

HOW TO TEACH POETRY USING

THE SECRET OF ME

A Novel in Poems by Meg Kearney

(AGES 12+)

A TEACHER'S GUIDE



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The Secret Of Me: A Novel in Poems by Meg Kearney

With: An Afterword by the Author

Guide to This Book's Poetics

Some Poems Lizzie Loves

Recommended Books About Poetry

Recommended Books and Links About Adoption

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INTRODUCTION

Whether you are a teacher who is at ease with and knowledgeable about teaching poetry or a bit intimidated by the subject, this *Guide* is meant to give you—and your students—inspiration and ideas for talking about and writing poetry. It is my hope that readers of *The Secret of Me* will come away with a new sense of what poetry is and how it might play a role in their own lives.

For Lizzie McLane (the character writing the poems that tell the story of *The Secret of Me*), poetry is a passion. While the world buzzes around her—filled with television, cell phones, computer games, and the pressures of the intricate social tightrope that is middle school—reading and writing poems provides Lizzie with a quiet, contemplative means to explore and make sense of her feelings and the people and events in her life.

It's important to note that poetry is not merely self-expression, but an art form that—when it's working—discovers universal truths in the personal, the imagined, and/or the observed. This means that poetry, at least the kind that Lizzie and I are interested in, is meant to be understood by others, even if it takes a bit of rereading and thought to unpack an individual poem's layers. While mystery is often a source of power in poetry, poems that are too mysterious to understand serve no one but their authors.

This *Guide* is offered as a supplement to *The Secret of Me* and the explication of the poetics found in the book's backmatter, "A Guide to This Book's Poetics." **Terms found in the backmatter guide are indicated here in bold.** As the author of both, I welcome feedback and questions from teachers and students; feel free to contact me through my web site, www.megkearney.com.

PRE-READING DISCUSSION

By the time they read *The Secret of Me*, some students may have already decided they don't like poetry, or that they don't understand it. Others may happily claim that they love poetry and write it themselves. Most classes will include a mix of poetry lovers and writers, poetry "haters," and students who have no feelings about poetry one way or the other. For such groups, teachers will want to dispel common misunderstandings and assumptions, and lay some groundwork for reading a novel made of poems.

Some general questions a teacher might ask and discuss before asking students to read a novel in verse include:

WHAT IS A POEM?

Definitions of poetry are seemingly endless. Students might answer this question by saying "poetry is short, and it rhymes," or "writing with lots of rules," or "it's like rap." As hip as young people are these days, their ideas of what poetry is are often as dated or narrowly defined as the idea that all poets are white (usually dead) men who wear berets.

Dylan Thomas said, "Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing." This seems worth repeating, as poems—good poems—should make us *feel something*. They make us gasp, laugh, shout, cry, or simply emotionally move us in one way or another. Perhaps there are so many *different* definitions of poetry because this art form resists being nailed down as any one thing. Still, most people know it when they read it. That's why it's perhaps best to talk instead about what poems can do, and how they do it.

WHAT CAN POEMS DO?

Ask your students this question and see how many different responses they can come up with. You might want to revisit this question after students have read the book, and see (a) if their ideas have expanded and (b) how many of Lizzie's poems they can match with the suggestions below:

- Tell a story (e.g.: about a basketball game, or finding a hurt bird).
- Say “This is how I’ve solved being alive thus far” and/or “This is what it’s like to be inside my skin, my head.” The poet Stanley Kunitz said poetry is “the telling of the stories of the soul.” It’s important for students to know that such stories can be made up. Often we have to make up a fiction in order to tell an emotional truth.
 - Express an emotion that’s otherwise inexpressible.
 - Find the universal in the personal: for the reader, a poem can provide a way to enter someone else’s life and perhaps understand that the poet (whom you thought was very different from you) has the same fears, problems, joys, ideas, traditions that you do—or you are able to see differences in a new way, and maybe understand them better.
 - Make a statement (funny, political, vengeful, loving).
 - Help us remember things (the first poets lived before man had invented the printing press; these traveling bards used rhythm and rhyme as ways to remember and retell stories that people could pass on from one generation to the next).
 - Entertain.
 - Celebrate or pay tribute (the job of odes and elegies).
 - Battle silence—find expression for the thing left unsaid, the thing no one wants to talk about, or fears talking about, or doesn’t know how to talk about.

