



## **“It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”: The 2006 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry**

**Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., JonArno Lawson,  
and Richard Flynn**

### **Winner:**

Wynton Marsalis. *Jazz A·B·Z: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits*. Illus. Paul Rogers. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2005.

### **Honor Books:**

Marilyn Nelson. *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Illus. Philippe Lardy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Naomi Shihab Nye. *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls*. Illus. Terre Maher. New York: Greenwillow, 2005.

Shel Silverstein. *Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

This year’s award winner, *Jazz A·B·Z*, doesn’t quote the Duke Ellington number that gives this essay its title, but Wynton Marsalis’s Ellington poem swings, as do the rest of the poems in this outstanding collection (fig.1). In the Ellington poem, Marsalis experiments with meter, replicating time signature shifts, “Eager to exclaim the joy of jazz” (n.p.). If, in the words of Guy Debord, poetry is “liberated language, language recovering its richness, language which breaks its rigid significations and simultaneously embraces words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, facts, acts” (115), then Marsalis’s musical tour de force and the other fine and playful honor books we discuss here are certainly excellent poetry.



**Figure 1.** *Jazz A-B-Z: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits.* Illustrations Copyright 2005 Paul Rogers. Text Copyright 2005 Wynton Marsalis. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Inc., Cambridge, MA.

Children's poetry may be a special subset of poetry, but it is, nevertheless, poetry—though perhaps more immediately connected to commerce than its adult counterparts. No one expects a collection of adult poetry to make much money, but presumably when HarperCollins releases a posthumous collection of poetry by Shel Silverstein, someone is thinking of it as a surefire moneymaker. While we were initially suspicious that Marsalis's book might be another of those recent dreadful celebrity titles, once we opened the book and read the poetry and savored Paul Rogers's dynamic illustrations, we were hooked. Sifting through the piles of this year's books, the bad and indifferent threatened to overwhelm us. We were, it could be said, on the point of despair. But we are proud that the books we've selected to recognize as this year's most accomplished volumes of

children's poetry share a concern with language as *matter*: the sounds, the grammatical textures, and the look of language. Unlike the bad and indifferent books, all the shortlisted collections recognize the serious nature of play. And though we have reservations about the interplay between text and pictures in at least one of our honor books, there is no doubt that our winner displays playfulness not only in its superior poetic language, but also in its design.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, but we were—delightfully surprised—to find that Marsalis's musical expertise extends to his verbal poetic text. Among this year's submissions, another book about music, Quincy Troupe's *Little Stevie Wonder* does just about everything wrong, despite the fact that Troupe is a notable poet for adults. Garishly and busily illustrated, it is a text that we can't distinguish from prose—and relatively run-of-the-mill prose at that. If it weren't packaged with a CD containing a couple of Stevie Wonder tunes, it would have nothing to recommend it. A lukewarm response by Warner, an eight-year-old reviewer writing in *Black Issues Book Review* sums up our reaction: "I am now eight years old and learning to play the piano and enjoyed discovering what Little Stevie Wonder could do at my age, but I enjoyed listening to the CD more than the book" ("Out of the Mouths" 41). Smart kid.

Newbery Award winning author Sharon Creech also has a book of poetry out this year, *Who's That Baby? New Baby Songs*. It too disappoints. Even the accompanying illustrations by the usually excellent David Diaz fall short of expectations, a bit too sweet, too cute, much like the poems, which try so hard to be sweet, they become cloying:

A tisket, a tasket  
a baby in the basket!

I'm so snug  
and I'm so warm  
I'm so cute  
I'm just born! (n.p.)

A more promising poem, "Leaky Baby," is, like many of the poems in the collection, impossibly narrated from the baby's point of view. Unlike the others, however, it promises to address the dark—and certainly less cute—side of baby rearing. Yet it somehow makes even "Diapers leaking / everywhere" sound precious (n.p.). Admittedly, this is some accomplishment, but it doesn't make for compelling poetry. One expects better from Creech, but at least she can write verse—though perhaps *Love That Dog* and even the highly poetic novel *Walk Two Moons* demonstrate this better knowledge.

