Workshopping the Heart

New and Selected Poems

Jeri Kroll

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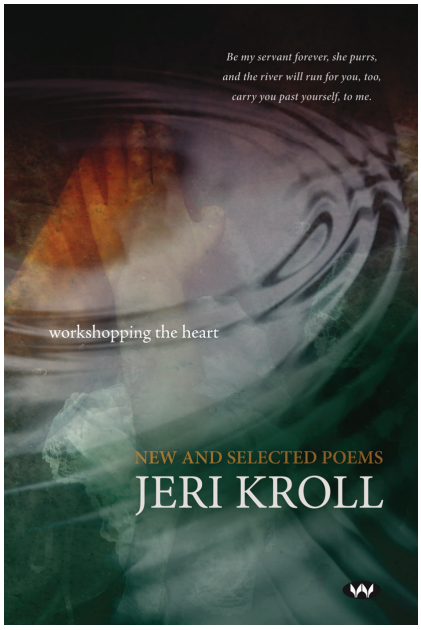

Teachers' notes

Notes prepared by Jeri Kroll © 2014

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These Teachers' Notes provide useful ways into the text, but are not meant to be exhaustive. At the conclusion teachers will find a discussion about free and metrical verse and figurative language. Additional resources are also listed, including critical essays by Jeri Kroll about the verse novel.

I. Introduction – *Workshopping the Heart: New and Selected Poems*

This witty, moving and accessible collection gathers poems from six previous books, beginning with *Death as Mr Right*, which won second prize in the 1982 Anne Elder Award for the best first book of poetry published in Australia. With irony and frankness, Jeri Kroll workshops the complex relationships that individuals establish over the course of a lifetime with friends and family, as well as with the physical and social environments that shape them. In particular, she tackles the significance of parenthood, gender and aging.

The collection contains a substantial amount of new work, including extracts from Kroll's crossover verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, which has been adapted for the stage in the United States. It will have a full production at George Washington University in Washington DC in October 2014. Puncher and Wattman will publish the full text of the novel in June 2014.

Below are critics' responses to Jeri Kroll's poetry.

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First reviews of *Workshopping the Heart*:

'Jeri Kroll's new collection of selected poems is titled *Workshopping the Heart*. It does just that. It takes you into the chambers of the human heart as it pulses and courses with blood through arteries, uncovering dark recesses and pools of light. There is love, there is pain, there is fear, there is grief, there is disappointment and jealousy, there is wonder, there is joy, and there is ambivalence ... Her title is therefore unusually accurate: this collection of two hundred pages comprising old and new poems as well as excerpts from *Vanishing Point*, a verse novel ... is for workshopping the heart ...' – Dominique Hecq, bukkertillibul.net/ASU_Archive.html

'... readings from *The Mother Workshops* would superbly complement and enrich texts by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf.' – Anne Magee, *Viewpoint*

'The painful ambivalence of ageing's inverted parent/child relationship ... is brilliantly captured ... The toughness of truth tempered throughout by tenderness, this is a perceptive and beautifully balanced tribute. – Katharine England, *Advertiser*

'... there is a strength and vigour in her best poems that make the work of many of her contemporaries seem enervated and vapid. Her characteristic style is direct and forthright, engaging the reader immediately and sustaining that engagement by taut rhythms, metaphoric inventiveness and ironic wit.' – Bev Roberts, *Australian Book Review*

II. Biographical Background

Personal

Jeri Kroll was born and grew up in New York City, but she spent ten summers in the Catskill Mountains at camp pretending she wasn't a city person. She has travelled widely in Europe and began her academic career in the UK and the US before moving to Australia in 1978.

Jeri's hectic life is divided between her job, writing, family and horses. The children have escaped but all live in South Australia. The three dogs and three cats lived to an inordinately old age, breaking the local vet's longevity records. She and husband Jeff Chilton have now downsized to one manic blue heeler. Jeri is still the oldest member (in terms of age and tenure) of the Fleurieu Horse and Pony Club and continues to compete when she can in equestrian events on her horse Pete (Petros).

