



## POETRY STUDY AND TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR

# FROM THE TOP OF A GRAIN ELEVATOR

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## CLASSROOM USES

*From the Top of a Grain Elevator* is a collection of poetry for children that journeys through the seasons in the Canadian Prairies. Because of the wide range of poetic forms and techniques used in the book, it can be used as a tool for teaching poetry in classrooms ranging from grade three through grade nine. This guide moves through the basic elements of poetry, specifying poems and exercises that can be used to teach each element as well as suggestions for setting up a poetry unit in your classroom. In addition to Language Arts, the poems can be used as links to discussion, activities and resources in Social Studies, Science, and Visual Arts, as illustrated in this guide. A glossary and author's note are included in the book itself, and can be used to define central images such as the caragana and the slough.

## LANGUAGE ARTS: THE POETRY UNIT

### *Using the Five Senses*

Every poem in *From the Top of a Grain Elevator* uses sensory imagery, that is, things that can be heard, seen, smelled, touched, and tasted in the world around us. Three of the following sections—personification, simile, and metaphor—use this imagery in different ways. First, however, the imagery must be observed and collected from the students' experiences.

### THE TOWN & COUNTRY FAIR (PG. 26)

This is a good poem to introduce students to the use of sensory imagery, because it uses every sense except smell. Write each sense on the board. Read the poem out loud or have students read it to each other and identify/write on the board the words relating to each sense.

#### *Example:*

#### Hearing

*softballs in leather gloves*

#### Taste

*salty shells*

#### EXERCISES

- Following the model begun with "The Town & Country Fair" and the headings already written on the board, do a group brainstorm, gathering words relating to each of the five senses for a particular season. Students should choose words that relate to *their* landscape, *their* experiences. Students in St. John's, Newfoundland, named the ice they hear tinkling in the trees after freezing rain in winter; those in Holyrood, Newfoundland, named the "sallysuckers" (sorrel) they taste in summer; and students in Dawson City, Yukon, named the crunch of snow in early October.
- Students can then go through the process individually for a season of their choice. Using the words and phrases from their lists, they should create a poem about the season that uses all of the senses. This exercise is an excellent way to get students thinking in terms of sensory detail.



- Have students keep a small “sensory image” notebook. This is their poetry “sketchbook,” to take with them wherever they go for the entire length of the Poetry Unit (and hopefully longer). In it they can record things around them that they have observed through the senses. This can range from the way hot pizza burns the roof of the mouth, to bits of dialogue heard on a bus, to the smell of the bus, to the sound of frogs in the nearby pond. Students can use the images they’ve collected when writing their poems.

## *Personification*

In its simplest definition, personification is the giving of human characteristics and qualities to an animal, idea, abstraction, or inanimate object. This is a good place to introduce students to poetry; it often comes naturally to them in play and conversation, and they will be familiar with the concept from classic early childhood books such as Margaret Wise Brown’s *Goodnight Moon*. Many examples of personification are used throughout *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, only some of which are included here.

### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: SPRING (PG. 3)

Read the poem out loud to the class, or have students read it to each other. (See pronunciation note regarding “slough.”) Identify and discuss how the slough, wind, sky, falling stars, and willows are given human characteristics in the stanza beginning “Through the car window” to “willows gaze at...” on page four. How are sloughs like eyes on a gigantic face? Who are they watching? How and what does the wind tickle? Does the sky sometimes seem like a juggler of clouds, especially on the prairies? How? What characteristics of willows are like a human gaze? Can you picture them gazing at cows? (All four “Slough Cycle” poems can serve as links to discussions in Science.)

### THE WIND IN MAY (PG. 9)

After reading the poem out loud, have the students list all of the verbs that describe the human actions of the wind. They should come up with at least fourteen. Discuss how this linking of the wind with verbs makes it into a character in the poem. Note that even quoted dialogue is used to make the wind into a person. Describe the relationship between the speaker of the poem (“I”) and the wind. Does this relationship change from the beginning to the end? How?

### JUNE THUNDERSTORM (PG. 23)

Ask students if they have ever played the game “Telephone.” Who are the characters playing this game in the first stanza? Do they know people in real life who might be like the sparrows? As with “The Wind in May,” list and discuss the human actions that personify the storm.

### FORTY BELOW (PG. 53)

What is the game that the speaker of the poem plays with Forty Below? How does the speaker get ready to play this game? List the actions of Forty Below as it plays the game. Does the speaker change in how she/he feels about Forty Below from the beginning of the poem to the end? What actions does the speaker feel he/she can do at the end of the poem because of the experience that Forty Below has created? Why does the speaker feel warm, even though the night is so cold?

## EXERCISES

- Have the students think of an encounter they’ve had with the wind or another element of nature (storm, rain, heat, cold). Have them make a list of verbs from their own experience that describe the human actions and characteristics of this element, and write sentences using these verbs and the element.

*Example:*

*The wind flings sand in my ears and eyes.*

- Turn the favourite sentences into a poem that describes the experience. Make the poem at least three stanzas long, and include at least one personifying action in each stanza.

### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: SUMMER (PG. 15)

In this poem, the slough has “long grass eyelashes” (although they are like a cow’s) and is put to sleep by water striders. Students can identify how the speaker’s actions toward the slough (waking it up, trampling the ooze on the bottom) imply the human qualities of the slough and make it into a character. What is the slough’s revenge?