This year we received a large number of books that either could have been done better in prose or were indistinguishable from prose. For instance, we see no reason that *Heroes and She-roses*, by J. Patrick Lewis, featuring poems that celebrate “the valiant and the brave. / Those simple people known by / Two simple words: They gave” (n.p.), should be written in verse, if the verse is of this dubious quality. We are all for celebrating what’s heroic, but is this the way to do it? This mundane offering set JonArno wondering about a companion volume dealing with the devilish and the dubious, hammering home how some people have set very bad examples for us to follow, prompting him to compose this parody:

RUSSIA’S MONSTER Joseph Stalin, (1879–1953)

Did you think this would be about Ivan the terrible?  
Well it’s not—  
Think of someone a bit more unbearable:

When Stalin’s moustache trembled  
A continent would shake  
For 30 years he kept a hundred million souls awake

He hated everybody – everybody hated him  
Life under bloody Uncle Joe  
Was really pretty grim

But nowadays some miss him, I’m thinking of the niece  
Of a one-time snitch and operative  
Of Kiev’s secret police

She’s actually sort of pretty . . .  
But wait, that’s not my point. My point is Uncle Joe was BAD.  
He ruled too long—and what a pity.

We also had strong objections to the apparently new genre of writing instruction manuals masquerading as collections of poems. Some are quite good, like, for instance, Paul Janeczko and Chris Raschka’s *A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms*, which has the virtue of placing “children’s” poetry alongside “adult” poetry. Similar in design to their 2001 effort *A Poke in the I: A Collection of Concrete Poems* (which cleverly demonstrates the oft-ignored parallels between the world of the avant-garde and that of children’s literature), *A Kick in the Head* acts as a sequel of sorts, clearly explaining—and defending—the value of prescriptive poetic form.

We are, however, dismayed at anthologies in which the reading of poetry takes a back seat to writing pedagogy for children. At its worst, this genre allows for such abominations as the egotistical and incompetent *A Writ-*

*ing Kind of Day: Poems for Young Poets*, by Ralph Fletcher, a third rate children's poet who has written some very bad writing instruction books for young people. Fletcher outdoes himself with this one, presenting a collection of poetic models for the young, all *written by himself!* We will spare you excerpts from Fletcher's book. Suffice it to say that we found better poems in *A School Year of Poems: 180 Favorites from Highlights* (the magazine we remember fondly from the dentist's office), selected and annotated with teaching ideas by Walter B. Barbe, PhD.

Ultimately we determined that while anthologies are useful and necessary, we wished to honor the accomplishments of single-author collections, all things being equal. But two anthologies this year do deserve special mention. *I Just Hope It's Lethal: Poems of Sadness, Madness, & Joy*, edited by Liz Rosenberg and Deena November, transcends its premise (poetry for young people coping with mood disorders as well as ordinary adolescent growing pains) by reframing the poems selected in fruitful and unexpected ways. Even though a lot of the poems have been anthologized before, the editors' deft selections and arrangement make us see them anew: T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock" comes after Dorothy Parker's "Autumn Valentine"; an excerpt from Theseus's satiric comment on young love from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact," precedes June Jordan's "Wasted" and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." There is playfulness and humor in this collection of poems about depression, and that is no mean feat.

Likewise, Michael Rosen's anthology *A Spider Bought a Bicycle and Other Poems for Young Children* (originally published in 1987, but appearing for the first time in the United States in 2005) is a beautifully designed and well-selected anthology with a healthy selection of appealing poems from anonymous folk poetry to that by Walt Whitman and Kevin Wright. There are cozily playful poems such as Siv Widerberg's "It's Very Nice":

lying in Mama's bed  
feeling  
her soft breast  
'gainst your hand  
or your ear (107)

to irreverently playful poems such as the nursery rhyme parody "London Bridge is falling down / my hairy baby" (61). Rosen's anthology is genuine, especially when placed alongside such forgettable volumes such as Lee Bennett Hopkins's *Oh, No! Where Are My Pants? And Other Disasters: Poems*. While we like the old-fashioned look of the book and appreciate the lightly gross good humor of *Oh, No!* (particularly the title poem), it

seems a shame that a book with so few poems doesn't have more of the quality of Madeleine Comora's "Winter Rabbit," a highpoint of the slim collection.

