

An Education Between the Lines:
A Poet & Illustrator's Contextualisation of Her Work
Mandy Coe

A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements of Liverpool John Moores University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chapters are grouped within these three sections, reflecting the theoretical framework:

(I) Language and Memory: *referencing literary critic and semiotician, Roland Barthes and educationalist, philosopher, Paulo Freire*

(II) Education and Politics: *referencing author, educator and proponent for critical thinking, bell hooks and educationalist and international advisor on education, Sir Ken Robinson.*

(III) Illustration and Visual Literacy: *referencing philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, Roland Barthes and woodcut artist Frans Masereel.*

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Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Abstract

This is an autoethnographic PhD through the published work of author and educator, Mandy Coe. It focuses on a portfolio of poems and illustrations (for adults and children) drawn from Coe's 30-year publishing history, which includes poetry collections, anthologies and work broadcast on television and radio.

Coe's route into writing included periods of manual work, experiences of community arts and political activism within movements such as the Miners' Strike (1984-5) and Greenham Common (1981-2000). This thesis chronicles how these lived experiences influenced her writing and practice-led pedagogy advocating creative routes into literacy, primarily within the inner cities of North West England).

Through reflection and academic research, her findings are presented as a dialogue with the theoretical perspectives of thinkers such as bell hooks, Ken Robinson, Paulo Freire, Gaston Bachelard and Roland Barthes. In resonating with, and building on, the works of these established theorists, Coe's thesis opens a debate on how politics influences our access to education — and how education shapes our lives. In contextualising her illustration, writing and educational work, Coe critically explores the power of art and poetry to express critical thinking, support lifelong learning and foster a sense of agency — all critical factors when retaining social cohesion, especially in increasingly post-factual and politically polarised times².

This PhD, in contributing original knowledge to theories of creativity within education, seeks to inform and encourage writers, artists and educators. The reflexive nature of autoethnography reveals the contextual roots of Coe's career as a practice-led practitioner/experimentalist. This ensures her findings can resonate with researchers and practitioners not only within the arts and education, but within the humanities and social sciences.

² JSTOR, *The Humanities as a Compass: Navigating a Post-Truth Era*, Papadouris, M.
<https://about.jstor.org/blog/the-humanities-as-a-compass-navigating-a-post-truth-era/>

A recipient of two fellowships, Coe is widely published, and her work has won several literature awards.³ Her poems are critically recognised for their complexity combined with accessibility.⁴ Coe is a visual thinker, and this thesis considers the importance of visual literacy⁵ and the crossover between image and language, as demonstrated by her illustrations and graphic novel *Red Shoes* (1997).

In referencing theorists of reader-response criticism such as Louise Rosenblatt, it highlights the transformative agency of readers when they are acknowledged as the co-creators of a poem. Coe argues that the creative invitation inherent within poetry and the visual arts enhances dialogic teaching and presents accessible and invaluable opportunities for creative risk-taking, especially important for children. Coe has led several campaigns to promote the genre of poetry for children and, in arguing for this, she chronicles the rewards of writing poetry for children, a genre undervalued by critics and under researched by academia.

Key words: children's poetry, education, poets-in-schools, autoethnography, critical thinking, Liverpool, children's literature, political art, literacy advocacy, heutagogy, Freire, dialogic, poets-in-schools, creative risk taking, reader-response criticism, Greenham Common, visual thinking, graphic novels.

³ Manchester Metropolitan University, The Writing School, *Visiting Fellow, Mandy Coe*, [Mandy Coe | Manchester Metropolitan University](#)

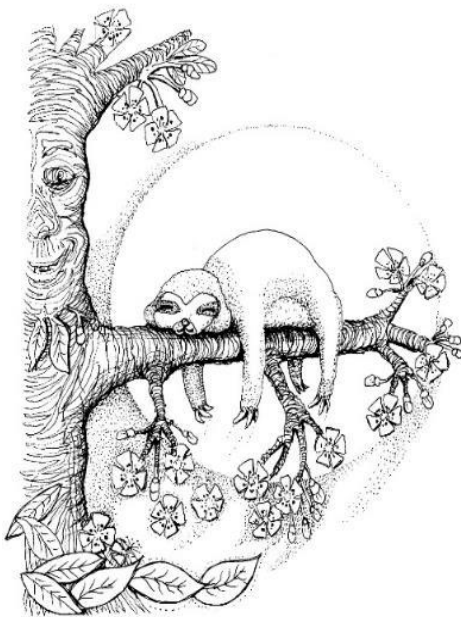
⁴ Poetry International, *Mandy Coe, Cheryl Moskowitz*, https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-27086_Coe

⁵ A term first coined by John Debes in 1969 to describe 'visual competencies'. Matzke, B. (2024). Visual Literacy. Central Connecticut State University. [Accessed: 12 January 2025].

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Liverpool's Centre for Arts Development Training, Colin Watts and the Dead Good Poets who set me on the right path. I owe much to Kaye Tew and the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University for showing their faith in me by awarding me a Visiting Fellowship and letting me loose to design conferences, poetry projects and campaign for poetry for children. Thanks, too, to the Manchester Poetry Library for inviting me to co-curate their poetry collection for children.

I am grateful to my family, Jim Sharples and Sue Coe, as well as dear friends and the fellow writers, teachers and students I have worked alongside. I am deeply indebted to the publishers, Shoestring Press, Otter-Barry Books, Macmillan Children's Books, who have supported my work, and my gratitude goes to all the poets who inspired me. Thanks to Liz Reynolds and poet Ria Beer for shared political commitment and those freezing nights at Greenham Common.



I am thankful to be part of such a supportive community of educationalists, poets and illustrators and the tireless librarians and literacy advocates who value the power of creativity, including the highly regarded work of Professor Morag Styles (1947-2024). A special thanks to Liverpool John Moores University for a scholarship allowing me to undertake this PhD, as well as the brilliant staff at LJMU library, and patient and hard-working supervisors: Sarah MacLennan, Dr Craig Hammond, Dr Emma Roberts and Dr Matt McLain.

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Finally, many thanks to the teachers. Those who taught me, and those who so kindly shared their classes with me. Their faith in our ability to learn and share fills me with hope.

⁶ Coe, M. (2002). *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

Introduction To the Body of Work

This thesis departs from a traditional academic style by use of first-person point of view⁷ and it is punctuated throughout with my art and poetry. It is an autoethnographic PhD by published works and the portfolio of poetry and illustrations (for adults and children) are drawn from my 30-year history of publishing and literacy advocacy in inner cities. The data is reflexive and qualitative, resulting from periods of journaling, reflection on my work and academic research into education and critical reading theory.

I am a recipient of a Hawthornden Fellowship and a Visiting Fellowship with the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University and my writing awards include the inaugural Manchester Poetry Prize and Ilkley Poetry Prize. I have taught with the Poetry Society, National Galleries, the BBC, Booktrust and with universities at undergraduate and postgraduate level. My graphic novel, *Red Shoes* (1997)⁸ is included in the Anne Frank International Library.⁹ My publications include seven poetry collections, two of which I illustrated and are for children, a poetry CD, graphic novel, teaching materials and articles. My poetry is widely anthologised and has been broadcast on radio and television (see appendices, pg. 73).

As a visual thinker, I perceived images and text as interchangeable.¹⁰ This blending of textual/visual literacy is illustrated in the thesis through extracts from my graphic novel *Red Shoes*,¹¹ about Red Shoe people who, forbidden words, speak in pictures; and the monograph *Sticks and Stones: A Visual Etymological Study* (1992).¹²

The portfolio of work is selected for a resonance with the concepts underpinning this thesis: *that the dialectic nature of art represents an invitation to creative partnership between art and viewer.*

⁷ Lim, W. M. (2024). [What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines](#). *Australasian Marketing Journal*.

⁸ Coe, M. (1997). *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

⁹ The Anne Frank Shoah Library, https://www.dnb.de/EN/Ueber-uns/DEA/DEA-AFSB/deaAfsb_node.html

¹⁰ Otis, L. (2016). A New Look at Visual Thinking. *Psychology Today*. Available at: www.psychologytoday.com [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

¹¹ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*, Good Stuff Press, Liverpool.

¹² Coe, M. (1992). *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick.

I see art as an act of observation/listening and my work reflects an ongoing dialogue with people, nature and city environment around me, representing a state of a permeability.¹³ As an example, the following poem for children explores a moment where body-language and the natural world are sharing stories.

When Eyelashes Speak of Love

The brown horse
nods his head over the wooden gate.
He breathes me in, then nods again.
Is this the language of welcome?
I smile a hello
and his flared nostrils exhale a greeting
sweet with rain and grass.
His tail swishes. Punctuation?
His ears flick. A question?
He could crush me,
he eclipses sky.
I hope my stillness speaks of friendship.
The horse shifts a hip and resting
one hoof on its point, his body tells a story
of fences and waiting.
When my hand goes out, wanting
to answer his story with my own,
his gentle lips read my palm,
planting there the tickling idea

¹³ Wilson, A (2011) [*Lifesaving Poems: Mandy Coe's Let's Celebrate*](#), "Everything in Mandy's world seems light. This is not to say she is not serious. I think everything Mandy writes is deadly serious, but wearing a grin and a cackle. Her project I think is to notice absolutely everything; not to do so, she seems to be saying, is not to live properly." [Accessed: 11 December 2024].

that language is everywhere.

Can this be true? Birds, trees, insects,
all telling stories? The horse nods again,
and his eyelashes speak of love.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mandy Coe, first draft commission, Macmillan Children's Books 2024.

Methodology



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This thesis draws on the methodology of autoethnography with researcher as informant.¹⁶ As a guide I refer to the excellent resource, ‘What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines’. Qualitative research is based on describing and analysing personal experiences within a wider, complex cultural framework. Lim describes qualitative research as “a unique lens through which to explore and interpret the complexities of social phenomena, which is in contrast to quantitative research, not as a contradictory, but as a complementary”.¹⁷ I relish this concept of ‘contradictory as complementary’. It opens rather than closes debate and resonates throughout this thesis.

Creating a timeline revealed intersections of lived experience and societal events, which contextualised my poetry and art and chronicled the influences that shaped my route into writing. As an artist and writer images and text are equally important.¹⁸ For the thesis, I created an illustrated timeline (see appendices, pg. 73). Extracts from this act as signposts for each chapter and its creation is explored further in the chapter, *How Education Shaped an Educator*. By making the timeline an artefact its creation became part of the reflective process. As John Bender and Michael Marrinan say in their book about visual thinking, “[d]iagrams such as timelines are artefacts in themselves. They are ‘objects to think’ with.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

¹⁶ Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10. Available at: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:O114-fqs1101108> [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

¹⁷ Lim, W. M. (2024). What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619> [Accessed 3rd May 2024].

¹⁸ Otis, L. (2016). A New Look at Visual Thinking. *Psychology Today*. Available at: www.psychologytoday.com [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

¹⁹ Bender, J. and Marrinan, M. (2010). *The Culture of Diagram*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press p.10.

The portfolio of publications included here are comprised of art *and* poems, and I consciously allowed the work's content rather than its form to dictate its placement in the thesis. This reflects *how* I think.²⁰ Psychologist Rudolph Arnheim, described how the dynamics of art, “resonates in the nervous system of the receiver... And these actions are not just physical gymnastics, they are ways of being alive, ways of being human.”²¹ This blending of textual/visual literacy is also illustrated in the thesis via extracts from my graphic novel *Red Shoes* (1997)²² and the monograph *Sticks and Stones* (1992).²³

These reflexive processes provide context for this methodology, which grew through the reflective practices at the heart of this thesis.²⁴ Data was gathered through journaling,²⁵ considering timelines,²⁶ and then reviewing published work in the light of the resulting information. To increase internal coherence and the flow of autoethnographic voice, this thesis uses footnotes.

Like many writers whose vocation was not initially their occupation, my path into writing was non-linear and this route and my approach to this PhD resonated with concepts of self-directed learning as represented by the philosophy of heutagogy: a process by which “individuals take the initiative [...] in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning.”²⁷ I see that the challenges and benefits of this roundabout route has informed my writing and collaborative style of teaching. This motivated me to deepen my understanding of the openness and accessibility

²⁰ Arnheim, R. (1969). *Visual Thinking*. Chicago: University of California Press.

²¹ Arnheim, R. (1989). *Thoughts on Art Education*. Los Angeles: The Getty Centre for Education in the Arts, p. 26.

²² Coe, M. (1997). *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

²³ Coe, M. (1992). *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick.

²⁴ Skukauskaitė, A., Yilmazlı Trout, I., & Robinson, K. A. (2022). Deepening Reflexivity Through Art in Learning Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*. Vol 22. Issue 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120985676> [Accessed 10th June 2024].

²⁵ Cogan, D. and Brydon-Miller, M. (eds) (2024) ‘Journaling’, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406.n202> [Accessed: 29 January 2024].

²⁶ Baú, V. (2024). Viewing life as a timeline: Digital Visual Research to Retrace People’s Journeys. *Qualitative Research*, 24(5), 1302-1311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241230233>

²⁷ Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A Guide For Learners And Teachers*. United States of America: Cambridge Adult Education, p. 18.

of learning by engaging with theoreticians such Louise Rosenblatt²⁸ and Donald Schön²⁹ (**Section II, *Education and Politics***).

This portfolio of publications is selected for its resonance with the concept of ‘invitation’ and the intersection where art/poems and viewer/reader share a dialogue on meaning. My work and teaching echo this concept by emphasising accessibility and literature development, so I review my pedagogy in the light of the writings of esteemed communicators who champion creative dialogic, such as Paulo Freire³⁰ (**Section (I), *Language and Memory***), educationalist Sir Ken Robinson,³¹ author bell hooks³² (**Section (II), *Education and Politics***) and artist Frans Masereel,³³ (**Section (III), *Illustration and Visual Literacy***).

Reflecting on juxtapositions of lived experience, and societal influences, such as capitalism, gender and class, autoethnography not only clarified key themes within my published works, they contextualised how practice-led pedagogy within the arts is influenced by the historical influences of ‘positivism’ — a western school of thought, traced back as far as Plato, which (rightly) values objective, empirical evidence, yet undervalues more subjective disciplines such as the arts and humanities.³⁴

Researching this hierarchal effect acted to reinforce my understanding that *practice evolves from theory and equally theory evolves from practice* (further explored in the chapter, *Education Through Teaching Poetry*). It also contextualised biases I experienced, for

²⁸ Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

²⁹ Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

³⁰ Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

³¹ Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*. 2nd ed. Chichester, West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Ltd.

³² hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

³³ Fultz, T. (2017). [Frans Masereel, the First Woodcut Novelist](https://www.metmuseum.org/en/perspectives/frans-masereel-woodcut). *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/en/perspectives/frans-masereel-woodcut> [Accessed: 2 May 2024].

³⁴ Raj, A. V. (2023). [Analysis of School Practices from a Positivist Perspective](#). *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 13(5), pp. 62-72.

example, my work being defined as vocational rather than professional; the devaluation of creativity in schools, and lower rates of pay for arts workers.³⁵

Exploring the disciplines of literary criticism and reader-development theory³⁶ has highlighted the complementary, rather than contradictory nature of the objective and subjective. By chronicling the sources and coherence of these themes, while comparing them with existing theories, contextual depth is added by presenting lived experiences as a dialogue with theoretical perspectives.

In researching the core themes of this thesis — *how the dialogic nature of poetry and art engages us* — I was better able to consider how my work resonates with theories of visual thinking and reader-response theorists such as Louise M. Rosenblatt³⁷ and Roland Barthes³⁸ and theorists who celebrate the power of dialogical interplay, such as bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*,³⁹ *Dialogic Pedagogy: The Importance of Dialogue in Teaching and Learning*,⁴⁰ and *Dialogic Pedagogy: A Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education*.⁴¹

Reflecting on the effects of a Secondary Modern school education alongside experiences of jobs held prior to becoming a writer in my late 30s, and my decades of social, cultural and political activism, has also contextualised my respect for the democratic nature of the dialogic and art as witness.

My supervisors were invaluable in providing a supportive space to discuss my self-directed research and in flagging up theories that might resonate. They gave guidance on the expected structure of this thesis, whilst also encouraging originality.

³⁵ Tapper, J. (2022). Observer; Culture. [The Guardian UK](#). [Accessed: 10 December 2024].

³⁶ Vaezi, S. (2006) 'Theories of reading', *TeachingEnglish*. Available at: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/theories-reading> [Accessed: 29 January 2025].

³⁷ Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

³⁸ Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press.

³⁹ hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁰ Skidmore, D. and Murkami, K. (eds.) (2017) *Dialogic Pedagogy: The Importance of Dialogue in Teaching and Learning*. London: Multilingual Matters.

⁴¹ *Dialogic Pedagogy: a Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education* (2024) Available at: <http://dpj.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/dpj1/index> [Accessed: 23 August 2024].

The reflexivity of autoethnography requires more than charting cause and effect; it maps topography, detours and even the odd creature of cartography⁴² as featured in the following poem, *Ten Pin* (2004). Here, a map of contemporary life overlays a historical one and engraved monsters mark where the world you know intersects with the world you don't.

Ten Pin

As the girls puff up their cheeks
to blow out cigarette smoke, they look
like ancient woodcuts of the wind
cornered on maps of a mediaeval world.
But their continent is tiny, a car park
and bowling alley, its sea
a puddle where mythical beasts
are reflected in red neon curves.

Colossus — the bouncer — straddles
the entrance. Behind him is the clatter
of coins and harsh bursts of song:
plum, plum, golden bell,
bar, bar, plum.
Deeper in the gloom
comes the rolling roar of wood on wood,
the axe-strike shriek of human glee.