### AT NEMIEBEN LAKE (PG. 16)

What is the Northern Pike’s secret? What happens as a result of it “swishing a secret”? How is personification used to describe a sunset? Note that the actual word “sunset”

isn't used, and that only one adjective (purple) is used to describe it. The usual, adjective-laden sunset description is avoided through the use of verbs and the personification of dusk as one who fingerpaints. Also note the human action of the red sun.

#### CARAGANAS (PG. 21)

Discuss the human parts given to the caragana. Are these accurate? Does a caragana *really* look like it has fat green cheeks? Do its roots really have the same shape as bones?

#### NIGHT HARVEST (PG. 30)

What human part is the moon given? How is this part described? What does it do? Discuss how the moon takes on the human quality of sharing. What does this quality of sharing have to do with the harvest? See also the discussion of this poem under Metaphor.

#### UP WITH THE GRAIN (PG. 32)

What human part is the grain elevator given? What does this part do? Discuss the ways in which a grain elevator can be like a soldier. For example, it stands straight and stiff at attention, it stands just outside town like a soldier on duty, it endures all kinds of weather, it is knocked down in the poem, as in battle.

#### EXERCISE

Brainstorm a list of human parts (voice, breath, shoulders, heart, mouth, feet) for specific plants that students choose, such as a palm tree, grass, a tulip, an apple tree or a carrot in the garden. Use these in sentences.

#### *Example:*

*The tulip's mouth opened today.  
It holds its mouth open to drink the rain.  
It stretches its long, thin neck to the sky.*

These should be as accurate as possible, as discussed with the caragana poem. Have students take their favourite sentences and turn them into a personification portrait poem about the plant they've chosen.

#### NORTHERN LIGHTS (PG. 25)

In this poem, the northern lights are personified not only through verbs and human characteristics but by creating an actual scene around "her." What are the elements of

this scene? What happens in it? List the props that would be needed if "Northern Lights" were acted as a scene in a play.

#### EXERCISE

Choose a "wonder" the students have encountered, such as an ocean, a waterfall, a tall or old building, a bridge, a beach, an ant colony, a rainbow, or a cave. Have them pretend that they are that wonder. What are their dreams? What do they remember? What do they want to tell us? Students should set themselves in a scene. Are they the rainbow trying to solve an argument? Are they the skyscraper trying to touch the sky? Are they the cave holding a secret meeting of the stalactites and stalagmites? The students can use the scene and the questions to write a poem in the first-person voice of this wonder. Do not use the actual name of the wonder anywhere in the poem, except in the title.

#### *Example:*

*Laughing in colour, I hold hands with both the rain and the sun. (rainbow)*

*For a hundred years I've felt the roar of cars over my back. (bridge)*

A related poem to study as a model for this exercise is "Mushrooms" by Sylvia Plath. Students can follow Plath's short-line, three-line stanza pattern, which will force them to choose each word carefully.

#### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: FALL (PG. 28)

Have students identify the personifying of willow leaves, mallards, fall, winter, and blackbirds. What do these things do that makes them human? How is silence used in the personification of the fall?

#### GIFT (PG. 47)

What kind of a person is the sky in the first section of this poem? Brainstorm a list of describing words (adjectives) for this person, for example: gentle, careful, generous. Does this person remind students of anyone they know, perhaps a friend or family member? What are the actions of the "person" in the poem? How does the speaker in the poem respond?

## HOARFROST (PG. 51)

There is a hidden “person” in this poem, revealed by the question asked at the beginning of each stanza: “Who iced the trees last night?” “Who iced the telephone wire last night?” The wonder of waking up to a hoarfrosted world is shown in each question, and in the personification of the hoarfrost that iced the world while the poem’s speaker slept.

## EXERCISES

- Choose a “change in nature” scene, such as the first snow, rain in the night, or the aftermath of a hail, wind, snow, or ice storm. Ask students to find a verb, like “iced,” that best describes what a person would do to achieve the change. They should ask at least four questions about the scene that begin with “who,” repeat the verb they’ve chosen, and end with “last night.”

### *Example:*

*Who threw the branches last night? Who threw the laundry last night? (wind storm)*

*Who soaked the grass last night? (rain)*

*Who decorated the trees last night? Who decorated the grass last night? (ice storm)*

- Have the students write a poem of four or five stanzas in the same form as “Hoarfrost.” Each stanza should begin with a question from their lists. Remember that each question should begin with “who,” use the same verb, and end with “last night.” After the question, they should write lines that show specifics of the nature scene.

## *Simile*

The simile is a stated comparison between seemingly unlike things using *like* or *as* to make the comparison. It is easy and natural for even very young children to make comparisons. Kenneth Koch, in his excellent book *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, introduces the concept by comparing a piece of chalk to a snowy mountain, asking students to say what is the same and what is different. *From the Top of a Grain Elevator* is filled with examples of similes. Students enjoy identifying similes after poems have been read out loud. In this

way they gain exposure to the types of things that can be compared, and get a sense of the rhythm different similes have before creating simile poems of their own.

## SPRING RECITAL: MEADOWLARK SOLO (PG. 10)

“Her song’s too quick for me,/like a quiver or a fawn/or a bird on a telephone pole—/makes me shiver, then is gone.”

