Other Books by Dawn Potter

POETRY
Boy Land & Other Poems (2004)
How the Crimes Happened (2010)
Same Old Story (2014)

PROSE
Tracing Paradise: Two Years in Harmony with John Milton (2009)
The Vagabond’s Bookshelf (2015)

ANTHOLOGY
A Poet’s Sourcebook: Writings about Poetry, from the Ancient World to the Present (2013)
The Conversation

Learning to Be a Poet

Dawn Potter
To the teachers and the poets
of the Frost Place

This is a fire I caught from the earth.

—Robert Frost
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Introduction
Fellow Feeling and Common Experience

“A poem is the act of having an idea and how it feels to have an idea.”¹ Robert Frost scrawled those words in one of the more than forty notebooks he filled with thoughts, complaints, teaching ideas, and poem drafts over the course of his writing life. The sentence was his own private remark, meant for no one but himself; yet when I, nearly a half-century after his death, stumbled across the line, I recognized, with a swift conviction of wonder and completion, the shape of what he, too, had so swiftly recognized. Yes, I thought. You have said exactly what I have never said myself. You have said it, and now I have heard it.

In a later notebook entry, Frost commented, “‘There you are—you’ve said it’ is the most influencing thing you can say to a person. Or I know exactly—you get it just as I have felt it.”² By means of this simple interchange, the speakers share, in Frost’s words, “fellow feeling and common experience.”³ At this instant, they are no longer engaged in instruction or chat, in argument or even discussion. They are participating as equals in a conversation that has crystallized around a suddenly shared perception. And that is exactly how I felt when I read his definition of a poem.

I’m sure that you, too, have been transported by a rare conversational moment when intellect and emotion and attentiveness synthesize into a “fellow feeling” of not only exquisite understanding but also exponential possibility. The participants in this conversation may be parent and child or student and teacher; they may be colleagues or lovers or accidental travel companions; they may be reader and poet, painter and viewer. They may be any two human beings in any time or place. What is necessary is the sense, whether actual or inferred, that one person has articulated some vital working of mind or heart and that the other has heard and acknowledged a shared, intense comprehension.

This spirit of conversation is at the center of poetry; and as Countee Cullen expressed in “To John Keats, Poet, at Springtime,” it can thrive without regard for time or circumstance:

“John Keats is dead,” they say, but I
Who hear your full insistent cry
In bud and blossom, leaf and tree,
Know John Keats still writes poetry.³

Yet to people immersed in their bustling present-tense affairs, this vibrating bond between people who are separated by centuries (not to mention divided by race, gender, class, religion, education, or sexual preference) may seem quaint, even suspicious. Cullen’s attachment to the English Romantic poets made him an oddity among more obviously progressive figures of the Harlem Renaissance. As James Weldon Johnson noted in The Book of American Negro Poetry:

Some critics have ventured to state that Cullen is not an authentic Negro poet. . . . There is in it a faint flare-up which would object to the use of “white” material by a Negro artist, or at least regard it with indulgent condescension. . . . Yet strangely, it
is because Cullen revolts against these “racial” limitations—technical and spiritual—that the best of his poetry is motivated by race. He is always seeking to free himself and his art from these bonds.4

In other words, the conversation that Cullen sensed between himself and Keats was not sterile scholarship. Rather, it interacted with the circumstances of his daily life, feeding the living reader’s imagination and his growth as a poet.

An intense relationship with poetry of the past doesn’t mean that a contemporary poet must forsake the pull of her own time and place. It’s natural for us to be drawn to work that is constructed from the details of our daily concerns, and certainly this is the world that will predominate, in one form or another, in our own writing. A closer bond with history simply gives us more scope, both technically and imaginatively. Keats may have loved Milton, but that doesn’t mean he wrote in the idiom of a politically charged seventeenth-century Puritan who was frighteningly well educated as well as blind and quarrelsome. He wrote in the idiom of the man he was: a bookish, nineteenth-century, lower-middle-class, tubercular agnostic, a loving brother who maintained a handful of intensely sweet friendships. Likewise, no one would mistake Countee Cullen for Keats, yet neither man would have become the poet he did had he not engaged in these century-spanning conversations.