HOW CAN YOU TELL A POEM FROM PROSE?

Besides its generally being shorter than prose, poetry has one main tool in its employ that prose does not: the line. In prose, the lines go from the left margin all the way to the right; when it runs out of room, a prose line returns to the left margin and starts its movement again to the right. In poetry, lines usually fall short of the right margin, for all kinds of reasons (**rhythm**, **form**, **enjambment** of meaning, for examples). Further explication is found in the “A Guide to This Book’s Poetics,” in the backmatter of the book.

WHAT ARE POETRY’S BASIC ELEMENTS?

Students often think that poetry *has* to rhyme and *has* to be written in form and meter. This is untrue. In fact, poets have myriad tools in their

toolbox, including but not limited to forms of prosody (**sonnets**, **sestinas**, **villanelles**, **blues poems**, **list poems**, etc.); **end** and **internal rhyme**, as well as other elements of sound (**alliteration**, assonance, onomatopoeia); **rhythm**; **meter**; **punctuation**; **image**; **metaphor** (and **simile** and other figures of speech, including personification); diction; tone; symbolism; and—again—the line itself. These tools are at the poet’s disposal, providing the elements essential to creating the right form for each individual poem’s content.

The poems in *The Secret of Me* dispel assumptions about what a poem is “supposed” to be by showing the variety of forms that poems can take—including formal poems (those that follow historically established models defined by the rules of prosody) and free verse.

“A Guide to This Book’s Poetics,” in the backmatter of the book, defines and provides examples of many of these terms found in a poet’s toolbox.

PRE-READING WRITING ACTIVITY

Samuel Taylor Coleridge described poetry as “the best words in the best order.” Poets can struggle for weeks, months, even years to find just the right word for a particular poem. They strive to make language seem fresh, avoiding the “easy” words that might be the first, but not necessarily the best thought that comes to mind when making a poem. Poets tend to avoid abstractions, too, choosing instead concrete words that draw on the five senses to convey feeling.

Ask students: what is the difference between abstract words and concrete words? Write the definitions on a black/white board, stressing the fact that concrete words are ones that we can see, touch, taste, smell, or hear. Then, ask students for a list of abstract words. For each abstract word, have students list at least three concrete words or phrases that might convey the *meaning* of the abstraction.

For example, if the abstract word is “love,” students might list “puppy,” “ice cream,” “Romeo/Juliet,” “slow dance,” “mother nursing her child,” or “a soldier risking his life to save a comrade.” Obviously, there are wide-ranging forms of love—all the more reason to be concrete!

Another example: if the abstract word is “beautiful,” then students might list “sunset,” “Marilyn Monroe” (or a well-known beauty in the school or in contemporary society), “wedding cake,” or “velvet.”

While drawing these concrete words out of your students, push them a little: Where is the sun setting? (“In my hometown.”) Where in your hometown? (“Over the lake.”) What’s the name of the lake? (“Huron.”) “Sunset over Lake Huron” gives a much better picture of “beautiful” than the abstract word.

This is also an opportunity to engage students in use of the five senses. What did the air smell like while the sun was setting over the lake? (“Fishy. And like wood. I was on a dock.”) Oh! You were *standing on a dock* watching the sun set over Lake Huron. Were there any sounds—fish jumping (what kind of fish?), frogs croaking, a dog barking in the distance? (“I heard the splash of a bass.”) That’s great—“splash” and “bass”

form an off-rhyme! What was the air temperature? (“Warm.”) Warm as what? (“My computer when it’s been on a long time.”) Do you remember what taste was in your mouth while you watched the sunset over Lake Huron? (“Ice cream.”) What kind? (“Strawberry. My favorite.”) Ah ha! Now *that’s* beautiful.