## SPRING RECITAL: FROG CHORUS ROUND SONG (PG. 12)

“hiccupping/sounds slip to dusk/like rain to the pond”

Note that the simile in this poem happens in the verb “slip.” The way the hiccupping sounds slip into the dusk is compared to the way rains slips into the pond.

## THE SLOUGH CYCLE: SUMMER (PG. 15)

“my fractions squiggling/down like worms in our slough”

## DRIVING HOME FROM THE LAKE (PG. 18)

“I watch northern lights/swim like hundreds of green minnows.”

## CARAGANAS (PG. 21)

“I suck caragana flowers,/yellow and sweet as candy.”

“It hides softballs like bubblegum/in its fat, green cheeks.”

## JUNE THUNDERSTORM (PG. 23)

“...voice rumbling/through town like an old truck,”

“listening to the sky’s distant grumbles/like a hungry stomach in church.”

## NIGHT HARVEST (PG. 30)

“I watch grain pour,/hear it roar like a waterfall.”

“after-bedtime hours/wind behind us like straw.”

## PRAIRIE HALLOWEEN (PG. 39)

“I want to be a hummingbird/with ruby throat and silver wings,/tiny and delicate,/flitting from house to house/collecting treats like nectar.”

## EXERCISE

Three different sentence structures can be given for even young children to try simile poems:

\_\_\_\_\_is/are like\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_reminds me of\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_is/are as\_\_\_\_\_ (adjective/describing word) as\_\_\_\_\_.

For the last sentence structure, a young boy in Ottawa came up with:

*My dad is as bald as a peanut!*

For younger grades, simply solicit oral examples of similes drawn from classroom objects, home, and the playground to come up with a collaborative simile poem. The teacher can record all of the examples on chart paper or the blackboard and read or have a student read the whole poem out loud at the end of the session.

Older students (grades three and up) can be given ten to fifteen minutes to come up with their own loosely structured, five to seven line simile poems, simply listing several similes in sentences. The images may be related or unrelated.

*Example:*

*The blackboard is like a slough covered in algae.*

*Her voice reminds me of a warm pot of soup.*

*His T-shirt is as bright as a popsicle.*

This exercise is a kind of warm-up to using similes, like scales for one studying the piano. Once students get used to using them, they can integrate them into other poems they've already written, such as the five senses poem given at the beginning of the guide.

## *Metaphor*

A metaphor is an implied comparison between seemingly unlike things. What happens when you take away the *like* and the *as*? The bridge formed by metaphor can surprise and delight. Writing in the language of metaphor involves taking a leap in the imagination, and may be more difficult for students to understand than the stated comparisons of simile. However, if they have been writing poems using personification, they have already been exposed to a kind of metaphor—for example, the implicit comparison

between northern lights and a woman sleeping and dreaming found in “Northern Lights.” Metaphor is one of the poet’s most important tools. It can occur as a simple, isolated comparison, or a larger metaphor may guide the imagery of the whole poem. Both uses of metaphor are illustrated here.

THE SLOUGH CYCLE: WINTER (PG. 44)

This poem contains an isolated metaphor that leads to a larger metaphor. Have students identify the metaphor—the implied comparison in the last stanza between the moon and a frozen slough. What can make a metaphor work well are the vast surface differences between compared things. Students can list the obvious differences between a frozen slough and the moon (actual size, matter from which it is composed, location in the universe), then discuss what they might have in common (similar colour, shape, flat appearance of the moon in the sky, designs left by skate marks similar to craters we see from a distance).

Another isolated metaphor to identify is the “stubble fields tumbled with stars.” Here, the moonlit field is implicitly compared to the night sky. Students can contribute their knowledge of the appearance of moonlit snow to discuss how the field can be “tumbled with stars.” Important to note is that this metaphor sets up the moon/slough metaphor in the last stanza by placing the slough in a “field-sky” before it is metaphorically placed as the moon in the real sky.

Older students can discuss the larger metaphor implied in “circles and circles/each year in the cold” by comparing the cycle (circles) of the moon to the cycle of generations. How does this skating on the slough event link the generations, the past, and the present? (Grandfather tagging the child speaker, passing on the same activity that is repeated year after year as a constant from the past.) How can this linking be compared, in a larger metaphor, to what the moon does? (Repeats the same cycles year after year, a circle that is constant from the past to the present.)

FACEWASH (PG. 49)

What is anger compared to in this poem? Discuss how the verb “melted” shows the comparison without “Anger is snow” actually stated in the poem. What makes the poem’s speaker angry? How does the anger build in the

poem? How is anger different from snow? What qualities of both things are the same? (Anger can go away quickly, can build up like snowdrifts, can hurt like snow rubbed in the face.)

### EXERCISE

Have the students choose an emotion such as anger, love, jealousy, happiness, fear, or sadness. Several sentences should be written using the emotion chosen, the word “is,” and any objects students see in the room or out the window, no matter how nonsensical they may seem at first.

*Example:*

*Love is a book.*

*Love is a dust ball.*

*Love is a pencil.*

*Anger is a piece of chalk.*

Have the students choose their favourite sentence, take the object from it, and list several characteristics.

