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BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS

In Honor of National Poetry Month (April 1998) -- Books to Develop The Sensibility And Imagination of Gifted Students And Their Teachers

WORLD POETRY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF VERSE FROM ANTIQUITY TO OUR TIME BY KATHARINE WASHBURN AND JOHN S. MAJOR, EDITORS, AND CLIFTON FADIMAN, GENERAL EDITOR. W.W. NORTON & COMPANY AND BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB, INC., NY. 1998.

This amazing collection is the most comprehensive resource of world poetry published in the last seventy years since Mark Van Doren's book, *An Anthology of World Poetry*, first appeared in 1928. The current volume (1338 pages) was organized by two editors and a general editor, Clifton Fadiman, who lost his eyesight while working on this book. Fadiman, 94 years old, has been on the Board of Directors of the Book-Of-The-Month Club since 1944. He continued working on *World Poetry* through the help of his son and assistants who tape recorded many poems for him to review. Poems created during all periods of world history are included in this anthology from 2200 B.C. to 1995. The editors have organized the book into eight sections ranging from *Poets of the Bronze and Iron Ages (2200-250 B.C.)* to *The Twentieth Century (1915-)*. It is without peer as a resource for studying aesthetic concepts (beauty, art, music, literature), religious and philosophical concepts (origin of the universe, higher beings, truth, reality, ethics and moral behavior), the power of language to express emotions and ideas (love, happiness, grief, fear) and human adventure and exploration (*The Iliad* by Homer, c. 800-700 B.C., *The Black Knight* by Antara, b. 550). All of the famous poets from hundreds of countries are found in this compendium – and many are included who are not as well known in the United States. A famous poet is Czeslaw Milosz (b. 1911) of Poland who said in a poem entitled, *Encounter*: “We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn./A red wing rose in the darkness./And suddenly a hare ran across the road./One of us pointed to it with his hand./That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive./Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture./O my love, where are they, where are they going/The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles./I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.” (pp. 971-72). A less well known poet is Lu Chi (261-303 A.D.) who said: “The pleasure a writer knows is the pleasure all sages enjoy./Out of non-being, being is born; out of silence, the writer produces a song.” (from *The Art of Writing – 4. The Satisfaction*, p. 228).

THE COMPLETE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON EDITED BY THOMAS H. JOHNSON. LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, NY. 1961.

Although few of her poems were published during her lifetime (1830-86), she is now recognized as a genius of American poetry. It was not until 1955 that her complete poems were published – and this 1961 volume contains all 1775 using one form for each poem. How did a person who lived a relatively quiet and isolated life generate such a large amount of creative energy and work? This is one of the mysteries of Emily Dickinson and the creative process that would make an excellent topic of discussion and investigation for gifted students. Is a life of solitude necessary for such high levels of creativity? What factors (e.g., teachers, mentors) in her early life influenced her to write poetry? In many respects, her short lines are more like language games and puzzles than poetry. Did she write this way primarily to relieve boredom and stimulate her interest in solving word puzzles? For example, poem number 381 (c. 1862) has this riddle quality that is typical of many of her poems: “A Secret told –/Ceases to be a Secret – then –/A Secret – kept –/That – can appal but One –/Better of it – continual be afraid –/Than it –/And Whom you told it to – beside –” (p. 182). On the other hand, many of her poems have a level of clarity and freshness unmatched among writers of poetry. As an example, poem number 1455 (c. 1879) says: “Opinion is but a flitting thing,/But Truth, outlasts the Sun –/If then we cannot own them both –/Possess the oldest one –” (p. 617).

Gifted students can use this book to study the development of Dickinson's talent because her poems are arranged in chronological order. Can certain progressively improved techniques be detected in her writing? What changes occurred in the topics she addressed over the years? Like a master chemist, she was able to blend her elements (words) into literary combinations that continue to amaze and inspire generations of readers. As a model for gifted girls, she lived a life of creative achievement and dedication unequalled in the history of American literature. ,

“Poetry is an art practised with the terribly plastic material of human language. . . .Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable. . . .Poetry is the capture of a picture, a song, or a flair, in a deliberate prism of words.” Carl Sandburg, 1923, *The Atlantic Monthly*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Recent issues of the **Smithsonian** magazine contain excellent articles on American history and culture. Some particularly interesting articles in the February 1998 issue are *Jack London Followed his Muse into the Wild* (influence of the Yukon on his writing), *Books, Books, Books, My Lord!* (history and recent closing of the British Museum Library) and *Times Square Reborn*. The March 1998 issue has articles entitled *Digging for Dinosaur Gold* (controversy surrounding the largest Tyrannosaurus Rex fossil ever discovered), *Making Room for Prairie Dogs* and *A Window on the World of Shape and Color* (about Richard Diebenkorn's paintings).

