

# On the flyleaf

Resources for teachers

A poetry workshop for S4–S6 students



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# 1. Introduction

I've devised and written these resources based on poems in my collection *On the flyleaf* (Luath, 2007).

As it draws on personal memories it is most suitable for older secondary pupils, roughly S4-S6. Pupils are asked to write about a particular book with strong memories or associations for them – thinking about the circumstances of reading as much as the book's contents.

The workshop relates to the Curriculum for Excellence by offering pupils opportunities

- ◇ to build upon their earlier knowledge and achievements, by choosing a book they have previously read and remembered;
- ◇ to draw together different strands of learning, by writing a poem about subject-matter of their choice;
- ◇ to demonstrate their creativity, through their use of language and poetic form.

It is also responsive to individual needs and particular aptitudes – the content of the chosen book and the manner of response can be as simple or complex as the pupil wishes.

## 2. Flyleaf Poems

A 'fly-leaf poem' is a poem written actually or notionally on the blank page of a particular book. My recent collection *On the flyleaf* includes a sequence of nineteen such poems, based on a broad range of writers (Ovid, Thomas Mann, Jack Kerouac) and types of book (guide books, comics, encyclopedias). In the sequence I took a 'holistic' approach to reading, focusing on the circumstances as well as the content of different reading experiences, and it includes books I read many years ago at school and as a student, as well as books I read just before I came to write about them.

Here are two poems from *On the flyleaf*.

This first is about one of the first books I remember buying, when I was about eight years old, and which I still have. Its black-and-white pictures are so utterly familiar as to seem to me archetypal.

The second was inspired by the colophon of an old book of Brecht's poems I found in a second-hand shop. I had started to write the flyleaf sequence, drawing on memory and personal experience, but this came out of the blue like a little gift. The contractual arrangements seem to mirror the broader tensions in Germany, and Europe more generally, at the time, in a way the canny Brecht would have appreciated.



### ***On the Flyleaf of A Pictorial History of Soccer (1968)***

*During the 2002 World Cup a BBC digital channel showed complete matches from previous finals.*

Match of the Week from Goodison Park  
features the 1966 quarter-final

when the North Koreans score three before  
the Portuguese wake up and score five

but what's most remarkable is the black and white  
fact of a single camera above the halfway line

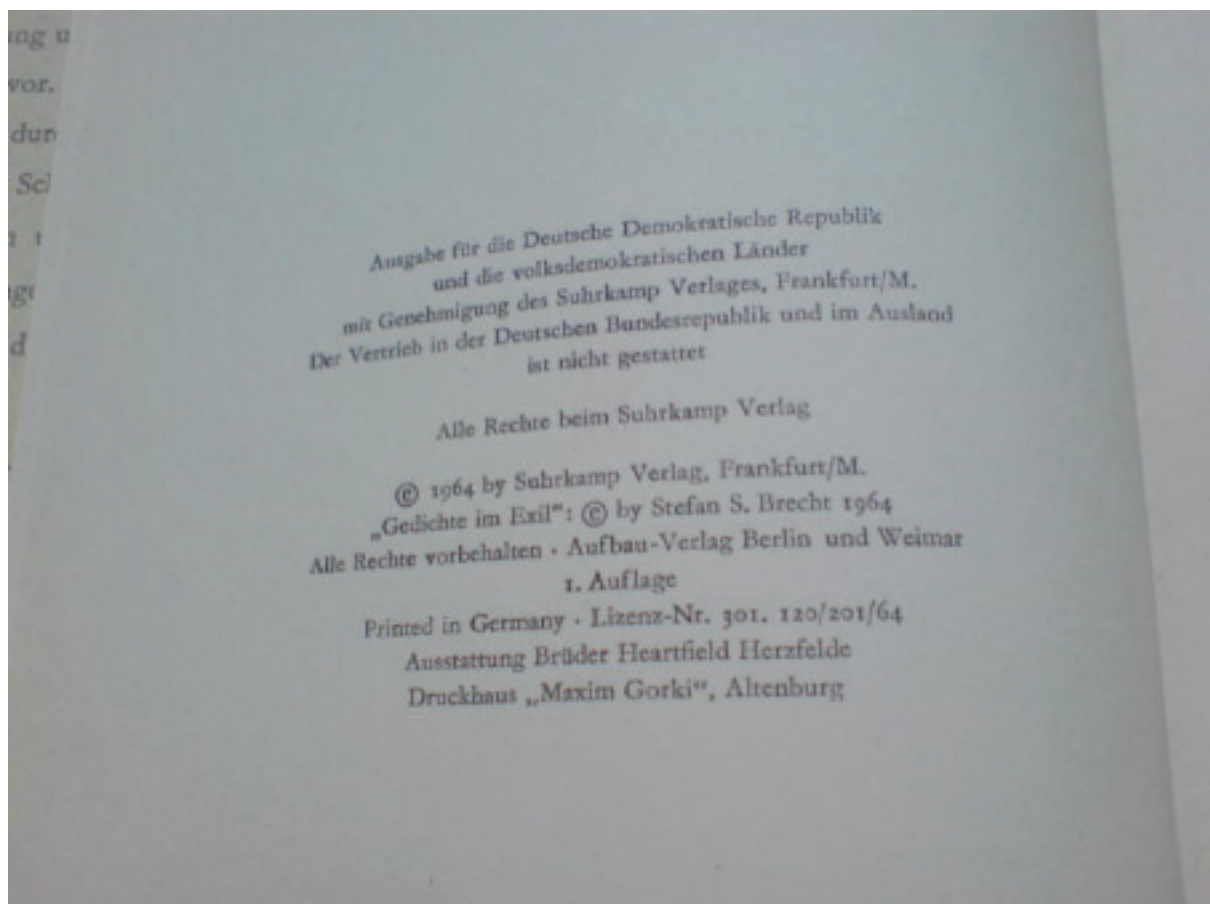
panning back and forth in real time  
no replays, no close-ups, no cutaways

just the flow and rhythm of the game  
illuminated without being dominated

by moments of individual brilliance.