The Reading-Conversation-Writing Cycle

In his essay “Of Studies,” first published in 1625, Francis Bacon declared, “Reading maketh a Full Man; Conference a Ready Man; And Writing an Exact Man.”5 Certainly, all three apply to teaching and learning about poetry. To be a writer, one must be a questing reader, forever seeking closer intimacy with the art; and talking about its details, whether in actual conversation or merely to oneself, can lead a reader down unexpected imaginative paths. The three actions are entwined: one leads to the other, leads to the other, leads to the other. Even if you think of yourself as more reader than poet, more teacher than reader, participating in all elements of the reading-conversation-writing cycle will help you become a more concentrated and flexible practitioner.

Reading

Anyone who teaches high school or college-level English classes has wrestled with students who are convinced that John Donne, Ben Jonson, Robert Herrick, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, and the rest of the oldsters that clog the front halves of survey anthologies are entirely irrelevant to their own lives. Even if they eventually learn to respect such poets as historical figures, many students—even those who think of themselves as writers—never see them as imaginative peers. This historical disconnect doesn’t just damage students creatively. It also impedes their growth as curious, questing, complex readers. Instead of wading into the mysterious waters of the poem, they skirt the edges, parroting the teacher’s literary tour guide rather than diving after their own treasures.

By means of this book, I hope to coax readers into more adventurous engagements with both canonical and contemporary poetry. Although I focus on poets from various eras, all share modern English as a common language (as opposed to Middle English or...
Anglo-Saxon), and all are accomplished and complex artists. Gender, race, religion, and other such markers have not been primary motivators in my decision about whom to include. Many other books offer such riches, and I encourage you to seek them out. But my purpose is different. My intent is to show that it is possible, even necessary, for us to converse with poets who are historically and aesthetically distinct from ourselves and that they have the power to speak to us as individual human beings and fellow artists.

There are many ways to absorb a poem: by listening, by reading silently, by reading aloud, by memorizing. But in my view, copying out a poem—letter for letter, word for word, comma for comma, line for line—is an essential tool for engaging with poetry. Although memorization is a wonderful way to absorb a poem, it leaves us open to error: for instance, we often misremember words or omit lines. It also allows us to overlook the visual power of a poem: punctuation and capitalization, stanza and line breaks. But when we write down every element of a poem, we come as close as we ever will to living inside another mind as it actively creates a poem. Moreover, copying out a poem forces a reader to slow down and take note of every single detail. This makes it an amazingly useful way to counteract writer’s block, which is often simply the malaise of distraction. Copying presses us to concentrate on the entirety of the poem—not its so-called meaning but its actuality: the bits and pieces of language that accrue to form a work of art.

In the classroom I frequently dictate poems to students so that the class as a whole can experience the sensatation of discovering a poem in this focused, cohesive, mesmerizing way. Master teachers Baron Wormser and David Cappella write persuasively about this approach in *A Surge of Language: Teaching Poetry Day by Day*: “By dictating the poem I can slow time down and get the words into my students’ bodies. Poetry is physical and I want them to experience that physicality. By writing the words down . . . they have to grapple with the physical nature of each word.”

For poets, readers, and teachers who are grappling alone with a poem, copying directly from the page serves a parallel function. So I suggest that, as you read this book, you commit yourself to copying out at least some of the poems I present. If you copy the poem before you read the accompanying chapter, you will be well positioned to follow and extend my conversational gambits in your own idiosyncratic way, whether you are more interested in pursuing these discoveries as a teacher or a reader or hope to use them as impetus for your own poems.