A poet might not use *all* of these concrete words instead of the abstract “beautiful,” but in striving for more specificity in this exercise, students get a sense of how much more power there is in concrete words than in abstract ones. I wonder what color and flavor that wedding cake is?

SECOND PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to take out a pen or pencil and a sheet of paper. Let them know that you are going to read several phrases out loud, and that after each you want them to write down the *first* thing that comes into their minds. Warn them that you are going to run through your list of phrases fairly rapidly (leaving about ten seconds in between each) and that there are no right or wrong answers. The only thing they must do is to write down the *first word(s)* they think of when they hear the phrase.

Here is the list:

White as . . .

Dark as . . .

Sharp as . . .

Cold as . . .

Hot as . . .

Now poll the group. What did they write to complete each phrase? How many wrote “snow” after “White as”? How many wrote “a sheet”? Probably most! How many wrote “night” in response to “Dark as”? How many responded “coal”?

You will find that most students respond to each of these phrases with clichés: “Sharp as a tack,” “Cold as ice,” “Hot as hell” are typical.

What’s a cliché? According to Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary, it’s a “1: trite phrase or expression; also: the idea expressed by it; 2: a hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation 3: something . . . that has become overly familiar or commonplace.”

Now, give students between five and ten minutes to come up with fresh, surprising words or phrases to complete these same phrases. Challenge them to come up with descriptive words or phrases that might never have been used before to describe these particular adjectives. (This is a good time for students to work in pairs or small groups.) Then, ask students to

read aloud what they've come up with. Most likely, they will surprise even themselves.

At this point, ask your students why they think clichés might weaken a poem or other piece of writing. The next time your students work on a poem—or any piece of writing—instruct them, during their revision process, to circle all the words or phrases that seem like clichés. Then their challenge is to find more creative ways of expressing what they're trying to say.

POST-READING DISCUSSION

- One of Lizzie's main concerns is with her adoption and all the secrecy and lack of communication (and therefore misunderstandings, especially about her own self worth) that arise from having been relinquished as a baby by her birthmother. But, as is suggested in the poem "Crossing Our Hearts in the Dark" (page 41), everyone has some concern, secret, or issue about which he/she feels deeply and which might be distressing at times. Ask students to give some examples of such concerns. Also, suggest that students write about what concerns them (in poetic or prose form), even if they show this writing to no one.

- How does Lizzie's relationship with her parents, siblings, non-adopted friends (Peter especially) evolve through the novel? How do the poems show this?

- How does Lizzie's self-image evolve? How do the poems show this?

- What are some of the moods/tones expressed in Lizzie's poems? (These might include insecurity, sadness, joy, anger, and nervousness.) Ask students to point to poems in the book that express these moods/tones. Does Lizzie use abstract or concrete language to convey them? (Ask students for specifics from poems in the book during this reinforcement of the pre-reading discussion/activity.)

POST-READING CLOSE READING (AND WRITING) ACTIVITIES

When discussing with students “what a poem is about,” remind them that poems attempt to express the otherwise inexpressible. If the writer could have expressed exactly what the poem is “saying” any other way, she wouldn’t have had to write a poem about it. It’s therefore more constructive to talk about *how* a poem reveals its meanings than what it’s *about*.

Poems are made things. Like a building, a poem has a basic architecture, a frame that holds it together. If the poem is well constructed, the reader doesn’t notice the frame; the poem as a whole attracts and keeps reader’s attention. After reading such a poem, the reader might ask, How did the poet *do* that? This is a question that students of poetry ask again and again as they study the work of others.

Here is a method for giving poems a close reading using three poems from *The Secret of Me*. First, look at how the poem is constructed. Then, develop one question about the poem that seems essential to understanding it and how/why it’s successful (or not).

“READING MY POEM ‘WHAT I WANT’ TO MOM” (page 11)

1) What kind of poem is this? How would you describe its architecture, or form?

This is a short, dramatic poem made of five **couplets**. None of the lines are **end-stopped** (the only end punctuation is the comma in the second line and the period at the very end). This gives the poem a kind of urgency and keeps drawing the reader down line to line, couplet to couplet, through the poem until its end.

