

From Poetry to Politics: The Gifts and Talents of Michael Rosen

Michael Rosen is a successful poet, author, radio broadcaster, playwright and speaker, with over a hundred books to his credit. Teachers and librarians across Canada have had the opportunity to meet Michael Rosen during his visits to Canada's Children's Literature Roundtable meetings and at various Canadian education conferences. Rosen delights audiences with his picture books for very young children (*We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, 1989a), books for older children (*You Wait Till I'm Older Than You!*, 1997) 'how-to' guides (*An A-Z Guide to Fatherhood: Goodies and Daddies*, 1991), books for both children and adults (*Shakespeare: His Work and His World*, 2001), books for adults (*Carrying the Elephant*, 2002), and teacher resource books (*Did I Hear You Write?*, 1989b).

Rosen spends a considerable amount of time in schools working with children, and in professional development sessions with teachers. The importance of his work in education lies in his belief that every child, no matter how young, comes to school with 'knowledge,' or as he would prefer to call it, 'culture' (Rosen, 1989b). It is a belief shared by many current educators and scholars (see Dyson, 2003). Rosen believes that most of a child's culture is acquired through oral language and that writing is a way of preserving that oral culture, of reflecting on it, and of opening up conversations about it. As a result, he encourages teachers to access the culture of the children they teach, to capitalize on it, and to ask children to write about the things they know and have experienced. Rosen uses this same premise in his own writing for children, and in fact, refers to his work as 'oral writing.'

Another side to Rosen's work is his quest for a realignment of power in contemporary society. He has become more active in his work for social justice, both internationally and in local communities, in recent years. He believes it is the duty of society to protect the rights of its less privileged and marginalized members, and that young children, who hold very little power in society, not only have a lot to say, but deserve to be heard. In June 2004, Rosen stood as a Respect Party candidate (an offshoot of the Socialist Party) for the greater London area in the British municipal elections. To those who know Michael Rosen and his work, it was not entirely unexpected. Although he is best known in Canada for his poetry anthologies, picture books and retellings of folktales for children, Michael Rosen has been well known in the UK for many years for his political commentaries and speeches. He has provided British children and adults with entertainment and information through books, newspaper columns and radio shows for over 30 years.

Rosen, the Poet

It was the publication of *Mind Your Own Business* (1974) that launched Rosen on his writing career. *Mind Your Own Business*, illustrated by Quentin Blake, is a collection of poems about his boyhood, family relationships and his view of the world around him. Rosen maintains that his publishing for children happened by accident:

At first I wanted to write about my childhood in the voice of a child, as a way of exploring who I was and where I came from. But I didn't have a child audience in mind. I imagined adults would be interested. But publishers told me they wouldn't, so the first set of poems about my childhood in the book, *Mind Your*

Own Business, ended up as a children's book. Once I was in the children's book world, I never got out. (BBC Onion Street, 2002)

It is as a poet that Michael Rosen remains best known.

In the mid-1970s, poetry collections for children largely consisted of work by writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Christina Rossetti, and A.A. Milne. The children's poems of Ted Hughes and Charles Causley were just emerging on the British scene and were not then well known. Rosen's poems were criticized as being 'light weight', and not 'real' poetry, and Rosen was put in the position of having to defend his work; an argument Rosen says concerns "poetry, children, writing, talking, culture and education" (Rosen, 1989b. p. 9). He writes,

The word itself, 'poetry', is being used as the criterion for good or bad, not the actual nature of what I, or any other writer, is trying to say . . . As a body of writing my work is a rag-bag of styles and genres, according to orthodox literary criticism. But does it matter? I'm not trying to hoodwink anyone, I'm not trying to gain membership to a Peerage of Poets. (Rosen, 1989b, pp. 9-10)

Poetry is one of the most powerful forms of writing and Rosen has become a master of the genre. His unique ability to relate life's experiences in humorous, amusing and heartfelt ways is a key to his success.

When they said

'What's your name?'

I used to say,

'Michael Rosen

Rosen

R,O,S,E,N

With a silent “Q” as in rhubarb.’

And they’d say,

‘That’s not very funny.’

(‘What’s your name?’ from *You Tell Me*, 1979, p. 13)

Another key to Rosen’s success is that he took the ‘scariness’ out of poetry for millions of children and teachers.