2. **Biography** magazine publishes interesting articles on popular culture figures, writers, musicians, artists and politicians. The March 1998 issue has articles on Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Britain's Queen Victoria, writer Frank McCourt, aviator Amelia Earhart, biologist Stephen Jay Gould and violinist Martha Curtis. This magazine is published by the Arts and Entertainment Network.

<p>TRIBUTE TO THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POET AND WRITER, LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-67): THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS IN HIS LIFE AND WORK BY MICHAEL E. WALTERS</p> <p>CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE HUMANITIES IN THE SCHOOLS</p>
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"You will find the world in your eyes, if they learn how to see, in your heart if it learns how to feel, and in your fingers if they learn how to touch. What your fingers transfer to paper – if you are able to make yourself into a writer – will grow and grow and grow until it reaches everybody's world." Statement by Langston Hughes quoted in **Langston Hughes** (1968) by Milton Meltzer. p. 250.

The artistic life of Langston Hughes was an intellectual feast, and a series of encounters and interactions with mentors who recognized and encouraged his gifted sensibility. Although for most of his life Langston Hughes suffered from racial discrimination, he was constantly meeting individuals of varied backgrounds who gave support and direction to his giftedness. The following vignettes describe some of these experiences.

While in high school (Cleveland, Ohio from 1916-20) he had two wonderful teachers. One of them was Helen M. Chestnut, the daughter of the famous African American novelist and lawyer, Charles C. Chestnut. She inspired him to persist in his ambition to become a writer. The other was an English teacher, Ethel Weimer, the daughter of a local high school principal. She introduced Langston Hughes to Shakespeare and modern poets such as Carl Sandburg. He was also intensely involved in the high school French club where he learned about the humanism of the French realists such as Guy de Maupassant. De Maupassant's short stories had a lifelong influence on Hughes' work and provoked his desire to write for African Americans in a manner that was similar to how this French author wrote for his culture. He would later spend several periods of his life residing in Paris.

As a waiter in a Washington, D.C. hotel (1925), he placed some of his poems beside the plate of the well-known poet, Vachel Lindsay. After Lindsay read his own poems at a poetry reading, he then recited the poems Hughes had given to him. The next morning Lindsay gave Hughes a gift – an inscribed copy of Amy Lowell's biography of John Keats. When Hughes was a college student in the 1920s, his poems were published in *The Crisis*, the NAACP national magazine that was edited by W.E.B Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. After he went to New York City, he was eagerly accepted by the senior members of the Harlem Renaissance, which included the leading African American intellectuals and artists of the 1920s. Therefore, even though he was struggling as a young man to survive, his gifted sensibility was constantly nurtured by established poets and thinkers.

The following vignettes are examples of his worldwide acceptance by international writers and artists. While on a tour of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, he met Arthur Koestler (author of **Darkness at Noon**, 1941) in Turkmenistan where they became good friends (while listening to Sophie Tucker records). "Beyond the warm smile of his dark eyes there was a grave dignity, and a polite reserve that communicated itself at once." (Koestler, circa 1931) Another example of his international acceptance occurred while he resided in Paris during the late 1930s. His friend there was the world famous photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

In 1937, while reporting for black American newspapers on the Spanish Civil War, Hughes translated poems by Federico García Lorca into English. In his later years, he became a mentor for many African American poets and writers (e.g., Ralph Ellison who wrote **The Invisible Man**, 1952). It is important to read Hughes' autobiographical books (**The Big Sea**, 1940 and **I Wonder as I Wander**, 1956) to enjoy the important influence that mentors can have upon gifted individuals.

"Bring me all of your dreams,/You dreamers,/Bring me all of your/ Heart melodies/That I may wrap them/In a blue cloud-cloth/Away from the too-rough fingers/Of the world." *The Dream Keeper* (from **The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes**, A. Rampersad, Ed., 1994).