The poet makes use of **internal rhyme** (“night” “tight” “light”; “bed” “said”); note these rhymes are not found right next to each other, but are sprinkled through the poem, avoiding a predictable “sing-song” sound. Note, too, that “poem”—the last word in the first line—and “them”—the very last word of the piece—create a **near-rhyme** (also called an “off-rhyme”), and that “them” refers here to “poems.”

The use of rhyme and near-rhyme gives the poem a musical strength that informs the emotions that are being revealed; that is, just as music can evoke emotion without words, musicality in poems can underscore the feelings the writer is trying to convey.

Why couplets (a type of “**strict stanza**”)? The scene portrays the interaction between two people—the form, in a way, mirrors the content.

2) How does the poet *use image and metaphor* to convey action and emotion?

The mother’s face is “an open window with the sun streaming in,” and the speaker (Lizzie) stands “in its light.” In other words, the mother is at first supportive, beaming all of her energy and focus on her daughter.

Then Lizzie reads her mother the poem, and window closes; the room goes dark. The mother literally shuts down, and is visibly no longer receptive to what Lizzie is trying to express. But if the poem actually *used* phrases like “she literally shut down” and “she was no longer receptive” instead of using imagery and metaphor, would the reader connect with the emotion of the poem, or just know the facts of the incident? Would such pedestrian language hold the reader’s interest? Would the reader be able to *feel* what the poet (Lizzie) feels?

The scene in the poem is set in Lizzie’s bedroom, a place where she normally feels safe. In a way, this makes the scene that much more upsetting; at the same time, perhaps being in her own room gives Lizzie the courage to tell herself that she can’t stop writing, even if she’s writing things her mother obviously can’t bear to hear.

3) **Exercise**

After giving a close reading to “Reading My Poem ‘What I Want’ to Mom” per the instructions above, have one student read the poem “What Happened to Cathy (and Me) on the Playground in Third Grade” (page 15) aloud for the entire class. Then, invite students to write a short poem (no more than 20 lines) that describes a scene. The poem should include at least one **metaphor** or **simile** and include at least two pairs of **internal rhymes**.

Revision: A detailed explication of how students might “workshop” their poems in class is described on page 17 of this guide; however, I would rec-

commend that early in the process of writing poems, students should simply read their poems aloud to the class. The students listening should be asked to pay very close attention while the poet is reading. After great applause, students should indicate what specific words or phrases they remember most from the poem they just heard.

Do they remember the first line? What is the last word in the poem? Most likely, the memorable parts of the poem will be the most concrete—the words or phrases that listeners could see, smell, touch, or taste in their imaginations. The poet should make note of what his/her fellow students found memorable, knowing these probably represent the strongest sections of the poem.

“WHAT SISTERS ARE FOR” (page 36)

1) What kind of poem is this? How would you describe its architecture or form?

This poem is a **villanelle**. To quote the “Guide to This Book’s Poetics”: this form is made of five **tercets** (six-lined stanzas) and a **quatrain** (four-line stanza) that add up to nineteen lines total. The first and third lines of the first tercet take turns repeating at the end of the tercets that follow, and both lines repeat as the last two lines of the poem. Notice that there are only two rhymes in the poem, determined by the end words of the poem’s first two lines (“say” and “bad”).

2) Why would the poet choose this form to write this particular poem?

Right from the start, the poet writing a villanelle knows that the first and last lines of the first stanza had better be strong, as they are going to repeat throughout the rest of the poem *and* determine its last two lines. Here, the first line, “There’s times I don’t know what to do or say,” represents a thought that repeats in Lizzie’s mind fairly regularly; she goes on to describe the kinds of moments that spark her feelings of being frozen and inadequate. Her sister, however, is one person who can help her move on, who assures her that everything is going to be all right even if it doesn’t seem that way at the time. Kate’s consistency as an emotional supporter of Lizzie is echoed in the repetition of her words, “Come

on . . . It'll be okay." (The irony is that Kate is supportive in all instances *except* when the subject of adoption is raised.)