*Example:*

*Pencil:*

*long*

*sharp*

*pointed at the tip*

*held tightly*

*moves a lot/busy*

*makes words, numbers, pictures*

*fills the page*

Students should read the sentence again (“Love is a pencil”), asking themselves the question “Why?” and answer choosing descriptive words from their list about the object. Don’t use the emotion word except in the first line.

*Example:*

*Love is a pencil*

*on the move,*

*long and sharp,*

*held tight*

*to fill my page*

*with dinosaur cartoons.*

### CROCUS HUNT (PG. 6)

Have students identify the metaphor—the implied comparison between a treasure hunt and a hunt for a wild prairie crocus. What action words/verbs used by the poem’s speaker show the reader that this is a hunt? Identify the moment when the speaker finds the crocus treasure (“their backs/a sun-silvery fuzz I touch”). What does the speaker finally hear in the second to last stanza? Discuss how the whole experience of new life in spring (frogs, magpie, Spring unpacking) is an extension of the crocus/treasure metaphor.

Another metaphor in the poem is the comparison between the crocus and an alert cat that can’t be heard but hears. Have students list words to describe a cat, as well as a prairie crocus, and find differences and similarities. Some research may be needed to identify characteristics of the prairie crocus (*Anemone patens*), which is not to be confused with the crocus (*genus Crocus*). How do the petals look like a cat’s ears?

### NIGHT HARVEST (PG. 30)

In the section on personification, the moon is identified as “sharing Dad” with the poem’s speaker. Why is he/she so excited to spend the whole night out in the combine with Dad and only share him with the moon? (Hint is in first stanza.) Dad and the speaker are harvesting wheat, but what is the other “harvest” shown in this poem? Have students discuss what is needed for the successful harvest of wheat (time, nurture, attention), compared to similar qualities needed in a relationship.

### Sound

Poetry has been described as an art that is “halfway between speech and song.” Students need to train their ears to become aware of the rich play of sound that is possible in poetry. Poems from the book will be discussed in three sections of sound—onomatopoeia, alliteration, and rhyme.

### Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is the use of words that by their pronunciation suggest or sound like their meaning. Some examples are “hiss,” “buzz,” “sizzle,” and “bang.” These kinds of words can help to heighten and create vivid sound pictures in a poem.

### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: SUMMER (PG. 15)

Have the students close their eyes. Say the onomatopoeic word *ooze* and have the students write down all the words that come to their minds at the sound. Do the same thing with the word *squish*. Discuss the word pictures that come up. Then have the students read the poem out loud to each other and compare the mud-between-the-toes picture in the poem to the pictures they came up with themselves.

### DRIVING HOME FROM THE LAKE (PG. 18)

Write *hum* and *dart* on the board. Group brainstorm a list of things that hum and a list of things that dart. Read the poem out loud and add *station wagon* under *hum* and *minnows* under *dart*. Point out that one of the reasons *hum* works as an onomatopoeic word is that the *m* at the end can be drawn out at length like the actual sound of a car or other things on the list. *Dart*, on the other hand, ends with the consonant *t*, which stops the word quickly and allows the sound of the word to actually dart away like minnows or the other listed items.

### CROCUS HUNT (PG. 6)

Say the word *hush* out loud to the students. What is it about the ending of the word that creates a feeling of quiet? Come up with a list of words that sound like *hush* but don't have the same meaning. Do they create the same effect? Have a student read the poem out loud and take a long pause after the word *hush* before reading the next line. What pictures came to the students' minds during the pause?

### EXERCISE

- Have students choose a poem they've already written, such as the five-senses poem or one of the personification poems. Ask them to write a list of onomatopoeic words that fit with the tone or mood that they've created in that poem.

*Example:*

#### *Wind Poem (Personification)*

*whir*  
*whip*  
*whistle*  
*whoosh*

- Have the students work one or two of these words into their poems to create a vivid sound picture.

### *Alliteration*

Alliteration is the repetition of the beginning consonant sound of words. When used with the right balance, alliteration can be a very effective tool.

### THE CHASE (PG. 37)

Have students identify alliteration clusters of *c* words (*crouch, curl, crinkle, crunch*), *s* words (*sweeps, street, scuttle, skip, swirl, stops, swing, skitter, six, school*) and *w* (*wind, whisks*). Discuss how these clusters create contrast of movement in the poem: the *c* words keep the leaves static on the ground; the *s* words send them dancing through the air; the *w* words set both the leaves and the speaker in motion again at the end.

### OCTOBER (PG. 35)

Read the last small poem out loud and have students identify all of the *s* alliteration words without looking at the poem on the page. Note how *sour* and *scowl* draw attention through the alliteration, working off each other to set a "sour" tone. The alliterative words tend to stand out and dominate the poem because it is so short.

### AT NEMIEBEN LAKE (PG. 16)

Have students identify all of the *s* words in the Northern Pike stanza. As with "The Chase," discuss how these words can build to a momentum that really does "swish" the fish away.

### *Rhyme*

*Full rhyme* or *true rhyme*, that is, rhyme that repeats both the final vowel and consonant of a word (*that/cat, street/meet*) has been used so extensively on the ends of lines (*external rhyme*) in the poetry of the past that students tend to have preconceived ideas about it—for example, that it's the only way to write poetry. For this reason, it's a good idea at first to insist that students *not* make their poems rhyme. This will encourage them to find their own voices, rather than following a set rhyme (and often consequently rhythm) pattern that can end up sounding stilted and contrived.