Jeri wrote her first poems when she was eight, encouraged by her sister, Judith Kroll, who is also a writer and teacher. Jeri began her career by publishing books of poems and stories for adults. When she had her own child she read to him daily and began to appreciate the variety and quality of children's books. Eventually she decided to try her hand at a picture book herself and that began another chapter in her life – as a writer for young people.

Professional

Jeri Kroll is currently Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University and Professor of English and Creative Writing. Formerly she was Program Coordinator of Creative Writing. She has published on Samuel Beckett, contemporary poetry and fiction, children's literature and creative writing research and pedagogy. Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), she is on the United Kingdom editorial Boards of *New Writing* and *Write4Children* as well as the AAWP's journal, *TEXT*. She has published over twenty titles for adults and young people, including poetry, picture books and novels. See www.jerikroll.com for full details. In 2013 *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan), co-edited with Graeme Harper, was published as well as *Workshopping the Heart: New and Selected Poems* (Wakefield Press). In 2011 a staged reading of her crossover verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, took place at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 'Page to Stage' Festival and Puncher and Wattman will publish the text in 2014. In October 2014, a full Main Stage production of *Vanishing Point* will take place at George Washington University in Washington DC.

Qualifications

PhD (Literature), Columbia University, New York City, USA, 1974

MA (Literature), University of Warwick, UK, 1968

BA Honours (English), Smith College, Massachusetts, USA, 1967

For further information about Jeri Kroll's life and career, please see www.jerikroll.com, which contains a full description of her publications as well as downloadable photos.

III. Collection Overview and Comparative Questions

Workshopping the Heart: New and Selected Poems contains work in both free and formal verse covering a variety of subjects that will allow students to exercise their imaginations, enhance language comprehension, including sensitivity to the sounds and nuances of words, and grasp the essential elements of literary structure. The poems are at once accessible and sophisticated, entertaining and moving.

The study of poetry in particular encourages students to empathise with other points of view by introducing the concept of voice (focalisation) and character. Who 'speaks' the poem? Why has the writer chosen this speaker rather than another? Is it a human being, inanimate object or a natural phenomenon that speaks? Is the speaker an omniscient or neutral voice that simply describes? This empathetic gaze helps students to become co-poets when they work out why certain strategies are effective and what poems might mean. Poets use a range of strategies to project their visions to readers (figurative language; syntax; rhythm; alliteration; onomatopoeia; humour) and any of these can focus class discussion.

Poetry fosters ways of understanding and therefore coping with a complex, rapidly changing world that utilises many forms of communication, whether they are based in conventional print or in social media and electronic platforms. Language still underpins human communication and figurative language, in particular, helps us to make sense of our lives. Young people will feel empowered by their mastery of language that will enable them to share their individual perspectives of the world.

Ways into the Text

1. In her review of *Workshopping the Heart*, Dominique Hecq comments:

'Jeri Kroll's new collection of selected poems is titled *Workshopping the Heart*. It does just that. It takes you into the chambers of the human heart as it pulses and courses with blood through arteries, uncovering dark recesses and pools of light. There is love, there is pain, there is fear, there is grief, there is disappointment and jealousy, there is wonder, there is joy, and there is ambivalence ... Her title is therefore unusually accurate: this collection of two hundred pages comprising old and new poems as well as excerpts from *Vanishing Point*, a verse novel ... is for workshopping the heart ...' – Hecq in *All Shook Up* bukkertillibul.net/ASU_Archive.html [accessed May 2014]

Do you agree with this assessment? Choose three to five poems on which to focus and construct an argument to support your case.

2. The title contains the verb 'workshopping'. What does this mean literally and what might it mean metaphorically? First define the word and then choose a minimum of three poems to support your point of view.