## ***On the Flyleaf of a 1964 Edition of Brecht's Poems***

Brecht was nobody's fool.  
Whatever it says on the dust-jacket about  
*seine entschlossene gesellschaftliche Parteinahme*  
(roughly, his resolute social commitment) this  
*Ausgabe für die Deutsche Demokratische Republik  
und die volksdemokratischen Länder*  
(that is, edition for the German Democratic Republic  
and the people's democracies)  
was only possible thanks to the  
*Genehmigung* (permission)  
of *Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt-am-Main*,  
resolutely on the other side  
of that hardening internal border.



# Poetry Workshop

## Choosing the book

Discuss the roles books play in our lives, for example:

- ◇ the kind of places books are found, from libraries and bookshops to our own and other people's houses;
- ◇ the kind of places, public and private, where we read books;
- ◇ the reasons we read books, whether for learning purposes, practical information, pleasure;
- ◇ why books are more or less useful, practical and enjoyable than other media, such as computers, iPods or mobile phones.

Then ask the pupils to choose a well-remembered book. It can be of any kind: a travel guide, recipe book, reference work, a text book, a children's book, a novel, anthology of poems, any kind of book at all. If they still have the book and can bring it in, so much the better, but if not they can work from memory.

Stress that they don't have to choose the 'best' book they've ever read - it's more interesting to choose a personal favourite, one with strong associations for them.

## Making notes

Ask the pupils to make notes in response to some or all of these questions. They can later use these notes when writing their poem.

- ◇ When and where did you get this book?
- ◇ Which other people do you associate with this book?
- ◇ What places do you associate with this book?
- ◇ What moods do you associate with this book?
- ◇ What do you remember most clearly about the book's contents?
- ◇ What do you remember about the look and feel of the book, even smell?
- ◇ Has anything been written in the book (by you or anyone else) – a name, a dedication, marginal notes, etc? If so, by whom?
- ◇ Has anything been inserted (by you or anyone else) - bookmark, pressed flower, letter, receipt, bus ticket, etc? If so, by whom?
- ◇ Do you still have the book? If you do, where is it now? If you don't, what happened to it?

## Writing the poem

Ask the pupils to write a poem based on their notes.

There are many ways to structure and write a flyleaf poem. Here are some suggestions for writing a three-verse poem.

### I. The book in the past and the present

v.1 a description the book – its contents, and/or as an object (size, format, cover, etc)

v.2 a memory the book evokes – something that happened in the past

v.3 the book in the present – what does it mean to you now?

### II. The story of your relationship with the book

v.1 how you discovered the book (or how it discovered you)

v.2 the reading experience (contents and circumstances)

v.3 what happened next (later events or reflections in the context of the reading experience)

### III. Relating the book's contents to your own experience

v.1 the circumstances in which you came across and read the book

v.2 the key aspects of the book's contents

v.3 relating the circumstances in which the book was read to the contents of the book, eg finding a parallel, or a sharp contrast, in the two

## Presenting the poem

The poems can be presented in different ways:

- ◇ read aloud
- ◇ published on the school website
- ◇ published as a pamphlet
- ◇ written on a card to form a bookmark
- ◇ written into the books that inspired them!

## Flyleaf poems and Further Reading

from **Books**

Books wove and mined  
and slithered their coils  
and little by little, behind  
the face of things, behind working,  
there grew, like a bitter odour,  
with the clarity of salt,  
the tree of knowledge.

Pablo Neruda (1904–1973)

A 'fly-leaf poem' is a poem written actually or notionally on the blank page of a particular book. Such poems go back at least to the 18th century, with examples by Burns, and 20th century writers including Borges and Bunting also wrote them.

### ***Extempore: on being requested to write on the blank leaf of an elegantly bound Bible***

Free thro' the leaves ye maggots make your windings;  
But for the Owner's sake oh spare the bindings!

Robert Burns (1759-1796)

20th century flyleaf poems include

'On the Fly-leaf of Pound's Cantos'  
by Basil Bunting, in *Collected Poems* (OUP 1977)

'Letters About Things Read' (Horace, Epistles, II, i)  
by Bertolt Brecht, in *Poems 1913-1956* (Methuen, 1976)

'Poem Written in a Copy of Beowulf'  
by Jorge Luis Borges, in *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1985)

The Canadian poet Aislinn Hunter has written a poem called  
'Marginalia Found in Books at the Vancouver Public Library' – see  
[www.spl.org.uk/poets\\_a-z/hunter.html#poem](http://www.spl.org.uk/poets_a-z/hunter.html#poem)

General background information can be found in H.J. Jackson's book  
*Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (Yale University Press, 2001)