Listen to Children

The Jack Prelutsky Antiquarian Children's Poetry Collection at WWU

SYLVIA TAG

In the preface to her book *What the Dragon Fly Told the Children*, Frances Bell Coursen speaks directly "To the Children's Grown-Up Friends" stating that, "Nearly all children are poetic. They live near to the heart of things in the early spring-tide of life when 'birds and buds and they are happy peers.' They have also a natural rhyme and rhythm and the melody of verse."[1] The adult reader is gently reminded that listening to children allows us to embrace the endless possibilities of language and imagination.

Founded as a teachers' college at the end of the nineteenth century, the Western Washington University (WWU) Libraries contains noteworthy children's literature collections. Over the last decade, we have dedicated resources to deepen and expand our youth poetry collections through grants, gifts, and advocacy. Our distinctive collection, Poetry for Children and Teens (PoetryCHaT), supports collection development and a wide range of programming. A particularly successful event, Poetry Camp 2016, brought more than forty poets and twice as many attendees to campus for a weekend of workshops. Co-directed by WWU faculty Sylvia Tag and Nancy Johnson, with keynote speakers Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong, the weekend culminated in a standing room only performance by Seattle poet Jack Prelutsky.

Known for his inventive and irreverent poetry, Prelutsky has amassed many awards in his long career, including the *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year, *School Library Journal* Best of the Best Book, International Reading Association/Children's Book Council Children's Choice Award, and the Library of Congress Book of the Year. In 2006, he was appointed as the inaugural United States Poetry Foundation Children's Poet Laureate.

Jack and Carolynn Prelutsky

His first book, *A Gopher in the Garden* (1967), started it all. Prelutsky's combined works have sold more than a million copies and been translated into many languages. During the height of his popularity as a best-selling poet, he traveled all over the United States doing book promotions and visiting antiquarian bookstores building a personal collection of more than twelve hundred books, toys, pamphlets, art, and ephemera.

In 2019, Jack and Carolynn Prelutsky gifted their extensive antiquarian children's poetry collection to the WWU Libraries. The gift included funds to preserve materials, something few donors think to include. As the sorting, processing, and cataloging commenced, the breadth of the donation was evident. Then, came 2020.

Sylvia Tag *is a librarian and associate professor at Western Washington University where she curates the youth literature collections, in particular, Poetry for Children and Teens (PoetryCHaT).*

As the COVID pandemic enveloped the world, the country, and Washington State, the WWU physical campus closed. Shelved in silence, some of the Prelutsky Collection books had traveled over two hundred years to arrive at WWU. These items would have to wait a couple more. In 2022 when spaces and services reopened, the library took stock of projects that had stopped midstream. The Prelutsky Collection was a joy to rediscover. By 2023, cataloging and preservation had begun in earnest. As we pondered how best to spread the word and share this extraordinary collection, plans for an exhibit and catalog began to percolate.

Dating back to the late eighteenth century, items in the Prelutsky Collection give a sense of what children's poetry was like, at least in the English-speaking world, in times gone by. Some of it is familiar, some of it is not. Some of it is still a joy to read, some of it is off-putting and even offensive, either because of its style, content, or perspective. The books were owned and used by real people who lived, in some cases, more than two hundred years ago. While it's hard to say what the poems meant to them, we can hold the same books they held and, with a little imagination, listen to their voices.

The Exhibit and Catalog

Listen to Children: The Jack Prelutsky Antiquarian Children's Poetry Collection was conceptualized and curated in collaboration with Western Libraries Special Collections Librarian and rare book scholar Michael Taylor. Exhibit design and catalog composition began in early 2023 and was finalized just in time for the exhibit opening in spring of 2024.

An exhibit is a valuable experience for those who visit but is confined to a physical location. If the pandemic years taught us anything it is that multimodal delivery is essential. Publishing an exhibit catalog has allowed us to share the collection with a wide audience. A collection of essays, images, and references, the catalog offers a fresh look at youth poetry through topical explorations, including early didactic poetry, Mother Goose, nature, nonsense verse, illustration, imaginary voyages, politics and history, songbooks and scores, and advertising. Blurring the boundaries of audience, and in contrast to the innocence of youth, there are examples of satirical, political, and commercial poetry published for adult audiences. No young people's exhibit would be complete without the magical world of movable parts and unexpected formats.

Making historical poetry relevant to young readers of today is important. We are grateful to the contemporary poets who contributed to the catalog, sharing their own creative practices, experiences with young people, teaching insights, and joyful reflections: Margarita Engle, Kenn Nesbitt, Joyce Sidman, Peter Sís, Arianne True, Sylvia Vardell, and Janet Wong. These important voices bring items in the collection into the present, expanding the exhibit content beyond themes in antiquarian poetry. Here are a few selected highlights from the exhibit and catalog.

