

Sharing a Poem with Audience Participation
by Eric Ode

Here's a fun poetry activity which, although not immediately a writing activity, certainly encourages student writing. It also requires your students to be active listeners and creative participants. Not such a bad thing!

Begin by selecting a longer story-telling poem you'd like to share with your students. Some good examples include:

"Ollie's Escape" by Dave Crawley (*If Kids Ruled the School*)

"Hey, Ma, Something's Under My Bed" by Joan Horton (*Miles of Smiles and Dinner with Dracula*)

"Jessica Jean" by Kenn Nesbitt (*When the Teacher Isn't Looking*)

"Watermelon Bird" by Eric Ode (*Rolling in the Aisles*).

I've used this activity many times with my poem "Mulligan Martinson Marley McGraw." (*Tall Tales of the Wild West - And a Few Short Ones*, Eric Ode, to be published 2007) Many other poems in this upcoming release will work well, too. Here's the poem.

MULLIGAN MARTINSON MARLEY McGRAW

The tiniest cowboy the world ever saw
was Mulligan Martinson Marley McGraw
who bathed in a teacup and rode on a rat
and wore him a thimble instead of a hat.

Now Mulligan fancied a life on the range,
but folks in the town, they considered him strange.
They called him a dreamer, a fool, and a clown.
"You're simply too small," said the people in town.

"You can't brand a steer or deliver a calf.
You can't mend a fence," said the folks with a laugh.
They sneered at the way he would yodel and sing.
They scoffed at the lasso he made out of string.

But Mulligan said, as he stuck out his chin,
"A winner don't quit, and a quitter don't win.
You say what you will. I don't care about that.
A cowboy is more than the size of his hat."

And so life continued, as life often does,
till early one morning the streets were abuzz,
and people, they panicked from up hill to down
with news that the prairie dogs moved into town.

They came without warning, three-thousand or more,
invading the homes and the general store.
They slipped behind saddles. They hid behind suits.
They squeezed into boxes and barrels and boots.

They slept under tables. They crept under chairs.
They filled all the benches and stables and stairs.
And no one in town seemed to know how to cope.
Those critters were simply too tiny to rope.

The sheriff then shouted, "We'll seek and we'll search.

We'll clean out the barns and the school and the church.
We'll round up them varmints. We'll get the job done!"
The folks tried their darndest and caught not a one.

But Mulligan Martinson said with a grin,
"A winner don't quit, and a quitter don't win.
As sure as a hound dog is riddled with fleas,
I'll round up them critters as quick as you please."

The townspeople chuckled but said not a word
as Mulligan left for that prairie dog herd.
His boots in the stirrups. His string at his side,
he guided that rat through the streets far and wide.

He rode through the houses, the bank, and the jail,
and lassoed them dogs by the tip of the tail.
Then one to the next, like the cars of a train,
he built him a seven mile prairie dog chain.

The people applauded. They shouted and cheered
as, into the sunset, that herd disappeared.
But that was the last that the town ever saw
of Mulligan Martinson Marley McGraw.

The folks like to say that he's still on the plains.
He's guiding that herd with his hands on the reins.
He left us a lesson. No doubt about that.
A cowboy is more than the size of his hat.

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Now select a small handful of response words. These should be important words to the story and should turn up at least a few times. With "Mulligan Martinson Marley McGraw," I use:

Mulligan Martinson Marley McGraw (and any variations on the name)
cowboy
rat
prairie dogs
town
hat

Have the students come up with responses for these key words. The responses might be called out (Yee haw! is a typical response for the key word "cowboy"), acted out (digging motions for "prairie dogs" for instance) or both. Review the key words and responses with your class. Then as you read the poem to the students, pause at each key word to allow the students to respond. Immediately they've gone from being passive listeners to active listeners.

Now that your students have had the opportunity to take part in a few participation readings, allow them to write their own stories, either in poetic form or in prose, and share these new stories in the same way. Have fun!

- Eric Ode