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## Revise! Revise! Revise! And Then It's a Poem

By BARBARA STEWART



ATLANTIC CITY— Peter Murphy, who teaches English at Atlantic City High School, starts off his classes by announcing he will say a particular dirty word of four letters. The word, he says, is poem. Boring stuff, pointless and stilted, he says. The Rodney Dangerfield of arts.

He hates poems when they are like that, too. That's why he refuses to teach them, schmaltzy verses a million miles removed from teen-agers' lives. Instead, he startles his students by reading poems about child abuse and Superman's kryptonite. Then he urges them to write poems themselves, poems that aren't safe or cute or self-indulgent. To Mr. Murphy, poetry is not a frill or an elite or expendable art. He knows poetry that is outrageous, cutting and profound. He wants his students to know about these poems, too, and to write some like them -- lean and gut-hitting, about concrete, personal subjects.

Often, he gets what he wants. More often, anyway, than any other English teacher in the state, if poetry awards are any measure. This year Mr. Murphy's students won two first-place prizes in the statewide Rutgers high-school poetry contest. This has become routine. Since the Rutgers contest began six years ago, Mr. Murphy's students have won 17 prizes, far more than those of any other teacher.

Poetry is taught in schools in many ways, from the classics to a Beat poem or two. But a teacher's approach can make the difference between seeing poems as pointless or vivid. A teacher chary of poetry may stick to rote recitations and memorization of technical terms, said James Haba, poetry director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, which sponsors poetry-in-schools programs. Students who learn poetry that seems to speak directly to them may be more open to poetry of earlier eras.

"You need some teacher who's interested in poetry," said Gerry Warshaver, associate dean of the Arts and Sciences Department at Rutgers University. "Unfortunately, a lot of schools don't have it."

Atlantic City High School is not in the well-off suburbs. It is not a place where parents who are high-powered professionals move for the strong academics and prestigious college placement. It is a huge urban high school with a preponderance of students from low-income families. Many were raised by young single mothers on welfare. There are drugs and violence, Mr. Murphy said. One of his students was killed in March.

To teach poetry, he must get students to see that the real issues in their lives -- drugs, violence, love, rejection, poverty -- are fit topics for poetry.

"The biggest thing is getting them to want to do it," he said. When he succeeds, students who come to his class thinking poetry is indecipherable wordplay leave knowing it can be as real and earthy as menstrual cramps, the subject of one of the dozens of poems he hands out.

He gives them assignments to write about their lives, their real lives. "First you just want them to write it down," he said. "The second step is, be outrageous. Focus and write anything that comes to mind about it."

Anything and everything. "He wants people to see poetry everywhere in people's lives," said Mr. Haba of the Dodge Foundation. "There are profound cultural, emotional and psychological consequences to this. People learn to trust their own imaginations and language, to function better as parents, brothers, sisters, citizens, employers."

Mr. Murphy's final teaching step is the least popular. "Revise," he said. "Revise, revise. When you wrote a draft, it's not the end but the beginning of a relationship with the poem. Most beginning writers just want to express themselves. But it takes discipline to make it mature into a work of art."

It also takes encouragement -- nagging, some of his students say -- to get young writers to look critically at the emotions they've spilled onto paper.

"He brings an edgy passion to his work with students," said Mr. Haba said. "He has a cutting passion for making poetry matter in people's lives."

It's obvious that the best lines his students write are lines that matter very much. Lines like these, by Tammara Lindsay, a senior and a Rutgers poetry contest winner:

Crack explodes  
in your head  
like lightning  
on a dark  
dark night

Like many of his students, Mr. Murphy might at first have seemed an unlikely candidate to be a poet. He was born in Wales in 1950 and moved with his family to New York City as a toddler. His father worked in heavy construction. His mother died when he was a child. After high school he enrolled in three colleges, and rapidly failed and dropped out of each. He supported himself at his father's trade, construction, working in New York and Wales. Overseas, his life was changed by two introductions -- one to his future wife, a woman from New Jersey also traveling in Great Britain, and one to the Baha'i religion, which was founded in Iran in the 19th century and emphasizes the "oneness of humanity" and that people should "develop their own art, craft or trade as worship," he said.