If awards like this serve partially to draw attention to exceptional books that may otherwise be overlooked, you may wonder why we named Shel Silverstein's posthumous collection *Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook* an honor book. Few collections of poetry—even children's poetry, which invariably sells much better than its adult counterpart—can look forward to the success guaranteed simply by the spare, black and white dust jackets that adorn Silverstein's children's books. Yet there is a reason for Silverstein's success, as *Runny Babbit* confirms. Silverstein's simple, yet bold line drawings come as a relief from the often gaudy art work shouting from the covers of most of the books we received this year. Author and illustrator, Silverstein obviously felt no need to sugarcoat his words with flashy collage or ostentatious color. *Runny Babbit* is all new work, and both the drawings and the poetry are vintage Shel. In terms of the marriage of text and illustration, it is about the best we've seen, excepting, perhaps, Paul Rogers' fine work on our winner, Marsalis's *Jazz A·B·Z*. As its title suggests, *Runny Babbit* is a collection of spoonerisms, a venerable comic technique in which the initial sounds of two words are exchanged. If you plow through the book in one sitting, this technique can grow tiresome, much in the way that a parent might tire of her children who insist on speaking Pig Latin throughout an entire, eight hour car ride. At the same time, most of the poems are better, even when they're de-spoonerized, than many of the poems in this year's sample. Taken in small doses, however, the poems are delightfully energetic and often subversive little gems. If there were more children's poetry books like Shel's children, like dear old Runny Babbit, might choose to read more. Instead, as we find out in "Runny's Heading Rabbits," when he heads off to the library, "guess which [type of book] he took— / A bience scook? A boetry pook? / Oh, no—a *bomic cook!*" (43). Of course he did.

The spoonerisms in *Runny Babbit* allow Silverstein to push the limits of what is deemed acceptable in children's poetry. For example, in "The Funny Bamily," he achieves textures of meaning unavailable in its unadulterated form: unchanged, the poem is sweet—too sweet, one would think—but mix up the letters and the family is "funny," and the usually respected parents become caricatures of common stereotypes, "a dummy and a mad" (6). Is angry (or insane?) father capable of a slap or two? Or perhaps the mother, upon being called a dummy? Or even the sisters, who, spoonerized, suggest the rather unflattering image of blisters ("two bristers")? Why else, we wonder, would this funny family be called a

“Bamily” (6): “Calling *me* a dummy, are you?” we imagine the mother exclaiming before the inevitable *Bam!* Another poem implies that our hero, Runny Babbit, might be “a *ranging hound*” (maybe Runny’s a March Hare?) capable of unspecified sins:

Toe Jurtle said, “What are you doin’  
So high agrove the bound?”  
Runny Babbit sinned and graid,  
“Oh, I’m just *rangin’ hound.*” (10)

And yet another relates the various birthday games in which Runny Babbit and his cohorts participate (there’s a “gillion” of them): In addition to the evocative “Fo Gish, Rin Gummy and Mold Aid,” we have the violent sounding “Hing of the Kill,” and the more scatological “Mind the Fonkey” and “Beek-a-Poo”—the latter sounding rather fonky indeed (64). Throughout *Runny Babbit*, the language play not only allows for such imaginative interaction, it demands it.

Our next honor book, Naomi Shihab Nye’s *A Maze Me*, is a fine collection, one that begins with an introduction that recalls Randall Jarrell’s famous lines from “The Lost World,” where he writes:

The phone rings: Mrs. Mercer wonders if I’d care  
To go to the library. That would be ideal,  
I say when Mama lets me. I comb my hair  
And find the four books I have out: *The Food  
of the Gods* was the best. Liking the world where  
The children eat, and grow giant and good,  
I swear as I’ve often sworn: “*I’ll never forget  
What it’s like, when I’ve grown up.*” (CP 286)

