times a day, while the average forty-year-old laughs only four times a day. As Robert Frost once said, "If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane." Clearly we need to laugh more; let's embrace our inner four-year-olds and infuse our daily lives with more humor and joy. •

Janet Wong is the author of dozens of books for children and the co-creator (with Sylvia Vardell) of *The Poetry Friday Anthology* series, the *Poetry Friday Power Book* series, the *Things We...* series, and the *What Is...* series, all published by Pomelo Books. Her most recent anthology, with Sylvia Vardell and 50+ poets, is *Clara's Kooky Compendium of Thimblethoughts and Wonderfuzz*. Email: janet@janetwong.com

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