He settled in New Jersey, earning a bachelor's degree from Stockton State College. After being hired to teach English at Atlantic City High School, he earned a master's degree in writing education from New York University, doing his thesis on teaching poetry to high school students.

The school, where Mr. Murphy has taught for 20 years, has recently had racial and academic problems. For years its advanced classes had been largely white, though the school's population was predominantly black. The principal did away with advanced classes last year, putting students of varying levels together. Many parents, white and black, say this has drastically lowered academic standards.

Mr. Murphy says that he tries to concentrate on his classes and keep away from school politics, and that he is allowed to teach what he wants, as he wants, without interference. He counts as victories students like Tammara Lindsay, who knew little or nothing of poetry before his class.

He recites his own poetry at public readings and has had it published in various poetry magazines. He also teaches poetry writing to adults. Working with the Dodge Foundation, he teaches other English teachers to teach poetry to teen-agers. In winter, he holds an annual poetry-writing retreat at Cape May, attended by some 60 adults. The idea for the annual retreat came from his own method of forcing himself to write. Once a month, he takes his own writing retreat, a weekend away from his wife and teen-age daughter, away from their home in the comfortable suburb of Ventnor. He gathers books and paper and goes to "the most anonymous, most impersonal hotel I can find." There, in the hotel's plainness, he feels free to write, giving himself assignments to get himself going. "I'll write about the lighter side of something dark, like the good parts of something or somebody I hate," he said.

In the anonymous room he tries to do what he teaches. He tries to push his writing further than he thinks he can. "I want my students to find something to surprise themselves when they write - in the subject, the sound, the music. If they surprise themselves, they'll surprise the reader."

#### IN THEIR OWN WORDS 'My Mother's Hands . . . Creased a Thousand Times'

The first poem is by Emily Van Duyne, the second and third by Tammara Lindsay, both students of Peter Murphy. The last is by Mr. Murphy, reprinted from a 1995 issue of the journal *Poets On*.

## Zoo Story

Do you recall where  
you were  
when you first learned  
that the scaly snake  
was rough?  
Not the slimy,  
repulsive creature  
you imagined, but one  
who cut rather than  
dampened its prey  
before killing?  
That was the day  
that my sister  
disappeared at the zoo,  
as we sat, recalling  
the recent deaths of those  
children at the jaws of  
the polar bears,  
who were shot to death  
after instinctively swallowing  
the two young girls whole;  
punished  
for two million years  
of evolution.  
To distill the red-riding-hood image  
of live children cut from a  
furry white belly  
I purchased  
a book on butterflies and insects  
and failed to see the distinction among  
the thousands of tiny creatures.  
I learned to fear the arachnids  
especially, as they brought forth  
from the black depths  
of the subconscious live children  
suffering in the intestinal tract  
of a bear; or me  
crushed and bruised by a snake.

## Communion

My mother's hands  
dark with age  
and hard work  
fold at the altar,  
creased a thousand  
times by a thousand  
dishes and five children:  
those hands loved  
our skin raw.  
They embrace  
until they ache  
or shrivel.  
They balance the body  
in a paper thin fist  
and raise  
it to her mouth.

## Your Nights Are Sleepless for JWL

Crack explodes  
in your head  
like lightning  
on a dark  
dark night --  
the flash  
then the void.  
You are a boy,  
a man, a father,  
a son, a crackhead  
pacing tortured  
by this hunger,  
slowly murdered  
as you embrace  
it and stifle  
your own  
raspy breath.

## The Toast

Do not throw the soft bodies of rice  
at these we love. Instead, pelt them  
with rocks. Scar their smooth skins

with the heaviest and sharpest stones.  
Make the groom bleed and the bride weep.  
May they never forget this reception  
in honor of their lives together.  
May they learn that when one wears clothing  
that catches on fire, the other must beat them  
to save them from burning.

Photo: Peter Murphy, with students at Atlantic City High School. They have won 17 prizes in the Rutgers contest for high school poets. (John Sotomayor/*The New York Times*)