Figures in a nativity scene, white skittles await
each player's eye and aim, the heartbeat
pause of ball, offered up
as a votive gift, then the step, dip and swing.
Soft shoes whisper as bowlers skip back.
For everyone knows that tumbling darkness
conceals the edge of the world.⁴³

⁴² Onge, T. (2006) *Imaginary Maps in Literature and Beyond: Map Monsters*. Library of Congress. Available at: <https://blogs.loc.gov/maps/category/series-imaginary-maps-in-literature-and-beyond/> [Accessed: 8 December 2024].

⁴³ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

Section (I): Languages and Memory

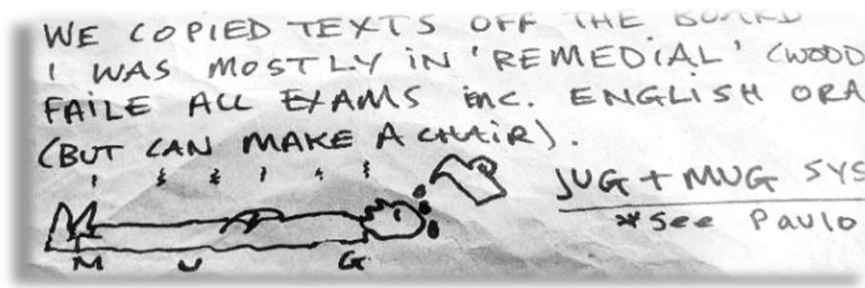
*The theoretical framework of this section references the work of French literary critic and semiotician, **Roland Barthes**, and the Brazilian educationalist and philosopher, **Paulo Freire**.*



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⁴⁴ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*, Otter-Barry Books, London.

Personal Foreword



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There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom. Richard Shaull.⁴⁶

Seeking employment, my family had moved from the North of England to the South and I was born on the outskirts of London in the late 1950s. It was a landscape where World War Two bombsites were children's playgrounds, in an era of black and white TV, the mixed economy and Welfare State. Dance halls were gathering places for a newly emerging group known as *teenagers*,⁴⁷ and the culture of *Pop* was making flamboyant changes to a drab post-war Britain.⁴⁸ The family eventually parted ways, and my parents returned to the North. For a while I had a rather unsettled life of living in squats, but I returned to the North in the 1980s, and Liverpool has been my home ever since.

Periods of homelessness brought upheaval, yet they also presented opportunities of reinvention and an enhancement of the 'outsider's eye' — so invaluable for writers. The concept of writer as 'anthropologist' is key to autoethnography (does being fully immersed in a culture mean you stop seeing it?). The writing of this thesis encouraged me to reflect on this debate, so eloquently described by philosophers, Maykut and Morehouse.

⁴⁵ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

⁴⁶ Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, from the introduction, Shaull, R.

⁴⁷ Staverly-Wadham, R. (2020) '[Birth of the Teenager](https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2020/03/30/birth-of-the-teenager/)'. *The British Newspaper Archive blog*. Available at: <https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2020/03/30/birth-of-the-teenager/> [Accessed: 30 March 2020].

⁴⁸ Whiteley, N. (1985) '[Pop, Consumerism, and the Design Shift](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1511416)', *Design Issues*, 2(2), pp. 31-45. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1511416> [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others — to indwell — and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand.⁴⁹

The goal of my youth was to 'indwell' in the adult world by accessing nightclubs. Wobbling on high heels, faces caked with make-up, we blew smoke rings while reciting fake birth dates until jaded bouncers waved us in to dance on sticky floors to Bowie, James Brown and Motown. The next morning saw us in class, eyes still smudged with mascara. That bouncer's wave-through into air sweet with rum and Coke, taught me the dichotomy of 'costuming': striving for a gender-visibility so generic it made us invisible, no longer individuals, no longer children.

This era was pre-mobile phones, pre-internet and post-industrialisation. The Winter of Discontent was yet to come. The world beyond our streets was only glimpsed through TV headlines and *Top of the Pops*.⁵⁰ Yet we were on the cusp of upheaval: the birth of anti-establishment counterculture, civil rights, feminism, and peace movements triggered by the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and The Troubles in Northern Ireland. However, lacking an education in history, geography or politics, these world affairs were impenetrable. This extract from *Small World* (2004), from my second collection, explores this teenage dissonance, of inhabiting a familiar world inside an unknown one:

*But I can't say we missed learning / about the world - about people. / We just were as we were. All trying / to be exactly the same; / drawing endless hearts and the initials / and longing for love, longing / not to be the odd one out.*⁵¹

I attended a Secondary Modern school (designed to teach basic literacy, mechanics, woodworking and domestic science) where leaving with minimal qualifications was not

⁴⁹ Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (2002) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophical and Practical Guide*. London: Routledge, p. 123.

⁵⁰ A long-running live TV show (1964-2006) in the UK, showcasing the best-selling records in the charts for that week.

⁵¹ Coe, M. (2004) 'Small World', *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

unusual.⁵² The school's authorised curriculum was almost secondary to an unspoken one; teaching us that our inability to learn was no one's fault but our own. When my entire year group failed history, due to being taught the wrong curriculum, I still recall the shame of *not knowing*. Sweating beneath the examination clock, I wrote on the exam paper an apology for my lack of answers. Then, feeling the need to do *something*, sketched characters I had seen that day on the bus.

This was an education described by Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire as a *banking system*.⁵³ Or as poet, Michael Rosen describes it, *a jug and mug* approach, relying on pupils (the mugs) being empty vessels to be filled by the educators (the jugs).⁵⁴ No child is empty however, yet whatever we came to school brimming with was to be carved out and discarded as if we were Halloween pumpkins.

Bred to boldly go

no further than Butlins, the future was not an option for us.
Ink stained and sweaty, we slumped at desks:
11-plus failures in green nylon sweaters.
Preparing for life
by memorising Kings and Queens.

Menstrual cramps, Benny Hill,
Nimble-Girls with tape-measure belts
— the distant rumble of feminism had not yet
cast doubts on our gentle mutilations:
bleach, mascara, crippling high heels.
So my sister and I forgave Star Trek
the tin-foil bikinis, the obligatory mushy kiss.

For here was the whisper of revolution:
the promise of a future beyond shop-work and babies.

⁵² In the 1950s the bipartite education system used the eleven-plus examination to measure 'intellectual capacity'. Those who passed were filtered into grammar schools. Those who failed attended secondary moderns to be taught basic literacy, mechanics, woodworking and domestic science. The 11 plus pass rate varied according to the number of places at grammar school, which varied from 10% to 30%. Available at: www.michaelrosenblogspot.com [Accessed 20 January 2025].

⁵³ Freire, Paulo (2006) [1970]. "[The Banking Model of Education](#)". In Provenzo, Eugene F. (ed.). *Critical Issues in Education: An Anthology of Readings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: [SAGE Publications](#). pp. 105–117.

⁵⁴ Rosen, M. (2024) 'Harrington: Labour Must Listen to Teachers, Says Rosen'. *Camden New Journal*, 28 July. Interview. Available at: <https://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/article/harrington-labour-must-listen-to-teachers-says-rosen> [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

Jobs never dreamed of: engineering, science,
communications. And of course, we wanted
to be Spock, serene Spock, his face
bathed in the cool, blue light of computer logic.

Comrades, adventure, putting wrongs to right:
this was a ship-shape world of quantifiable tasks.
No groping in cinemas, paired in a foursome
with someone you hate, just to be with your best friend.
No Whicker's World. No parental Sunday-dinner
violence. No Vietnam.

Dee dum da-da-da-da dum, we sang, thrilled
by the simplest of revolutionary ideas:
it doesn't have to be like this.⁵⁵

In *The Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire writes of a people's need to understand how a social system functions, yet how often they are 'forbidden to know'. He goes on to outline that awakening of curiosity, and the:

[...] critical effort through which men and women take themselves in hand and become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the 'why of things and facts'.⁵⁶

My first experience of being 'an agent of curiosity' came, not through education, but a TV show, namely *Star Trek*, first aired on UK TV in 1969. In modelling alternative worlds and the outsider's eye, science fiction permitted reflection on how things *might* be, thereby revealing how things *are*. I was too immersed to know my reality as dystopian or utopian, yet this tool of critical thinking — that *what if?* — stayed with me as a potent tool of teaching and writing. The following poem explores a metaphysical *what if?*, reflecting the

⁵⁵ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

⁵⁶ Freire, P. (2014) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 57.

influence of Irish poet, Matthew Sweeney⁵⁷ and Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda⁵⁸ both of whom I admire for their alternative realism and metaphysical poetics.

When the Earth Let Go

On the first day it was like being in love,
each step a little lighter. Wine poured,
thick as honey. Sagging flesh seemed to lift.
Apples lay in the grass unbruised
and when the broken-hearted jumped
it wasn't to their death.
Grocers narrowed their eyes at the scales,
tapping on a few more grains.
Airline pilots frowned, easing off the throttle.
Rain didn't fall
but hung as mist. The tides went out,
then out some more. Grandparents rose
from armchairs to dance.

It didn't last.
We burn with shame at that first joy.
Now, roped to trees and rooftops we float,
hands grasping like starfish at whatever passes.
But we can only hold on to so much.
Rivers of mud and fish rise
through a broken dome of sky. Animals moan
as they scabble in the littered air.
We pray for a return of the earth's pull,
but at night the stars circle
under our feet, while round our heads
tears and snot curl in ribbons, silver
speech bubbles emptied of words.⁵⁹

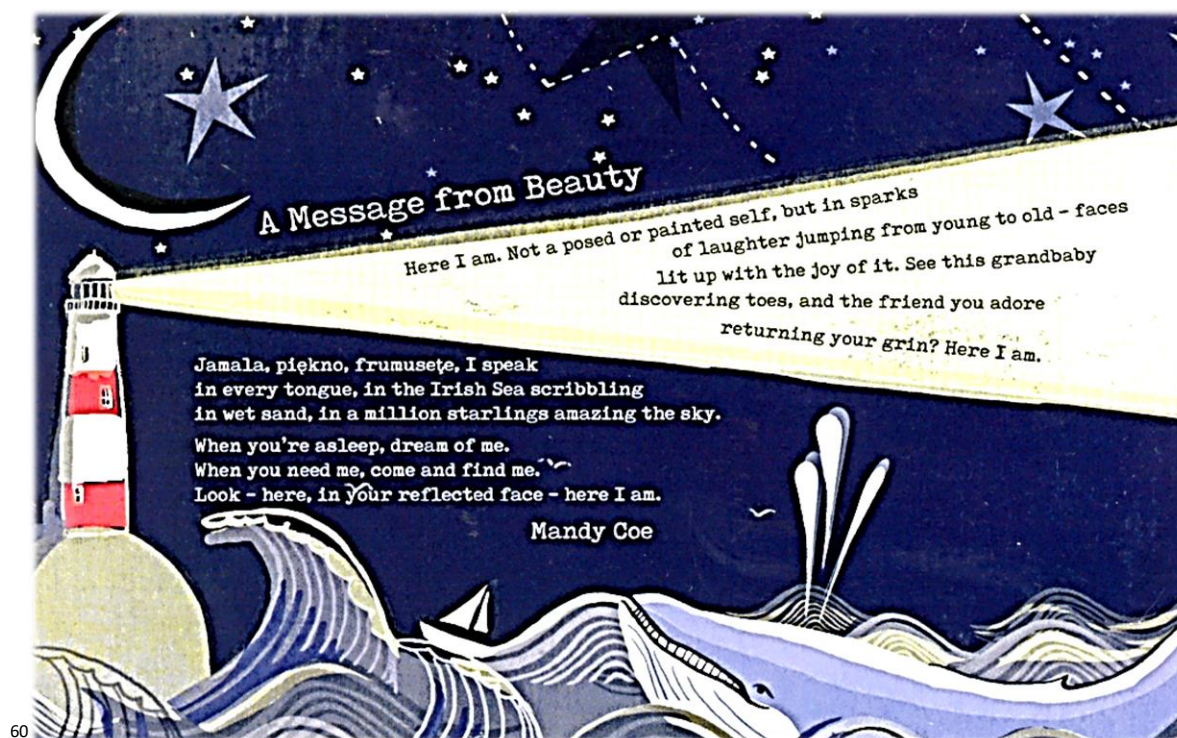
My grandparents were in the Midlands when, in the 1970s, my sister flew to New York to pursue a career as a graphic artist. We were a scattered family, whose connections were maintained through coins fed into a red phone box and postcards of the Statue of Liberty. These postcards, the physicality of flipping between image and message, is all about invitation, as is pinning them up in a penniless gallery of 'high' and 'low' art. Even the

⁵⁷ Sweeney, M. (1952-2018) 'Biography'. *The Poetry Archive*. Available at: <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/matthew-sweeney/> [Accessed: 1 June 2024].

⁵⁸ Griffith, O. (1987) '[Neruda's Galope Muerto: Impressionism, Metaphysics and Arte Poetica](#)', *Journal Storage Online*, 11(3), pp. 599-610. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27762528> [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

⁵⁹ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

smallest artform can scale up to capture social and personal history and many community projects I participated in have featured postcards.



Apart from an art teacher, Mr Kelner, who often invited our input, my school did not expect much of me. Yet, on reflection, this acted as a crude form of liberation. By absorbing the narrative that my limitations came from an inability to memorise text copied off a board, I received the epistemological message that books were the repository of knowledge. As a result, with little notion of career options, I believed that books could level any playing field. If a gate was locked, a climbing-guide would help scale the wall.

In his book *The Rustle of Language*, Barthes writes of this hearing/sensing a background hum of books and verbal 'goings on' in everyday life. Questioning the underpinnings of classical criticism, he also touches on that push and pull of the reader and text, writing that, "...for centuries we have been overly interested in the author and insufficiently in the reader..."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Coe, M. (2022), Blackpool, *Wish You Were Here* 'What is Beauty?' Blackpool Library Services.

⁶¹ Barthes, R. (1989) *The Rustle of Language*. California: University of California Press, p. 30.

Libraries, in giving readers the power to select or reject, redress that imbalance and this brass neck got me a long way. For me, libraries still combine the peace of a church with the grittiness of a pub backroom stacked with tools used for breaking and entering. The following poem illustrates that metaphysical ‘rustle’: trying to communicate across vast distances via unreliable means.

On The Line

On the telegraph pole a herring gull perches
white against black cloud.
Centring the maypole of conversations
it transforms our calls. Hello? Hello?

Words pass up pink legs, behind
its red-ringed eyes and yellow bill,
down every feather’s quill and feather-edge,
until crackling fractal distances connect

and we shout over our shoulder,
It’s a seabird on the phone! A seabird
wants to speak to you. And as raindrops
glide to join at each wire’s dip

and growth rings in the pinewood
dry and split, we press plastic
to our ears, frowning,
Who is this? Speak up!⁶²

Discovering Barthes through this project gave context to my hesitation around theoretical discourse. Barthes reemphasises this power imbalance when speaking of the goals of classical literary criticism as establishing “... what the author meant, and not at all what the reader understands.”⁶³ Studying Barthes and Freire for this thesis has reinforced not only how dialogic teaching empowers — but how deadening education can be without it.

As a school-leaver, I sought advice from a job agency. Here, the interviewer scanned my application, then called over her shoulder to a colleague, “This one’s fit for manual work”. I don’t know if the tone of this comment was intentional, or it was simply a tired woman at

⁶² Coe, M. (2016) *There Will be Cherries*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

⁶³ Barthes, R. (1989) *The Rustle of Language*. California: University of California Press, p. 30.

the end of a long day, but I was up for work, manual or not. However, the alliteration of those Fs, and being referred to as *this* one rather than *someone*. It made me uneasy.

I packed clothes, learned brazing in a marine engineering factory and spent several years assembling electronics. All these jobs appear in my poems, and I discuss their relevance in the chapter *In an Education Through the Workplace*. The following poem, *Trained Up Nice* (2001), chronicles physical details, rhythms and technical terms: *copper-zinc*, *spelter* and black fingerprints embedded in white bread (who wants to waste break-time queuing for the sink and Swarfega?).

Trained Up Nice

I tightened bolts, brazed and soldered,
wielded flame to fuse the spelter:
copper-zinc, alloys and lead.
At the end of the day, we queued
for the sink, slicking sore hands
in glistening green, staring unseeing
at the poster of workplace rules.

At dinner times we'd go out into the yard,
to lean against rusted machines,
silver filing dusting the ground.
Given no time to clean filthy hands,
mug handles slid in greasy palms
and we bit into blackly finger-printed bread.

When they made a company brochure
I had to leave the shop floor to pose at a desk.
"Type," ordered the manager.
"I can't," I told him. "I can braze, but I can't type."
"Pretend then."
So, I splayed grimy fingers over the keys.
The middle-aged secretary tutted and shook her head.

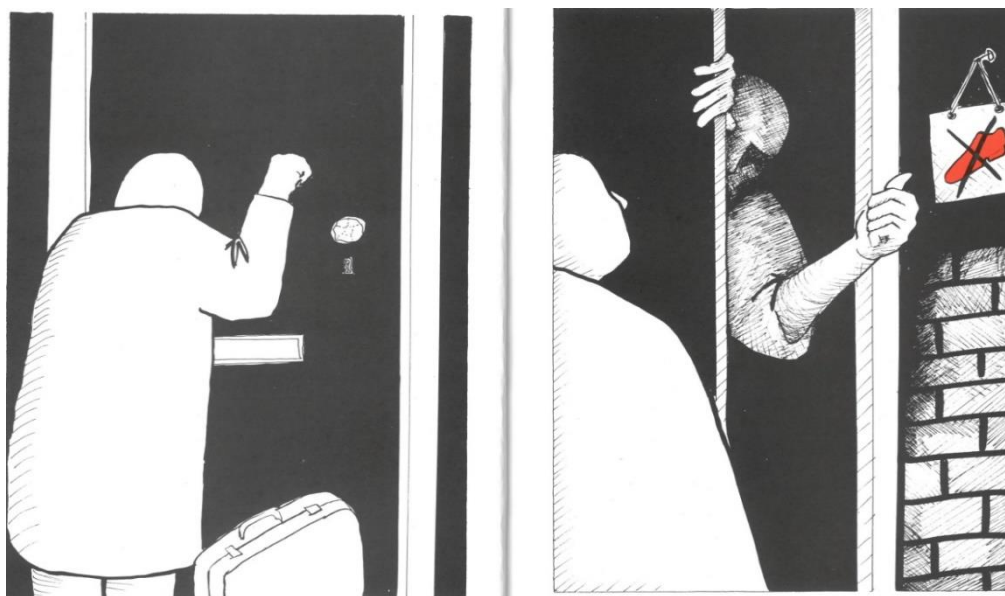
When the overseer handed me back my overall
He said not to mind:
"You've trained up nice for a lass," he said.
"I'd not have employed you myself,
But you've trained up nice."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Coe, M., 2000. *Pinning the Tail on the Donkey*. Liverpool: Spike. Highly Commended for the Forward Prize First Collection 2001.