A lot of the poems we read are in a voice from the past or quite a complicated voice, or sometimes when poets are writing they are trying to be very dense or compressed and also many poets write in what is called a metaphorical way . . . so it becomes rather like a crossword puzzle, it’s difficult, it’s cryptic but not all poetry is like that. (BBC Radio, 1997)

Rosen’s poetry is certainly not cryptic or difficult. He is known as one of the first poets to make poetry accessible to children. Poetry critic Morag Styles (Penguin Putnam, n.d.) has no hesitation in identifying Rosen as “one of the most significant figures in contemporary children’s poetry.” He was, says Styles, one of the first poets “to draw closely on his own childhood experiences . . . and to [use] the ordinary language children actually use.” Rosen refers to poetry (after W. H. Auden) as “memorable speech” (1989b, p. 10). He enjoys playing with language and when he writes his stories, poems and plays, he includes word play, tongue twisters, riddles, rhymes and puns. His basic premise is simply “telling it like it is” (BBC Radio, 1997). Rosen is successful in using the voice of

a child, the “voice that you speak.” His writing is “spoken on the page and he puts his sense of being onto the page” (Book Box, n.d.). He writes hilarious accounts of real life situations in language children can understand.

I say:

I’m a stuntman

I’m a stuntman

I can jump off two stairs.

He says:

Yes – jump off two stairs.

Then I jump off.

I say:

I can jump off four stairs.

He says:

Yes – jump off four stairs.

Then I jump.

I say:

I can jump off eight stairs.

He says:

Yes, jump off eight stairs.

Then I jump.

I shout:

Look at me I'm a stuntman.

He says:

Yes, you're a stuntman.

Then I say:

Now you can be a stuntman if you like

What do you want to do?

And he says:

You lie down on the floor

And I'll jump on you.

("Stuntman," from *Don't Put Mustard in the Custard*, 1985).

Rosen maintains that he has two streams to his writing: an "anecdotal voice" where he explores and tries to explain why things happen, and a second stream where he explores the "texture of language itself and the texture of words" (BBC Radio, 1997). Texture is an appropriate word to describe what Rosen does with the language of his poems and stories. The reader can *feel* his writing. He uses the language people, adults and children alike, understand and appreciate, and he successfully combines words in unique ways.

But at the heart of every good poem, every poem that touches a reader, is the language. And don't worry if you think you can't be a poet because you don't

have a good vocabulary. More often than not, the language of a poem is simple, ordinary language that the poet uses in inventive ways. When the right words combine, they frequently make meanings beyond the words themselves. (Janezko, 1999, p. 43)

Michael Rosen's poems go beyond the page and into the reader's mind and memories. When reading his work, readers are able to relate his images to their own life experiences and visualize the words he has written. His poems and stories 'ring true.'

The Early Years

Born in 1946 in Harrow, England, Michael Rosen was the second son of educators and authors Harold and Connie Rosen. Connie Rosen taught primary school and Harold Rosen taught secondary school. In later years they both taught in teacher education programs and researched and co-authored books (for example, *The Language of Primary School Children*, 1973; *Stories and Meanings*, 1983). Not surprisingly, Rosen's childhood was rich in books and stories. His parents often took him to see Shakespearean plays, helping him to understand what was special about Shakespeare. As an adult, Shakespeare's work remained an important element in his life. Growing up, Rosen was surrounded by teachers, so much so that he thought everyone was a teacher and "if they weren't they should have been" (Book Box, n.d.).

Rosen was brought up in a left-wing Jewish household and when he was 11 years old, his parents took him on a holiday to East Germany. It was only 12 years after the end of the Second World War and Rosen came face to face with the results of extreme discrimination, hatred and prejudice. In Berlin he observed allied soldiers on duty and piles of rubble left over from the war. He noted the strong racist comments made by

various citizens, and he listened to his parents and other adults talking about Hitler, Stalin and the politics of Europe. The visit strongly influenced Rosen's future thinking and writing, and focused his ideas around the politics of everyday life, including power relationships within communities and within the culture of the classroom.

In a BBC World Service interview (1997) Rosen remarked, "I didn't like poetry very much when I was at school. It was a bit like medicine, you were told that it was good for you, but it didn't taste very nice." However, when he was 15 or 16 years old his father taught him English Literature and it was at this time, he believes, that his father instilled in him an interest in poetry. The interest was to become a turning point in his life, as he began to believe he could write his own poetry. When he was 18, Connie Rosen was producing a British radio program that featured poetry. She encouraged her son to begin writing his own work for the program, some of which she eventually used. Rosen modeled his early work after D. H. Lawrence, writing several pieces imitating Lawrence's spontaneous style. He also tried the style of nineteenth century poet G. M. Hopkins. These efforts did not turn out as he had hoped they would, and in 1966 he began to write about "his own childhood in the voice of a child, and that's really when it started" (BBC Radio, 1997). Rosen was strongly influenced by American poet Carl Sandburg (who remains his favourite poet) because he writes about things in a "spoken voice". At this time, Rosen was discovering his own voice as a poet. He says: "Suddenly it all fused: the writing, the performing, the popular audience. It was just incredibly exhilarating" (Penguin Putnam, n.d.).