Comparative Questions

1. In her review of *The Mother Workshops* published in *Viewpoint: On Books for Young Adults*, Anne Magee writes:

'This is a wonderful collection and the teacher in me cries out for a class set of *The Mother Workshops*. While the texts themselves could be read primarily by senior students as exploring the poet's changing relationship with her mother...they can also be read, more generically, in relation to all parent-child relationships, about the moments when the lines of authority and power waver and the baton – or distaff – is passed to the next generation. Furthermore, as intertextual treats for teachers and students, readings from *The Mother Workshops* would superbly complement and enrich texts by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Simone de Beauvoir, Audre Lorde and Virginia Woolf ...' – Anne Magee, feature in *Viewpoint* 12 [3] Spring 2004: 23

Do the statements about 'the poet's changing relationship with her mother' and 'all parent-child relationships' apply to the rest of the collection, or only to the selections from *The Mother Workshops* that are included? In what ways do they apply? What do you believe the critic means by 'generically'?

2. Anne Magee's review suggests that poems in *Workshopping the Heart* would provide stimulating comparisons with the texts of a number of contemporary women poets. Groups of students can choose poems from one or more of those poets and some from *Workshopping the Heart*. Discussion or essay questions might be:

How does each poet treat the subject of parent-child relationships or aging? What strategies does each poet use? Students can consider structure, form, vocabulary, etc.

IV. Form and Structure

Conventional forms might restrict a poet but they also challenge and stimulate. The form itself sometimes allows poets to discover things that they would not have said otherwise. Modern and contemporary poets in particular have played with conventional forms in order to rediscover what they can offer. Some writers have adhered strictly to the rules and others have relaxed them almost to the point where readers find it hard to recognise the structure.

The Sonnet

Ask students to choose one sonnet from the list below and to compare it with a sonnet from another set poet. How does each poet manipulate the form? How closely do they follow the conventional pattern? If the pattern breaks, how does this support the poem's meaning?

'Jealousy'
'Stepson'
'Respite'
'The Kestrel and the Moon'

'San Francisco Trio' (sequence of three sonnets): Students can discuss why the poet might have chosen the sonnet form to respond to the 1989 San Francisco earthquake. They can research the historical background of the earthquake and its aftermath.

Writing Exercise: Ask students to write a sonnet on a subject of their own choosing. How closely will they follow the pattern? If they vary it, ask them to explain why they have done so.

The Villanelle

This demanding form revolves around repetition of lines in a strict pattern. Have a group of students discuss why writers might want to challenge themselves with this form. Are there particular subjects that seem to suit a form that is so self-contained? How might the villanelle in fact allow poets to discover deeper meanings?

*In 2013, ABC Radio National's *PoeticA* produced a program featuring contemporary Australian villanelles (including Kroll's 'Villanelle: Portrait of a Lady'). See if students can access this program and have them choose one or two villanelles for discussion.

'The Towers of Silence': This poem won first prize in the 1981 Artlook Poetry Contest and was republished in *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*.

1. In this poem, comprising two parts (a villanelle and a rhymed poem), students can discuss the appropriateness of the villanelle form to the subject. They can research the Parsee community in Mumbai (known as Bombay until 1996), India. Centuries ago the Parsees fled Iran because of religious persecution. The city of Mumbai today comprises a myriad of ethnicities and religions. As a commercial centre and port that is home to India's flourishing Bollywood film industry, it attracts international tourists and businesspeople.

2. Students can discuss the relationship between the poem's two parts (i The Parsees and ii The Tourists). How do they help to unify the poem? What similarities and differences can students detect between the rhyme scheme and rhythm of each part?

'Villanelle: Portrait of a Lady' (Exercise 9 in *The Mother Workshops*): Students can consider how the poem's strict form nevertheless helps to develop the portrait of a personality in decline.

A reproduction of the original cover of The Mother Workshops appears at the beginning of this section of Workshopping the Heart. A clearer picture can be viewed on Jeri's website (http://www.jerikroll.com/poetry/The-Mother-Workshops). Jeri's mother was a singer and dancer, working in New York (dancing at Radio City Music Hall), touring around America and also performing in the Panama Canal Zone.

The Sestina

The sestina is one of the most demanding forms. Sir Philip Sidney's 'Double Sestina' in the sixteenth century is doubly difficult (see https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem1942.html). In each century since poets have experimented with the sestina, sometimes more than once. In the twentieth century, American poet Diane Wakowski composed two well-known sestinas (http://sestinas.jelyon.com/2007/05/10/sestina-from-the-home-gardener-diane-wakoski).