In a shift of life that still amazes me, I moved from that way of earning a living to this one, where my teaching has taken me into communities, museums, hospitals and universities, receiving commissions from the Literacy Trust, National Galleries and the BBC. I have been a writer far longer now than any other job I ever held, yet I still value the quantifiability and skills of manufacturing, a subject often overlooked in literature.

To develop my teaching and poetry performance, I relied on reflection-in/on practice and learned — while teaching and performing — to read others in the room whilst being read myself. The alchemy of this public intersection is as potent as postcards or notes from packers, providing a subversive, collaborative space to question worlds we know while being curious about the ones we do not.

In chronicling these influences of my earlier life, I take delight in the empowerment that Paulo Freire's philosophy brings. His conviction in our agency and his understanding of people as *transformative*, rather than *beings of accommodation*, underscores my resistance to the passivity of the non-dialogic, and celebrates the strength of people expressing a collective craving for agency.⁶⁵



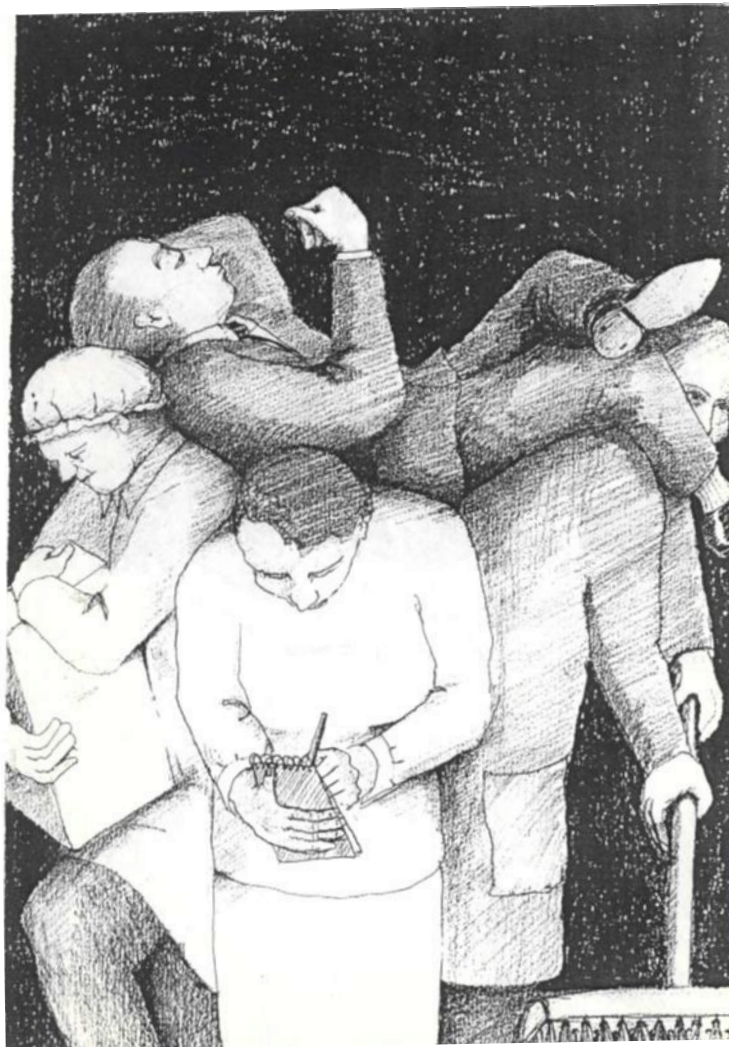
66

⁶⁵ Freire, P. (2006) [1970] '[The Banking Model of Education](#)'. In Provenzo, E. F. (ed.) (2006) *Critical Issues in Education: An Anthology of Readings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 105–117.

⁶⁶ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

Section II: Education and Politics

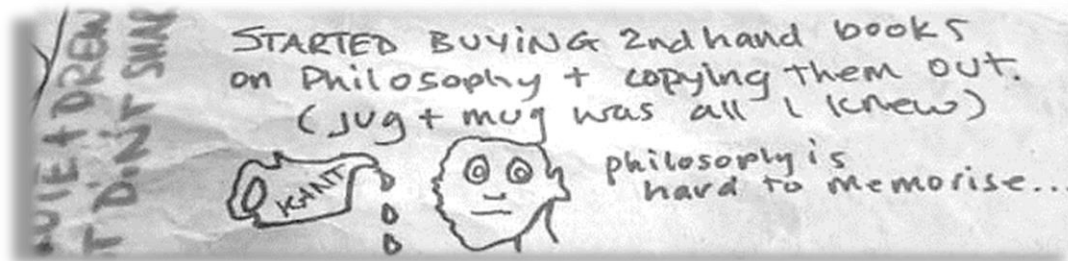
*The theoretical framework of this section is contextualised by referring to the work of author, educator, and proponent for critical thinking, **bell hooks**, and educationalist and international advisor on education in the arts, **Sir Ken Robinson**.*



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⁶⁷ Coe, M. (1992) *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick. (A study of the word: *labour*).

How Education Shaped an Educator



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Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

William Butler Yeats ⁶⁹

This autoethnography benefited from the creation of timelines juxtaposing my personal life with the culture and politics of the time. However, a challenging home life and periods of homelessness made reflecting on the past as inviting as rolling in nettles. But clearing my kitchen table, I laid out a roll of butcher's paper and began to draw.

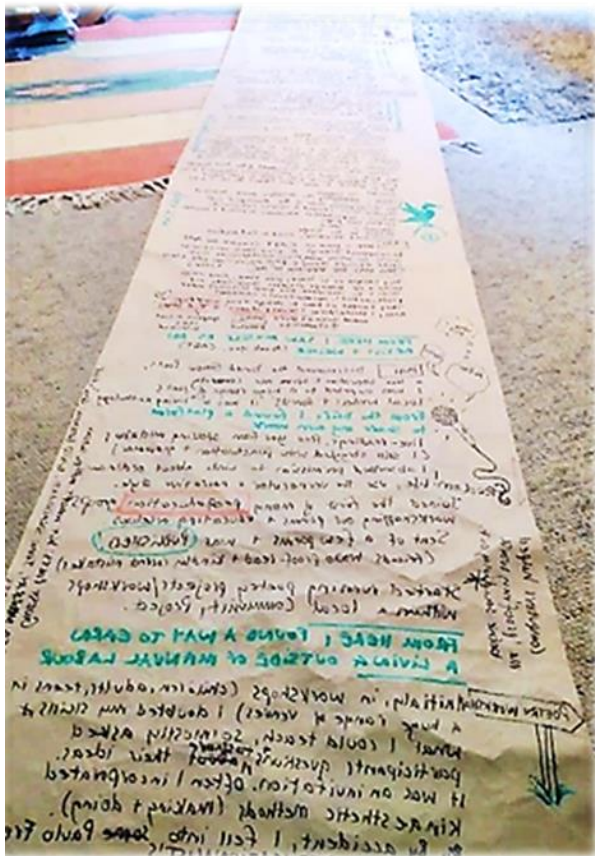
Supported by my supervisors, I chose pen and paper, knowing this would expose a paradox: I am a writer who struggles to write. (Please let me draw, you can't misspell a drawing.)

Revision and spellcheck usually conceals what this butcher's paper did not: clumsy handwriting where vernacular battles with politeness and grammar. This underpinned my first reflection: if I can reframe my handwriting as a legacy of a 1970s Secondary Modern school⁷⁰ can I reframe a lifelong attempt to conceal it as translation?

⁶⁸ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

⁶⁹ Haslam, D. (2014) '[Education Is Not the Filling of a Pail but the Lighting of a Fire](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25055410/)'. *The Practitioner*, 258, p. 35. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25055410/> [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

⁷⁰ In the 1950s the bipartite education system used the eleven-plus examination to measure 'intellectual capacity'. Those who passed were filtered into grammar schools. Those who failed attended secondary moderns to be taught basic literacy, mechanics, woodworking and domestic science. The 11 plus pass rate varied according to the number of places at grammar school, which varied from 10% to 30%. Available at: www.michaelrosenblogspot.com [Accessed 20 January 2025].



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I would have overlooked the nuances of this self-consciousness, attributing it to imposter syndrome, but within the supportive perspective of a PhD, this intersection of private/public self within the timeline allowed me to reconsider how struggles with literacy and visual thinking drew me to the polysensory invitation within poetry and art. It also underscored my educational work — designed to challenge the social and personal mediating cognitive factors that disfranchise us from literacy.

Concealing the obstacles placed in the way of literacy is another effect of that unspoken curriculum. A BBC article, ‘Educationism: The Hidden Bias We Often Ignore’, speaks of the psychological restraints of stigma that limited educational resources can generate.⁷² In this context, *hidden* is the most crucial word. Unnamed obstacles demand we cope with them, however, by publicly naming them we advocate for communal change.

⁷¹ Thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

⁷² Hogenboom, M., 2017. Educationism: [The Hidden Bias We Often Ignore](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20171219-the-hidden-judgements-holding-people-back). BBC Education. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20171219-the-hidden-judgements-holding-people-back> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

The Theatre of Shadows

Blindfolded, you take your first step.
There are giggles from your right.
From your left, the squeak of a balloon.
The neck of your red velvet party dress
is tight as a noose. A hand presses you
firmly in the back: *go on then*.

Like the afterimage of a camera flash
the drawing of a donkey lies ahead.
you reach out:
one hand feeling the air, the other
gripping the pin and greasy shoe-string tail.

A thousand children dance in jelly-scented light,
their shadows leap like flames.
Parents are there, you feel them
sharing knowing looks. A hand nudges
guiding, hurrying.
You want to be sick.
You want that prize.

Your fingertips rasp on the paper.
Someone whispers:
Stick in the pin. That's it!
Wherever you think.

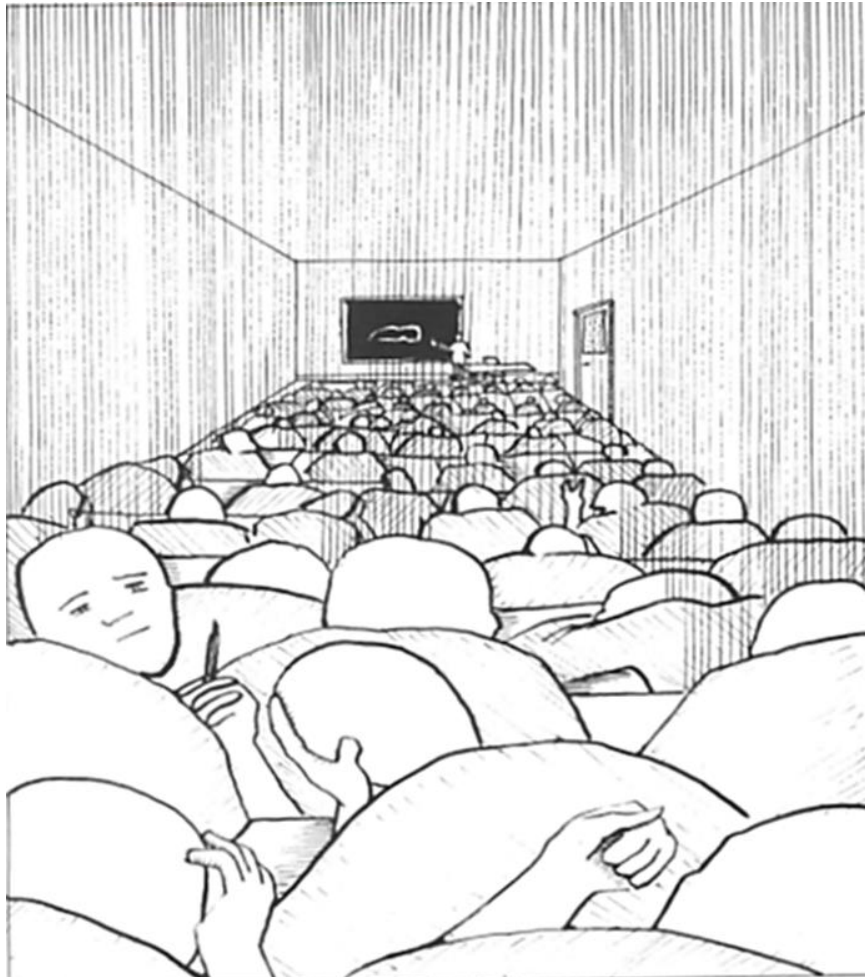
You pray: *please let me get it right.*
Or at least
let me get it so wrong
*people will think it's funny.*⁷³

The communication style of children is a sophisticated combination of gestures and physical and linguistic metaphors, punctuated with a myriad of ways of checking-in on the listener (*d'you know what I mean?*).⁷⁴ To underpin references to body language, I refer to

⁷³ Coe, M., 2000. *Pinning the Tail on the Donkey*. Liverpool: Spike. Highly Commended for the Forward Prizes First Collection 2001.

⁷⁴ Macuch Silva, V., Holler, J., Ozyurek, A. and Roberts, S.G. (2020) '[Multimodality and the Origin of a Novel Communication System in Face-to-face Interaction](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.182056)'. *Royal Society Open Science*. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.182056> [Accessed: 10 September 2024].

anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell who estimates that humans can make and recognise around 250,000 facial expressions.⁷⁵ The image below, is taken from my graphic novel, *Red Shoes*, which is used as an educational resource for young people who are disfranchised from literacy. This image illustrates the passivity of a large class.



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Language abilities may, according to theorists such as Noam Chomsky, be rooted in our evolution,⁷⁷ but learning to write words down is a recent development that must be bolted

⁷⁵ Macuch Silva, V., Holler, J., Ozyurek, A. and Roberts, S.G. (2020) '[Multimodality and the Origin of a Novel Communication System in Face-to-face Interaction](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.182056)'. *Royal Society Open Science*. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.182056> [Accessed: 10 September 2024].

⁷⁶ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

⁷⁷ Hoque, M. (2021) 'The Universal Grammar Theory: Noam Chomsky's Contribution to Second Language (SL) Education', *The Journal of EFL Education and Research*, 6, pp. 57-62. Available at: <https://www.edrc-jeffler.org/images/submitted/Volume6/6.-Dr-Md-Enamul-Hoque-The-Universal-Grammar-Theory--Noam-Chomskys-Contribution-to-Second-Language-SL-Education-.pdf> [Accessed: 20 January 2025].

on. Theorist and semiotician, Gunther Kress, argues that all communication is multimodal, suggesting that learning to write should be taught through a range of creative routes. In his thought-provoking book, *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths into Literacy*, he proposes that, “[t]he paths into writing are many, enormously complex, and long. It is the adult’s simplistic view which obscures this.”⁷⁸ Kress is right to call for multiple creative paths into literacy. I think it would be equally useful to pin down which adults still hold this obscuring and ‘simplistic view’.

We are taught that written language holds more validity than images, yet prioritising literacy, and placing it at the heart of education, ensures the repercussions of being denied it are profound.⁷⁹ I do not question the value of literacy — much of my career has been in literacy advocacy — what does interest me is: why continue to teach it in ways that are more likely to fail?⁸⁰

Like many poets in schools, I have participated in insightful projects which have researched this very issue; some even funded by the UK Department of Education.⁸¹ So, I know that those responsible for the UK curricula, such as the Secretary of State and Department for Education, have as much access to research into the power of creativity as has anyone else.⁸² This begs the question, if the arts are *proven* to support literacy in schools, why cut them?⁸³ Quantifiable, testable subjects do make learning easier to evidence, however, as

⁷⁸ Kress, G. (1997) *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy*. Taylor & Francis Group, p.8. Available at: ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷⁹ Stephens WB. Literacy in England, Scotland, and Wales, 1500–1900. *History of Education Quarterly*. 1990;30(4):545-571. doi:10.2307/368946 [Accessed 21st June 2024].

⁸⁰ Wheal, S. (2022) 'Focus on Phonics to Teach Reading Is Failing Children, Says Landmark Study'. *The Guardian*, 19 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/19/focus-on-phonics-to-teach-reading-is-failing-children-says-landmark-study> [Accessed: 12 September 2024].

⁸¹ Wilson, A., 2011. University Of Exeter Research Project, [The Write Team](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/projects/socialsciences/index.php?id=73). Available at: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/projects/socialsciences/index.php?id=73> [Accessed 20 July 2024].