Rosen began his post secondary education at Middlesex Hospital Medical School where he intended to study to become a doctor. After one year he transferred to Wadham

College, Oxford and completed the first year of a degree in physiology. Following that, he switched to English Literature for the next three years, dabbling with the idea of becoming an actor. Rosen still maintains that his first love was acting and drama. He wrote his first play while in university. Entitled *Backbone*, it was performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1969. After university, Rosen worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation where he participated in a variety of projects and in 1973 he joined the National Film School. In 1993 he received a Master's degree and later a Doctorate in Children's Literature from North London University (now London Metropolitan University) where he currently teaches as a visiting lecturer (BBC News World Edition, 2003).

Published Works

Michael Rosen's work has been published in many countries and by a variety of publishers and distributors, but his original publisher, André Deutsch of London, continues to publish most of his works. Rosen does not illustrate his own books because he maintains he is "absolute rubbish at drawing" (BBC Onion Street, 2002). As a result, an array of illustrators has illustrated his texts. Rosen's favorite illustrator is Quentin Blake, who illustrated many of Rosen's early collections of poetry. Rosen's retellings of folktales are illustrated by John Clementson, whose style seems to authenticate the selected stories. The rich language of *Shakespeare: His Work and His World* (2001) is illustrated by Robert Ingpen, whose atmospheric paintings evoke the romance of the era and capture the pageantry of the plays. This art style is very different from the illustrations in Rosen's more humorous works that have been illustrated by such artists as Bob Graham, Bee Willey, Neal Layton, and Arthur Robins. These illustrations are crude,

quirky and cartoon-like. The exuberant images heighten the humour and mimic a child's artistic techniques.

When Rosen is asked about his work he comments: "Sometimes I go into schools, sometimes I'm on the radio, sometimes I write, sometimes I lie in bed thinking of all the things I would write if I got out of bed. Some people are worried about whether what I write is 'poetry.' If they are worried, let them call it something else, e.g. 'stuff'" (Young Writer, n.d.). Rosen writes his 'stuff' anywhere an idea strikes him and his 'stuff' has earned him many awards. He has received the Eleanor Farjeon Award for his contribution to Children's Literature, the 'Talkies' award for the best poetry tape of the year, the Parent Magazine Award for best picture book of the year, and the Glenfiddick Award for the best radio program of the year (on the subject of food). Rosen has been short-listed for the Kate Greenaway Award and the Carnegie Medal, and was awarded the Smarties Prize in 1989 for *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (1989a).

Works for Adults

Michael Rosen had five children. He is stepfather to Naomi and Laura and father to Joe, Eddie and Isaac. Rosen writes honestly about his life experiences, and this is especially evident in *Carrying the Elephant: A Memoir of Love and Loss* (2002). His first book of poetry written exclusively for adults (since then he has published *This is Not My Nose*, 2004), *Carrying the Elephant* contains 72 prose poems and was written after Eddie's tragic death from meningitis. *Carrying the Elephant* (2002) contains profound insights and is probably more meaningful to readers when they know something about the author. The honesty with which Michael Rosen portrays his life experiences is startling. He writes about events as disparate as his childhood trip to East Germany, the

thrill of waiting to know if his first book would be published (and the resulting injury he sustained, which is at once hilarious and painfully graphic in the telling) and about being hit by a car as a young man, sustaining serious injuries to his pelvis. He writes about the death of his son, and the break-up of his first marriage and the resulting betrayal he felt. He writes about his mother coming home to die and does not gloss over the hard and unpleasant facts about death. He talks about how superficial life can be on the outside (nice and neat) and how messy it is likely to be on the inside. “A mess. And the thing is you’d never know from the outside. That’s the thing” (Rosen, 2002, p. 36). Rosen writes about the things in life that are not as they appear. As with all his work, he ‘tells it like it is.’ It is Rosen’s special ability to convey life experiences that are both humorous and painful that makes him such a popular writer and makes *Carrying the Elephant* a powerful book.