*From the Top of a Grain Elevator* is, however, filled with rhyme and sound connections, particularly instances of *half-rhyme*, in which the vowels of two words are repeated (*assonance*: trough/across) or in which the final consonants are repeated (*consonance*: realm/from). Full rhymes and half-rhymes are found throughout the book, sometimes on the ends of lines but often inside the lines (*internal rhyme*). Students can develop their musical ears by listening for these sound connections in the poems.

#### SONGS FOR JUMPING ROPE (PG. 8)

In the tradition of jump rope songs, these use full rhymes (except for *inside/fry*) on the ends of lines, so that the person jumping can land on the ground in rhythm with the impact of the full rhyme. One student can be chosen to jump rope while everyone else chants the poems. The full rhyme should land exactly when the feet hit the floor and in this way reinforce the rhythm.

#### CONSTELLATIONS (PG. 20)

This is a Shakespearean sonnet using the rhyme pattern *abab cdcd efef gg*. (See discussion of this poem in the Author's Note in the book, as well as under "Forms and the Line.") Almost all of the rhymes are some kind of half-rhyme or variation. Have the students listen to the poem, then look at it on the page and pull out all of the rhyme pairs:

*there/where*  
*under/curve*  
*call/Shelled*  
*we/Cookies*

As they look at the connections between words and repetitions of sound, students will start to see and hear the rich possibilities that are open to them in the world of rhyme.

#### CARAGANAS (PG. 21)

##### EXERCISE

This is an ear-training exercise. After going over appropriate definitions, have students take out a blank sheet of paper and mark columns for *half-rhyme* and *full rhyme*. Slowly read the first section of "Caraganas." Have them write down the rhymes they hear under the appropriate columns. Read the first section again. Discuss what the students heard. Have them look at the poem on the page

and identify the internal assonance half-rhyme cluster of "leafy," "screen," "peek," and "sweet" that creates a kind of "screen" at the beginning of the section. Also to be noted is the internal full rhyme pair, "stay" and "play," which emphasizes and gives force to the word *stay*, and the "fuss," "suck," "honey," "dust" assonance half-rhyme cluster that closes and gives a sense of finality to the section.

##### Repetition

Repetition of words or lines can give a poem structure. It can help to emphasize an important idea or emotion. It can create a musical effect, like a song lyric. It can accurately depict the meaning of a word by showing what it really does, such as *knock, knock* or *tick-tock, tick-tock*. Repetition is used often in *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*; a few examples are shown here.

#### CROCUS HUNT (PG. 6)

To emphasize the repetition, choose a small group of students or one student to read "I can't hear the crocus but it hears me," while another person or group reads the rest of the poem. How is this repetition like going on a treasure hunt? (You keep repeating the same gesture of looking as you get closer to the treasure, and closer to the end of the poem.) Also note the way the repetition, with its emphasis on the crocus hearing, builds to the cat's ear metaphor and simile in stanza four.

#### SPRING RECITAL: FROG CHORUS ROUND SONG (PG. 12)

Repetition is the core element of this poem. Three groups are intended to read it as an actual round song. First, have the class read through the entire circle together. As they read around the circle, the poem is actually repeated three times. Divide the class into three groups. The first group begins with "From the dugout, hundreds/of voices croak a round." At this point, they continue on around the circle while the second group begins "From the dugout..." This process repeats with the third group, who will end the song on "Ribbet, ribbet, ribbet, ribbet." The number of repetitions and multiple voices should give the effect of many frogs croaking in a pond.

#### AT BATOCHÉ (PG. 36)

Have students identify the repeated pattern that guides this poem. (Each stanza is a question that begins and ends with the same words.) Students can practise different ways of reading the poem out loud, having one person



read the first three lines and everyone together reading “over a hundred years ago,” and vice versa. The repeated phrase of “over a hundred years ago” emphasizes the wonder of the speaker at the number of passing years, and at being in a place that bridges the past and the present.

#### SASKATOONS (PG. 19)

The word *saskatoons*, repeated on its own at the beginning of each stanza, gives a musical effect but also reflects and emphasizes the repetitive motion of picking the berries. Note that the speaker never actually states that she/he is picking saskatoon berries in the poem. This is shown in the imagery and the repetition.

#### EXERCISE

Have students choose a favourite activity, like skiing, riding a bike, playing with the dog, or baking cookies. Ask them to choose one central object that they will need to do this activity, like snow, a bike, a cocker spaniel (or whatever specific kind of dog they have), or chocolate chips.

In the style of “Saskatoons,” use this object as the first line of the first stanza. Follow it with three more lines that describe the object and in some way show the activity. Repeat the word at the beginning of each stanza to create a poem about the activity that is at least four stanzas long.

*Example:*

*Chocolate chips,  
sweet cupfuls  
fall into the dough  
with sugar and flour.*

*Chocolate chips,  
brown and small  
make happy eyes  
for my cookie dog.*

#### Forms

Although many of the poems in *From the Top of a Grain Elevator* are written in lyrical free verse, the Author’s Note at the end of the book defines and discusses some of the forms that are used, such as syllable-count, tanka, sonnet, and shaped poems. Students can read the poems and

then try their own poems in the same form. Students might be inspired by “Getting the Tree,” “From the Top of a Grain Elevator,” and “Buried” to try their own shaped poems. Older students may want to try a half-rhyming sonnet in the style of “Constellations.”