If you are a teacher who is using this book in the classroom, you might ask your students to copy out the poems and turn them in to you. By way of this seemingly innocuous assignment, you both may discover that accurate copying requires considerable concentration and that people who create an exact facsimile of an existing poem are perforce learning a great deal about the subtle power of even the tiniest elements of the language. Not only can this discovery teach us to bring our own poems to life, but the very act of copying out a poem can be a form of homage, even a gift. Picture the look on a student’s face if you were to copy out one of her poems and then return it to her, along with your admiration. In 1904 Rainer Maria Rilke offered such a gift to an aspiring young poet named Franz Kappus. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke wrote:

You see—I have copied your sonnet, because I found that it is lovely and simple and born in the form in which it moves with such quiet decorum. . . . And now I give
you this copy because I know that it is important and full of new experience to come upon a work of one's own again written in a strange hand. Read the lines as though they were someone else's, and you will feel deep within you how much they are your own.

**Conversation**

Most of you know how transporting a class discussion can be. There are moments when the group’s verbal connection seems to lead every participant into new territory. Suddenly, students with different beliefs, ideas, skills, and backgrounds are listening and absorbing each other’s words, not just for the sake of politeness but because those words are leading both the group and the individuals into complex explorations.

In 2010 I hosted an informal online reading group that centered around Shakespeare’s play *The Winter's Tale*. The project began as a sudden, unplanned idea that sprang from a conversation with a friend. Although not everyone who initially expressed interest ended up taking part in the reading group, we did have a core group of participants. One was my twelve-year-old son Paul, who was thrilled about the idea of reading his first Shakespeare play. His friend Conor (also twelve) and Conor’s mother Allison, a social worker, joined the group. Other participants included Donna, who was home with her young daughter and working on her associate’s degree; Ruth, an elementary school teacher; Lucy, an archivist and author with a Ph.D. in history; Sheila and Scott, both high school English teachers; and an anonymous reader.

My first act as facilitator was to toss out handful of discussion questions about the first half of act 1.

1. What word or phrase in this section was most beautiful, or strange, or annoying, or disturbing, or in any other way particularly noteworthy? Why?
2. What surprised you about the characters or their conversation?
3. What confused you about the characters or their conversation?
4. Who’s your favorite character so far, and why?

Following are the responses to those questions, in the order in which they appeared.

**Dawn**

1. I love that phrase “sneaping winds” (scene 2, line 13). I don’t exactly know what “sneaping” means, but it sounds like one of those chilly, pestering breezes that torment onlookers at elementary soccer games in early November.
2. I was most surprised by Hermione’s conversation with Polixenes. Having read this play before, I know that her husband will become wrongly jealous of her relationship with P. But you know, she really does sound kind of flirty here. I’m not excusing Leontes’ future bad behavior. But I’m beginning to see how she allowed it to happen.
3. It took me a while to figure out who Camillo and Archidamus were and how they were connected to Leontes and Polixenes and which person was king of Sicilia and which of Bohemia. I kept having to recheck the cast of characters to sort them all out. I suspect that on stage this would be less confusing than it is on the page.
4. So far my favorite character is “young prince Mamillius,” and he isn’t even on stage
yet. Everyone speaks of him with such affection. He is a “gallant child, one that, indeed, physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh.” I have a weakness for a couple of gallant children myself, which probably accounts for this preference.

Paul
I think it started out slowly but is getting there. I don’t get what the first scene was about but that’s okay. It’s one of those scenes that isn’t rigidly connected to the story.

Lucy
Honestly, my first surprise was that that Winter’s Tale is not Measure for Measure. I had mixed up the two plays in my mind. Because of that, I had to figure out if I had ever read the play and skimmed the whole play online in some early edition. As a result, I can’t comment on anything in particular except for my utter surprise at how vicious the play is. As I think on that, I think about the power of jealousy especially in the face of unfaithfulness to take over your whole brain and body. I never took such dire steps as Leontes, but I sure did some pretty crazy things when caught up in those feelings.
The first scene just confused me. I tried reading it out loud, but the puns and malapropisms without any context were too hard. I like it better when these kind of scenes show up later in his plays. If I was directing the play, I would have cut from that section.

Dawn
I’ve never researched this issue, but I’ve often wondered if the first scenes of many Shakespeare plays were mostly a chance for Globe audiences to finish up their fistfights, etc., and settle down to start watching the show.