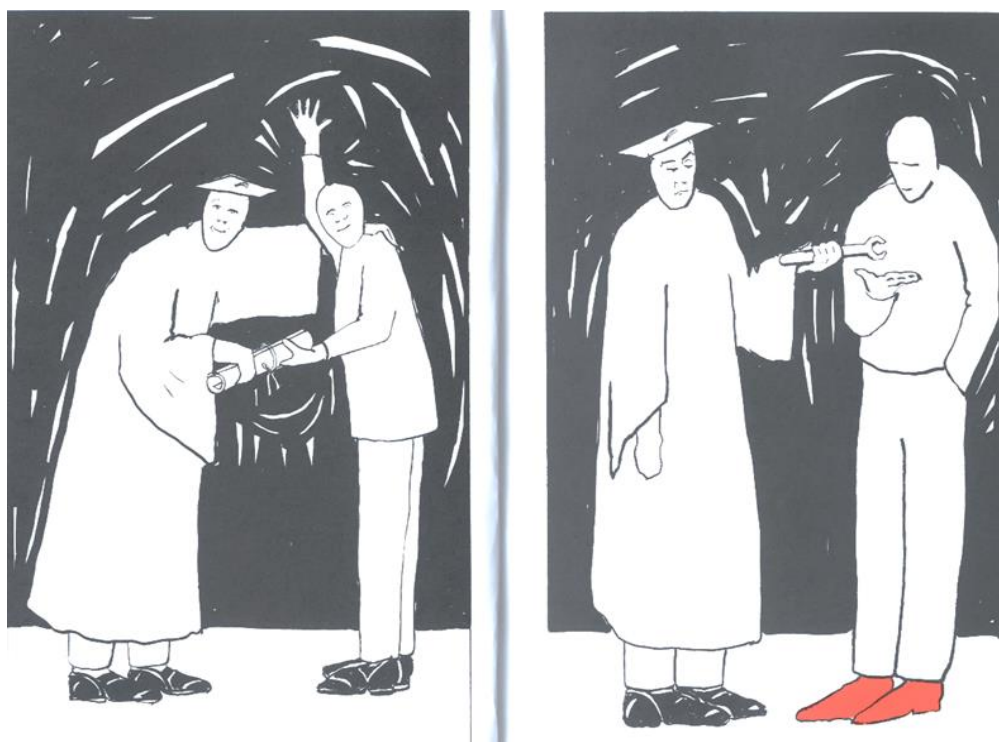
⁸² Safford, K. and Barrs, M. (2005) *Creativity and Literacy: Many Routes to Meaning*. London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. Available at: <https://clpe.org.uk/research/creativity-and-literacy-many-routes-meaning> [Accessed: 01 July 2024].

⁸³ BBC News, 2023. Teaching Creativity Benefits Teachers and Pupils. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-67296878> [Accessed 20 March 2025].

national curricula also reflect political ideology, we must also take into account how much education any government wants its voters to have.⁸⁴

Educationalist, Ken Robinson goes further: “[i]f you run an education system based on standardisation and conformity, which suppresses individuality, imagination and creativity, don’t be surprised if that’s what it does.”⁸⁵ In his book, *Out of Our Minds*, he writes:

It is often said that education and training are the keys to the future. They are, but a key can be turned in two directions. Turn it one way and you lock resources away, even from those they belong to. Turn it the other way and you release resources and give people back to themselves.⁸⁶



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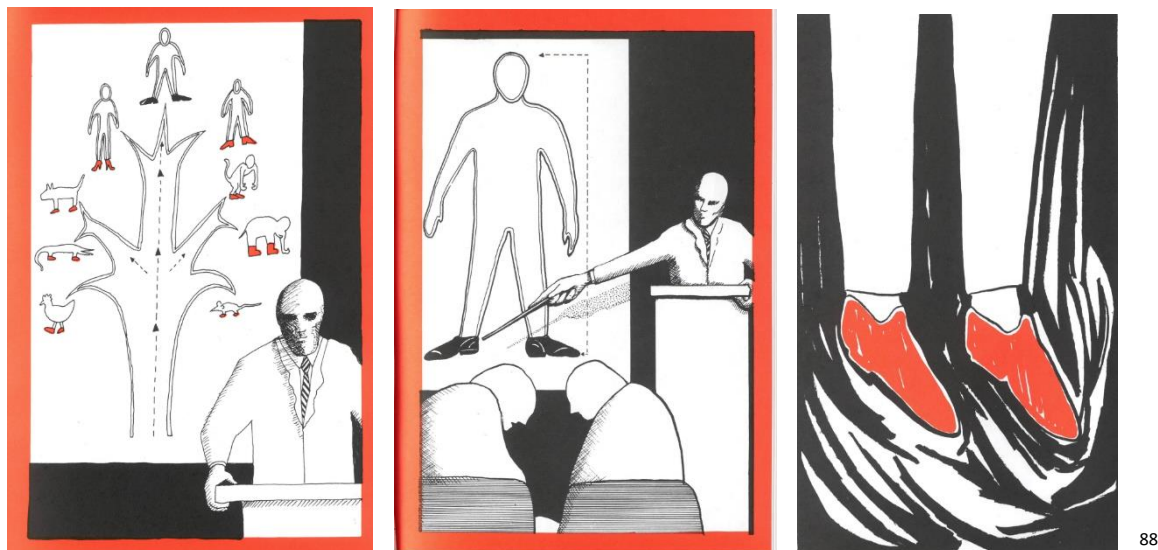
⁸⁴ Mundy, K., Green, A., Lingard, B. and Verger, A. (eds) (2016) *Handbook of Global Education Policy*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, p. 35. Available at: ProQuest Ebook Central [Accessed: 21 January 2025].

⁸⁵ Robinson, K., 2010. 'The education system is a dangerous myth'. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/sir-ken-robinson-education-system-dangerous-myth> [Accessed 10 June 2024].

⁸⁶ Robinson, K. (2011) *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*. 2nd ed. Chichester, West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Ltd., p 7.

⁸⁷ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

The previously mentioned art teacher Mr Kelner, in welcoming our input, did more than teach; he let us be teachers too. Educator and proponent of critical thinking, bell hooks, has long campaigned for this kind of dialogical conversation between teacher and pupil. *Red Shoes* (1997) celebrates this unspoken dialogic, sharing silent stories via body language. The images above and below are from the book's section on education.



My first experience of a poetry anthology was transformative. I found it on a desk in school, its tattered cover barely readable. It was *Junior Voices* edited by Geoffrey Summerfield.⁸⁹ Part of a series on teaching poetry, it combined edgy black and white photographs with poems — very few of which were written specifically for children. I sat up, immediately recognising this as an invitation. For the first time in my school life, I was being asked, not for the right answer, but for *my* answer.

Central to my teaching pedagogy is valuing the democratic, dialogic space for storytelling as provided within art. This theoretical strand runs through all my work, and *Red Shoes* (1997), accepted into the Anne Frank Library chronicles how, when forbidden to use words, Red Shoe people tell their stories through pictures.⁹⁰ The book became a teaching aide to celebrate visual literacy and to stimulate storytelling in youth groups across the UK.

⁸⁸ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

⁸⁹ Summerfield, G. (ed.), 1970. *Junior Voices*. London: Penguin Books.

⁹⁰ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*, Good Stuff Press, Liverpool.

Speaking of the profound value of storytelling in her seminal book, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, bell hooks writes:

I had been trained to believe that anyone who relied on a personal story as evidence upholding or affirming an idea could never really be a scholar and/or an intellectual, according to dominator thinking via schools of higher learning. Telling a personal story to document or frame an argument was a sign that one was not dealing in hard facts, that one was not scientific enough.⁹¹

But what is left but stories if history does not reflect us? The stories recorded in *Red Shoes* are intersectional and layered, shared by people in my community (this process is fully explored in the chapter *Illustration and Visual Literacy*). As a catalyst for critical thought, art has the power to deny or reaffirm, and the act of listening/observing needed to create it is an education in itself. As bell hooks says:

Active listening draws us closer together. Students listen to one another's stories with an intensity that is not always present during a lecture or class discussion. One of the ways we become a learning community is by sharing and receiving one another's stories; it is a ritual of communion that opens our minds and hearts.⁹²

⁹¹ hooks, b. (2009) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, p. 49.

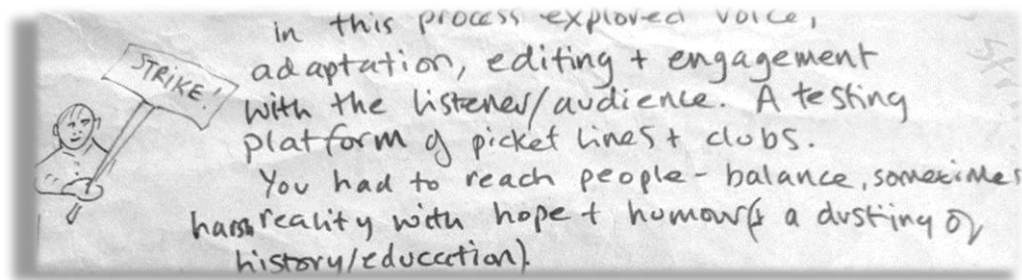
⁹² hooks, b. (2009) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, p. 52.



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⁹³ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

An Education Through Activism



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In the 1980s I took part in political movements such as protests at the siting of American nuclear missiles at the UK RAF base, Greenham Common (1981 onwards)⁹⁵ and the 1984-5 UK Miners' Strike.⁹⁶ Seeing mounted riot police charge down Whitehall at a national miners' rally, causing members of the brass bands to fling aside instruments and run, was a visceral experience. We scattered up side streets, bracing against walls to create protected spaces for children. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's libertarian policies were extreme, as were the responses to perceived resistance.⁹⁷

It was against this backdrop of post industrialisation and mass unemployment, with unions labelled as "the enemy within"⁹⁸ that I was laid off for forming or even joining a union; such were the costs of speaking up. However, an education that made a professional career path unlikely, only increased my willingness to risk-take.

Political/direct action brought with it a sense of global 'sub-culture', with an ecosystem of art, history and music, and I discovered the work of Brecht, Victor Yara, Gil Scott-Heron,

⁹⁴ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

⁹⁵ Barber, E. (2024) *The Women Who Took on the British Government's Nuclear Programme*. Imperial War Museum. Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-women-who-took-on-the-british-governments-nuclear-programme> [Accessed: 04 May 2024].

⁹⁶ University of Oxford (2025) *The Miners' Strike of 1984-5: An Oral History*. Available at: <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/miners-strike-1984-5-oral-history> [Accessed: 12 April 2024].

⁹⁷ History is Made at Night (2022) *Riot in Whitehall: London Miners Demo*. Available at: <https://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.com/2022/08/riot-in-whitehall-london-miners-demo.html> [Accessed: 20 January 2025].

⁹⁸ Reuters (2013) '[Britain's Margaret Thatcher, in her own words](#)', *World Edition*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/britains-margaret-thatcher-in-her-own-words-idUSBRE9370LI> [Accessed: 02 August 2024].

Christie Moore, Jacques Brel, Woody Guthrie, Sweet Honey and the Rock, Dick Gaughan and UB40 (named after the attendance card needed to sign on).

Recording these experiences through diaries and sketches felt natural and helped me to process them. I made a careful note of how a politicised justice system works from the inside, once, while handcuffed to the floor of a police van, and another time, while held at gunpoint by soldiers in a pit at Greenham Common.⁹⁹ These were raw moments: the grittiness of the van floor, seeing scattered sweet wrappers beneath the driver's seat, or the cold mud and dark eye of a rifle muzzle.

These instances, privately recorded in diaries, were also public historic events and portraying them solely as a personal experience can disempower them. While arrests and evictions had individual impact, those demonstrations and squatters' cooperatives also reflect collective power, reinforcing my understanding that the personal is political. The image below, from my monograph, *Sticks and Stones*, considers the word *private*, from the root *privere*, to deprive, cut off from others.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Jones, S. (2018) [Greenham Common Women Everywhere](http://www.greenhamwomeneverywhere.co.uk). Transcript from: www.greenhamwomeneverywhere.co.uk [Accessed: 15 September 2024].

¹⁰⁰ Coe, M. (1992) *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick.



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These experiences of activism fed into my poetry and in the poem, *Arrested* (2004), by using second rather than first person point of view, the poem shifts from autobiography to a more collective representation.¹⁰² Again, this reflects a concept of 'art-as-witness', and an invitation to consider social as well as personal context.

¹⁰¹ Coe, M. (1992) *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick, (study of the word: *private*).

¹⁰² Parker, J. (2012) '[In Their Own Words: On Writing in Second Person](#)', *Connotations: A Journal for Literary Debate*, 21(2-3), pp. 165-76.

Arrested

The sky tastes like gravel. Your teeth,
raw in your cheek, bite down on gravel.
His boots, your knees,
make the noise of gravel.

Somewhere near your face
a walkie-talkie clicks and hisses.
Chunks of your hair are caught
on the silver buttons of his sleeve.
Gloved hands fold you

neatly as origami. You grow
a wing. Your arm, bent
sharply backwards lifts you
on an impossible
updraught of pain.

You must fly from this.
He thrusts you forward,
yet, like a boy rehearsing
the launch of a paper aeroplane
he doesn't let go.

The van is partitioned into six cells,
each the size of a Portaloo.
You have a cigarette but no lighter.
Your neighbour folds a matchbox flat
and slides it under.

At traffic lights, you see
through the blur of reinforced glass,
shapes of ordinary people
going about a world you have fallen off.¹⁰³

Another method used within my narrative poems, are narrators who belong, yet are 'other'. I contextualise this with the theories of the philosopher and literary critic, Michael Bakhtin who celebrates the creative outsider.¹⁰⁴ In a quotation from his 1970 essay, 'Response to the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff,' he says, "[i]n order to understand, it is immensely important for

¹⁰³ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

¹⁰⁴ Reflection on this section of the timeline illustrated resonance with Bakhtin's theory on the dialogic, emphasising our constate state of dialogue with other people - with everything - as our interaction with the world depends on our unique and place within in. Bakhtin believed that we can better see your own exterior via others' perspectives. Robinson, A. (2011) Bakhtin in Theory: Bakhtin: [Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia](https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/), *Ceasefire Magazine*. Available at: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/> [Accessed: 20 January 2025].

the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding — in time, in space, in culture.”¹⁰⁵ The following poem explores the role of traditional outsider: a court jester.

Fool

I rule by dividing men
from their pomp.
Bare-arsed, I slide up
their ladder of order, mingling
with the life-takers, lawmakers.

Touching themselves under velvet gowns,
they weigh up the size of my insult.
And in that narrow-eyed moment
there is no sound
but the faintest tremor of my silver bells.

Then they laugh,
for I am the lunatic,
the Cardinal of Numskulls.
The Lord of Misrule.

Look! The Pope is giving birth.
Panting, I squat
and drop a squirming puppy
from beneath my gown.
A circle of purple faces defines my stage.

It has its father's eyes!
The faces swell, burst.
Through showers of spittle
I see back teeth, judge
each suck and blow of breath,
measuring... Now it is time
to bow.

In the quiet of the passageway
I grip the iron door handle,
lay my forehead against the wood.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Kumamoto, C.D. (2002) 'Bakhtin's Others and Writing as Bearing Witness to the Eloquent "I"', [*College Composition and Communication*](#), 54(1), pp. 66-87.

¹⁰⁶ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

This concept of inside and outside — *indwelling* — is further explored in the next poem by asking us to witness the preciousness of the everyday, seconds before destruction. Hope is suggested by stressing that poetry has no power, but instead *is* a power, as described in the sub-titular quote taken from Auden's, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats and Ireland*.

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where
executives/ Would never want to tamper, flows on south/ From ranches of
isolation and the busy griefs,/ Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives, /
A way of happening, a mouth.¹⁰⁷

For Poetry Makes Nothing Happen

"it survives, a way of happening, a mouth." W.H. Auden

When the olive trees stand unbroken
and black smoke has not risen
from a village that has not yet fallen,
let nothing happen but sunlight
playing its tricks between leaves,

and this old man at the table
who does not weep or run and hide,
only wipe his mouth with his sleeve
after a meal of sweet wine and ripe tomatoes.

When oiled bullets lie boxed in rows
and maps rest, the borders not
arrowed in red, let nothing happen except
leaves being brushed from a white tablecloth
and talk about worn tyres and fat avocados.

A round pebble is placed on the table
to roll in an unsteady path toward a girl
who glances at the boy. Let nothing happen.
Please let nothing happen.¹⁰⁸

Reflecting on the concept of stories and art-as-witness has revealed how much I relish it.
Poetry is as much about observing as it is about writing, and the following three works

¹⁰⁷ Auden, W.H. (2024) *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*. Poets.org. Available at:
<https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats> [Accessed: 03 December 2024].

¹⁰⁸ Coe, M. (2016) *There Will be Cherries*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

investigate this. The first, set in a museum, explores one era per stanza and creates distance by inviting us to observe the observers. The exhibits/eras in the poem are experienced through the lens of a cleaner (reinforcing that whatever the era, it is predominantly women who clean it).

Dusting Through the Ages

In a white overall and gloves
she cleans the Victorian room.
High-collared ancestors
scowl down on this laborious task, their hands
frozen in their laps, while hers
move intimately round the gilded frames.

Twentieth century people pass,
insubstantial as spirits, but still treading through
real dirt and dust. A stuffed spaniel sleeps
by the red light-bulb fire, but
varnished cakes don't drop crumbs.

The fen worker's home is easier to keep:
stone flags, shepherd's crook, coffin-shaped crib.
A brace of motheaten rabbits
hang from the beam, guarded by the sheepdog,
whose begging glass eyes need a daily wipe
allowing them to catch the light.

The keening-wind plays in a constant loop
as a family in neon anoraks rustles past.
The child points at the woman:
Look mummy, a ghost.
Glenn Miller's *Little Brown Jug*
echoes up the stairs. There's still the 1940s to do.¹⁰⁹

The illustration below is from my monograph, *Sticks and Stones*. It represents the word *economics* the etymological source of which is *household management*. The maid indwells two worlds, and I use perspective to place us in hers.

¹⁰⁹ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.



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Art invites us to engage across time, and this viewer's engagement ensures the work lives. Poets read this beckoning finger, leaning in to reinforce or subvert by asking *what if*...? The following narrative poem responds to a Hogarth etching from 1726 which portrays a scandal of the time: Mary Tofts falsifying giving birth to rabbits.¹¹¹ The poem, from the point of view of the husband, asks *what if* this event were true?