Students can work individually or in groups to search out contemporary Australian sestinas. Thomas Shapcott's work is available on http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/shapcott-thomas-w/sestina-in-the-time-of-el-ni-o-0534014 and http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/shapcott-thomas-w/sestina-with-refrain-0058034, for example.

‘Sestina for Two Voices’: This poem won third prize in the National Federation of State Poetry Societies Grand Prize Competition (1977).

Students can discuss why two voices, rather than one, narrate the poem. The six-line stanzas are equally divided. In that case, who narrates the concluding three lines? What is the subject of this poem and how does the sestina form suit it (or not)?

The Found Poem

Strictly speaking, a found poem takes what it needs from actual text verbatim (newspapers, advertisements, billboards, graffiti, dialogue, etc.) and shapes the words into a poem. The structure is supplied by the poet and dictates how readers understand the words. In many cases, though, poets will take a certain amount from others and add or subtract words in order to heighten the effect of the original text.

‘The Reluctant Bride’: How does the poet integrate the language of the newspaper report of the murder into the poem’s text? Note that the husband and wife’s names are similar: the child-bride Krishna – also the name of the blue god – and the husband Krishan.

‘Exercise 8: Found Poem/Checkup at the Memory Disorder Unit’: This poem is based on an actual interchange reported to the poet by her sister. Her mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, visited a doctor periodically to ascertain the rate of decline. The name of the facility was in fact ‘The Memory Disorder Unit.’

Ask students to define ‘euphemism’ and discuss how the name of that facility functions. They can then discuss the relationship between the actual words spoken and the comments the poem’s narrator makes after each speaker (the doctor, the aide and the old woman).

Writing Exercise: Students can source text from newspapers, advertisements, television, social media, etc. What has caught their attention as they read or listened? What was it about the text – the actual words, the meaning, the context? Ask them to shape those words into a poem that through its structure communicates their attitude to the text. If they wish they can add some of their own words to sharpen the poem’s impact as in ‘Checkup at the Memory Disorder Unit’ above.

Thematic Structure of Individual Collections

1. *Monster Love*

This child-centric collection (1990) tackles the emotive subject of giving birth to and raising a child. What happens when people become parents? How do their lives change? The collection confronts the ambiguous feelings that parents can have for the children they love, focusing in particular on toddlerhood. *Monster Love* follows a chronological logic to some extent but also includes the larger family circle (stepchildren, divorced friends).

2. *House Arrest*

The opening sequence bears the title of this 1993 collection. Students can research the circumstances of ‘house arrest.’ What does it mean and what restrictions does it place on those sentenced to it? How does the term function metaphorically in these poems to reflect on family relationships?

Students can attempt a close reading of ‘Parole’ that develops this metaphor about families: ‘Every family is a life sentence.’

The collection as a whole begins at home and ends in space. Compare the hothouse atmosphere of the house arrest sequence with the final poems, which are ‘Eavesdropping’ and ‘Spy Satellite.’ Has the perspective of the poet altered?

In *Monster Love* and *House Arrest* there is a strong domestic focus, yet each book also raises questions about responsibility for others and for the environment. Both collections contain poems that would provide useful comparisons with Gwen Harwood’s ‘Suburban Sonnets’ and Bruce Dawe’s work (in particular, his concept of ‘Homo Suburbiensis’).

3. *The Mother Workshops*

Studying all of the selections from *The Mother Workshops* suggests how writers can manipulate reader responses through structure. Students can ask:

Why does the poet call the collection *The Mother Workshops*?

What is the meaning of ‘workshop’ and why is each poem an exercise? Does this make the collection more or less formal?

4. Verse Novels (hybrid forms) – Selections from *Vanishing Point*

Students can research the contemporary young adult verse novel, the adult verse novel and the crossover verse novel. What are the dominant characteristics of each? How different are they? What is meant by 'hybrid form'?

Anorexia and bulimia are predominantly twentieth and twenty-first century diseases. Students can research these conditions and discuss why young women and men become susceptible to them. They can then focus on why Diana, the protagonist of *Vanishing Point*, becomes anorexic.