#### *The Line*

Related to forms and rhythm in poems is a discussion of how to break lines—for example, the lines in “Constellations” are broken according to a set rhythmical and rhyming pattern. The subject of how to break the line is huge; poets deal with it all of their lives. The following *general* rules (and there are certainly exceptions, because every poem is unique) could be discussed with older students. 1) Because there is an implied pause at the end of a line, that place in the line receives the most emphasis. Therefore, students might want to think hard before they put a word like *the* at the end of a line. 2) Lines that contain only one word are given much emphasis, and students should consider if the word deserves the whole line they give it. In the case of the repetitive structure exercise, a word like *saskatoons* deserves the whole line emphasis because it’s the central image of the whole poem.

#### GOPHER TALES (PG. 5)

Read this poem out loud to the class. Give a slight pause after the word *caught* in the second-to-last line of the poem. Discuss how the open space after “I’ve caught” could lead the reader to believe that the speaker has caught a gopher. “Caught” on the end of the line holds suspense over the line to make “I’ve caught/the first sign of Spring” doubly resonant, because the expectation has been otherwise.

#### CROCUS HUNT (PG. 6)

Read out loud and note the line break after “hush.” Discuss how the open space given in both the stanza and line break after “hush” actually create a moment of silence. Students can recall sound pictures created by “hush” from the Onomatopoeia section. The line and stanza breaks give those pictures a space to breathe.

#### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: FALL (PG. 28)

Read this poem out loud and take a pause after “breath” in the second stanza. Why is the line broken here? Why is the stanza broken here? Does this give a feeling of move-

ment in the poem? If so, what is the movement? How are the line and stanza breaks like a breath? How do the line and stanza breaks contribute to the overall feeling and mood of the poem (journey, saying goodbye, taking a deep breath before starting something new)?

#### ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

##### Create a Poetry Environment

Set up a display of poetry books in your classroom. A few are suggested in the Resources section of this guide. One teacher at Lakecrest School in St. John's, Newfoundland, had students choose from these books for a "Poem of the Day" and a "Poem of the Week" that they read out loud during the Poetry Unit. Displays can be set up with definitions and samples of the basic elements of poetry: simile, metaphor, personification, etc.

##### Response Journals

In addition to the image notebooks mentioned in Using the Five Senses, students can respond to poems they are reading in a poetry response journal. In it they can note examples of poetic elements that they see in the poems, such as personification, simile, and images drawn from the senses. As well, they can write down questions they have, things they don't understand, lines they particularly like or don't like, and why. The purpose of the journal is for students to begin to interact with the poems they read, to become readers as well as writers of poetry.

##### Reading Out Loud

Because of the musical element of poetry, it's very important for students to read their own and others' work out loud, to gain a sense of the rhythm and the sounds of words. This can be introduced if students read the poems for discussion either to each other or in front of class, as well as in a regular "performance" time for students to read their own poems in front of the class. These "mini-readings" can culminate in a reading event by the whole class at the end of the unit that could involve invitations to parents and friends, food, and advertising to the rest of the school. Students could read from their own handmade and illustrated books.

## VISUAL ARTS

### *Line/Aquatint Etchings*

The most obvious link to art in the book is the illustrations: fourteen line/aquatint etchings by Kathy Thiessen.

Find out about the line/aquatint etching method. What process did the illustrator go through to make these images? An education package resource for Thiessen's touring exhibition, *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, is available from:

Organization of Saskatchewan Arts Councils (OSAC)

1102 8th Avenue

Regina, Saskatchewan

S4R 1C9

Phone: (306) 586-1250

Fax: (306) 586-1550

E-mail: [osac@sk.sympatico.ca](mailto:osac@sk.sympatico.ca)

Web site: [www.osac.sk.ca](http://www.osac.sk.ca)

#### ACTIVITIES

- Choose an illustration for a poem in the book. Study the connections between the poem and the illustration. What is the most important image in the poem? What is the most important image in the illustration? Does the illustration capture the feeling of the poem, and vice versa?
- Now look at all of the illustrations as a set. Do you see any repeated lines and patterns and images, just as there are repeated lines and patterns and images in the poems? What do these repeated elements tell us about the book as a whole?

### *Illustrating Your Poems*

Once the students start writing poems, a natural art project follow up is the illustration of these poems. Students can choose media depending on the mood and tone of their poems, keeping in mind that they can use both the poems and the illustrations in the creation of their own poetry book.

One project for illustrations could be printmaking. Information on printmaking and teaching printmaking can be found in the Resources section.

## Bookmaking

Students can bring together their poems and illustrations in the creation of their own books, which they can read from at the final Poetry Unit event. This project could include various related art projects such as calligraphy and papermaking.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

### THE WIND IN MAY (PG. 9)

“Is this the wind Grandpa fought as a boy,/one that licked scraps of cloud from the sky?” and the following stanza allude to the Great Depression on the Canadian Prairies in the 1930s, otherwise known as the “dirty thirties,” that coincided with great drought and dust storms. The poem can be used as a trigger for discussion and research projects about that era in Canada’s history. “Caraganas” can also be discussed here—did they have a function during the Great Depression?