¹¹⁰ Coe, M. (1992) *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick.

¹¹¹ Hogarth, W. (1726) *Satirical Print*. Etching. [The British Museum](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1847-0508-19). Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1847-0508-19 [Accessed: 01 November 2024].

When Mary Toft Gave Birth to Rabbits

Hogarth (1726)

The midwife lifted her eyes,
then raised her bloodied hands, cupped
and offering me the chance
to cry out or fall in love
as fathers do.

I am a Waterloo sweep
who knows how to lay out sheets;
the weight of brushes and rods.
I've seen tumbling rooks
clap up a storm of soot.

But my stare makes no sense of this:
no crumpled face,
no fists, no kicking feet.
This baby is in six parts,
each stirring, each one blind.

The midwife fills her lap
and with an apron corner
begins to rub
squirming scraps of fur.
She nods to the other three.

There are many things a father can do
when faced with this.
I can think of none
and tugging out a shirt tail,
begin to smooth a tiny head, back, ears.¹¹²

The illustration below, is from my children's collection, *Belonging Street*, and further develops the visual aspect of this leaning-in and asking *what if* sharing stories were as easy as pouring them?

¹¹² Coe, M., 2009. *Clay*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.



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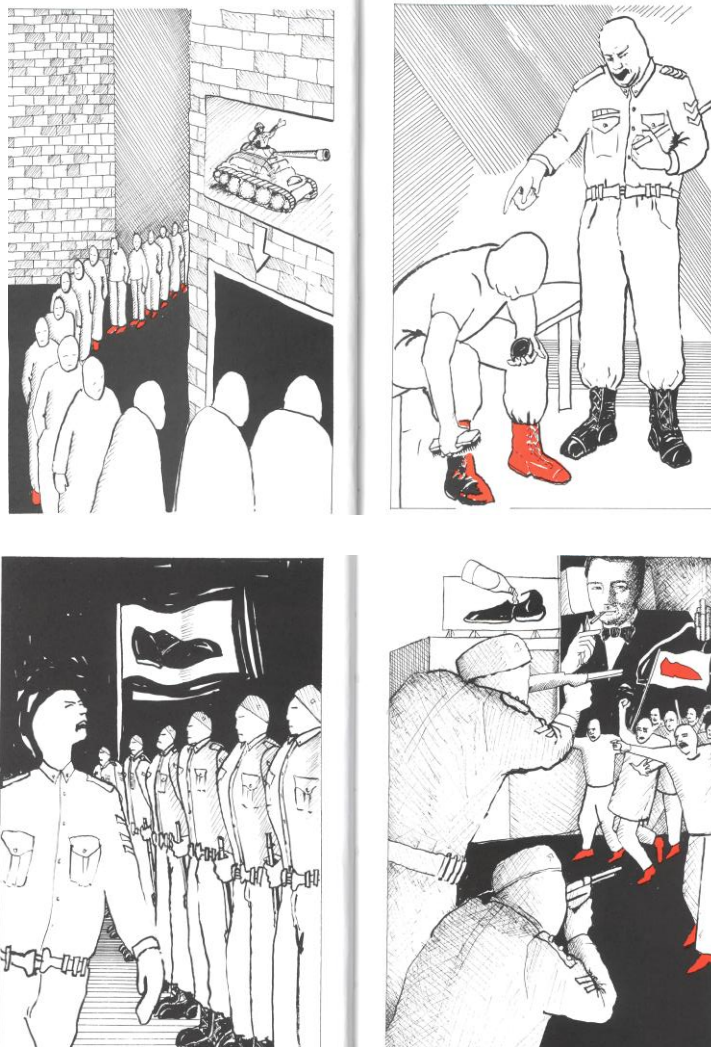
It was during these decades of activism that I discovered community arts. If a placard was to be painted or poster printed, my hand went up. Liverpool has a vibrant culture of music, theatre and poetry, and I joined Merseyside's *Left Theatre Trust*, a descendant of the nation-wide workers' Unity Theatre movement (formed in 1936).¹¹⁴ During a wave of unsurpassed industrial closures on Merseyside, our stages were picket lines, fielding requests for songs by Woodie Guthrie, Pete and Peggy Seeger and Billy Bragg.¹¹⁵ We transcribed for the stage scenes from novelists such as John Steinbeck and Robert Tressell, and experimented with 'reportage theatre': a multimodal genre combining newspaper extracts with witness statements, poems, music and projected images.

¹¹³ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

¹¹⁴ Unity Theatre Trust (2024) *Unity Theatre Trust*. Available at: <https://www.unitytheatretrust.org.uk> [Accessed: 07 November 2024].

¹¹⁵ Smithsonian Folkways (2024) *Classic Labour Songs from the Smithsonian*. Smithsonian Folkways Catalogue. Available at: <https://www.smithsonian.org> [Accessed: 07 November 2024].

In the highly policed 1989-90 protests against the UK Poll Tax ¹¹⁶ our group explored 'invisible theatre', as outlined in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.¹¹⁷ Developed to resist dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina, it incorporated audience participation in steering the narrative, to the extent that the audience became protagonist or *spect-actor* (a term coined by Boal).¹¹⁸



¹¹⁶ The National Archives (2024) *Revolt: The Story of England's First Protest*. Available at: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk> [Accessed: 29 October 2024].

¹¹⁷ Campbell, A. (2019) *The Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal*. London: Bloomsbury.

¹¹⁸ 'Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Rancière, and the Twenty-First Century Spectator', *Performance Matters*, 5(2). Available at: <https://performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/article/view/159> [Accessed: 09 November 2024].

¹¹⁹ Coe, M. (1997) *Red Shoes: A Graphic Novel*. Liverpool: Good Stuff Press.

All art demands critical participation, and in this sense all aesthetic practices are political. Cartooning and graphic art routinely use satire, a reliance on exaggeration and irony. A tradition that goes as far back as the satirical cartoonist James Gillray (1756-1815)¹²⁰ and is just crucial for contemporary artists such as Banksy.¹²¹ The above extracts from *Red Shoes*, are from the section on mass unemployment, where the officer's order to mask the recruits' red shoes satirises changes of identity needed when joining the army.

As Bakhtin says in the *Dialogic Imagination*, "[b]y manipulating the effects of context [...] it is, for instance, very easy to make even the most serious utterance comical."¹²² The following poem *Why Don't They Say What They Mean?* (1986) is derived from government guidelines recommending the public *avert their eyes* from the flash accompanying nuclear attack. The poem is from *Police State* a poster-style book cataloguing Sue Coe's artwork and using my text. The original guidelines are printed alongside the poem. In this way, the intertextual connotations are subverted by poetic-form line breaks and replacing the word *flash* with the phrase, *the destruction of humanity*.¹²³ Here is that original text, followed by the poem.

The flash can be most easily dealt with. DO NOT LOOK at the flash or DAMAGE TO THE EYES will result. The normal reaction of a person sensing the flash is to turn and look at it. In war this reaction must be resisted. The flash is many times brighter than the sun, and may last several seconds, the flash will penetrate curtains and will be seen indoors. KEEP THE EYES SHUT, turn away from the flash and take temporary cover until the flash stops.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Paul Mellon Centre (2024) [James Gillray: A Revolution in Satire](https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/about/news/james-gillray-a-revolution-in-satire-now-published). Yale University. Available at: <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/about/news/james-gillray-a-revolution-in-satire-now-published> [Accessed: 03 December 2024].

¹²¹ Banksy Explained (2024) [Graffiti, Consumerism and Capitalism](https://banksyexplained.com/issue/graffiti-consumerism-and-capitalism/). Available at: <https://banksyexplained.com/issue/graffiti-consumerism-and-capitalism/> [Accessed: 14 December 2024].

¹²² Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, p. 286.

¹²³ Coe, S. and Coe, M. (1986) [Police State](#). Virginia, USA: Anderson Gallery.

¹²⁴ Coe, S. and Coe, M. (1986) [Police State](#). Virginia, USA: Anderson Gallery.

Why Don't They Say What They Mean?

The destruction of humanity can be most easily dealt with.
DO NOT LOOK at the destruction of humanity
or DAMAGE TO THE EYES will result.
The normal reaction of a person sensing the destruction of humanity
is to turn and look at it. In war this reaction must be resisted.
The destruction of humanity is many times brighter than the sun,
and may last several seconds, The destruction of humanity
will penetrate curtains and will be seen indoors.
KEEP THE EYES SHUT,
turn away from the destruction of humanity
and take temporary cover
until the destruction of humanity has stopped.¹²⁵

In the 1980s, Liverpool was buzzing with performance poetry¹²⁶ letting me delve into the intersection between performer and audience (reading while being read). It is an intimate and dialogical process in which audiences, through heckling, gifting silence or applause, become *spect-actor*. In the argy-bargy of open floors in pubs and clubs, watching poets wield rhythm and tone, I learned how far to push a poem (and how glazed eyes signal the need to edit), while absorbing ways to balance a 'set': a transferable skill when editing anthologies and collections.

A certain snobbery hovers around the popularisation of arts and sciences. Performance poetry has, in the past, been dismissed as the poetics of a marginalised genre. Yet I know it as a dynamic force of linguistics. To underpin this, I reference Richard Bauman and Charles L Briggs in their influential essay '*Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Social Life*', where they note that:

The balance between these two views shifted in favour of poetics in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a new emphasis on performance directed attention away from study of the formal patterning and symbolic content of texts to the emergence of verbal art in the social interaction between performers and audiences.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Coe, S. and Coe, M. (1986) [Police State](#). Virginia, USA: Anderson Gallery.

¹²⁶ Lucie-Smith, E. (1967) 'The Liverpool Scene', *Critical Survey*, 3(2), pp. 90-91.

¹²⁷ Bauman, R. & Briggs, C. (2003). [Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Social Life. Annual Review of Anthropology](#). 19. 59-88. 10.1146/annurev.an.19.100190.000423, P 59.

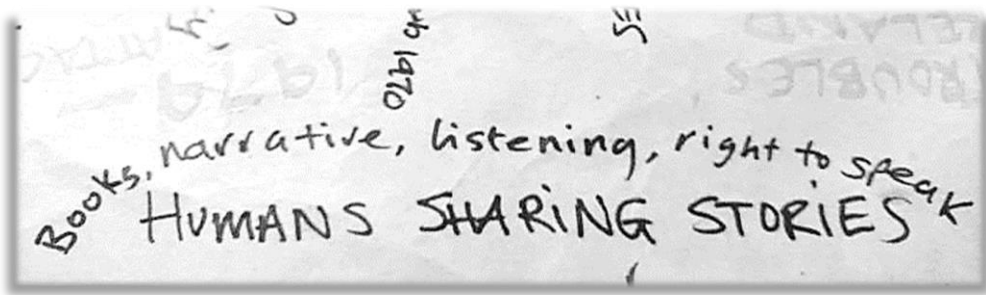
Rather than a back door to literature, performance poetry hefts the house from its foundations and turns it round.¹²⁸ It is a global and democratic means of communication that defies censorship.¹²⁹ Unrestricted by filters of formal education or class, Merseyside poets wrote about philosophy, race, high heels, being laid off, the latest news and Greek myths. It was here that I found accessible routes to advancement through peer education, moving from 'open floor spots' to 'supporting' for a guest reader, eventually becoming a guest poet myself, and I am immensely indebted to Liverpool's Dead Good Poets for making this possible.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ [Spoken Word Performance: Does Democracy Need Poets](https://www.poets.org). [online] Available at: <https://www.poets.org> [Accessed 4 May 2024].

¹²⁹ The Poetry Foundation, 2024. Poems of Protest, Resistance and Empowerment. [online] Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org> [Accessed 14 November 2024].

¹³⁰ The Dead Good Poets Society, 2024. [Dead Good Poets](https://www.facebook.com/deadgoodpoetsociety). [Facebook] 20 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/deadgoodpoetsociety> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

An Education Through the Workplace



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Technique is the test of sincerity.

Ezra Pound¹³²

If there are problems on assembly lines — work backwards. I do not apply this concept to poetry with the goal of uniformity as each poem requires its own (unmakeable) element of mystery. Nonetheless, in contrast to opaque concepts of innate talent, knowing skills are learned was invaluable. Preciousness or rejection can paralyse writers, however, the pragmatism of learning to learn fosters the confidence needed to risk-take.

When I took up a weekend pottery class, its physical, elemental nature only served to reinforce this. No matter how thorough your technique, an exploding pot in the kiln demands pragmatism rather than shattered ego. This lesson was so profound I named my fourth poetry collection, *Clay* (2009). Here is the titular poem:

Clay

it melts metal this heat
it puddles sand
I will send my work to hell hoping
its secret bubble of fear
won't explode

spreading cool orange blood
the clay bends
my fingers to its heart
draws my palms flat

¹³¹ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

¹³² Pound, E., 1962. The Art of Poetry. Interviewed by D. Hall. *The Paris Review*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theparisreview.org> [Accessed 2 June 2024].

against its smooth sides
spins me
to dip in the well of its 'o'

the weight of raw meat
smelling of rain
it is given from the earth knowing
it will be returned
gravity tugging it back to smash
curves to points
points to dust
but now

it rises up
a slippery stem of an idea pushing
through my clumsy fists¹³³

American ceramicist, Ken Ferguson, spoke of intentionally breaking most of the pots he threw on the wheel: "[t]here was a certain contemplative satisfaction and deep learning to be found in gazing down at your own vessels, smashed in the slaking barrels."¹³⁴ Perhaps this approach made me as much artisan as artist, but demystifying technique and valuing the process certainly helped me teach with conviction. Saying, *I can't do it* without adding the word *yet*, only reinforces the concept that creativity is innate, and learning is instant. As educationalist Ken Robinson says "[i]f you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."¹³⁵

The following three poems address the culture and alienations of labour. From 'coughing the dust of nothing into your fist', to botany in silk and envying those who buy the products you create but cannot afford, all three poems explore the contemporary and historical challenges of physical labour.

¹³³ Coe, M., 2009. *Clay*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

¹³⁴ Ferguson, K., 2007. *Talking with the Wheel*. Arlington, Texas: Silver Gate, p. 12.

¹³⁵ Robinson, K., 2010. *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. London: Penguin, p 104.

Assembling

It makes me think of clowns
twisting sausage dogs from squeaking balloons.
The air is hot with the smell of plastic,
the clock, as far away as the moon.
We sit in rows, back to back,
reading each other's moods
by the hunch of shoulders, a roll of the head.

A tangle of gossip tugs us backwards,
we speak corner-mouthed
as the supervisor passes.
We make nothing,
scraps of nothing collect under our feet.
We cut, fold, build and stack.
Behind us a pen clicks
and ticks off boxes on a clipboard.

One of us is leaving but is keeping it secret.
One of us is in love
with someone they shouldn't be.
On a washroom sink an engagement ring
lies forgotten in a lather of soap bubbles.
Inside a locker door a photo of a baby
is framed with black electrical tape.
Going outside we cough
the dust of nothing into our fists.¹³⁶

The Broderers' Guild Apprentice

The lilies were hell, reticello:
This is the largest piece we have ever created
– Flowers of the World. Embroidered,
it will take four to fold it, five to lift it.
Our old frames toppled
under the weight of the canvas, this one
fills the room with the smell of new wood.

We work in pairs.
My partner stitches from above,
I lie on a bench underneath and pull the needle through.
The taut cloth is my sky, the silver needle quick

¹³⁶ Coe, M., 2009. *Clay*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

as a shooting star. I reach up, push it back.
A sweet rhythm, the pop and hiss of thread,
diminishing loop. Tension
must be exact.

English Bluebells this week. Up there,
in true-colour-daylight, the blues glow.
But I can't see right-side.
In the lamp's hot light, I identify silks by number,
threading, tying-off, passing work from leaf to stalk.
Down here the flowers spread in a tangle
of cross-threads and knots. Fabric-dust
catches in my throat, stitches
are eclipsed by the shadow of my hands.
You have to be patient on the underside,

reach too soon and the needle bites.
Our designs are drawn from live specimens.
The colour and shape of every petal,
every stamen must be understood. There is no room
to be vague with stitches. As apprentices
we learn how Catherine of Aragon worked
in only black and white, but for our Dutch tulip
we used thirty-eight reds.

I visit cathedrals on my Sundays off.
Passing blackened robe-chests I know
what lies within – the months of work,
miles of gold thread. My shoes squeak
as I spin on my heel and wonder
how long it took to gild the vaulted roof.¹³⁷

Shop Girls

I remember the roughness of women's heels,
the smell and rasp of tights as their toes slid
into unyielding new shoes.
White tissue rustled as we unboxed each style,
presenting it for approval like a bottle of wine.

¹³⁷ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press (this poem won the 2003 East Street Poets International Poetry Competition).

Lips pursed, the women posed
on six-inch heels, while we crouched
on nylon carpet, looking up and longing
for them to trip over and die.
Flat-footed and tired, we coveted those shoes,

so high and sharp, that wherever
you walked you left a perforated line.
At lunchbreak, elbows on sticky formica,
we totted up wages and fantasised
about our big night. The shoes

would be magnificent:
spiked and glossy; virgin
soles unscratched. Like racehorses
we would clip-clop the streets. Elegant and tall,
as if filmed by someone kneeling at our feet.¹³⁸

The title of the next poem *Packers Untie* (2000) was an error (it should read *Unite*) and it reflects the repetition of manual work, the to-and-fro rhythms of speech and the bubbling subversiveness of women told what to do. In this packing centre I wore an earpiece connected to a small portable radio, perhaps hoping to absorb the skills of those who wrote the afternoon play. A radio was forbidden, so I told the foreman it was a hearing aid, and he would shout instructions into my overall pocket.

