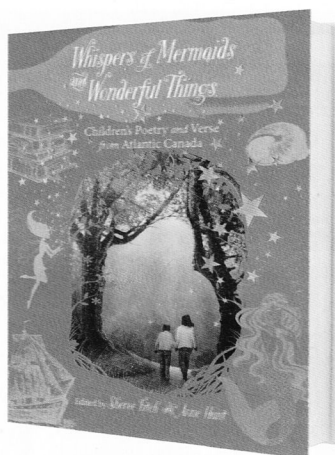


# CAN'T-GO-WRONG CHILDREN'S POEMS

*An Excerpt from the Foreword of* *Whispers of Mermaids and Wonderful Things: Children's Poetry and Verse from Atlantic Canada*



**Whispers of Mermaids and Wonderful Things: Children's Poetry and Verse from Atlantic Canada**  
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“We almost never notice the extent to which our language is drenched in, is composed of, figures of speech which depend on our already sharing values, assumptions, connections, with each other. And, most centrally, recognizing the sharing; knowing, without anyone saying it, that the speaker is expecting you to recognize her language as intending something, as being the utterance of someone whose mind is deeply like your own. Who knows that you know that she knows.

And where does the ability to use language that way come from? Consider a toddler, a parent, a book. Consider how the toddler, in order to understand what is happening at all, has to come to feel the relations between the voice of the mother, the

voice of the author, and the marks on the page. As the mother and the toddler share the surprise of the turned page, the bounce of the new and unexpected word or idea, the three become one experience, and the child's understanding of how experience of other human beings' experience can be shared through that page.

And so, what about a book of poems? A book of poems coming from our shared social context, written without the academic assumption that to be “good,” poetry needs to be nearly incomprehensible without the help of a scholar or critic or teacher? A book using language that can build on that assumption that we already share experience of a world, of how that world is connected together and how people act in it, to extend and deepen our ability to use language to participate in that world together? So when Mom reads you, or when you read yourself, something like Bill Bauer's amazing “Tantrum Poem,” you know, and learn, that everyone can share the complex amusement at the small child's refusing to eat something everyone else agrees is just fine, and imagining the absurd consequences.

Contemplate how wonderfully complicated that experience is. It's the voice of someone else, a stranger, someone named Bill Bauer, pretending to be a child, and it's dad's voice, or perhaps now your own, taking the same language on, knowing that it's play, that there is no child with a wad of meat stuffed in a cheek, knowing that it's funny, and at the same time understanding

just how it would be to be that child, imagining how, 35 years from now with the meat still there, “everyone / Will say, and won't I be glad when they do, / What cruel parents he must have had / To drive him to do such a thing as that.” The richness of that social experience—of that understanding, tolerant amusement—is deeply humanizing.

But what about a book of poems “from Atlantic Canada”? To engage with the voices far from us, the voices of the world, we begin with the voices near to us, the voices of Mom and Dad, the voices of family, the voices of neighbours. And the voices of our shared cultures and surroundings. The recognition of our own experiences can be shared, can be made into metaphors, can become opportunities to share our life with others. Find a poem at random and you come upon Elizabeth Brewster's springtime girl who “abandoned / rubber boots too early,” who is picking her way “delicately / over the small islands of mud and ice.”

Open the book. Pick a poem at random. You won't go wrong. ”

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*Dr Russ Hunt is Professor Emeritus in the English Department at St. Thomas University. He was one of the first to introduce children's literature as a credit course in an English Department.*

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