Rosen’s contributions to the British political scene and his social commentaries have brought him considerable popular recognition in recent years and he frequently speaks at political rallies. He writes articles for *New Humanist* magazine, and has signed his name to a Palestinian Centre for Human Rights document that opposes occupation, apartheid and ethnic cleansing, and reaffirms a commitment to justice and peace. His views on some of these issues are evident in *Carrying the Elephant* (2002).

A Selection of Rosen’s Works for Children

We’re Going on a Bear Hunt (1989a) is an obvious choice to mention here, as it is one of Rosen’s best known books. It is a family adventure story where a father and his children go exploring in search of a bear (a big one). The phrases “We’re going on a bear hunt / We’re going to catch a big one / What a beautiful day! / We’re not scared.” (Rosen,

1989a, p. 1) invite young children to participate in the reading because they can easily remember these repetitive lines. The book has elements that children love: adventure, excitement, onomatopoeic words, repetition, a scary encounter, racing to safety and a warm and cozy ending. As the family meets obstacles along the hunt, the adventure becomes more and more exciting and interesting. But the obstacles are bigger than life: the family doesn't go through ordinary mud, but "thick oozy mud;" they don't go through a regular snowstorm, but a "swirling whirling snowstorm." Illustrator Helen Oxenbury alternates black-and-white drawings with full-color watercolor paintings, which creates a wonderful effect. When the family's "...got to go through it!" the story and illustrations come alive with colour. The arrangement of the illustrations and the ease with which the text can be chanted aloud make this ideal for read-alouds or for small family groups to share. Oxenbury's creative technique adds to the joy and excitement of the story. A retelling of an old song by the same title, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* has already become a modern classic.

Michael Rosen had another hit with his book *Freckly Feet and Itchy Knees* (1990), a book about body parts. Children can immediately relate to the actions various parts of the body can make. In this book Rosen writes about noses, hands, feet, eyes, knees and bellies. He provides lots of information about what these various body parts look like and can do, as in *Bellies*:

I'm talking about bellies

muscly bellies

wobbly bellies

full of jellies

bellies on the beach

bellies on the mountain

bellies in the sun

bellies in the fountain

The book is entertaining with some clever rhymes. Children can move to the book, as in “We’ve got to get the/ Noses going wiggle wiggle/ Hands going jiggle jiggle/ Feet going hop hop/ Eyes going pop pop/ Knees going knobble knobble/ Bellies going wobble wobble.” The book certainly gets children wiggling, jiggling, hopping and popping!

This is Our House (1996) was written to explore attitudes of selfishness, prejudice and bullying. Like many people, Rosen has experienced prejudice and discrimination in his life. Recently, he has been attacked on account of his involvement with human rights issues and anti-war protests. Rosen has observed that children too often find their place in the world by using the ‘language of discrimination’ and he believes children’s attitudes are formed at a very young age. *This is Our House* addresses the topic of discrimination and the lack of logic behind it. The main character, George, discriminates against other children for very superficial reasons such as wearing glasses, the colour of their hair and their physical stature. The story takes place in a public housing playground where a cardboard box has been transformed into a house that George has claimed as his own. George won’t allow any other children into the house. The illustrator, Bob Graham, has

developed characters who are obviously from many different ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, George does not discriminate on this basis, but on the basis of those elements a child would understand – being different because you wear glasses or you are small. This work is an example of how Rosen speaks through ‘the voice of a child’ and demonstrates his understanding of a child’s thinking in a child’s world. Perhaps in this book Rosen is trying to tell us, on another level, that children like George who decide ‘who’s O.K. and who’s not’ may become adults with prejudices that go beyond the superficial to the extreme. If George’s discrimination was to go unchecked by his peers (George is eventually excluded from the house himself because he has red hair), he may well have grown up to be a very prejudiced adult. *This is Our House* skillfully addresses the topic of discrimination for young readers.

In his book *Lovely Old Roly* (2002) Rosen deals with the topic of death and bereavement. In this story a beloved pet cat dies and the two children try to come to grips with the loss. At the end of the book, the children realize that even though the new cat, Sausage, is with them a lot, Roly is with them all the time. He lives on in their memories and no matter where they go he will always be with them. Rosen wrote this book before the death of his eighteen-year-old son. In the dedication at the front of the book he writes, “It seems incredible but this book was written before my son Eddie died and before the new baby was born two years later.”