Note that it's perfectly fine to be funny in a poem: the lines about throwing up in Bob's candy bucket and "a roll in the hay" are meant to make the reader laugh. Not only does humor make a poem fun to read, but also inserting light moments into a poem can serve to heighten the effect of the more serious ones.

Here, too, is a chance to talk about the "universal" in the "personal." The situations that make Lizzie feel as if she doesn't "know what to do or say" might be specific to her, but chances are students can relate: they've all had moments when they've been made to feel awkward, dumb, embarrassed, and speechless.

3) **Exercise:** The Villanelle

Students might want to read more examples of villanelles before starting this exercise. Two famous poems that are readily available (in many anthologies and on the Web) are "Do Not Go Gently Into This Good Night" by Dylan Thomas and "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop.

Having to follow a specific form can actually provide the writer with a sense of freedom. Instructions for the "frame" exist already (they don't have to be discovered or made up, as in free verse) and the frame itself provides a "safe house" within which difficult subject matter can be explored. A poet can claim, "I had to use that word to complete the rhyme" or "I was amazed by what the poem said once those lines came together at the end!"

Revision: It's particularly difficult to revise a formal poem, as one little tweak can shatter the frame. Still, students should be urged to keep language fresh; and to read their poems out loud, listening for stumbling lines, hard-to-pronounce words that slow the reading down, and unwanted repetition (not to be confused with repetition that seems to add to a poem's strength). When it comes to **rhyme**, students can also be creative by using **off-rhyme** or **near-rhyme** (e.g., "fresh" and "test;" or "green" and "steam"); they can also play with homophones and puns—words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings (e.g., "daze" and "days," "their" and "there").

“DIFFERENT” (page 45)

1) What kind of poem is this? How would you describe its form?

This poem is made of five **quatrains**. Upon first examination, one might think this is a formal poem, and in a way it is. Although it does not meet the definition of any specific form in prosody and is essentially “**free verse**,” the poem generates its own kind of form.

There is really no such thing as “free verse.” At some point in its formation—sometimes starting with the first line, sometimes after many revisions—a poem starts to inform its writer about how it’s meant to be put together. The form for “Different” developed after the first stanza was written; it seemed interesting and significant that not only did the first line rhyme with the third line and the second with the fourth, but also that they were the *same* word. This then set up the form for the remaining stanzas.

Note, too, that there is—again—very little end punctuation from line to line or even stanza to stanza. The reader is pulled along and down through the poem and its story with a feeling of urgency. The “stops,” or periods and question marks, usually come after power-packed words that (because of the punctuation) the reader will dwell on for a split second longer than other words: “news,” “baby,” “natural,” “me,” “feel,” “different.”

2) How does the form of this poem relate to or underscore its content?

The poem essentially is a story about someone telling a story—it feels urgent to the writer of the poem (who is leaving out all that end punctuation), and it seems important to the teller within the poem (Kate, who keeps going despite Bob’s interruptions). But how does this form—which essentially created itself—work to reveal just how important this story is to its writer?

One of many things Robert Frost said about making poems was: “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.” One surprise for me after having written this poem was the effect that the repeating end words had on me as its reader. At first it was a subtle but insistent prodding, like someone poking me in the ribs (not too sharply, but with intent); then, upon a closer look, what those end words were saying slapped me in the

face: “Tell Mom! Tell Mom!” and “Baby child! Baby child!” and “Called mad! Called mad!” and “Saw face! Saw Mom’s face!” and “How different! How different?”

Sometimes it seems that the poem knows more than its writer—the more we uncover its layers, the more we understand.

3) **Exercise:** The Not-So-Free Free-Verse Poem

Ask students to write a ten- to fourteen-line poem using at least five of the following words: sidewalk, dust, orange, pigeon, buzz, butter, slime, chalk, gold, clock, paper, cringe, mocha, oak, crater, bust, rock.

