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Aural crystal and cotton wool

Reva Klein on the unorthodox teaching methods of an American poet

To the anodyne tinkling of new age music by Brian Eno, a group of nine and ten-year-olds sit and write poetry in silence, picking up a bit of cotton wool from the table every now and then to play with for inspiration. No giggles, no whispers, no "please miss, I can't think of nothing" in earshot. They're sitting in on a guest visit by Carol Burnes, an American poet, teacher and performer who takes poetry and kids seriously but gets her seriousness across with warm smiles, encouraging words and a minimum of fuss.

This is the sixth year running that Burnes has been invited to the Dragon School in Oxford. She has also taught in ILEA schools and in teacher training colleges in London. Her approach to poetry is not what you would call *English*, which is probably why she is so popular here. It's a way of teaching poetry that is down to earth, geared to encouraging expression using a few guidelines, a lot of free association and great tape-loads of that aural crystal that is known as new age music.

She introduces children to poetry writing by explaining the "rules": rhyming isn't necessary, keep the lines short, repeat sounds and rhythms, squeeze what you want to say into the fewest possible lines. They do a few short exercises in simile and metaphor and throw a bean bag around: the one who catches it has to quickly compare it to something else. Once they've got the hang of it in theory, she puts on the music and asks the pupils to write down a list of words that it inspires. After that, she has them elaborate on the words, using simile and metaphor. Once they're in the throes of



Carol Burnes: "Good writing comes from sensory images"

that, she wordlessly distributes cotton wool, or any other sensory object she may have brought for the occasion in her bag, for the kids to feel if they want.

If it all sounds a bit simplistic and facile, it is: but the results Burnes yields are the proof of the pudding. One nine-year-old was inspired to write, after a few minutes, "Snow dangerling off the branch of a tree / Lonely and sad". Another boy's poem started off "Spring beginning to form itself / the birds slowly go to bed after a party". It may not be Keats, but this lady's not talent-scouting. As she checks their work in progress, she looks for clarity and focus, helping them to rearrange lines here,

momentum day in and day out, but some of her approach does carry on."

One of the most impressive results of Burnes's work with the children, Harrison finds, has been the tone of the poems they create. "It's easy to get them to write negatively. But you really achieve something when you get them to write positively."

Not that the Massachusetts born and bred Burnes tries to channel their thoughts in one direction or another. Aware of the manipulative power of music, she eschews an obviously upbeat Vivaldi or, heaven forbid, Kylie, in favour of the "drifty, non-specific, abstract" strains of new age music. "With this music, they can go in many more directions, free associating with it in a way that they couldn't with more directed music, which can be too predictable."

Her quiet charisma seems to be as popular with adults as it is with schoolchildren. Along with travelling the length and breadth of America working with children in the same way as she does here, she runs poetry writing workshops for teachers, writing workshops for students and adults and performs her own poetry and stories, sometimes accompanied by musicians, both in the United States and abroad.

Her message to any teacher wanting to develop children's writing is, like her own methodology, simple: "Basic good writing comes from sensory images, an impression through the senses. The more sensory input you give them, the greater their intellectual activity."

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replace flat words with more descriptive ones there. "It's all about getting them to respond. If they react to a piece of music or a bit of cotton by writing, if they can choose words to create a picture, I feel they've accomplished something."

Teachers here think so, too. Michael Harrison, head of English at the Dragon School and another poetry specialist, values Carol Burnes's influence. "My approach is more cerebral, more from examples of other writing than from objects themselves. Her work has rubbed off on me, certainly, and it's gradually spreading throughout the school with each visit she makes. We couldn't keep up the