### ACTIVITY

Find and interview people who lived through and remember the 1930s on the Canadian Prairies. Questions could include what they remember about the wind and dust, how things have changed between then and now, how they ate and bought supplies, or they could be asked to describe a significant memory. Compare your findings with the experience alluded to in the poem.

### NIGHT HARVEST/UP WITH THE GRAIN/FROM THE TOP OF A GRAIN ELEVATOR (PG. 30/PG. 32/PG. 33)

All of these poems can be used to trigger discussion and study of farming practices and process in the Canadian Prairies.

### ACTIVITIES

- Research and follow the life cycle of a wheat crop on the prairies. When and how is it planted? What are its ideal growing conditions? What related jobs must the farmer do to ensure a good crop? When and how is it harvested? Why does a farmer have to work so hard to make sure that the crop is harvested in time? Illustrate your research with pictures and diagrams.

- Follow the process of what happens to grain once it’s taken to the elevator. What does the inside of an elevator look like? How is grain put into the elevator? What kinds of grain are stored in an elevator? How is it stored? How long does it stay inside? What takes it away and where does it go? Illustrate with pictures and diagrams.

- Research the disappearance of the old grain elevators on the prairies. Find pictures in magazines to show what they look like. Why are they being taken down? How are they taken down? How many are left? Will they all disappear, or will some be left? Does the disappearance of the grain elevator from towns affect other systems, such as the railroad?

### DRIVING HOME FROM THE LAKE/NORTHERN LIGHTS (PG. 18/PG. 25)

Research and present these poems, perhaps dramatically in a play, First Nations myths and legends associated with the northern lights.

### AT BATOCHE (PG. 36)

Reading this poem can lead to a whole unit on the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, an important event in Canadian history. Timelines of important battles in the uprising can be made; dramatic scenes written and enacted; presentations made on important figures such as Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont; models created on the Métis people and their way of life; maps created of the battle sites, village, and surrounding area; and a possible field trip taken to Batoche.

## SCIENCE

### THE SLOUGH CYCLE: SPRING, SUMMER, FALL, WINTER (PG. 3/PG. 15/PG. 28/PG. 44)

Research the characteristics and life cycle of a slough on the Canadian Prairies. How does it change in each season? List the natural plant, animal, and bird life that lives in/around the slough in each season. What is the name of the itch-causing organism in “The Slough Cycle: Summer”?

### CROCUS HUNT/CARAGANAS/SASKATOONS (PG. 6/PG. 21/PG. 19)

Research plant life native to the prairies, namely the prairie crocus, the caragana and the saskatoon. Include descriptions of leaves, fruit and flowers, growth habits and habitat. Illustrate your information with pictures and diagrams.

SPRING RECITAL/THE SLOUGH CYCLE: FALL/AT NEMIEBEN LAKE (PG. 10/PG. 28/PG. 16)

Find information on the following birds and fish, including appearance, song and habitat:

Meadowlark  
Magpie  
Northern Pike  
Loon  
Mallard

DRIVING HOME FROM THE LAKE/NORTHERN LIGHTS (PG. 18/PG. 25)

Find information on the phenomenon of the northern lights, or aurora borealis. What causes it? Where does it occur? Why does it appear on some nights and not others? Illustrate your information with pictures and diagrams.

THE WIND IN MAY/JUNE THUNDERSTORM/FORTY BELOW/HOARFROST (PG. 9/PG. 23/PG. 53/PG. 51)

Choose one of the following weather patterns and illustrate with pictures and diagrams why it occurs and what happens in it:

Dust storm/drought  
Summer thunderstorm  
Extreme cold temperatures, such as forty below zero  
Hoarfrost on plants and objects

## RESOURCES

### *Poetry Books for Your Classroom*

Adoff, Arnold. *All the Colors of the Race*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1982.

———. *Black Is Brown Is Tan*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992.

———. *Friend Dog*. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1980.

———. *Love Letters*. Toronto: Scholastic Canada, 1997.

———. *Outside Inside*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shephard, 1981.

———. *Sports Pages*. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1986.

Alderson, Sue Ann. *Pond Seasons*. Toronto: Groundwood, 1997.

———. *Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 1995.

Baylor, Byrd. *Desert Voices*. New York: Scribner, 1981.

———. *If You Are a Hunter of Fossils*. New York: Scribner, 1980.

———. *Hawk, I'm Your Brother*. New York: Scribner, 1976.

———. *The Way to Start a Day*. New York: Scribner, 1978.

Belting, Natalia. *The Sun Is a Golden Earring*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.

Booth, David (Ed.) *Till All the Stars Have Fallen: Canadian Poems for Children*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1998.

Fleischman, Paul. *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

———. *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Spin a Soft Black Song*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.

Joseph, Lynn. *Coconut Kind of Day: Island Poems*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shephard, 1990.

Lee, Dennis. *Alligator Pie*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1987.

———. *Bubblegum Delicious*. Toronto: Key Porter, 2000.

———. *Garbage Delight*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977.

———. *Jelly Belly*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1994.

Merriam, Eve. *Finding a Poem*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

———. *There Is No Rhyme for Silver*. New York: Atheneum, 1962.

Milne, A. A. *Now We Are Six*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966.

Rosen, Michael. *The Best of Michael Rosen*. Berkeley: Wetlands Press, 1995.