Ruth
I agree with Lucy; the first scene just confused me too. By scene 2, I was getting into the language and not really worrying if I “got” everything or not and found that I had a better grip on the story. It has been way too long since I’ve read any Shakespeare.
1. I really like scene 2, line 47 when Hermione says, “Verily you put me off with limber vows; but I, though you would seek to unsphere the stars with oaths, Should yet say, ‘Sir, no going.’”
2. Dawn, Hermione does sound flirty. Perhaps she is one of those women whom I sometimes envy: they just seem to know how to flatter their audience. I do like her and have always liked that name too. I had a doll named Hermione.
3. Paul, that’s a good point about scene 1 not being rigidly connected.

Scott
“Finish up their fistfights”! lol
1. I like the line “Thou wants a rough pash and the shoots that I have” (1.2.128). I mean who doesn’t want a rough pash?
2. I’m a little surprised at the extent of Hermione’s efforts to keep Polixenes around. Somewhere in that exchange her requests that he stay cross the line from a polite expression of affection into something else. For his part, Polix has been gifted with a
quick wit and seems to be showing a lot of restraint, like Shakespeare doesn’t want him
to be held to blame for anything that happens between the happy couple later. I can’t
decide if that makes him dull straw man of a character or not.
3. I kept having to re-read the lines around 1.2.23–27 “were in your love a whip to
me.” I get the point, but I’m not sure how it gets there.
4. My favorite is Archidamus, though he doesn’t really say anything to distinguish
himself yet. He just strikes me as maybe one of the reasonable minds who is going to be
just enough removed from the drama to be able to deliver some nice quips about it. If
he doesn’t, I’ll be disappointed.

Sheila
Re the issue of Leontes’ jealousy: Do you think that he is jealous of Hermione’s ability
to attract Polixenes’ attention, to convince him to stay when his childhood friend
Leontes cannot? I thought it was no accident that L. becomes jealous after Hermione
sweet-talks P., esp. after how the two kings have been talking about how close they
were when they were younger.

Anonymous
1. I had a tussle with “affection” until I realized that it meant any disposition or
mood. Its repetition in the first two scenes makes me think it may be a key word for
understanding the play. We shall see.
2, 3. To soon to tell. I am too busy retuning my eye and ear to Elizabethan English.
4. Without a doubt, so far, it’s Archidamus. His wisecracking at the end of the first
scene caught my sense of humor.

Donna
The language is very hard for me to understand although I think I am able to pick up
some of the important stuff and just shrug off the rest for now.
The line that really made an impression on me was when Hermione says, “one good
deed dying tongueless slaughters a thousand waiting upon that.” I’m not exactly sure
what the context was that she said that but it really made sense to me in that I try really
hard to do good things that make a difference.
It is interesting to read what other people think of the play. Thanks for doing this. I
don’t think I would have attempted any more Shakespeare on my own!
Just a little funny note about the name “Hermione.” When I substituted in fifth grade a
long time ago the teacher was reading Harry Potter out loud to the class. The kids got on
my case about how I pronounced Hermione. They were convinced that I was saying it
wrong. When I asked how it should be pronounced, I was told that it was HER-MEE-OWN-
EE-OWN. I still can’t help but chuckle every time I see the name “Hermione.”

Allison and Conor
Conor and I just finally got around to reading this together; we read it aloud, and
Conor wanted to note that he really enjoyed the word “verily.” I liked the image of
Polixenes and Leontes as “twinn’d lambs that did frisk I’ the sun, And bleat the one at
the other.” I was surprised that we both seemed to be able to follow what was going on
fairly well, though we also found that the first scene seems sort of unnecessary and even unclear.

I have to jump in and defend Hermione here; I really did not feel that she was overly flirty with Polixenes. Leontes called her “tongue-tied” and asked her to intervene when he was failing to convince Polixenes to stay, and it seemed to me that there was only a short time when she was focused on addressing him alone; for most of the scene she is eliciting from him memories of his boyhood with her husband, and then teasing Leontes about his assertion that this was one of the two greatest times she ever spoke. However, I’ve never seen or read this play before, so I don’t know if this becomes part of a pattern of Hermione flirting or behaving suspiciously with Polixenes.