Teachers can read Jeri Kroll's critical studies of the verse novel online. References appear at the end. She discusses Diana's situation in particular in four of the essays listed.

*Puncher and Wattman published the complete text of *Vanishing Point* in mid-2014.

V. Figurative Language

The centrality of poetic language in human thought and of metaphor, in particular, has been pointed out since Aristotle first began studying the manner in which we manipulate language. In the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* he affirms that metaphor teaches us in ways ordinary language cannot. The section at the conclusion of these notes defines simile, metaphor and symbol, provides an extended discussion of the significance of figurative language and explains the differences between free and metrical verse.

Similes

Poems in *Workshopping the Heart* offer innumerable examples of the use of similes and metaphors. Below are poems that should offer much for students to discuss.

'Bathtime': How appropriate are the similes used to describe the toddler's body? What seems to be the mother's attitude towards him?

Exercise 1: Similes – 'The Mother' from *The Mother Workshops*: This is the first poem of 'the workshops' sequence. Students can discuss why the introduction takes this form, building up a portrait through a series of similes. Does the poet use metaphors at all? If so, where? Focus on the conclusion: what connection does the poet make between the mother and herself?

Writing Exercise: Ask students to compose a poem made up predominantly of similes that attempts to build up a portrait of a relative or friend. How closely were they able to follow this format? Did they find that their understanding of the person became clearer through this process or did they find it constricting?

Metaphors

Suggested poems for study: 'Parole' (see suggestions above under *House Arrest* as a thematic collection), 'Possums,' 'Hunting Swans,' 'Swan Dancing,' 'The Zen of Grey.'

Myths and Fairy Tales

The similes and metaphors in the concluding poem of *Monster Love* highlight the titular metaphor 'monster love.' Students can research the mythical stories about Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur, the monster at the heart of the maze that the master craftsman Daedalus built for King Minos. How apt is the metaphor of a monster for parental love?

'A Vindication': This retelling of Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf demonstrates how a contemporary writer can manipulate a familiar story to highlight issues about gender, role stereotyping and aging. American poet Anne Sexton's book of updated fairy tales called *Transformations* (1971) and Australian poet Diane Fahey's book entitled *Metamorphoses* (1988) offer material for comparison.

Writing Exercise: Students can update a favourite fairy tale and then reflect upon whether the process has made them discover new aspects to the original. In addition, has the transformative process allowed them to understand contemporary society more deeply?

'Icarus Relaunched': Students can research Icarus, one of the most memorable characters in Greek mythology. His story and that of his father, Daedalus, continues to influence writers, sculptors and visual artists.

Students can research ekphrasis (writing about another art form). This poem reflects not only upon a contemporary mobile called 'The Aviator' (that hangs in the poet's house), but also on W H Auden's ekphrastic poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts,' which in turn responds to a famous painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder' entitled 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.' See Jeri Kroll's chapter, 'The Creative Writing Laboratory and its Pedagogy,' in Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (eds), *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 102–132 (in particular 120–21).

Vanishing Point: This crossover verse novel exploits Greek and Roman myths about Artemis or Diana, who is a virgin goddess, Apollo's twin sister and hunter-in-chief to the gods (see 'Namesake'). Students can research the variety of Greek and Roman stories about Diana and also her transformation through the centuries (Selene, Hecate, etc.). What constants can they find in her personality and why do her alter egos appeal to Diana, the protagonist of *Vanishing Point*? Does she in fact want to become 'like them'; in other words, does she want to embody their attributes?

VI. Subjects

Poems are grouped under subject headings for convenience. In most cases questions are provided for close study of one or more poems.

Youth at Risk

Jeri wrote about young people at risk while she was a writer-in-residence at Southside Youth Centre in Noarlunga. A Community Writer's Fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council allowed her to work there for a year (1991–92). The majority of those poems appeared in *House Arrest* (1993).

'Tight Jeans': Students can discuss how jeans (or indeed any clothing) might define a person.

'At the Drop-in Centre': Drop-in Centres are funded by local, state or national government bodies and/or NGOs (non-government organisations). Adults have therefore established them. Students might research the background of youth centres in South Australia or in other states for comparison. Can these types of organisations really provide what young people need?

