

The Sand in the Oyster Vetting the Verse Novel

by Patty Campbell

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The verse novel? What is it?
It's poetry.

Poetry? What is it?
Who knows.

Maybe Webster knows
Or at least American Heritage.

Aha!
"A composition designed to convey
a vivid and imaginative sense of experience,
characterized by the use of condensed language
chosen for its sound and suggestive power
as well as its meaning,
and by the use of such literary techniques as
structured meter,
natural cadences,
rhyme,
or metaphor."

Which about sums it up
Except for the part about rhyme.

IF YOU THINK the above sounds like I've been reading too many YA verse novels, you're right. Twelve, to be exact, of the thirteen or fourteen published so far in 2004. An impressive statistic, because up until last year there had been only about thirty titles in the form's whole ten-year history. But each year more writers have been choosing this way to shape a YA novel, and this year's sudden jump in numbers may mean that the verse novel has become a standard part of young adult literature, rather than an occasional oddity. In any case, we've seen enough now to look at the origins and history, the rules and parameters, the successes and pitfalls of this emerging form.

A long story told in verse is probably the prototype for all literature, but this approach to storytelling faded away with the appearance of the prose novel in the eighteenth century. Its reinvention in YA--lit and only in YA lit, because there is no adult equivalent--is one of the glories of adolescent literature. The first verse novel to be recognized as such was the masterwork *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, published in 1993. However, the poetry collections of Mel Glenn had been groping toward the form for several years before that. In the late eighties Glenn wrote three books of poems in the voices of his high school students, and in 1991 he assembled those voices around a central theme and place--a guidance counselor's office--in *My Friend's Got This Problem, Mr. Candler*, a book that came within a hair's breadth of being a verse novel. Then in 1996 he got it, with *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?*

Glenn went on to write four more, while a few other established writers had a try at this new form--Robert Cormier with *Frenchtown Summer*, for example--but often seemingly without any awareness that they were tapping into an emerging literary pattern. Most spoke of the story itself

wanting to be told in this manner. Cormier said, "As I began to write it seemed to cry out for verse. I tried writing it in prose but it didn't work, so I let it go its own way." Virginia Euwer Wolff, who had written successful prose novels previously, also seemed surprised by this new shape her words had taken. In an interview with Roger Sutton (*Horn Book*, May/June 2001), she said, "The form just came to me.... I did try changing part of a draft into paragraphs, and I just got all blocked and stifled and couldn't do it." She also wanted the page,, with its large amount of white space, to look less intimidating to the young mothers she visualized as her audience.

A handful of new writers, however, jumped into this fresh writing opportunity with awareness and enthusiasm, and some, like Sonya Sones, have continued to be completely committed to it. The verse novel gained mainstream critical acceptance and admission into the classroom when Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* won the Newbery Medal in 1998, and further visibility later when Wolff's *True Believer* won the National Book Award and Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* won the Printz.

But is it poetry? Virginia Wolff, in the face of Roger Sutton's insistence that the compression of her language made it poetry, denied it staunchly. "Writing my prose in funny-shaped lines does not render it poetry," she said. Other authors have agreed with her about their own work. This humility serves them well, because, as Sutton and other critics have agreed, the prevailing pitfall for writers of verse novels is pretentiousness, a self-consciousness about the prosody of their words that can make the whole undertaking seem a little operatic.

Nevertheless, good verse novels fit that dictionary definition of "poetry," especially in their use of condensed language, natural cadences, and metaphor. And as for "a vivid and imaginative sense of experience," I can still feel Billie Jo's burn-constricted hands (in *Out of the Dust*) and smell Jolly's slovenly apartment (in *Make Lemonade*). Here is Lorie Ann Grover in this year's *On Pointe* (McElderry) describing a class of young ballet students putting on their toe shoes:

We grind our teeth and blink back
the stinging pain.

Blisters pop.
Clear liquid runs.

Fresh blood oozes.
Gauze,
tape,
moleskin,

and spongy pink toe caps
hold the skin
and blood in place.

Our feet slip
into satin shoes
with stiff shanks,
hard boxing,
tight elastic,
and slippery ribbons
that wrap and end
in hard knots.

But as to structured meter and rhyme, usually the rhythms of ordinary speech take the place of formal metric patterns, and rhyme has not been part of the picture until this year, when Linda Oatman High's sharp and sweet *Sister Slam* and the Poetic Motormouth Road Trip (Bloomsbury) explored the jagged tempo and unexpected rhymes of rap.

Twig had this
smug mug of a
satisfied face,
and she was
wearing a chaste
pitch-black
lace dress: the best
poet's dress, I must confess.