Mother Goose

Perhaps the deepest area within the collection is Mother Goose. Hundreds of editions of this classic collection of nursery rhymes are available, along with numerous spin-offs, parodies, and attempts to explain what the rhymes mean. For example, *Mother Goose for Grown Folks* (1860) by Adeline Whitney contains brilliant and funny explications.

What is it about these simple and yet not-so-simple rhymes that led them to become perhaps the most familiar poems in the English language? Part of the answer may be that Mother Goose bridges both of the two major historical "schools" of children's poetry. Over the years, some have tried to show that like Aesop and his followers, Mother Goose teaches serious moral lessons. That said, the rhymes are also the forerunners of Victorian (and later) nonsense poetry, deliberately ridiculous verses that celebrate play and imagination for their own sake and reject the idea that children's poetry must have an instructional purpose.

A few titles in the Prelutsky Collection overhaul Mother Goose as social satire. Eve Merriam's *The Inner City Mother Goose*, first published in 1969, is about urban poverty and the many issues associated with it. The book was widely banned because of its provocative subject matter and illustrations. *The Liberated Mother Goose* (1974) by Tamar Hoffs, by comparison, was intended to be funny, but also offers biting social critique from feminist, antiwar, and pro-Native American rights perspectives. Both works use Mother Goose as a way of saying that we shape the world by what we teach our children.

Nature

In the second half of the nineteenth century, nonsense poetry mated with Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and gave birth to a new breed of storytelling that delighted readers young and old. Probably the most well-known example, Edward Lear's *Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets* (1888), can be interpreted as a caricature not only of the Victorian fascination with science, but also of the many new theories that were being proposed at that time—some sensible, some not. Was the Fizzigiggious Fish, "who always walked about upon Stilts, / because he had no Legs" really any crazier than the conclusions that highly respected scientists were drawing about topics like race and genetics?[2]

Other nature-themed works challenge humans to see things from a non-human perspective. In *The Vege-Men's Revenge* (1897), a young girl named Poppy is kidnapped by Herr Carrot and Don Tomato and taken to Vege-Men's Land. The vegetables, she learns, are unhappy about being diced, mashed, and fried at the hands of humans. Poppy is placed underground, where she grows, is harvested, undergoes kitchen prep, and is finally served as the main course at a banquet. The reader is grateful when it turns out to be just a dream.

Nonsense Verse for Children

Nonsense poetry acknowledges the resilience, tenacity, identities, and independence of young people. One reason that nonsense is attractive to young readers is its lack of nostalgia and sentimentality, both of which might be considered adult preoccupations. Nonsense is refreshingly straightforward. The child who is wise beyond their years might ask, "What is not nonsense?" In what could be referred to as the liberation of young readers, nonsense as a literary form was popularized in the Victorian Age. Illustrations often play a collaborative role in nonsense verse through the double laugh—once for the words and again for the images.

An early novel in verse disguised as a picture book, *The Tale of Mr. Tootleoo* (1925), takes the reader on a nonsensical journey with a jovial sailor who suffers shipwreck but does not drown. The book and its two sequels were written by Bernard Darwin, grandson of naturalist Charles Darwin. His wife, artist Elinor Darwin, created the book's whimsical lino print illustrations.

Poetry in Periodicals

Vast as it is, the Prelutsky Collection contains few periodicals, which are among the major places where children's poetry was historically published. Educators and researchers may wish to consult online resources to access these publications. Many academic libraries subscribe to the American Antiquarian Society's American Historical Periodicals database. In addition, a growing number of publications are freely available online through sites such as the HathiTrust Digital Library and Google Books. These resources contain major periodicals such as *The Juvenile Miscellany*, *The Youth's Companion*, and *St. Nicholas* magazine.

Before the mid-twentieth century, mainstream publishers printed very little poetry by people of color; instead, it tended to appear in periodicals. *The Brownies' Book: A Monthly Magazine for People of the Sun* edited by W. E. B. Du Bois is a good example. Other poems by people of color were printed in newspapers, either for general audiences or specific groups. Thirteen-year-old Phillis Wheatley's first published poem, for instance, is found in the December 21, 1767, issue of the *Newport Mercury*. Some periodicals were short-lived but historically significant, such as *La Edad de Oro* (*The Golden Age*). Published in 1889 by Cuban exile José Marti and dedicated to the children of the Americas, only four issues were ever printed. Newspapers and magazines are also an important source of poetry by anonymous authors, many (perhaps most) of whom were women. In short, periodicals are an important part of the study of historical children's poetry and should not be overlooked.