How does this poem deal with the question of ownership?

Is the Drop-in Centre a place that offers young people want they want or what they need?

Is there a difference?

'Thursday Night': This poem is divided into two parts and students can focus on their relationship. What is the significance of 'Thursday Night' in the suburbs? How does the weather function metaphorically?

How does the poem develop a picture of the young woman – 'she' – and what does her relationship seem to be with the others at the Drop-in Centre?

Students might consider how the poem would be different if the young woman spoke in her own voice.

Why doesn't she speak in her own voice?

Who then is the poem's narrator?

Writing exercises: Students can write a short poem in the young woman's voice, covering her experiences either before, during or after the events of the poem. They can also write a poem about their typical Thursday Night.

'High Rider': How does the poem develop a picture of this unconventional chaplain?

Love

Suggested poems for study: 'Moving to Australia' and 'Long-Distance Affair' (also appropriate for the migrant experience), 'the drum in your ear, 'Diagnosis,' 'You slide down my body,' 'Walking Scared,' Monster Love poems, in particular 'Bathtime' and 'On watching a sleeping child,' 'Pearl,' 'The Best Sleep.'

Family Dramas

Suggested poems for study: 'Parents' Move,' 'The Night Before the Funeral,' Monster Love poems, House Arrest sequence, 'Ten Things You Can Do With Your Son's Room.'

Aging and Illness

Suggested poems for study in *House Arrest*: 'Mammogram,' 'Fainting While Giving Blood.'

A Coastal Grammar (in particular 'Water to Water') and *The Mother Workshops* sequence (in particular, 'What it Means,' 'Checkup at the Memory Disorder Unit,' 'Villanelle: Portrait of a Lady,' 'Personification: My Mother's Pathology,' 'Still Life with Cracked Urn'): Students can research Alzheimer's disease and discuss what happens to a person who suffers from it. How does their decline affect the family? How can a relative respond? How do we understand the concept of memory and how do our memories ground us?

New Poems: 'Common Prayer for the Beach,' 'Skin,' 'Nursing Home,' 'Final Copy,' 'By this age,' 'Touching the Air.'

Writing Exercise: Students can experiment writing a poem either from the point of view of someone coping with a relative with memory loss, or one from the point of view of the sufferer.

The Wider World: Politics and Gender

Suggested poems for study of gender: 'Man Holding Cat as Woman,' 'Death as Mr Right,' 'For a divorced friend,' 'In the balance,' 'A Vindication' (see notes about Myths and Fairy Tales), 'Millennium Sun,' 'Ars poetica – as gender studies,' 'Namesake' from *Vanishing Point*, part 2, Baptism in particular, 'Astral Bodies.'

'On the Australian War Crimes Trials': Students can research the history of the Australian War Crimes Trials. How many people were charged? What was the nature of the public debate about the logic of bringing people to account so many years after World War II? What happened to those who were charged?

How does the poem's two-part structure comprising questions and possible answers suggest a point of view?

'There are those who say': Who might these people be?

'Ask those who…': Who might these people be? What effect does this phrasing have on reader response?

Students can discuss who is therefore the poem's speaker. Whose voice do readers hear?

'Eavesdropping': The epigraph to *House Arrest* is a comment made by astrophysicist and science populariser Carl Sagan: 'We are alone in the universe or we are not. Either prospect is mind-boggling.' Why is it mind-boggling? What are the implications of either possibility? How does this comment reflect upon the poem 'Eavesdropping?'

'Spy Satellite': How is perspective manipulated in this poem?

Cultural Contexts

Suggested poems for study from *Indian Movies*: 'Monsoon at Kovalam Beach,' 'Translations,' 'Noon at Duladeo Temple,' 'The Towers of Silence,' 'Indian Movies,' 'The Reluctant Bride,' 'Shawar.'

'Indian Movies': Research on the Bollywood film industry based in Mumbai can be used to enhance understanding of 'Indian Movies.' The cover of the individual collection (published in 1984) incorporates a photograph of an Indian movie poster (taken by the poet's sister, Judith Kroll). A reproduction of that cover can be viewed on Jeri's website (http://www.jerikroll.com/poetry/Indian-Movies). The tattered poster on a slum wall contrasts the glamour and opulence of the screen world with the poverty experienced by huge numbers of rural and urban Indians.