The Realm of Possibility (Knopf) by David Levithan is the most innovative verse novel of this year's crop in its playful exploration of poetic form. Levithan uses iambic pentameter ("My girlfriend is in love with Holden Caulfield"), haiku, the popular song ballad, and probably lots more patterns that I haven't recognized. He even constructs a series of stanzas in which the initial letters of each group follow in alphabetical sequence, and he shapes the whole novel in the circular form of the rondo, all without losing the authenticity of the voices of the many narrators.

There are several other features that most verse novels share, and that may be definitive for the form. They are almost always written in the present tense and narrated in the first person by a teen. The text is shaped in a succession of one- or two-page poems, usually titled, that end with a punch line. This provides temporary closure for the reader, a necessary resting point in the very concentrated narration. (The importance of this feature is illustrated by its lack in *On Pointe*, in which the unbroken intensity is draining for the reader.) It also provides a way to change speakers often. Some of the best verse novels are told by one voice, but there can be two, three, or multiple voices. A change in speaker is usually indicated in each poem's title or at the beginning of a section as a guide to the shift.

No matter how many speakers there are, they are all intensely internal, focused on the characters' feelings, because emotion is what the verse novel--and poetry--is all about. Characteristically, the action centers on an emotional event, and the rest of the novel deals with the characters' feelings before and after. An example from this year is *Splintering* (Scholastic) by Eireann Corrigan, which shows at great length a family's devastation from a home invasion by a drug-crazed intruder. The title of Sonya Sones's new work, *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies* (Simon), is apt (although this particular verse novel is not as grim as it sounds). The death of parents--and grandparents--is a frequent theme. The effectiveness of the verse novel on this subject is shown beautifully in *North of Everything* (Candlewick) by Craig Crist-Evans, in which a boy finds solace for his father's death in the recurring life cycle on a Vermont farm. *Escaping Tornado Season* (HarperTempest) by Julie Williams also shows a teen coming to terms with a father's death and the disruption his absence causes in her life. Even when a verse novel looks at history, the center is a concentrated emotional event--the Hartford circus fire of 1944 in *Worlds Afire* (Candlewick) by Paul B. Janeczko or the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby and the subsequent trial and execution of a probably innocent German immigrant in Jen Bryant's *The Trial* (Knopf).

And in the verse novel there's a whole lot of lovin' going on--not so much sex as the yearning, aching quality of first love that poetry so gracefully captures. *One Night* (Knopf) by Margaret

Wild shows that first love gone awry, as Helen, a girl with a deformed face, staunchly deals with the pregnancy that is the consequence of one night of what she thought was love. Several of the other verse novels of this year have romantic love as a secondary theme. But the very best, and my personal favorites, are two little books by the Australian poet Steven Herrick. In *Love, Ghosts, & Facial Hair* (Simon Pulse)--prissily retitled from the original *Love, Ghosts, & Nose Hair*--Jack lets go of the ghostly presence of his mother for the love of Annabel. And in *The Simple Gift* (Simon Pulse) Herrick uses spare, ordinary language to tell the exquisitely touching love story of Billy, who at sixteen has chosen to leave his abusive father and become deliberately homeless, and Caitlin, a girl who is looking for some meaning beyond her parents' wealth.

The structure of the verse novel, then, can be quite different from the novel, which is built with rising conflict toward a climax, followed by a denouement. The verse novel is often more like a wheel, with the hub a compelling emotional event, and the narration referring to this event like the spokes. So perhaps the verse novel is not a "novel" at all, or "verse" either, which requires regular meter and rhyme. Is it too late to give this new form another name?

And now, the eternal basic YA question: do the kids like these books? Lynn Evarts, a Wisconsin high school librarian, recently told the YALSA-BK listserv: "Without fail, my kids love the verse novels. It's interesting to watch them and talk with them when they choose one for the first time. Many are hesitant, initially, because they are afraid that it's poetry. I tell them to read a little, and get the feel of the book ... To a one, they return raving about them!" But without a watchful librarian to promote books in this funny-looking form, would teens be willing to brave the potential tedium of a story written in what looks like poetry? The jury is still out on this one.

I have to confess that when I open a novel and see those short lines, I often stifle a groan. Sometimes I wonder why the author didn't just say it, especially when the poems plonk along over daily events. Why are so many writers turning to verse novels--are they easier to write? Surely not, at least not easier to write well, although it cannot be denied that they are shorter. Perhaps the intention of some, like Virginia Euwer Wolff, is to hook reluctant or struggling readers. Or conversely, could it be to make the work seem more "literary" and award-worthy? Whatever the reasons and the readership, the verse novel is here to stay, and with its condensed language and suggestive power it can make a story soar beyond the possibilities of prose in a way that changes even this reader's initial reluctance to eventual enthusiasm.

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Patty Campbell has been a longtime advocate of young adult literature as a librarian, critic, and educator. Currently she edits the Scarecrow Studies on Young Adult Literature and is at work on a book about Robert Cormier.

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