After the students complete a first, rough draft, have them read the poem aloud (this can be done at home or in class). If students are reading the poems aloud to their peers, it’s important to stress that these are *early drafts*, and not meant to be “finished” or especially “good.” Next, ask if they can find any kind of structure or pattern emerging. Can they detect an “average” line length? How about an average number of syllables per line? Do any words they’ve used rhyme (or nearly rhyme) with other words? Is there a word or image that’s repeated two or more times?

Now ask students to write another draft of the poem. If they noted an average line or syllable length, challenge them to rewrite the poem so that *all* of the lines are about this length or number of syllables. (They might find themselves having to cut or add words.) If they picked up on two words that rhymed, or nearly rhymed, challenge them to create more rhymes throughout the poem using a structure they make up (e.g., the rhymes appear in the middle of every-other line, or the initial words of the first and third line rhyme, and the initial words of the second and fourth rhyme, etc.). If they noticed a word or image that appeared more than once, ask them if it’s possible to compare that word or image with something else, creating a metaphor with that word/image the first or last time it appears in the poem.

Revision: One of the most important things students should learn about writing poems is that it’s fun. They should feel free to *play*—with words, with sounds and images, with structure. Invite students to rewrite this particular poem as many times as they’d like, but to stop when it seems that their poem has reached the limits of its “fun potential.”

POST-READING WRITING ACTIVITIES

Using poems from the book as examples, and building on what students have learned, write:

1) The Portrait Poem

Both “Self Portrait” (page 8) and “Word Pictures of Kate and Bob” (page 17) use concrete language and metaphor to draw portraits of Lizzie and her siblings. Ask students to reread these poems, and then to write either a self-portrait or a portrait of someone they love or admire by using words to paint their picture. Remind students to use concrete language and to avoid clichés.

This should be a take-home exercise, as students should be instructed—while they are working on the poem—to read what they have written aloud to themselves (many times over, especially after the first, raw draft is complete). Most poets make a practice of this, as it enables them to hear where the words or lines feel awkward or too repetitive or nonsensical and then to make changes as needed.

Revision: When students have brought their draft poem to class, divide them into groups. It’s best if photocopies can be made so that students have copies of each other’s poems; if this is not possible, they will have to listen closely during this “workshop” exercise. If copies *are* available, have the students in the groups exchange poems with each other (so that, for example, a member of a group of six has five poems plus her own). Then ask each student in each group to take turns reading his/her poem aloud. The members of the group should be listening for (a) language/images/phrases that “leap out” because they are memorable or especially strong for some stated reason; (b) language/images/phrases that seem tired, worn-out, over-used; (c) abstract words like “ugly,” “pretty,” and “happy.”

Students who have been listening will now give feedback to the poet, starting with what they liked most about the piece. They must be specific:

“I liked it” or “it’s good” is not acceptable; instead, they must point to specific words/phrases/lines/stanzas in the poem that seem strong, fresh, startling, or otherwise memorable and then say why this is so. Next, the person providing the feedback should offer some kind of constructive criticism: “I got lost in the second stanza, where the speaker describes what might be a cloud,” or “It seems that ‘hot ticket’ is a phrase I’ve heard before. Maybe you could think of something else that seems fresher.”

After all students have had a turn at both giving and receiving feedback, they should be given time (in class or at home) to revise their poems again.

2) What It’s Like

In the three “Broken Place” poems (pages 12, 28, and 90), Lizzie describes how she feels by using metaphor and concrete language. She does not have to say “sometimes I feel scared and alone”—she conveys these emotions through her metaphor of the cave and the monster.

Ask your students to write a poem expressing what it feels like when they are sad, happy, lonely, anxious, angry, afraid, or filled with great excitement or anticipation. Note that all of these words are abstract. Students may use any of these abstract words in their titles, but not in their poems; instead, they must describe their emotions by comparing them with something else.

Revision: Use the same take-home and workshop technique as suggested in post-reading exercise 1.