Students can research the billion-dollar Indian film and television industry. The award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) plays with the conventions of popular Indian musicals. Students can view this film and compare it with the conventional Bollywood film. They also can compare it with the 2004 *Bride and Prejudice*, the Bollywood take on Austen's classic.

Jeri's poem foregrounds the clichés of the genre while at the same time underlining the impact they have on the audience – in this case a relative named Selim. Why are they so powerful? How do they affect the young man's view of life?

'The Reluctant Bride': This poem is based on a murder reported in *The Hindustan Times*. Students can research the custom of arranged marriages in India. Are they still frequent? Do they occur more within one social class? Students can discuss the tone of the newspaper report in particular.

'Shawar': This poem is more personal, as it is based on the case of a distant cousin by marriage – the Shawar of the title. The poet's sister and her husband tried to intervene. Why and what was the outcome?

Landscape

Suggested poems for study: 'Bushfire Weather,' 'Glass's Gorge,' 'Trees,' 'Maslins Beach,' 'Winter Mornings,' 'Astral Bodies' from *Vanishing Point*.

'Bushfire Weather': How does this poem create an atmosphere of tension? Why does it open in the hills, rather than in the city where the speaker is based? Is there a reversal in this poem? Where?

Animals

Suggested poems for study: 'Man Holding Cat as Woman,' 'felis domestica,' 'Still Life with Dog and Fire,' 'Dog 8 am Winter,' 'Possums,' 'Nipped,' 'The Zen of Grey,' 'First Love' (Changeling, First Flight, Drought) from *Vanishing Point*.

'felis domestica': Who is this poem's speaker? Does the speaker judge the cat as it eats the bird? Why or why not? What is the significance of the title, 'felis domestica' or domestic cat?

'Still Life with Dog and Fire': How does this poem make an implicit comparison between the dog and the speaker's mother? Does the poem suggest differences between how animals and humans experience the aging process?

'Possums': Is this poem about the damage that possums can do in the roof of a suburban house? If not, what does it suggest through the metaphoric manipulation of possums?

'The Zen of Grey': Students can research Lipizzaners to discover why they are famous in the equine world. They can also consider the meaning of Zen. What does the title mean therefore? How does this poem work metaphorically to suggest something not only about horse colouring but also about the nature of truth?

'First Love: Changeling, First Flight, Drought': Students can focus on 'First Flight.' What factual information about horses do these poems convey and what meanings in particular does 'flight' possess? Do these facts help readers to understand the relationship between animals and humans?

Definitions and Additional Resources

Free Verse:

Free verse is a term that basically was coined to describe nineteenth-century innovative French verse that did not obey the strict rules of classical French prosody – hence ***vers*** [verse] ***libre*** [free]. It has become a catchall term that covers all English verse that is not organised into conventional patterns (such as the sonnet) or into strict metre. Free verse usually does not rhyme, but it can and, therefore, can look quite formal. Line lengths often vary. It frequently exploits strategies that play with rhythm, sound and structure. For example, a poem might contain many instances of assonance and consonance.

assonance

1: resemblance of sound in words or syllables

2: a: relatively close juxtaposition of similar sounds especially of vowels

b: repetition of vowels without repetition of consonants (as in *stony* and *holy*) used as an alternative to rhyme in verse.

consonance

1: harmony or agreement among components

2: correspondence or recurrence of sounds especially in words; *specifically*: recurrence or repetition of consonants especially at the end of stressed syllables without the similar correspondence of vowels (as in the final sounds of 'stroke' and 'luck').

(See http://www.meriam-webster.com/dictionary)

Line lengths in free verse poems can be irregular but regular in some stanzas, depending on the poem's meaning. In other words, the poet herself can establish a pattern that determines how the poem needs to be read.