Packers of the World Untie

It was the size of a football pitch,
windowless against the clock of the sky.
Time passed in slow shifts, one-week contracts,
passing in blue check, unbuttoning or buttoning up.
From dusty chains hung fluorescents
that added years in an instant, stripping
make-up laid over bad nights, bad rows and bad pay.

I once asked a workmate a question
across busy packing hands, repeating it
until with a start, her eyes refocussed.
“Sorry,” she said. “I was miles away,”

¹³⁸ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

then laughing: "If I was here, I'd go mad."
Sitting was not allowed (except in pricing)
but legs complained where we didn't dare:
veins sagging like baggy tights, collecting
round calves in lumpy blue rosettes.

After the first three hours you'd hear the cry:
"That's the childminder paid for - what I earn now's me own!"
"Yours and the rent man." "Him and me old man!"
Clocking off we were shocked by dusk.
Where did the day go? Did none get saved for us?
The bright promise of going home
fades to another night of supper and telly.

Laughter, forbidden, came all the more often,
along with the foreman spreading disapproval
like muck. At the end of one shift,
not knowing we were making it our last,
we scribbled notes - a bit of fun- figuring
if there's packers, someone, somewhere
must unpack: *Packers of the world unite!*
Is it as boring for you as it is for us?
Then giggling like kids, we slipped them in,
each one signed: *From Packers - with love.*¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Coe, M., 2000. *Pinning the Tail on the Donkey*. Liverpool: Spike (Highly Commended for the Forward Prize First Collection 2001).

Writing Poetry for Children



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I have found that children are more prepared to accept poetry than adults.

Matthew Sweeney¹⁴¹

In 2006, I won the Ilkley Poetry Festival prize — a place on a residential writing course with Arvon. I chose their Moniak Mhor centre in Scotland, where poet Carol Ann Duffy¹⁴² was running Arvon's first course on writing poetry for children. I was new to this genre but felt stirrings of liberation about this door-to-somewhere-else. Twenty years on, I know it not as a door but a hatch in an aeroplane where *jump* is the only rule. Naturally, after a poem is written, comes the rigour of editing, where you may, or may not, consider appropriateness of topic and language for various age-groups. Nonetheless beware of your bias. We may assume *what* a child reader is, but we rarely know *who* they are.



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¹⁴⁰ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journaling process, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Sweeney, M., 2018. '[I Prefer Not to Dwell on My Demise](https://www.irishherald.ie)'. *Irish Herald*. [online] Homepage, Lifestyle. Available at: <https://www.irishherald.ie> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

¹⁴² The Poetry Archive, *Carol Ann Duffy*, <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/carol-ann-duffy/>

¹⁴³ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

Some poets write for an imagined child, others write for the child they once were. I write for the former but illustrate for the latter. The ex-Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, describes writing for adults and children this way, “...I write what amuses and interests and satisfies both. So, it has to obey those criteria set by my imagined younger self. And it has to meet the quality controls that I apply to my other verse.”¹⁴⁴

The poem below subverts this concept of ‘what and who’ by offering advice for ponies and for poets — then swapping one with the other.

Advice for...

ponies

let the pictures flow
what do you see?
taste every sound
 neat?
 tidy?
 no
look at apples
without saying apple
be brave
thoughts can interrupt thinking
run fast
learn to stand still

poets

dream of a land without fences
never show anyone how high you can really jump
accept kindness softly
between the stars and each sweet blade of grass
lie secrets that sound like grasshoppers
let frost make your breath white
know that you are the creator of all rhythms found between stillness
and the rare moments you run so fast
you no longer touch the ground.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Hughes, T., 1995. Interview with H. Neil. ‘[The Nature of Poetry](#)’. *TES Magazine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.tes.com> [Accessed 21 March 2024].

¹⁴⁵ Coe, M., 2011. *If You Could See Laughter*. London: Salt Publications.

In *Monsters Under the Bed*, Andrew Melrose writes that “[c]hildren understand more than they can articulate at all the stages of their life.”¹⁴⁶ Born headfirst into an incomprehensible world, children exist in a powerful state of hyper-learning, drawing on interpretation and the multisensory modes of communication spoken of earlier. If poetry had a habitat, it surely would be here.

The following poem for children celebrates that multisensory, synaesthetic child-view. It is for younger children, so includes a repeated refrain. It was written on that first Arvon course, and many thanks to Carol Ann Duffy and fellow attendees for their insights and encouragement.

Soft as the Blanket

I can touch a coin and tell you
if it's heads or if it's tails.
I can taste a loaf of bread
and swear the baker wore blue shoes.
*Say a daft thing and make me grin,
I'm as soft as the blanket
you wrapped me in.*

One silver raindrop on my tongue
and I feel the height of its fall.
If I brush a feather along my wrist
I know the miles it flew.
*Say a daft thing and make me grin,
I'm as soft as the blanket
you wrapped me in.*

If I touch my lips to a stem of grass
I know what hour it was cut.
If I smell a yellow pencil
I'll tell you the last word it wrote.
*Say a daft thing and make me grin,
I'm as soft as the blanket
you wrapped me in.*

I can taste in a grain of salt
the whale-songs of the sea.
If I touch your sleepy head I know

¹⁴⁶ Melrose, R., 2012. *Monsters Under the Bed: Critically Investigating Early Years Writing*. London: Routledge.

the colour of your dreams.
*Say a daft thing and make me grin,
I'm as soft as the blanket
you wrapped me in.*¹⁴⁷

Writing for children has influenced me deeply. Being exposed to the subtle, creative intellect of child-readers has enriched my view of adult-readers. It taught me how poetic insights are liberated by the confidence/permission to think aloud and revealed the infectious shine of those whose creative response is invited and respected. In common with those reluctant to define what poetry for children is, I can only describe it this way: consider the subject and tone of contemporary poetry for adults — well, poetry for children includes some of that *and everything else*.

Ted Hughes described writing poetry for children as 'a curious occupation', going on to say that the most curious thing about it is:

[...] that we think children need a special kind of poetry. Each writer for children has his own idea of what that is.... Publishers, of course, know that poetry is not sold to children — it is sold to their parents or teachers. The author thinks he knows what they want, or need, the teachers or parents think they know best. And the publisher thinks he knows best what poet & teacher think they know best. And we all think differently.¹⁴⁸

Interestingly, one of the groups Hughes mentions here both supports and inhibits poetry. Within the more functionalistic strands of education, using poetry solely to improve literacy, or to test objective analysis, can inoculate us against poetry for life. Yet, when approached creatively, poetry wields irresistible potential within education, for its form/scaffold offers such a clear invitation to aid new writers venturing into their own unknown. To contextualise this the poem below, *Find You, Find You*, (2020) contains a wordplay structure exploring the etymology of birds' names.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Coe, M., 2011. *If You Could See Laughter*. London: Salt Publications. Recipient of the Children's Literature in Primary Education Highly Commended Award.

¹⁴⁸ Paul, L., 2005. "Writing Poetry for Children Is a Curious Occupation": Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. *The Horn Book Magazine*, 81(3), pp. 257-267.

Find You, Find You

Chough, whooper swan, curlew,
kittiwake, chiffchaff, cuckoo,
hear you, hear you, hear you.

Redwing, blackbird, yellowhammer,
snowy owl, greenfinch, goldcrest,
paint you, paint you, paint you.

Turnstone, wagtail, woodpecker,
flycatcher, dipper, shoveler,
what do, what do, what do.

Rock pipit, reed bunting, marsh harrier,
sea eagle, willow warbler, tree sparrow
find you, find you, find you.

Turtle dove, nightingale, puffin
linnet, song thrush, merlin,
save you, save you, save you.¹⁵⁰

In the 1980s, children's poetry in libraries and bookshops was categorised under *Jokes & Humour*. Speaking of poetic styles for children poet Philip Gross¹⁵¹ put it this way, "... there don't have to be two separate worlds of poetry — one which is serious, sensitive and high-minded, and the other which is entertaining but like fast food." ¹⁵²

The connection between children's poetry and humour is traditional, but it is also reinforced by poetry's interactions with schools. There was a living — perhaps the *only* living — to be eked out by poets by working as 'poets-in-schools'. However, with one eye on the budget, a school's approach favours mass exposure and for poets faced with a whole-school assembly of wriggling four to eleven-year-olds, using humour equalled survival.

My imaginary shelf for poetry for young people would perhaps bridge the poetry gap between adults and children. It would certainly feature my favourite poets, most of whom

¹⁵⁰ Coe, M. (2020) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

¹⁵¹ The Poetry Foundation, *Philip Gross*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-gross>

¹⁵² Glover, M., 1994. '[Steak with a Punk Mermaid](#)': Michael Glover Discusses the Child's Eye View with Award-Winning Poet Philip Gross. *The Independent*. [online] Culture Online. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk> [Accessed 10 September 2024].

write for both genres, poets such as Jackie Kay,¹⁵³ Matthew Sweeney, Rabindranath Tagore,¹⁵⁴ Charles Causley,¹⁵⁵ Imtiaz Dharker, Ted Hughes, Carol Ann Duffy. These are writers who may not always know, when beginning a poem, which age group/s will eventually enjoy it. Responding to the lack of critical regard for poetry for children, the Manchester Writing School opened its award, the prestigious 2014 Manchester Poetry Prize, to children's poets across the globe¹⁵⁶ and I invited Philip Gross and Imtiaz Dharker to co-judge it with me. This project resulted in an anthology *Let in the Stars: New Poetry for Children*. As a result, the book and myself as editor, were shortlisted for the CLiPPA prize in 2015.¹⁵⁷ The book featured many wonderful poets, many of whom are still writing for children today. Poets such as Matt Goodfellow, winner of the 2024 CLiPPA Award.¹⁵⁸

Today, after decades of campaigning by UK poets, children's editors, publishers and literacy organisations (and the inimitable umbrella organisation the *Children's Poetry Summit*),¹⁵⁹ most bookshops, have given poetry for children its own shelf.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, in 2020, I was invited to co-curate the children's collection at the Manchester Poetry Library, where poetry for children represents a library within a library.¹⁶¹

These changes and provision of additional support for the genre of poetry for children means that humour is now a joyful option and not a life-raft. Today, the genre encompasses a vast range of styles and poets' voices along with a rich sister-community of designers and illustrators. Looking back, I am awed at how many poets navigate the conflicting demands of

¹⁵³ The Children's Poetry Archive, Jackie Kay, <https://childrens.poetryarchive.org/poet/jackie-kay/>

¹⁵⁴ The Nobel Prize, Rabindranath Tagore, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/biographical/>

¹⁵⁵ The Children's Poetry Archive, Charles Causley, <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/charles-causley/>

¹⁵⁶ Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Writing for Children Prize. The resulting anthology of winners featured many of today's UK's top poets writing for children.

¹⁵⁷ The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2024. Stars. [online] Available at: <https://www.clpe.org.uk> [Accessed 1 January 2024].

¹⁵⁸ The Poetry Society, Matt Goodfellow wins the CLiPPA, <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/news/matt-goodfellow-wins-the-clippa/>

¹⁵⁹ www.childrenspoetrysummit.com Mission Statement, accessed 11/11/24.

¹⁶⁰ Rosen, M., 2019. *A Sense of Revival*. Children's Poetry Summit Blog. [online] Available at: <https://www.childrenspoetrysummit.com> [Accessed 9 October 2024].

¹⁶¹ Manchester Poetry Library, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2024. [online] Available at: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/poetry-library> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

education, working alongside teachers, bringing live literature into schools, and modelling writing activities whilst keeping true to their own writing voice. It is a fascinating co-dependency as, with so little critical recognition, contemporary poetry for children might not even exist without its partnership with schools. However, traditionally associating childhood poetics with the language of school playgrounds can diminish the intellectual power of play *and* the sophistication of child-readers, perhaps contributing to a deficit of critical and academic regard for the genre. In the introduction of the influential book, *Poetry and Childhood*, Morag Styles states clearly how much poetry for children is overlooked within the world of wider literature and academia:

Regrettably, poetry is also the Cinderella of children's literature, receiving very little scholarly attention. It is usually poorly represented at academic conferences and is the subject of minority interest. In a new *Companion to Children's Literature* (2010) poetry is subsumed within a section on 'neglected aspects of children's literature'. In critical writing, poetry is thin on the ground in comparison to fiction and picture books. As a result, children's poetry remains radically under-theorised.¹⁶²

Occasionally poets who have published collections for adults and children¹⁶³ are interviewed on writing poetry for children. But those writing solely for children, are rarely invited to speak outside the children's poetry world. My research quickly revealed many hundreds of 'how-to' guides and courses on writing poetry for adults, yet only a handful of guides or articles that celebrate the global breadth and potential of this liberating genre of poetry for children.¹⁶⁴ Is that because writing poetry for children is seen as easier? Well, it isn't. It is deliciously hard, yet immensely rewarding. So, I would say to anyone considering writing poetry for children, don't hesitate — jump!



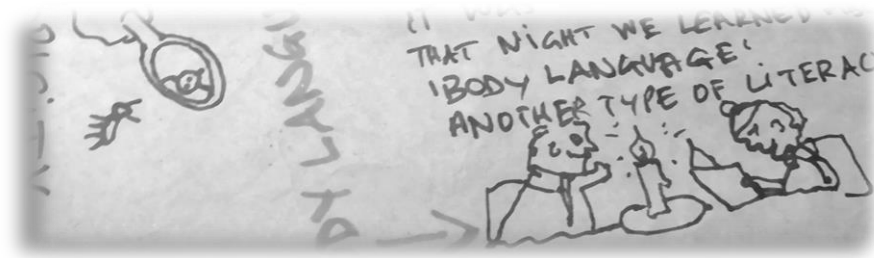
¹⁶² Styles, M., Joy, L. and Whitley, D. (eds) (2012) *Poetry & Childhood*. London: Trentham Books, p. xv.

¹⁶³ Philip Gross, Carol Anne Duffy, Charles Causley and Ted Hughes, all but a few of the UK's contemporary poets writing for both adults and children.

¹⁶⁴ Styles, M., Joy, L. and Whitley, D. (eds) (2012) *Poetry & Childhood*. London: Trentham Books.

¹⁶⁵ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

An Education Through Teaching Poetry



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Currently 30% of children in the UK live in poverty¹⁶⁷ and the reading age of the majority of adults is 11-14 years old.¹⁶⁸ These are shocking statistics, worsened by regional differences.¹⁶⁹ In my work in education, this was occasionally illustrated by bus drivers refusing to drop me outside certain schools, instead dropping me further up the road shouting *good luck!* as the doors hissed shut. However, the resilience of communities fighting to overcome obstacles to literacy has both inspired and educated me, plus, as literacy advocacy often incorporates community arts, it was an ethos I was familiar with.

When facilitating writing workshops, I am practitioner and experimentalist. My theory/pedagogy is a synthesis of reflections from my work as a responsive practitioner, something philosopher Donald A. Schön calls *reflecting in action and reflecting on action*.¹⁷⁰ Running workshops with all ages involves intuition and deep listening. Each situation is unique, demanding you navigate value conflicts and contradictory demands. You are stressed yet calm, uncertain yet enthusiastic. You are tasked with an outcome yet would

¹⁶⁶ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ UK Parliament, House of Lords Library, 2024. Child Poverty Statistics. [online] Available at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/child-poverty-statistics-causes-and-the-uks-policy-response/#:~:text=It%20added%20that%20this%20meant,from%2036%25%20in%202011%2F12> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

¹⁶⁸ The Library & Information Association, 2021. [The Adventures of Co-Curating a Poetry Library Collection for Children](#) by Mandy Coe. *Health Literacy*, NHS Library. [online] Available at: <https://library.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/08/Health-literacy-how-to-guide.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

¹⁶⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024. UK Poverty 2024: [The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK](https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk). [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk> [Accessed 10 June 2024].

¹⁷⁰ Schön, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, p 49.

prefer to facilitate creative risk taking with uncertain results. Variables are understood and actions linked to outcomes. It is rewarding, exhausting and I love it.

Workshops are a marketplace, where we exchange seeds of ideas, world views and writing. This illustration from *Belonging Street* is a playful translation of sharing — the way trees share seeds.



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In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön describes a hierarchical model of professional knowledge whereby researchers hold a more esteemed position than practitioners, yet he suggests that theories cannot always explain the “artful competence which practitioners sometimes reveal in what they do.”¹⁷² I was interested to read of theories of *knowing-in-*

¹⁷¹ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

¹⁷² Schön, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, p 49.

action. Their contextualisation of the hierarchical divisions between theorist and practitioner helped explain how career opportunities and income for freelancers compare unfavourably with the colloquially termed, ‘proper jobs’.

Much of my literacy advocacy has been in Manchester, one of the most language-diverse cities in the UK.¹⁷³ Poetry thrives where multiple languages are spoken and translation is an everyday skill, but the positive outcomes of poetry in *all* schools are well-documented, with publications like *Making Poetry Matter*, by Sue Dymoke and Anthony Wilson, capturing the innovation and passion of the poetry-in-education community.¹⁷⁴ It is a natural fit with teachers welcoming a chance to observe pupils relate to another adult, while poets relish sharing their work and writing practices.

In one class, I was stampeded by children desperate to see a BBC rejection-slip I had brought in. The teacher justified this by explaining that “pupils rarely see adults fail.” I am sure they do, but are far too polite to point it out, so this BBC rejection-slip represented a chance to discuss rejection and resilience. Modelling risk-taking, defusing negative perceptions around getting it ‘right’ or ‘not getting it’ is crucial for learners of all ages. Ours is a fast-changing world, and when existing knowledge becomes outdated, self-directed autonomy (or learning to learn) is invaluable. I underpin this by referring to Pasi Sahlberg, a champion for creativity in education, who writes “[b]eing right is a goal of education but it is not enough for success in an unpredictable and complex world. Creativity is often blocked by the fear of appearing to be strange or wrong.”¹⁷⁵ But I do understand, that for education, the idea that *learning to succeed requires learning to fail* presents a challenging paradox.