Similarly, Nye, eyeing the “faces of all fretful, workaholic parents,” thinks, in the voice of her childhood, “*Adulthood is cluttered and pathetic, I will never forget*” (2). This refusal to forget is at the heart of *A Maze Me*; it is about remembering one’s childhood in *language*, in poetry. After all, she writes, “You will feel your thinking springing up and layering inside your huge mind a little differently. Your thinking will befriend you. Words will befriend you” (7). Admittedly, we are a panel of three men; however, we don’t quite understand why someone thought it was necessary to have “Poems for Girls” as a subtitle for this otherwise well-titled collection. Nowhere in the poems is it clear why male readers should be excluded from delighting in them—we certainly did—nor is it clear why a young man might not benefit from this candid look into girlhood life.

Nye conveys an atmosphere of constant discovery and quiet astonishment in her writing. We sense that not only do her observations surprise

her, but also that she's able to find just the right words to transmit those observations. Some of the finest poems are about her family. "Ellipse," for example, begins:

My father has a parenthesis  
on either side of his mouth.  
His new words  
live inside his old words. (22)

Besides evocatively capturing the literal image of lines around her father's mouth, this magnificent set of lines raises many questions: Does she mean that the sense of his new words is limited by, or further clarifies, things he's said in the past (the word "parenthesis" contains the word "parent" and "thesis")? Or is she implying that parents can never escape the lifelong scrutiny to which their children subject their words and actions? These are lines to make you think, to make you imagine.

"Supple Cord" is a poem about the narrator's relationship with her brother. They slept in the same room and after the lights were out they would tug a cord they kept connected between their beds to reassure each other; after he falls asleep:

I missed him terribly,  
though I could hear his even breath  
and we had such long and separate lives  
ahead. (25)

Nye doesn't stoop to the usual dumbed-down, one-dimensional tone you find in most children's poetry books, where brothers and sisters are only able to tease and torment each other. "Supple Cord" is a poem of intensely felt love and longing for her brother, an uncomplicated and keenly felt nostalgia for the reassurance they offered each other as children. It's a poem many adults and children will discover with a sense of identification and relief.

The poems fall down a bit towards the end; "To My Texas Handbook," for instance, could have been omitted without weakening and perhaps bettering the collection. But Nye knows what a poem is, and *A Maze Me* shows a remarkable consistency in the quality of what she offers, especially, as we've suggested, in contrast to most of the other books we read.

Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmett Till* is a stunningly beautiful book-length poem, and it is certainly the most accomplished poetry we've read this year. After her 2004 *Fortune's Bones*, which won last year's award, we were excited that this heroic crown of sonnets commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the lynching of the fourteen-year-old Till in Money, Mississippi was being made into a book for young people.

The young deserve what is too often denied them: serious poetry on serious subjects. And Nelson's poem, we knew from reading it when it was published in the Hartford *Courant*, has incredible power. This power lies largely in its unflinching honesty in connecting the racist violence of 1955 to our contemporary fear of the Other in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

Like his gouged eye, which watched boots kick his face  
 we must bear witness to atrocity.  
 But we are whole: We can speak what we see.  
 People may disappear, leaving no trace,  
 unless we stand before the populace,  
 orators denouncing the slavery  
 to fear. For the lynchers feared the lynchee,  
 what he might do, being of another race,  
 a great unknown. (n.p.)

Nelson's speaker imagines placing Emmett Till in a parallel universe, invoking the concept from physics of a wormhole, "a tunnel in the geometry of space-time, postulated to connect different parts of the universe or to enable time travel" (notes, n.p.) For readers, this time travel emphasizes that the story of the Till murder isn't something that happened in some now-transcended racist past. The speaker's wish for a parallel reality for Emmett Till is also a wish for a parallel reality in the present, for:

. . . a nice, safe universe,  
 not like this one. A universe where you'd  
 surpass your mother's dreams. But parallel  
 realities may have terrorists, too.  
 Evil multiplies to infinitude,  
 like mirrors facing each other in hell.  
 You were a wormhole history passed through,  
 transformed by the memory of your victimhood. (n.p.)

Those "parallel / realities," the poem makes clear, include especially our current reality—fifty years later.