Classroom Applications

Rosen has much to offer educators on the topic of literacy teaching, especially the teaching of writing and the value of poetry in the lives of young readers. He has observed that young children are frequently asked in school to write in the written mode, which is

more formal than the oral mode and ignores the idiomatic language and dialect children grow up with. Children are asked to write in ways in which they would never speak; to write things they would never say. Rosen maintains that teachers need to begin with oral language; with the language and experiences children bring to school with them. Rosen sees value in all of children's life experiences – their 'cultural capital' – and he sees how that diverse 'cultural capital' can contribute to a vibrant literary culture in the classroom. By beginning with oral language, teachers can demonstrate to their students that their own ideas and experiences are valued; that their voices are recognized and that school is a place that focuses on the child's world rather than on the world of adults.

Rosen also believes that poetry can be a natural form for youngsters to use in their early writing, especially if they are encouraged to write in free verse. In his book *Did I Hear You Write?* (1989b), Rosen presents numerous 'starting points for oral writing' including free verse and anecdotes. He suggests techniques such as group poems, writing in the present tense, interviewing (one-on-one sitting with children and helping them to write), sensual writing, shape poems and playing with words.

His idea for a group poem might include taking a 'chorus line' such as "That's what mom says" and asking each child to contribute one line to the poem. If the teacher writes it on a wall chart, the children can see their poem coming together, with the chorus line inserted every three or four lines. The children can then copy it, change it, create their own, rewrite parts of it, and so on, perhaps ending up with a class collection of twenty or so poems on a theme.

Rosen underscores how easy it is for children to tell anecdotes in the present tense (they might say: 'so she comes in and she looks awful, and then he says . . .) and how

easily teachers can encourage their young students to begin writing in that same tense. For example, a change in voice occurs when ‘My dad drove the car over the sand . . . ’ becomes ‘My dad is driving the car over the sand . . .’. As Rosen says, it allows for “more immediate emotions, dialogues and moments’ (1989b, p. 75).

A third example Rosen provides is sensual writing, which he maintains is a way of re-expressing experience. Combined with ‘playing with words’ it can create an interesting effect. He provides this example of writing about the pouring rain:

It’s raining

It’s raining cats and dogs

Wow, it’s raining

Boy, it’s raining

It’s really coming down out there

Rain-raining

Rain-raining.

With the current emphasis on ‘genre writing’ and the use of organizers for almost all of the writing children do in some elementary classrooms and school districts, it is probably time to look again at the purposes behind teaching children to write. What are the aims of writing instruction? Many teachers have observed that youngsters are not writing as well today as they did just a few years ago. Rosen’s work demonstrates a range of creative ideas for teaching activities in the classroom that engage children fully in the act of writing. In addition, Rosen encourages teachers to reflect on the role of oral

language in the literary lives of the children they teach, and to incorporate oral language into writing activities, especially for young children, whenever possible.

Reflections

Michael Rosen has been fundamental in opening up poetry to children. From his first poem about a moth, written when he was 16, to his heartfelt revelations in *Carrying the Elephant* (2002), Michael Rosen has refined his talent and made poetry a popular genre with children. His ability to ‘tell it like it is’ allows his audiences to relive, relate and reflect upon their own lives. His success in reaching both adult and child audiences can partly be accounted for by his sense of humour and word play, and by the poignancy of his observations. His topics and choice of words create sounds and images that capture and hold a reader’s attention. The repetitive phrases and rhymes in his books engage children from pre-school onwards and his sense of the ridiculous can make a reader laugh out loud. Most importantly, Rosen writes in the language children use and understand, and he tells about things that children (and adults) can relate to.

Rosen continues to contribute to literacy pedagogy through his work with teachers and children, and his book *Did I Hear You Write?* (1989), is as relevant and inspirational now as it was when it was first published 15 years ago. Rosen’s attention to power and who holds it in children’s writing in school (and who *could* hold it) is an issue increasingly debated by educators. Rosen believes that children can take control and have power over their writing and their school experiences when they are guided by knowledgeable teachers. These teachers can show their students how to use their own experiences in their writing. Rosen’s message is always to help children write about what they know and to write about it in ways that have the maximum effect. A guiding

question is: 'how can you write this so that people read it in the way you want them to?'

Rosen's answer is often "in poetry" – both for himself and for the children and adults

who read his books.

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Notes: An interview with Michael Rosen, along with some of his poems, is available on a young readers' website at www.maninthemoon.co.uk (October 2004).

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