3) What I Remember

There are four “What I Remember” poems in *The Secret of Me* (pages 7, 20, 51, and 75), each of which focuses on a season. These are essentially **list poems** (as is “What I Want,” page 9 and “Adopt a Useless Blob,” page 40). List poems, also known as “catalog poems,” itemize things or events. They can be made of lines of any length, rhymed or unrhymed.

Invite your students to write a poem titled “What I Remember,” in which they focus on a specific day, time, or place in their lives—the first

day of kindergarten, the year they were five years old, or a special place they used to go (or thought was magical) but no longer visit. The students should focus on writing images, “painting” what they remember with words, getting as specific as possible and using all five senses in their lists. Students might also want to include comments or thoughts about certain lines, such as Lizzie does at the end of each of her “What I Remember” poems.

Revision: These drafts might need less revision than other kinds of poems, but students should be encouraged to read them aloud as they polish their list of remembrances. In doing so, they might discover that certain lines sound better in a certain order. They might also realize that they’ve repeated an image or word without meaning to, or that they’ve used a cliché and might instead find a way to make what they are saying feel “new.”

4) The “Sonnet-Like” Poem

It’s difficult to write a **sonnet**, especially a good one. Not only does one have to write in iambic pentameter, one also has to follow a strict rhyme scheme. For many poets, even practiced ones, the sonnet’s meter often falters and the rhymes sound sing-song at best. Shakespeare is brilliant at it, of course, but students—especially those new to poetry—often find his language and imagery difficult. Two of my favorite and very accessible sonnet writers are Robert Frost (see his spooky Petrarchan sonnet, “Design,” easily found on the Web or in his *Collected Poems* at the library) and Molly Peacock, who—unlike Frost—is still writing poems today. For the most part, Molly Peacock writes formal verse; two sonnets that come to mind are found in her book *Original Love: “Portrayal”* (Petrarchan) and “The Hunt” (Shakespearean). It was Ms. Peacock who taught me, when I was having trouble writing in strict iambic pentameter, to count syllables instead. She explained that if a line contains ten syllables, there is a good chance it falls into iambic pentameter (and even if it doesn’t exactly, it will be close). This is how I learned to write “sonnet-like” poems, which feature fourteen lines of ten syllables (on average) each. There is preferably a “turn” (like a turn in a plot, or a climax) in the last six lines or in the final

couplet, and sometimes (but not always) there is a Petrarchan rhyme scheme (abbaabba cdcdcd or cdecde or cdedce) or Shakespearean rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg).

Ask your students to read “The Bird” (page 79). How many syllables are in each line? What kind of rhyme scheme does the poem follow? Can students identify any **near-** (or “**off**”) **rhymes** (like “fern” and “learned”)?

Now, ask students to try writing a sonnet-like poem: each line should average ten syllables (if a few lines are nine or eleven or twelve syllables, that’s fine). They should attempt to follow a sonnet’s rhyme scheme, but should also be encouraged to use “off rhymes” liberally. Invite students to use *everyday language*, avoiding flowery diction or words they would never use in conversation (e.g. “hark” or “thee”). Also, the poem should be fourteen lines—much of poetry’s power and energy comes from its compression.

Revision: Students should practice reading their sonnet-like poems aloud, listening intently to the rhythm of each line. Where the rhythm falters or stumbles, there might be an extra syllable (or lack of one) at fault. Have the students identify the lines that seem rhythmically awkward. How many syllables do these lines contain? If the student changes a word or two, increasing or decreasing the number of syllables in those lines, does the rhythm become less stilted? Students should try to revise until the poem sounds as smooth and near to “regular” speech as possible.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ASPIRING POETS

Aspiring poets, like Lizzie McLane, should be avid readers. We would not expect a songwriter not to listen to music, or a young basketball player not to watch professionals play. We learn through example. No one can sit down and write a “good” poem if she or he hasn’t read a great number of poems. The art of poetry is really a kind of ongoing dialogue—throughout the centuries, poets have written in response to reading the work that’s come before them. In addition, I urge aspiring poets to read not only poetry, but everything they can get their hands on: history, fiction, science, newspapers, billboards, restaurant menus. The seeds of poetry are everywhere; one never knows what might inspire a first line, a title, or at least an idea for a poem.