When the poem was published in the *Courant*—a "family" newspaper—it was illustrated with documentary photographs, including the famous picture of Till's mutilated body lying in the open coffin Mamie Till insisted on so the world would see what had happened to her boy. Frank nonfiction accounts of the Till lynching have been published for young people, such as Chris Crowe's excellent *Getting Away with Murder*. Whatever possessed the editors at Houghton Mifflin, then, to publish Nelson's great poem as a picture book? Philippe Lardy's illustrations are a cop-out. They are so garish and busy that they often obscure or detract

from Nelson's text. Compounding this ill-conceived and, in our opinion, cowardly publishing decision—it is supremely condescending to think that young people need to be spared the actual historical images—the layout and typography are also distracting and condescending. The first line of each sonnet is set in a very busy and ugly bolded typeface as if it were a title, and this typeface is used for the first letter of each line in the concluding acrostic sonnet, presumably because the book's designers think children are idiots.

Last year, the judges praised the interaction of text and illustration in *Fortune's Bones*, which was published by the independent Front Street books. We suspect that the less adventurous practices of the mainstream house Houghton Mifflin have conspired to destroy—nearly—a major poem. It is a testament to the power of Nelson's verse that they have not succeeded. The reason Nelson's excellent poetry did not win again this year lies in this unfortunate marriage of image and text, of the book's design and the content so designed. Of course, this marriage is an arranged marriage—a marriage of convenience not rooted in love, but in economics, in the desire for a safe, saleable product. It's a shame.

There's nothing shameful, however, in Marsalis's *Jazz A·B·Z*, which, in addition to being “an A to Z collection of jazz portraits” (as the subtitle proclaims) is also an ABC of poetic form, each carefully selected to match the jazz icon with which it is paired. Marsalis chose the poetic forms himself, and, in collaboration with his editor, developed the clear and never condescending explanatory notes. Included are standard forms such as the sonnet, ode, pantoum, and the limerick, and also novel forms such as “performance poem” and the calligram. Additionally, Marsalis offers us the “insult poem” (though we wish he'd called it “the dozens”). His poem for “*King Oliver, reigning monarch of the Crescent City corner*” is a welcome addition to the world of children's poetry, providing playground ammunition to the clever child who memorizes lines such as these: “You knuckle-headed, knock-kneed, / careless, kindergarten klutz,” or:

You have the ambitions of a knight  
 but the talents of a kidney. The roar of a lion but the bite of a  
 kitten. You were keeper of the flame when it became a smoking  
 wick. The doctor who birthed you gave you a knee-deep kick.  
 Kidnappers paid your momma's ransom note. She took the  
 cash, then gave you your coat.” (n.p.)

And there's more, much more, where that came from. “Abstract,” for example, is defined in sharply-etched terms:

Like abstract painters, abstract poets concentrate more on their medium  
 than on what they're actually portraying—but instead of colored paint, their

“medium” is sound. The sounds in an abstract poem, [sic] can be as small as phonemes, the shortest units of speech (for example, *s* of *sin* versus *ch* of *chin*) (n.p.).

Each poem in the book is an abecedarian poem, and while the constant alliteration does grow a bit monotonous at times, his “abstract” poem for Ornette Coleman (fig. 2) is a perfect poetic analogue to free-jazz’s melodic play:

Lo O’Leary’s lore lures lonely only loyal oily Olympians. Oh me!  
 Omit my meow mow molten moany moldy me mostly mocha omissions  
 on no noon. New oat known own noun neo noisy no nosy nap nozzle Ooop!  
 Ooh oozy oomph. Ow! Oompah varoom! “Oolong of oodles,” opined Ophelia  
 portly opened pour posted au pair opposite polly-opals pro quo quakkis  
 oak Quintana Roo quoth roccoco cue co-wrote,

“Our round droll groom drools orange o’er trolls to trounce known knolls,”  
 where Homer wrote, “Nor ornament, nor orthodoxy, nor ornithology.  
 Or-Or-Or-Or-Ornette!!” (n.p.)

