

## A Balancing Act . . . Writing the Picture Book in Verse

by

Shutta Crum

Sometimes we need a little imbalance in our lives to make us think about how to get centered again. Writing a picture book in verse is like that, too.

When writing in poetical stanzas (With all those good things that any picture book needs-characterization, setting and a plot, for goodness sake!) the writer has an additional concern. That is, a sense of balance. Oftentimes we can sense imbalance but we are not quite sure why something doesn't work. For example, the magical number in most western literature is three. Tasks, bad luck, good luck, etc. come in threes. (Unless you come from a Native American background, then four is usually the special number.) If this is violated, somewhere down deep we readers feel a bit uneasy. Things are not quite what they should be.

Most picture books are thirty-two pages in length. (Some are forty, or twenty-four; all are a number of pages that can be divided by 8.) Working with thirty-two pages, a writer of picture books has to be able to envision action for approximately thirteen double spreads (26 pages), and two single pages (first right-hand page and final left-hand page). The remaining four pages are front and back matter. One of the jobs for the verse writer of picture books is realizing how the stanzas, with or without a chorus, play across these pages in a balanced way so the reader feels, yes! This is right.

Early in my writing career I wrote a book from which my editor wanted me to remove one stanza so we could get it into a twenty-four page format. But which one should I remove?

This manuscript also contained a repeated chorus at precise points in the story. In my mind it was designed like one might a beaded necklace. There was an opening, three strands (stanzas) of a certain rhyme pattern and rhythm, a chorus strand with a different rhyme and rhythm, three more of the basic strand, another chorus, three more of the basic, and then a closing. So the pattern was: Opening, 3 stanzas, chorus, 3 stanzas, chorus, 3 stanzas, closing.

How could I remove just one and keep the whole thing working in a balanced way? Well . . . obviously, I had to remove the center stanza so the central strand of the basic pattern contained only two stanzas. Now my pattern was Open, 3, C., 2, C., 3, Close.

Now, you might think at this point that I am being just too fussy. But am I? Certainly a reader sometimes is not aware of all the work a writer does behind the scenes to make a story flow as though it were effortless. However, if we jarred the reader rudely at a point in the flow-he/she would certainly feel it, even though the reader might not be exactly sure why it didn't work for him/her.

For example lets look closely at this title from a friend of mine's manuscript (Hope Vestergaard) that will be out with Greenwillow in the next year or two: ***Digger, Dozer, Dumper***. Obviously, this is a book of large machines for little readers. And the title is perfect. Why is that?

First, we have the very descriptive words that tell exactly what each machine does. Second, we have the wonderful alliteration so beloved in children's books that helps the title just roll off our tongues. But there is more . . . a third thing. This is something an author would think about and deliberately design, something that just feels right.

Notice the vowels? Each one progresses down in tone and where they said in the mouth. The "i" is higher, said using the tongue up near the roof of the mouth. The "o" is said in the round chamber of the middle of one's mouth, while the "u" is said more in the lower back of the mouth near the throat. It feels good in our mouths to say it. It's memorable, it's musical. It's perfect!

Now you know a little about why I fume when someone comments, "Oh it must be so easy to write those books. They're so short." When this happens I grit my teeth and remark that often the things we love most in the world are short, but they *are not* easily written. Think of Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods," Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," or the 23rd Psalm. The best writing is precise and balanced perfectly.

Here's to the beginning of a new writing year! Happy Holidays, all!