Poets also write, rewrite, revise, throw things out, and write again. Learning to write well is like working a muscle: the more one writes, the stronger one’s poems will be. Just as a basketball player has to practice free-throws for hours, or a saxophone player has to practice his scales, a poet must write, write, write. (Then read some more.)

The flip side to writing is revising. For many poets, the difficult part of the process is getting that first draft onto paper—then comes the fun part: playing around with words and line breaks, adding or removing stanzas, making the last line the first line, and all the other efforts that might go into revising a poem. It’s important for the poet to know and remember that the original draft isn’t going anywhere; students should be advised to keep their first drafts (on paper and on the computer) and to keep revisions as separate documents. This way, the poet feels more at ease in making changes—even radical ones—because they can always return to that original draft. Most poets revise their poems a dozen or even fifty or a hundred times before it feels “finished.”

One reality about being a writer is that we work, for the most part, in solitude. The life of a writer can get pretty lonely. For this reason, there are poetry festivals and conferences. There is a terrific conference for high school students held every spring at The Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire (www.frostplace.org). The Frost Place also has a great confer-

ence for teachers. Another poetry event that features a day for high school students is the Dodge Poetry Festival, held every other fall in New Jersey (www.grdodge.org/poetry).

The other antidote to a poet's loneliness is a writers' group. Students with peers who share their love of poetry can get together regularly to workshop each other's poems and to read poems aloud (poems they have written in addition to poems by others they've discovered and want to share).

SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR TEACHING POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM

There are several excellent sources for teaching and learning about the art of poetry are listed in the back matter of *The Secret of Me*.

Teachers might also find that they and their students are inspired by poetry anthologies. Some of these can also be quite useful in schools that teach across the curriculum. Here are just a few of the many excellent collections:

Laure-Anne Bosselaar, ed. *Never Before: Poems About First Experiences*. New York: Four Way Books, 2005.

Laure-Anne Bosselaar, ed. *Urban Nature: Poems About Wildlife in the City*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000.

Kurt Brown and Harold Schechter, eds. *Conversation Pieces: Poems That Talk to Other Poems*. New York: Knopf, Everyman's Library Pocket Poets series, 2007.

Kurt Brown, ed. *Verse & Universe: Poems about Science & Mathematics*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1998.

Cornelius Eady, Toi Derricotte, and Camille T. Dungy, eds. *Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. (Note: Cave Canem is an organization dedicated to the discovery and cultivation of new voices in African American poetry.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Meg Kearney is an award-winning poet, the author of *The Secret of Me*, as well as two volumes of poetry for adults, *An Unkindness of Ravens* and *Home By Now* (forthcoming, 2009). In 1999, she received an M.A. in Poetry from The City College, City University of New York. She has been Associate Director of the National Book Foundation, sponsor of the National Book Awards and of an educational program for teens, which was under her direction. Kearney has given many public readings and taught poetry in middle and secondary schools, and at The New School University in New York City. She presently directs the Solstice Creative Writing Programs of Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

This teacher's guide supplements the Guide to Poetics, found in the backmatter of *The Secret of Me*. It focuses on teaching and learning about:

- Poetry's relevance to readers and writers of all ages
- Poetry as a means of both self-exploration and connection with the wider world
- The power of poetry to reach its audience both aurally and visually
- The use of form and meter in poetry
- The relationship of form and content
- Close readings of poems
- Writing and revising poems

PRAISE FOR *THE SECRET OF ME*

"[This book] is just plain touching. It pulls the reader in and allows one to feel what [14-year-old Lizzie] feels. It can be used with classroom poetry units with great success."
—VOYA

"Kearney exploits poetry . . . uniquely to access and express Lizzie's innermost hopes and desires and how they affect the choices she makes. . . . Adolescents will get a good dose of real poetry with unique and inspiring language so often sacrificed for story in this genre. Substantive backmatter makes this a first-rate offering."
—*Kirkus* (starred review)



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