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Bearing Witness: Poetry by Teachers About Teaching

Margaret Hatcher
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Teachers, those great observers of the young, are aware of the poetry people carry inside them. Therefore, it's appropriate that the editor, a teacher herself, assembled this anthology of poems written by teachers about teaching. Divided into three sections—Teaching, Students, and Teachers' Inner Lives—the book touches on the difficulties and the emotional rewards of the profession. It's easy to imagine that most teachers will relate to at least some of the poems in this collection.

Taylor Mali, for example, begins his poem "What Teachers Make," with a dinner companion's statement: "He says the problem with teachers is 'What's a kid going to learn / from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?' / … 'I mean, you're a teacher,' he says. / 'Be honest. What do you make?'" The question revolves through the poem: clearly, the questioner speaks in economic terms, while the poem's speaker resolves the question with "I make a… difference!"

In "Autopsy Girl," Rick Stansberger's teacher suspects plagiarism from a student who has turned in a story about a murder, but finds that her ambition to be a "homicide cop" and her uncle's job as a coroner have given her all the details she needs. "I mumble the usual / this-is-nice-keep-writing, /and she bounces off to physics. / It is such a / normal-looking bounce," the speaker muses.

In Judy Michaels' poem "Earth Day, 1999: Shootings at Columbine High," a teacher takes her class out for a nature walk the day after the Columbine shootings. "Daffodils are wild in this wind / that chills the water. Words are too tame, / we thrust our hands in up to the wrist. They redden / with cold, it's hard to hold the pencils, spring / was just beginning to come."

The anthology was compelled, Hatcher explains in the preface, by the belief that "in today's culture, teachers are among the most maligned, criticized, underpaid, and undervalued of all professionals." The sixty-six teacher-poets contributing to this collection bear out her assessment and react to it, but they also give readers an insight into the joys that keep them returning, September after September, to the classroom.

JANET HOLMES (December 16, 2001)

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