Silverstein, Shel. *Falling Up*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

———. *A Light in the Attic*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

———. *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

Willard, Nancy. *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981.

## *Poetry Resource Books*

All of these books were used as resources in the creation of this guide.

Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature (Fourth Edition)*. Indianapolis, IN: ITT Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing Company, Inc., 1985.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. New York: Random House, 1970.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Tucker, Shelley. *Painting the Sky: Writing Poetry with Children*. Glenview, IL: GoodYearBooks, 1995.

Note: The books by Shelley Tucker and Kenneth Koch are excellent resources for teaching children poetry in the classroom.

## *Additional Poetry Resources*

The League of Canadian Poets provides resources and information on many poetry-related topics, as well as a listing of poets available to visit Ontario schools. As well, they sponsor an annual National Youth Poetry Contest with cash prizes in various age categories.

The League of Canadian Poets  
54 Wolseley Street  
Toronto, ON  
M5T 1A5  
Phone: (416) 504-1657  
Fax: (416) 504-0096  
E-mail: [league@ican.net](mailto:league@ican.net)  
Web site: [www.poets.ca](http://www.poets.ca)

[www.youngpoets.ca](http://www.youngpoets.ca)

This Web site is designed to foster an appreciation of poetry and to encourage and teach young poets.

Also, check out the resources available from your provincial writing organization. Often it will have listings of poets available for school visits, as well as information on student publications and contests.

## *Printmaking*

Clemson, Katie, and Simmons, Rosemary. *The Complete Manual of Relief Printmaking*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

Elam, Jane. *Introducing Linocuts*. New York: Betsford Watson-Guptill, 1969.

Erickson, Janet, and Sproul, Adelaide. *Printmaking Without a Press*. New York: Reinhold, 1966.

Saff, Donald, and Sacilotto, Deli. *Printmaking: History and Process*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.

## *Bookmaking*

Stinson, Kathy. *Writing Your Best Picture Book Ever*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers, 1994.

## *The Depression*

Booth, David, and Reczuch, Karen (illustrator). *The Dust Bowl*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1996.

## *Grain Elevators*

Hicken, Sophi. *Still Standing: The Grain Elevators of Southern Alberta*. Lethbridge: Paramount Printers, 1999.

Korol, Todd (photography) and Butala, Sharon (essay). *Harvest*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992.

Kurelek, William. *A Prairie Boy's Winter and Summer*. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1978.

## *Mythology*

Waboose, Jan Bourdeau, and Deines, Brian (illustrator). *SkySisters*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 2000.

## *Batoche*

Batoche National Historical Site  
Box 999  
Rosthern, Saskatchewan  
S0K 3R0  
Phone: (306) 423-6227

Fax: (306) 423-5400

E-mail: [Batoche\\_Info@pch.gc.ca](mailto:Batoche_Info@pch.gc.ca)

Web site: [http://parkscanada.pch.gc.ca/parks/saskatchewan/batoche/English/Reach\\_e.htm](http://parkscanada.pch.gc.ca/parks/saskatchewan/batoche/English/Reach_e.htm)

Campbell, Maria. *Riel's People: How the Métis Lived*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978.

### *Prairie Plants*

Vance, F. R., Jowsey, J. R., and McLean, J. S. *Wildflowers Across the Prairies: Revised and Expanded*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984.

### *Northern Lights*

[www.exploratorium.edu/learning\\_studio/auroras/](http://www.exploratorium.edu/learning_studio/auroras/)

This excellent, colourful site takes you on a self-guided tour. It shows what the auroras look like from space and on Earth, how they are created, and where they can be found.

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For their invaluable assistance and advice on this guide, I would like to thank Jen Hamilton and Michael Carroll at Beach Holme Publishing, Cindy Nickel, Sherry van Hesteren, and Kathy Thiessen.

## ON WRITING THE BOOK

For comments on the process and motivation for writing *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, see the last paragraph of the Author's Note on page 59.

## ABOUT BARBARA NICKEL

Barbara Nickel's novel for children, *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart*, was shortlisted for the Mr. Christie Book Award, the B.C. Red Cedar Award, and the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction. Her book of children's poetry, *From the Top of a Grain Elevator*, was named a finalist for the 2000 Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children, and its launch was aired on CBC Radio's *Gallery* (Saskatchewan). Both of Nickel's children's books were selected as Our Choice books by the Canadian Children's Book Centre, and she has used them to give readings and workshops to children in schools in B.C., Saskatchewan, Ontario, Newfoundland, P.E.I., Nova Scotia, and Yukon.

Nickel's poetry book for adults, *The Gladys Elegies*, won the 1998 Pat Lowther Memorial Award given by the League of Canadian Poets for the best book of poetry by a Canadian woman. She has also written a play for adults, *SchumannBrahmSchumann*. Born and raised in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, Barbara currently teaches creative writing at the University of British Columbia.

## CONTACTING THE AUTHOR

Barbara Nickel visits many schools and libraries, and may be contacted through Beach Holme Publishing.

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## BUYING THE BOOK

Copies of the book may be ordered from bookstores, and the Teacher's Guide can be ordered from Beach Holme Publishing. A free Teacher's Guide is provided with each class set of books.

This guide was written by Barbara Nickel.

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