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Ideas to finish your summer reading card fast

It appears I've been mis-timing my bi-annual appeal for everyone to read some poetry since we don't really see an uptick in poetry checkouts or even conversation. But do not hang up on me! We have to have our adult summer reading cards done by August 15 to get prizes. With a new approach, you can polish off a bunch of categories such as favorite genre (who is to know), new author, a book you read before, and a book you read in high school (or should have).

Other than missing the trash truck, nothing brings me to tears faster than poetry. It is elemental. It's what we first heard as babies and in song. It pre-dates writing to tell history orally.

I was an assistant to a young professor from Yale visiting at U of M long ago (meaning he talked, I graded papers – all good). Day One of class focused on poetry. He walked in and wrote on the board, "The ocean was so blue / blood could not have been more red." Poetry is efficient. It is image. We process it immediately. No long explanation could show you how blue the ocean was better than this image. Thus, poetry books are short. (It is possible some undergrads slept through this presentation at the 9:00 a.m. class, but I was electrified.)

I re-read Shel Silverstein's **Where the Sidewalk Ends** (so much in the Children's area is poetry and that counts) just because. This introduction popped up: "If you're a dreamer come in. / if you're a dreamer, a wisher, a liar / a hoper, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer / If you're a pretender come sit by the fire / For we have some flax golden tales to spin. / Come in! / Come in!" Wondering what children's book is well worth reading by your adult self? Accept Silverstein's invitation to come in to his most acclaimed book and finish a square.

People expect both too much and not enough of poetry. It is both enough and remarkable to come away with a line that lasts for decades, and those lines aren't hard to find. Here are a few along with the names of the poets. A single image can carry a wallop.

Robert Hayden's **Those Winter Sundays** reflects on his father who quietly "keeps the banked fires burning" in the cold, polishes children's shoes, alone and with no thanks expected, never abandoning his obligations. The image at the end comes back to me often, the adult looking back on his perceptions as a child: "What did I know? / What did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" A Hayden collection is a delight. He is one of the greatest American poets.

Less poignant and with none of Hayden's understatement, here's one by Allen Ginsberg. In his banned even on the west coast poem, "Howl," now a staple in college classrooms, he contemplates the idealistic ventures of the young who set out to go their own way, but "were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality." (Interesting little Ginsberg story. For thirty years, he stuck to his line that this long, complex, highly stylized poem was a single draft that came to him one crazy weekend, possibly written on a roll of toilet paper. When the 30th anniversary edition was published, he included his rough drafts complete with scratched out and added passages. Did he apologize for the toilet paper story? Nope.)

Sylvia Plath has quite a few volumes of poetry but the ending image in "Lady Lazarus" tends to stick with a reader. After speaking of three suicide attempts and obliquely pointing the finger at the man in her life, she triumphantly ends with the lines, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / and I eat men like air." Holy smokes.

And one more for the road, Emily Dickenson's famous opening, "Because I could not stop for death / he kindly stopped for me." If you can't spend an entire evening on that one, call me.

Find yourself one or two little volumes of poetry, include a great kids' book, and polish off those squares. Don't forget to date your finished squares and turn the card in at the library along with your name and contact number by August 15. Your library and all the poets throughout history are always here for you.