Illustration

Meaning and vocabulary can be elusive; art functions to explain metaphor and wordplay. In nonsense and parody, the juxtaposition of artwork and text may be contradictory, respecting the reader's acumen. Conversely, a concrete poem *is* the illustration, with the words being written in a shape. A poem on a page, surrounded by blank space, invites participation by the artist. Emotional responses can be confirmed, aroused, or soothed with shape and color. Most importantly, illustration invites us to linger. We may look at the picture and then the poem, or first the poem and secondly the art, and then the poem again.

The Prelutsky Collection includes examples of works by numerous artists from the Golden Age of Illustration including Arthur Rackham, Walter Crane, Beatrix Potter, John Tenniel, Jessie Willcox Smith, Howard Pyle, and Kate Greenaway. Artistic styles, together with new approaches in book construction, paper composition, graphic design, and eventually international printing, all made their mark on children's books, offering endless rabbit holes, twisty avenues, and spaces for exploring the intersection of art and poetry.

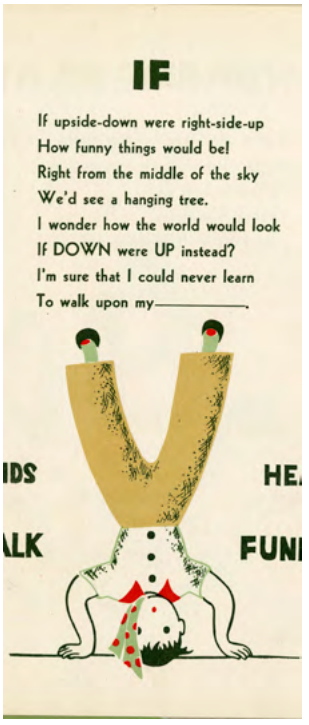
Toys and Novelty

How do children spend their play time? How *should* children spend their play time? When grownups purchase toys for children, they express their opinion and values about leisure. Educational toys may reinforce lessons while recreational toys may relax and rejuvenate. Some amusements do both. The Prelutsky Collection includes numerous, well-preserved miniature, craft, and activity books.

By the middle of the twentieth century, televisions were commonplace in middle-class homes. *My Little Television Sets* (1949) employed a TV cutout at the top of the packaging box. A fragile cellophane film printed with lever lines produced animation when moved, mimicking motion. Crude by today's standards, this must have been great fun at the time. Supplementing the screen action were nine Tom Thumb miniature books. Shared leisure activities that children and adults enjoy together are an expression of values. The variety of toys in the Prelutsky Collection adds to our understanding of childhood diversions and childlike play.

Music Lyrics and Scores

Children's poetry is rooted in ancient lullabies, nursery rhymes, and ballads, all of which were as likely to have been sung as spoken. Some songs that children still sing today date back to this early period. Jane and Ann Taylor published *Original Poems for Infant Minds* in 1804. Their book remains best known today for the poem "The Star," later retitled after the first line, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."



The familiar melody was taken from a French folk song, "Ah! vous dirais-je, Maman" ("Oh! Shall I Tell You, Mama"), which Mozart popularized through twelve variations for piano published in 1785. The easy-to-sing tune was paired with the earlier poems in *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song-Book* (1744), and with "The Alphabet Song" (1835) first copyrighted in 1835 by Boston music publisher Charles Bradlee.

By the late nineteenth century, even middle-class families could own something that had once been limited to the elite: a piano. Publishers stepped up to meet the increased demand for music that children could play and enjoy. Most scores contained only the music and lyrics, but some were richly illustrated, such as Walter Crane's *The Baby's Opera* (1877). As the Golden Age of Children's Literature embraced young people's perspectives and experiences, music books changed too. The poems in *A Child's Day in Song* (1916), tell of daily life, for example, "Dirty Face" and "Sometimes I Think." Music programs in schools began to appear around this time. Music anthologies for schools had themes ranging from playtime and bedtime to nature and manners.

Composers of color were largely excluded from songbooks and tune-books published for a general audience. A notable exception was the publishing house of Franklin Watts. Langston Hughes wrote *The First Book of Jazz* in 1955. Music books and scores in the Prelutsky Collection celebrate the longstanding relationship between lyrics and poetry.

Advertising and Marketing

Commercial poetry bundled as a packaged gift is challenging to trace due to its ephemeral nature and short-lived purpose. Literary marketing to young people took a giant leap forward in 1903, when Beatrix Potter patented a Peter Rabbit plush toy, wallpaper, and game. That same year in the United States, the pharmacy retailer Rexall wasted no time in following Potter's lead. The Prelutsky Collection includes *Rexall Nursery Rhymes* (1905), with their logo prominently displayed on the first page.