Lucy

If anyone else is interested in Shakespeare as a live drama, I just found an interesting version of Winter’s Tale called the Viola Allen Acting Version from 1905 on Google Books. It splits up the play differently and has some nice “production notes” and pretty pictures of Viola Allen (I don’t know who she was except I bet a famous actress).

It’s been almost four years since this exchange about The Winter’s Tale first appeared on my blog. Nonetheless, I still shiver with pleasure at the accidental, improvisational beauty of this conversation. It combines so many different kinds of reactions—wonder, worry, curiosity, opinion, delight, memory—and all work to expand confidence, emotional connection, intellectual growth, and civil engagement. One person’s thoughts jumpstart another person’s thoughts. Readers agree and disagree. They draw connections from their personal lives. They branch into further research. They puzzle over crabbed bits of language. They consider the complexities of character. They honestly admit confusion.

At the same time, no one out-talks anyone else. No one behaves as if she has privileged, superior knowledge. No one imposes a viewpoint or hijacks the topic under discussion. Older readers do not patronize younger readers. Younger readers do not sneer at older readers.

Finally, no one loses focus, gets flippant, or digresses into vagaries. This is an intellectual conversation. People are thinking hard. They are taking risks when they articulate their perceptions and ideas. They force themselves to stay concentrated on the work at hand.

Most of you know that this kind of intense civil engagement is not an everyday event. A teacher may weaken the discussion by focusing too much on her own preconceived answers. Conversely, she may not offer enough structural guidance so that participant remarks become scattered and irrelevant. Self-confident chatterboxes may squelch diffident participants. Small groups may align themselves according to gender, age, or experience. Debates may descend into quarreling.

Despite these challenges, productive conversation is a crucial element of collegial growth and discovery. Too often, we develop the habit of distrusting our own curiosity about a work of literature because, long ago, a teacher or a classmate dismissed or ignored our observations. Such injuries can fester for a lifetime. But the opposite is also true: a challenging, stimulating group discussion can give us the courage to continue our own private conversation with a work of literature.
Even though writing is a solitary business, the driving force behind it is a longing to communicate with our own kind. Writers and readers play both sides of the street. They move back and forth, demanding at one moment isolation, at another connection. As Gretel Ehrlich writes, “A writer makes a pact with loneliness. It is her, or his, beach on which waves of desire, wild mind, speculation break. In my work, in my life, I am always moving toward and away from aloneness. To write is to refuse to cover up the rawness of being alive, of facing death.” Within that aloneness comes, now and again, the grace of a conversation—with a poem, with a forest, with a circle of readers, with another burning, lonely mind.

**Writing**

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser prefers to use the word *witness* rather than *reader* or *listener* because it “includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence.”

The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self. These three terms of relationship—poet, poem, and witness—are none of them static. We are changing, living beings experiencing the inner change of poetry.

Reading, conversation, and writing are bound to one another. What we read not only changes us but presses us, in Rukeyser’s terms, to take “responsibility” for “giving evidence” of that change. For an analogy, think of how listening intensely to music can press a songwriter to create her own work. Yes, the listener is acquiring information about song craft and construction. But she’s also drawing the sounds and emotional resonance into her inner self. Her subsequent need to write her own music is driven by the “climate of excitement and revelation” that creates her “inner change.”

Philip Levine describes this sensation in his essay “The Poet in New York in Detroit”:

I had known García Lorca only as the author of the “gypsy poems,” a writer of lovely, exotic poems that meant little to me. But now one Saturday afternoon became a miracle as I stood in the stacks of the Wayne University library, my hands trembling, and read my life in his words. How had this strange young Andalusian, later murdered by his countrymen, come to understand my life, how had he mastered the language of my rage? This poet of grace and “deep song” had somehow caught my emotions in a way I never had, and suddenly he opened a door for me to a way of speaking about my life. I accepted his gift. That’s what they give us, the humble workers in the field of poetry, these amazingly inspired geniuses, gifts that change our lives.