This concept is underpinned by the theories of heutagogy (as discussed on pg. 11), a pedagogy promoting creative risk-taking and self-managed learning. Hase and Kenyon, in

¹⁷³ Coe, M., 2020. Co-Curating and Poetry Library. The Library and Information Association blog. “Over 200 languages are spoken in Manchester.” [online] Available at: <https://www.libraryassociation.org> [Accessed 20 May 2024].

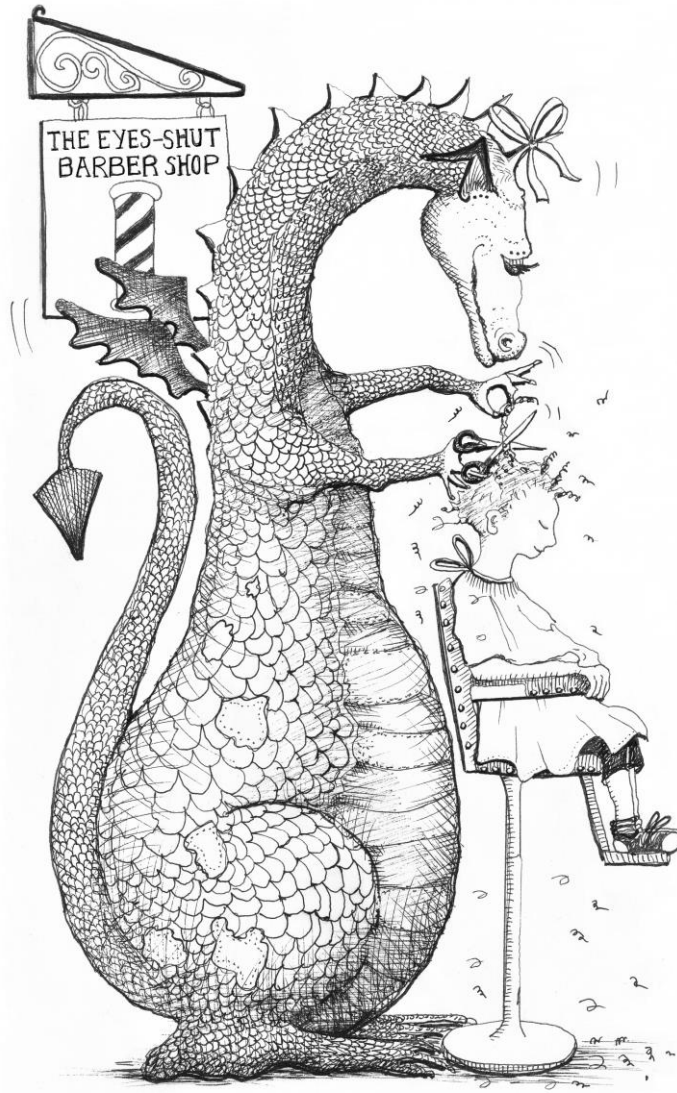
¹⁷⁴ Dymoke, S. and Wilson, A. (2015) *Making Poetry Matter: International Research on Poetry Pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury.

¹⁷⁵ Sahlberg, P. *The Role of Education in Promoting Creativity: Potential Barriers and Enabling Factors*. European Training Foundation. <https://www.greenschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Pasi-Sahlberg1-1.pdf> P. 338.

their book *Heutogogy: a Child of Complexity*, describe how becoming “a major agent in their own learning, people move more confidently into learning through acts of doing and exploring.”¹⁷⁶ This perfectly describes the practice of writers’ workshops, in which overcoming what freezes us is addressed through guided activities, signalling a dynamic shift from a passive *getting it* to an active *creating/seeking it*. As soon as participants, of any age, recognise that dialogic and subjective invitation to play, everything alters.

With its shorter length, and invitation for individual interpretation, poetry reinforces critical thinking. The very process of reading or writing a poem is a journey of learning, and when escaping the paralysis of ‘being right’ poems are transformed by each new translation. The following illustration shows a child frozen with doubts about his first haircut. This child imagines a dragon-barber — and I drew one — but she is a monster de-monstered.

¹⁷⁶ Hase, S. and Kenyon, C. (2007) *Heutagogy: A Child of Complexity Theory*. London: Methuen, Bloomsbury, p. 112.



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I explore this sense of agency and the relationship between reader and text further by referencing American educator, Louise Rosenblatt, whose renowned reader-response theory champions this concept of joint-creation. In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem*, Rosenblatt speaks of how “the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.”¹⁷⁸ In what she terms as ‘aesthetic reading’, the intensity of this relationship is key:

A two-way, or better, a circular, process can be postulated, in which the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time he must

¹⁷⁷ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

¹⁷⁸ Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 25.

draw selectively on the resources on his own fund of experiences and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response.¹⁷⁹

By emphasising the wealth each reader brings to a text, Rosenblatt establishes equality in reader-response theory, challenging the hierarchy of traditional literary criticism in a way that means the author doesn't have to die (as Barthes suggests)¹⁸⁰ he just has to share. Rosenblatt goes on to dismiss the concept of the 'ideal' reading by arguing that:

The emphasis should be rather on a creative transaction, a coming-together of a human being (with all that implies of past experience and present preoccupations) and a text (with all that implies of potentialities for participation).¹⁸¹

This coming together is a dance in which, instead of decoding in a chain of linear 'rightness', readers hop back and forth in the text, adding their experiences, changing their minds, subsequently changing the text's meaning. Styles and Arzipe, in writing about children's picture books, describe how this relates to visual literacy by artists inviting readers "to 'see the whole' through careful observation of the parts, encouraging the reader to move back and forth between the details and the big picture."¹⁸²

When teaching poetry, I often used the following optical illusion as a visual descriptor of this dance — the difference between *getting it* and *finding it*.

¹⁷⁹ Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 4.

¹⁸⁰ Barthes, R. (1989) [*The Rustle of Language*](#). California: University of California Press, p. 55. The full quote is: "The birth of the reader must be required by the death of the author".

¹⁸¹ Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 143-144.

¹⁸² Arizpe, E. and Styles, M. (2015) [*Children Reading Picturebooks: Interpreting Visual Texts*](#). London: Taylor & Francis Group.



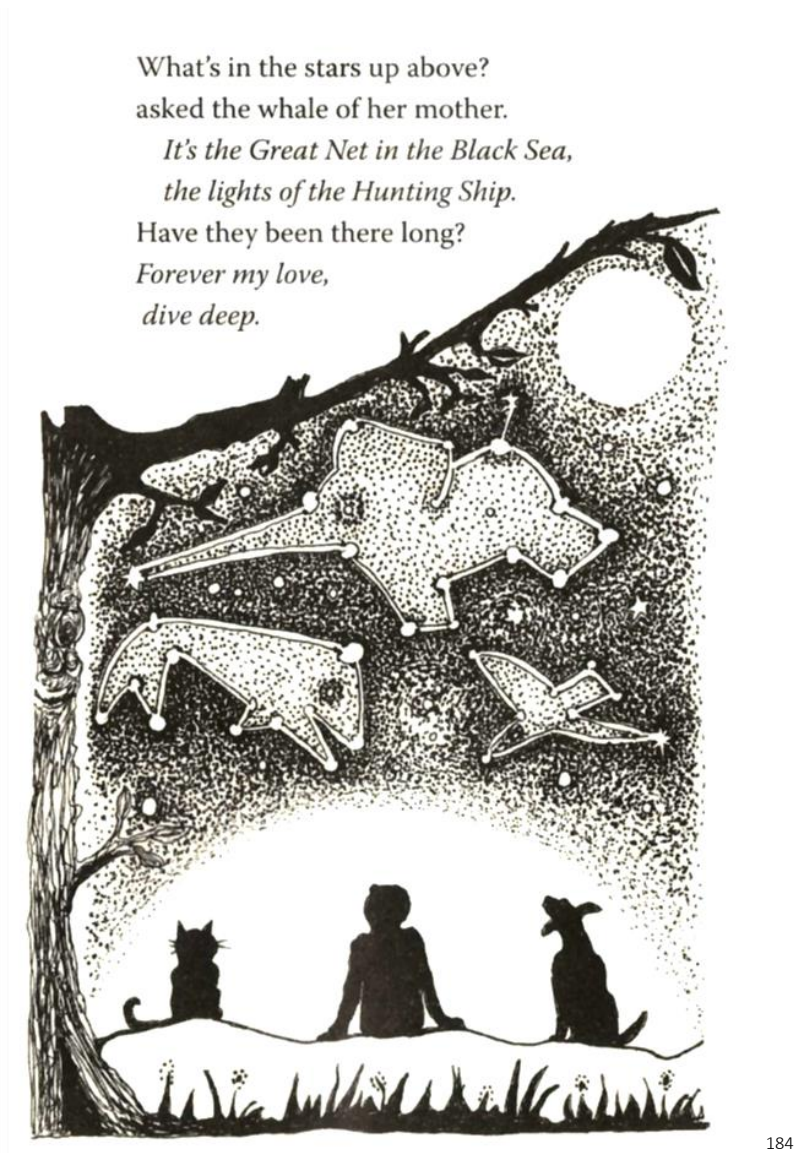
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Children adore this puzzle, and the audible gasps as each child 'sees' reinforces that equity of art/poetry and viewer/reader. In addition, when each child finds a fresh meaning, and the others ask them for clues, that child achieves new status, thereby gaining confidence not only in learning to learn, but in learning to teach.

¹⁸³ The Young Woman, Old Woman illusion was created by an anonymous illustrator in late 19th century Germany and reproduced on a postcard by William Ely Hill (1887 - 1962).

Section III: Illustration and Visual Literacy

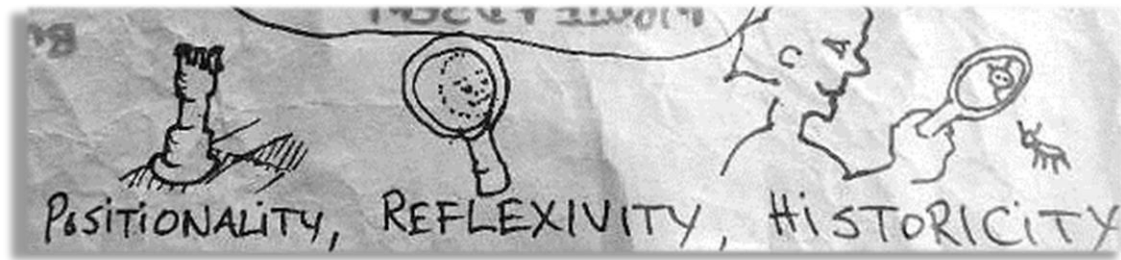
The theoretical framework of this section references the works of the French philosopher, **Gaston Bachelard**, **Roland Barthes**, and the art of the Belgian woodcut artist, **Frans Masereel** (1889–1972).



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¹⁸⁴ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*, Otter-Barry Books, London

Illustration and Visual Literacy



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The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound, that he will never get over it.
Robert Frost¹⁸⁶

I include Frost's quote about poetry to introduce a chapter on illustration as it so closely relates to Roland Barthes' concept of 'the punctum'. In his book *Camera Lucida*,¹⁸⁷ Barthes describes it as the moment when a detail "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."¹⁸⁸ I relish this acknowledgement of art's physicality in reaching beyond the frame. But, just as interestingly, in his categorisation of news photographs as images that 'shout' but not wound, Barthes expresses a preference for pictures that invite him to lean in. "Ultimately," he says, "photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive, when it thinks."¹⁸⁹ Barthes' responses are personal (one viewer's shout is another's punctum), but his descriptions of subjectivity describe dialogue, a quest that even incorporates our sense of nowness: a *double movement* that Barthes compares to Baudelaire's poetry in *La vie antérieure* (translating as

¹⁸⁵ Extract from thesis timeline, evidencing reflexivity and the journalling process, 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Frost, R. (1925) *The Poetry of Amy Lowell*, *The Christian Science Monitor*.
<https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Poetry/2013/0430/Robert-Frost-on-poet-Amy-Lowell>
[Accessed: 4 May 2024].

¹⁸⁷ Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Howard, R. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 29-54.

¹⁸⁸ Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Howard, R. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 26.

¹⁸⁹ Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Howard, R. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 29.

'a former life').¹⁹⁰ The following poem explores the ability of detail to leap out and the slipperiness of *double movement*.

Cathedral Tower

Two hundred and eighty stone steps
have corkscrewed you to this height. Staggering out
into the roar of the sky, you forget for a moment
how a straight line is walked.

In the wind your face feels stiff as a mask,
your eyes stream. Roofs and chimneys
clamour for attention,
but there are no familiar landmarks.

The river has dipped out of sight and the hills rise
in all the wrong places. You focus instead
on medieval graffiti under your fingers,
the hammered strips of lightning conductor.

A pigeon and a gargoyle pointedly ignore you
until a bell tolls the quarter-hour and the bird falls,
opening into empty air. Below
tiny people cross a square of grass,

neat as a card table. On the bench a sandwich
is being unwrapped. You bite into it,
squinting at the sky, already
doubting you were ever up there.¹⁹¹

The concept of art reaching beyond the frame and the viewer reaching in is also explored in Susan Peterson's book about the leading Japanese studio potter *Shōji Hamada: A Potter's Way and Work*.

In Japanese there is the expression, *mono o miro me*, meaning eyes that see. One says in English, 'He has an eye for things,' but the meaning in Japanese is deeper.

¹⁹⁰ Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Howard, R. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 40.

¹⁹¹ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

One not only sees things, he sees into it.... To make a vase or bottle is to make the inside.¹⁹²

This architecture of storytelling in art and narrative poetry is crucial, as the 'inside' is the place we invite the reader/viewer to momentarily inhabit. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes of how the newness of knowing the 'inside' helps us know the outside. In the chapter 'Shells' he asks "[i]s it possible for a creature to remain alive inside stone? Amazement of this kind is rarely felt twice. Life quickly wears it down."¹⁹³ In the following poem, *The Glassblower's Challenge* (2004), I visualise how one might know this inner world.

Glassblower's Challenge

Surrounded by ranks of mermaids and seahorses
the glassblower sweats.
Flawed spirals crunch underfoot as he steadies
then skills his breath and the blueprint in his head
down the length of his arms.
In a bucket the sea snail waits.

When the glassblower lifts it to his ear,
saltwater trickles down his cheek. He listens
to the dead silence of an occupied sea
and as his scalpel gently bisects the shell
the naked snail twists from the light,

but there is nowhere to go
except this annealed other-place. Contrary
midwife-fingers urge its soft body
into cool sinistral curves.

When the day-trippers gather at his window
the glass galleon is gone,
so are the dolphins and the sea-monster chess set.
There is only one fishbowl now, with a snail
clicking glass against glass, its pulsing heart
as magnified as a short-sighted eye.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Peterson, S. (2004) *Shoji Hamada: A Potter's Way and Work*. London: A&C Black, p. 67.

¹⁹³ Bachelard, G. (1964) *The Poetics of Space*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press, p. 127.

¹⁹⁴ Coe, M. (2004) *The Weight of Cows*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press.

Seashell (2011), from my children's collection, also investigates inside/outside, but this time, from the point of view of a seasnail who misses, not her shell, but the space she inhabited.

Seashell

Have you seen it? A pink-tinted
coil of air . . . about
so big?
At one end can be heard
the open roar of sea, the other
narrows to silence and infinity.
In between is nothing,
shaped like a ringlet
or honeysuckle twine, and
(before the orange grip
of oyster-catcher's beak)
it was the exact shape of me.
Have you seen that coil of air
where my soft self should be?¹⁹⁵

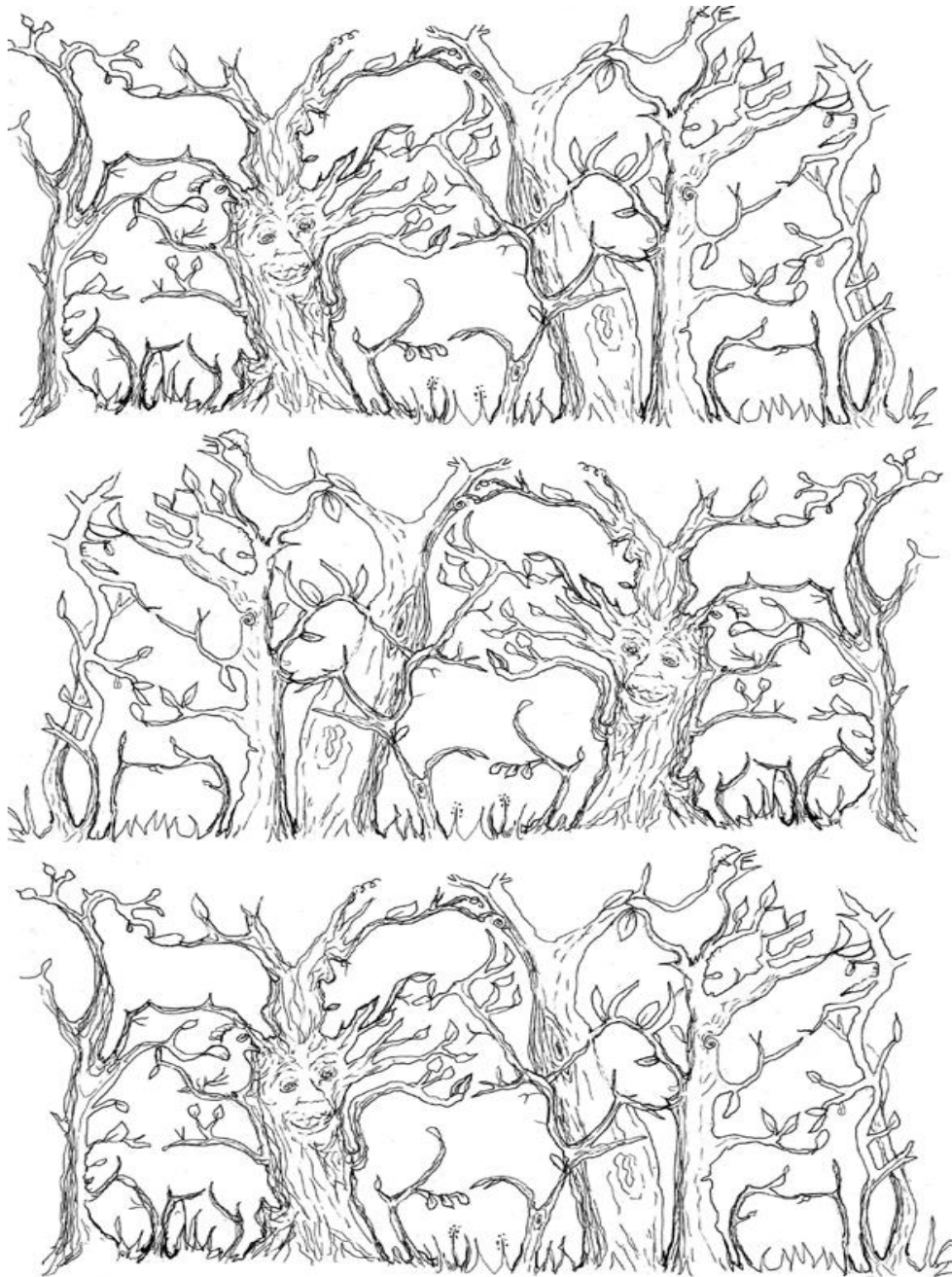
In the chapter 'Dialectic of Outside and Inside', Bachelard writes:

By means of poetic language, waves of newness flow over the surfaces of being, and language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up.¹⁹⁶

The following illustration from *Belonging Street* explicitly explores this sense of inside / outside, providing an invitation to play the hide and seek of meaning.