Free verse is sometimes confused with blank verse (the metre in which Shakespeare wrote his plays). Blank verse is simply unrhymed iambic pentameter (five beat lines comprising iambs – or one unstressed and one stressed syllable). The phrase 'she walks' is an iamb because we do not stress 'she' when we speak, but 'walk.' For further information, consult any glossary of literary terms.

Figurative Language

The centrality of poetic language in human thought and of metaphor, in particular, has been pointed out since Aristotle first began studying the manner in which we manipulate language. In the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* he affirms that metaphor teaches us in ways ordinary language cannot. Centuries later, the American poet Robert Frost offered his own interpretation of metaphor's significance by affirming why it is helps us to orient ourselves in a complex environment. He was addressing a group of undergraduates at Amherst College in Massachusetts, USA.

‘What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.’ – (Frost 1966, 160)

George Orwell wrote eloquently about the abuse of language in ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946). He worries most about the ‘huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves’ and, of course, of creating precise images that might provide more information than the writer wants. In particular, Orwell notes that some politicians have mastered linguistic obfuscation (‘weasel words’ is a phrase currently in use) that critically affects how people in a democracy understand key issues. ‘But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation …’, Orwell argues, and so we all would do well to write carefully and to turn to models of the best writing we can find. This is a lesson that young people can begin to learn as early as primary school in an enjoyable way by reading and writing poetry.

Image, simile, metaphor

An image creates a picture in a person’s mind. It can be one word or several. If you say the word ‘rose’ to a class, each member will conjure up a picture of a rose in their minds. Those pictures will be different, depending on their experience with roses and even on their favourite colours.

A simile draws a comparison between two things using ‘like’ or ‘as.’ If you say, ‘the rose is as red as fire,’ then you highlight the deepness, the vividness and perhaps even the shock of that colour. If you say, ‘The girl is like a rose’ (a cliché), that simile draws a comparison between a person and a flower. If you talk about the colour of the girl’s hair (crimson perhaps), or the tone of her skin, then you also by extension make the rose as well as the girl more specific.

A metaphor starts out as a single word or image but it connects the two elements – the original word and the new word or image – by asserting a kind of identity and, in so doing, illuminates both; for example, ‘The girl is a rose’ or ‘my mind is a hawk that soars.’ As a writer you might talk about how the girl’s scent lingers after she leaves the room, or your mind soars and then swoops after something you want to catch (a memory rather than a mouse).

Metaphors encourage us to look at the world on a deeper level that is not abstract but particular. They permeate our speech and thought (even if we might not be conscious of this) because we know that they allow us to express ourselves accurately. We say things we might not otherwise have said.

A full discussion of the significance of metaphor and how it can be used with secondary students appears in ‘Metaphor Delivers: An Integrated Approach to Teaching and Writing Poetry,’ *English in Australia*, Vol. 41, No 2 (July/Aug 2006), 35–59.

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Further Reading on Poetry and on Verse Novels/Adaptation:

Kroll, Jeri and Leslie Jacobson (2014) ‘A Fine Balancing Act: Adapting the Verse Novel to the Stage,’ Jeri Kroll and Leslie Jacobson, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, in print and online.

Kroll, Jeri, ‘From page to stage: A case study of transforming a verse novel’. The Encounters: Place, Situation, Context Papers – The Refereed Proceedings Of The 17th Conference Of The Australasian Association Of Writing Programs, 2012. http://www.aawp.org.au/the_encounters_place_situation_context_papers.

Kroll, Jeri ‘From now to once upon a time: Reading the Book of Myths,’ third paper in the Icarus extended panel. The Strange Bedfellows or Perfect Partners Papers: the refereed proceedings of the 15th conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 2010, 1–11. ISBN: 978-0-9807573-3-0. [online] Available from http://www.aawp.org.au/strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers-refereed-proceedings-15th-conference-australasian-ass.

Kroll, Jeri 'Strange Bedfellows or Compatible Partners: the problem of genre in the twenty-first century verse novel.' The Strange Bedfellows or Perfect Partners Papers: the refereed proceedings of the 15th conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 2010, 1–10. ISBN: 978-0-9807573-3-0. [online] Available from http://www.aawp.org.au/strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers-refereed-proceedings-15th-conference-australasian-ass.

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