So it’s important, whether you’re in the classroom or working alone at home, to make sure that your forays into writing aren’t limited to detached poetry prompts. By linking creative writing directly to creative yet focused reading, you and your students may
be lucky enough to discover that “suddenly [a poet] opened a door for me to a way of speaking about my life.”

I’m sure you’ve met more than one would-be poet who writes reams of verse but never bothers to read books. Often these writers seem to believe that a poem is nothing more than a blurt of undigested feeling, a hysterical diary entry broken randomly into lines. Detached poetry prompts do nothing to solve this attitude. Merely they offer a formula. Many, for instance, function as templates (“Write a four-syllable first line, a five-syllable second line, a six-syllable third line”). Others are simply story starters (“Imagine you’ve found a locket in a leaf pile”). Even though they induce writing, they don’t draw the writer into the larger conversation of poetry—what Jorge Luis Borges calls “the tale wherein all the voices of mankind might be found.”

Just as importantly, detached writing prompts don’t inspire revision. When you’ve fulfilled the instructions of the prompt, you’ve finished the poem. Revision becomes a chore, an imposition, not a natural stage of writing. But when you write within the reading-conversation-writing cycle, you’re always returning to poetry: perhaps rereading a poem, perhaps engaging with a very different one. The cycle ignites fresh conversations, and the poet strives to capture her quickened emotions and ideas in new approaches to a draft. Like Borges, she aspires: “Sometimes I am courageous and hopeful enough to think that it may be true—that though all men write in time, are involved in circumstances and accidents and failures of time, somehow things of eternal beauty may be achieved.”

Thinking Critically about Poetry

“Criticism,” according to M. H. Abrams, “is the study concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating works of literature.” Many of us tend to think of criticism as a scholarly or academic endeavor rather than an active element of our creative growth. But for writers such as Woolf, Auden, Miłosz, and many others, personal essays were a way for them to sort out the historical, intellectual, and emotional threads that bound them to their art.

Even writers without a formal commitment to criticism have sought outlets for this kind of thought. In his personal letters, Keats discussed books, reactions, epiphanies, and fears. As much as anything, those letters were messages to himself—a means to stand back from his work and take stock of what he had and hadn’t learned.

If you’re a teacher, you’re already working hard to promote your students’ critical-thinking skills. Often these assignments involve literary research and analysis. But do you ask students to think critically about their own creative work? About their own subjective reactions to what they have read? If you’re a poet working independently, do you push yourself to record your own intellectual quests and confusions?

In The Life of Poetry, Rukeyser asks, “What does [a poem] invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response.” That total response, she argues, includes both the emotions and the intellect, which are not separate routes but lead naturally from one to the other.

In this book, I’ve tried to demonstrate the organic relationship between emotional and intellectual reactions to poetry. To do so, I’ve organized the chapters into three sections, all of which take into account the reading-conversation-writing cycle while also pushing you to think critically about your own place in poetry. The first section, “Watching a Poet
Make a Poem," addresses specific elements of poetic language or structure. The second, “Writing about Poets and Poetry,” centers on writing personal literary essays about poetry. Finally, the third, “Meeting a Poem in Its Context,” focuses on the way in which poets choose to combine individual poems into a larger work of art. The book concludes with an afterword that takes up the subject of publication, always a fraught question for writers. I also offer a brief list of books that, over the years, have become important personal resources. My hope is that both the details and the structure of The Conversation will be useful guides as you, too, forge your own path into teaching or writing.

But most of all I hope you commit yourself to reading poems. As Rukeyser reminds us,

It is a great thing to hear the words of those who are worthy to speak them. It is a great thing to learn this in oneself. . . . It is a great thing to laugh with pleasure and delight, as children laugh; it is a great thing to say to our wordless, we will speak, in self-knowledge, in faith, at a beginning-place of many beginnings, in which none of these means is enough in itself, since each is an index to a beginning of the single spirit or of the world; it is a great thing to come to the unbegun places of our living and to say: Now we will find the words.16

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Watching a Poet Make a Poem