¹⁹⁵ Coe, M., 2011. *If You Could See Laughter*. London: Salt Publications (recipient of the Children's Literature in Primary Education Highly Commended Award).

¹⁹⁶ Bachelard, G. (1964) *The Poetics of Space*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press, p. 212.



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My sister Sue Coe,¹⁹⁸ illustrator, graphic artist, and human and animal rights advocate, has immeasurably added to my understanding of art, art history, and the power of art in social justice.¹⁹⁹ Through visiting her in the USA, and in undertaking a few collaborative projects,

¹⁹⁷ Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

¹⁹⁸ Coe, S., 2024. [online] Available at: <http://www.suecoe.com> [Accessed 10 September 2024]

¹⁹⁹ “For more than 50 years, Sue Coe has been at the forefront of art and social justice. She is a visual journalist who forces us to confront cruelty, suffering, prejudice, and exploitation regardless of whether it is toward people, animals, or the environment.” Stallwood, K., 2025. [Author interview with](#)

she introduced me to artists such as the Spanish painter and printmaker Goya, particularly *Los Capricios* (The Caprices) and *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War);²⁰⁰ German anti-fascist art, such as John Heartfield's photomontage work of the 1930s,²⁰¹ and the drawings of Kathe Kollwitz.²⁰² Through my sister, I also met authors and artists such as Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*),²⁰³ and Art Spiegelman, (*Maus*).²⁰⁴ These associations helped me understand how graphic artists do more than create art as a commodity. Working with print, their art is designed to be reproducible. These artists are communicators of *now* as well as documenters of their eras. From the storytelling graphic art of Masereel²⁰⁵ through to the New York 'Comix' movement in the 1970s, *Raw*, *Raw One-Shot* books and *World War Three Illustrated*,²⁰⁶ it is a movement reflecting consciously political artists/illustrators as at home in comics, posters and books as in galleries.

My graphic novel *Red Shoes* was created on a year-long community arts programme in Liverpool. It addresses discriminations within a 'Black Shoe' world in which — forbidden words — 'Red Shoe' people speak in pictures. Creating a slower read than the cartoon strip the book has one image per page, allowing readers time to pause, as in the (re)reading of a poem. Each chapter of *Red Shoes* represents stories shared by friends and colleagues, with every scene translated by actors to create vignettes while I sketched, reflecting the eloquence and authenticity of body language.

[Sue Coe. Stallwood Substack](https://substack.com/@kimstallwood), 10 January. Available at: <https://substack.com/@kimstallwood> [Accessed 10 January 2025]. , 10/01/2025

²⁰⁰ The Library of Congress (n.d.) [Goya: The Disaster of War](https://www.loc.gov/rr/conservation/goya.html). Available at: [www.loc.gov](https://www.loc.gov/rr/conservation/goya.html) [Accessed: 15 September 2024].

²⁰¹ MoMA (2024) [John Heartfield: Art & Artists](https://www.moma.org/artists/john-heartfield). Available at: [www.moma.org](https://www.moma.org/artists/john-heartfield) [Accessed: 13 September 2024].

²⁰² MoMA (2024) [Kathe Kollwitz: Art & Artists](https://www.moma.org/artists/kathe-kollwitz). Available at: [www.moma.org](https://www.moma.org/artists/kathe-kollwitz) [Accessed: 13 September 2024].

²⁰³ National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian (n.d.) [Angela Davis](https://www.nmaahc.si.edu/en/learn/angela-davis). Available at: [www.nmaahc.si.edu](https://www.nmaahc.si.edu/en/learn/angela-davis) [Accessed: 12 August 2024].

²⁰⁴ Menheim, L. (2022) '[What Art Spiegelman's Maus Means to the Children of Survivors](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/07/arts/angela-davis-maus.html)', *The Nation* [Accessed 07 July 2024].

²⁰⁵ Tamara, F. (n.d.) '[Frans Masereel, the First Woodcut Novelist](https://www.metmuseum.org/education/2024/frans-masereel)', *The Met Museum*. Available at: [www.metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org/education/2024/frans-masereel) [Accessed: 2 May 2024].

²⁰⁶ [World War Three Illustrated](https://www.ww3nyc.org/) WW3 NYC (2024) Available at: <https://www.ww3nyc.org/> [Accessed: 12 December 2024].

One of my influences was the Belgian graphic artist Frans Masereel.²⁰⁷ Seen as the inventor of the woodcut novel, his books, such as *The City*, *Passionate Journey* and *The Radical*, portray those who survive the metropolis. Using one image per page, his books are referred to as 'silent novels' (referencing silent film). Masereel's brilliance is in his pace and narrative 'readability' for those disfranchised from literacy, or who shared other mother tongues. Masereel is someone I could only aspire to learn from, a master of invitation. To highlight this, here is New York graphic artist, Eric Drooker:

Whenever I turned to Masereel's picture novels, I saw images of women and children living under unimaginably violent circumstances. I saw images of young men drafted, and sent off to war. [...] The fact that I was a New York City kid who didn't speak a word of French or German didn't matter a bit. Volumes of history, sociology, psychology, poetry – and the eternal human comedy were communicated to me directly through the language of pictures. Masereel continues to inspire my vision to this present day, as I create new picture stories for the twenty-first century.²⁰⁸

The 'newness' of perspective that Bachelard speaks of is an invitation that artists understand. He describes it as a reflective and intimate drama. Nonetheless, graphic artists also respond to the immediacy of social conflict: not just by 'flowing,' but waving and pointing, providing creative newness to injustices so old we have ceased to see them. We are entering an era where false narrative is on the rise and politicians on the far right do not hesitate to harness the power of aesthetics in their politics of persuasion.²⁰⁹ When narratives become impervious to facts, perhaps we need to tell better stories, or tell the old ones sharpened with newness.²¹⁰

The image below is from my monograph *Sticks and Stones* drawing on that same slow reading pace. It matches the etymological description of one word with one image, inviting

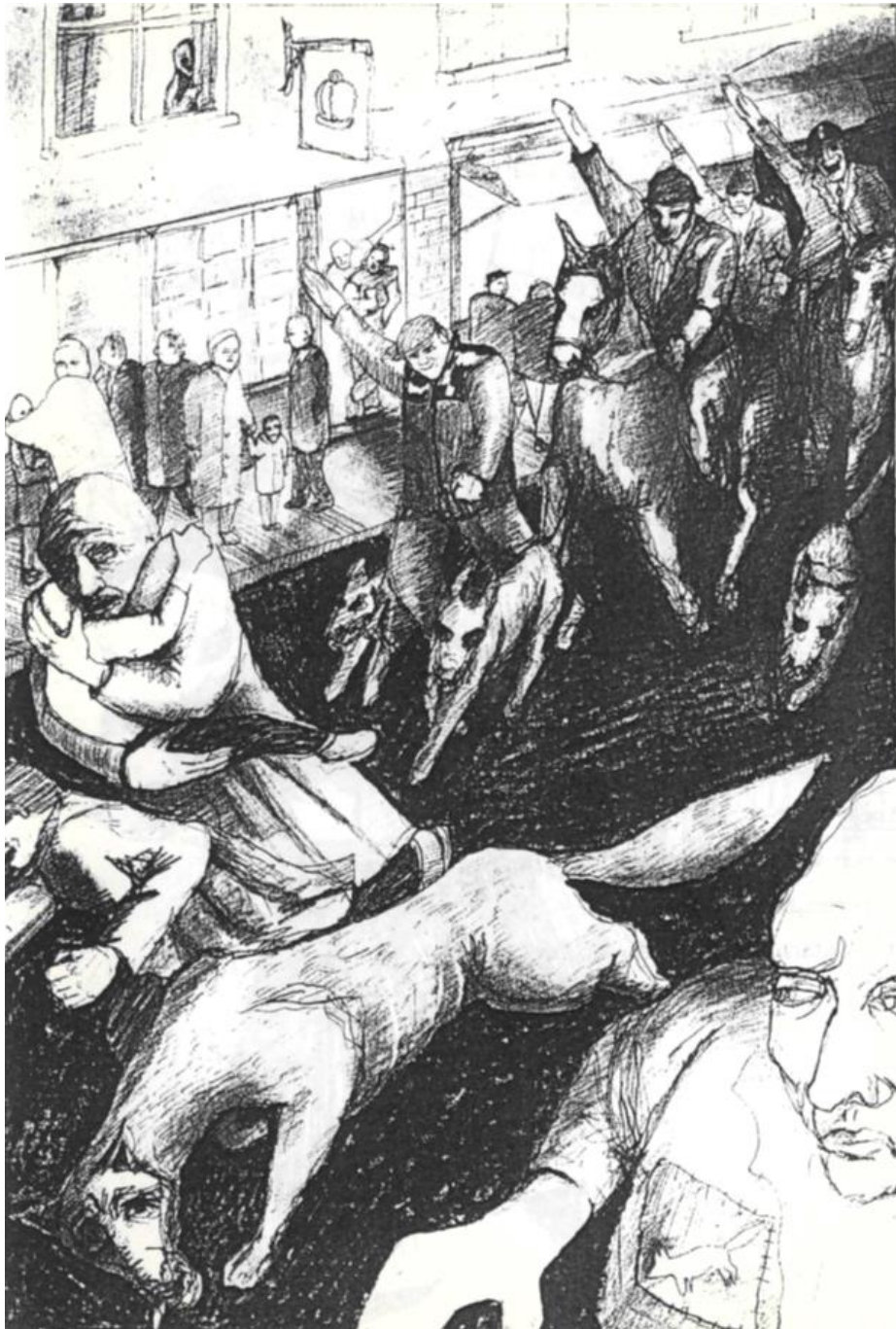
²⁰⁷ "[The 'Silent Novels' of Frans Masereel: Godfather of the American Graphic Novel](#)" by Joris van Parys, published on *The Low Countries* website. [Accessed 03 August 2024].

²⁰⁸ "[The 'Silent Novels' of Frans Masereel: Godfather of the American Graphic Novel](#)" by Joris van Parys, published on *The Low Countries* website. [Accessed 03 August 2024].

²⁰⁹ Quin, B. and Milano, D. (2024) '[How the Far Right is Using AI Generated Images](#)', *The Guardian Newspaper*, 26 November. [Accessed 28 November 2024].

²¹⁰ Coe, S., Eisenman, S, 2024. *Young Person's Guide to American Fascism*. New York: Or Books.

fresh perspectives of that word's root. This one illustrates the word 'persecute': *per* (thoroughly) and *sequor* (to follow).



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²¹¹ Coe, M. (1992) *Sticks & Stones: An Illustrated Etymological Study*. Liverpool: Just a Tick.

Conclusion



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In my children's collection, *Belonging Street*, I use the poetic technique of personification to create a character who appears throughout the book. He is a familiar symbol — a tree. Yet the *newness of art* of which Bachelard speaks, invites us to reconsider him: he walks! This concept of animation, deriving from the Latin noun *animare*, "give breath to,"²¹³ captures the essence of joint creation and storytelling as explored in this thesis. In an article on heutagogy and lifelong learning, Lisa Marie Blaschk describes the 'newness' of my autoethnographic experience perfectly:

²¹² Coe, M. (2002) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

²¹³ Online Etymology Dictionary, 2024. [online] Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/> [Accessed 03 November 2024].

Within transformational learning, learning occurs along a self-directed path; as the learner matures and reflects on life experiences in relation to his or her self-perception, beliefs, and lifestyle, the learner perspective is adjusted and transformative learning can occur.²¹⁴

Like many writers, my route to publication was circuitous, and reflecting on this through autoethnography *was* transformative, much like playing a familiar game, but reimagined, with ladders descending into the cellar and snakes arguing that they have been thoroughly misunderstood.

Within schools, poetry is commonly summarised by the quandary of how to 'get it into the classroom'. One way to achieve this is by getting it out, ideally via a curriculum that gives teachers and children the time (and support) to write.²¹⁵ If every poem were erased today, millions more would be written by tonight. Making poetry is truly human, as familiar as pondering, as sophisticated as playing and as innate as storytelling. For children, being asked to read poetry without the chance to write it is like cooking food without tasting it.

In advocating that writing poetry for children enhances the range and writing of all poets, I assert that an innovative, globally inclusive introduction to this genre could usefully feature within creative writing courses in higher education. This would act to both deepen academics' understanding of the genre and enhance it in the eyes of future writers and critics. Our challenge is to overturn the concept of poetry for children being somehow 'simpler' or 'easier to write'. Poetry for children is not the little sister of poetry for adults: it is the mother.

To underpin this, the selection of publications for this PhD's portfolio was guided by its themes. However, I would not have predicted that nearly half the work included would be for children. Yet this is the work that most strongly resonated with concepts of visual literacy and dialogic. Equally, I did not expect poems to illustrate sections on art. Nor to

²¹⁴ Blaschk, L. (n.d.) *Heutagogy and Lifelong Learning: A Review of Heutagogical Practice and Self-Determined Learning*. US Department of Education, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol 13, p. 58. [Accessed 30 December 2024].

²¹⁵ "Coe, M., 2007. Children are not the writers of tomorrow. They are the writers of today". *Creative Writing with Young Children*. NAWÉ. Available at: <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writers-in-schools/getting-started/early-years.html> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

expand on educational theories with images of wordless narrative. I am a visual thinker, but even I am intrigued by how fluid these forms proved to be. Sometimes, finding the right tone of authorial, prose voice was challenging. However, the art and poems jumped onto the page without hesitation.

My teaching pedagogy results from decades of lived experience and practice-led work in literacy advocacy within inner-cities. Chronicling my own education, and subsequently how I educate/learn alongside others, has reinforced how dialogic teaching and modelling creative risk-taking, empowers us, while an inadequate education undermines us in ways that takes a lifetime (if ever) to fathom. Undertaking this PhD acted to reinforced how much I had longed for an education and becoming a student let loose to rummage through academia's house has been a joy. I am deeply thankful to the thinkers whose writings/books allowed me to contextualise my poems and art, and to my supervisors and the library staff who supported this process.

The resulting reflections are presented in dialogue with established theories with the aim of 'making new' a few old stories and animating some emerging ones. These findings will resonate with practitioners and researchers in the arts and education. However, presenting them in the context of a wider cultural and political framework ensures they are equally relevant to disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences. These first-hand experiences, chronicled through autoethnography, are individual and based on past reflection, yet they are also 'in-common' and current. The thesis acknowledges a growing sense of urgency concerning social cohesion, social media and political disinformation, and the findings act to substantiate the power of creative engagement, of listening and sharing stories — all of which are especially critical for children and young adults.

During the 2024 far-right riots at Liverpool's Pier Head, alongside other Liverpudlians and (confused) tourists, I faced crowds incited beyond sense and enraged beyond words. As they showered us with bricks and curses, two visitors from Northern Ireland, caught in the push and shove, turned to me. "We recognise this," they said, "When listening stops the violence

starts.”²¹⁶ In conclusion, in the light of growing trends of polarisation and social disinformation,²¹⁷ this thesis proposes that it has never been more important to work alongside the arts to develop an education system fostering creative dialogue, listening and critical thinking²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Connail, C., 2024. ‘[Hundreds Gather at Liverpool Pier Head to as People Unite Against the Far Right](https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gallery/hundreds-gather-liverpool-pier-head-29715963.amp)’. *Liverpool Echo*, 10 August. Available at: <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gallery/hundreds-gather-liverpool-pier-head-29715963.amp> [Accessed 20 September 2024].

²¹⁷ Leingang, R., 2024. ‘[Elon’s politics: how Musk became a driver of elections misinformation](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/aug/12/elon-musk-elections-misinformation)’. *The Guardian Online*, 12 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/aug/12/elon-musk-elections-misinformation> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

²¹⁸ Leingang, R., 2024. ‘[Elon’s politics: how Musk became a driver of elections misinformation](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/aug/12/elon-musk-elections-misinformation)’. *The Guardian Online*, 12 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/aug/12/elon-musk-elections-misinformation> [Accessed 20 January 2025].



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²¹⁹ Coe, M. (2020) *Belonging Street*. London: Otter-Barry Books.

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