A textbook and map publisher, Rand McNally & Company, was established in the late 1800s, growing into a million-dollar business by the 1920s. An early example of Rand McNally's diversification into children's books can be found in the Prelutsky Collection. *The Runaway Toys* (1920) is part of a series set in Nuremberg, Bavaria. Always involving travel, in this book the

How I Became a Book Collector

Jack Prelutsky

By nature, I'm a collector—I'm still trying to find new quarters for about 40 boxes of frogs of every size and description that I've amassed in the past fifty years. Extending this kind of obsession to antiquarian books of children's poetry was inevitable.

The first books I collected were comic books. I was devoted to superheroes. I hated to finally part with them, but eventually I had to when I ran out of space among my jumble of birds, plastic bottle caps, found objects, decades of old *National Geographic* magazines. You get the picture.

When I first began working with Susan Hirschman, who remained my editor at Greenwillow Books for many years, she convinced me to not read any other children's poems so I could develop my own voice. I followed her advice for about ten years, until we were both convinced that I had sufficiently developed a singular style.

I then began frequenting libraries and buying inexpensive books at library sales. I discovered the world of children's poetry was much larger than I ever imagined. Some of these poets had voices similar to my own and others as different as can be. When I first started writing, I thought I wouldn't have enough to say, but as I continued to collect books of children's poetry, I learned this specialized corner of literature is infinite.

I guarantee that the first antiquarian book I bought is NOT in this collection. Let me explain: when I first started buying children's poetry, I had very little money to spend on books, so what I purchased were inexpensive copies, usually $5 or less. As I learned the finer points of book collecting, I replaced these "cheap" copies with ones in better condition, or a first edition, or an earlier printing.

Technically, while not in the category of an antiquarian book, but almost old enough to qualify, one of my purchases was a copy of my OWN book. *(As I shuffle through my eighties, my body and mind qualify as "antiquarian.")* My first book, *A Gopher in the Garden*, went out of print within a few years of publication. It didn't sell well enough to remain on the backlist, and I carelessly gave away my last copy. In those days before instant internet searches, I had to riffle through hundreds of shelves in used bookstores, and after years of searching, I eventually found a worn but serviceable copy—in the bargain bin in San Francisco. To this day, it's still my only decent copy of my first book.

While many of the poems in these books do not speak to a modern audience, this collection contains cultural artifacts and provides historical value. For example, the poem, "There was a Little Girl who had a Little Curl," has often been attributed to "anonymous," but among my antiquarian finds, there is a copy of this poem with authorship given to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (Albeit, there are scholars who dispute that Longfellow wrote this poem.)

I had many years of discovery and joy in putting this collection together, and now it's time to share these infrequently seen works with a wider audience. I'm delighted that these books have found a home in Special Collections at the Western Washington University Libraries, where adventurers in literature will continue to be surprised and make discoveries of their own.

Text excerpted with permission from *Listen to Children: The Jack Prelutsky Antiquarian Children's Poetry Collection* catalog.

children follow the runaway toys out of the town but return when their mothers promise to give them toys of their own.

The Jolly Adventures of Billy Van and Betty Camp (1923), published by Van Camp's Pork & Beans, is "Dedicated to the children of America." Aladdin presents his lamp to the title characters, sending them on adventures to Mother Goose Land and the Good Fairy's Castle.

"When they hungered for food, they just rubbed / on the Lamp / And the food that was brought them was / labeled 'Van Camp.'"[3] The advertising industry has long harvested children's literature content and repurposed it.

Conclusion

There are countless ways to enjoy and study materials in the Prelutsky Collection. One book is simply a starting point for the countless journeys that readers and researchers might take through the collection. In mounting the exhibit and publishing the catalog, we hope to inspire participants to launch critical conversations, look for poetry in unexpected places, and listen to children.

The Jack Prelutsky Collection has expanded and deepened our youth poetry holdings to a degree we could only imagine when *Poetry for Children and Teens (PoetryCHaT)* was established.

We look forward to hearing from librarians, educators, scholars, and creatives who would like to learn more about the collection. The physical exhibit has been dismantled, but an online exhibit and accessible catalog of *Listen to Children: The Jack Prelutsky Antiquarian Children's Poetry Collection* are available on the Western Washington University Libraries website, https://library.wwu.edu/archives-special-collections-events-exhibits. &

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2. Edward Lear, *Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets* (London: Frederick Warne, 1888), 54.
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