In the back of the book there is a wonderfully designed list of twenty-six jazz records: *Ornithology*’s not there, but Bird is (though listed under Charlie Parker). What irony in those last lines uttered by the blind poet, suggesting Charlie Parker—BeBop rebel that he is—has become, for Ornette, an orthodoxy that needs reconsidering (or, less mildly put, “trounce[d]”). As Phil Schaap writes in his note on Coleman, “Free Jazz, perhaps the most renegade of various attempts to free improvisers from the clichés of BeBop’s chord-running solos,” has its roots in “the blues, as well as, surprisingly, Charlie Parker’s BeBop. However,” Schaap continues:

instead of going back to the work song and the blues, Coleman suggested that the player make the actual sound of the laborers’ anguish—crying on one’s instrument rather than [sic] playing songs about tears. In this he trumped Hard Bop[.] (n.p.)

“Nor ornament, nor orthodoxy, nor ornithology.” Well, maybe a little ornithology.

As you can see, Marsalis doesn’t pull any punches intellectually or poetically. His Miles Davis poem alludes to Davis’s infamous drug use, as well as the “demon / myths” that surrounded him (many promulgated by Davis himself in the memoir he wrote with Quincy Troupe). It also blurs the line between his music and his life:

Motto: *Dough*  
*makes dopes*  
*money drunk.*



**Figure 2.** *Jazz A·B·Z: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits.* Illustrations Copyright 2005 Paul Rogers. Text Copyright 2005 Wynton Marsalis. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Inc., Cambridge, MA.

Muted drama  
Mixes Delta  
moans, demon  
myths, dummy  
media, drums,  
magic, Dixie  
mumbo, droll  
Monks, Dizzy,  
me-too. (n.p.)

The “muted drama” connotes his yearning for privacy and the dramas produced by his signature muted horn. “[D]roll / Monks, Dizzy, me-too” certainly recalls Davis’s desire for fame, to be part of the pantheon: “me-too,” he (and maybe Marsalis?) asks—or insists.

John Coltrane's piece moves from Coltrane's "country boy" roots to his "cosmic cubist counterpoint." The poem's words become lyrics to Coltrane's later musical excursions—found on albums like *Stellar Regions*—rising on the "incomprehensible crescendoing of cymbals, / ceaseless chaos, crisscrossed columns of / sonic calculus, and a stormy sea of collective / concerns." No Pollyanna, Marsalis knows that this kind of poetry—just like Coltrane's final compositions, may very well "chase the crazy crowd away!" but Marsalis doesn't seem to care, letting his language take him where it will.

In case anyone might worry that his language has taken him somewhere children won't be able to follow, it should be of interest that *Jazz A-B-Z* has not only been "scholar tested" by the judges but also "child approved": JonArno's five-year-old, Sophie, and two-year-old, Asher, who read many of the entries, have repeatedly asked for re-readings of the "Jazz Band" book: Sophie has taken to singing "Bouncin' with my baby to Basie's Big Time Band" and "Baked beans and barbecue and a big brown bass below" from the poem "Count Basie." (n.p.). Asher is fixated on sassy "Sarah Vaughan," as well as "Nat King Cole," "Fats Waller," but most of all, these two lines, from "Ornette Coleman":

Odious ode! Dough-dee-doeed a doughty yodel! oh-oh! oy!  
Oedipus so easy eats eons, eels a week, eel! eel! eel! awful. (n.p.)

These lines get a big laugh every time. In fact, Asher sometimes complains when JonArno moves on in the poems, demanding that the winning lines be read again and again.

That Marsalis managed to do so much so well in one book while some publishing houses managed to avoid putting out even a few good lines in a whole stack of new collections, should give many publishers and writers pause. Marsalis's lines in "King Oliver" double as a fitting description of the judge's trek though the books published this year as children's poetry: "I traveled from the top of Kilimanjaro to the bottom of Kalamazoo, / seeking any anyone half as sad as you. Kept on trying, if you only knew, / then came across a crazy kleptomaniac with a store-bought kazoo. / Even he was better, but not his kangaroo" (n.p.)

Marsalis makes us feel something, makes us want to tap our feet, and makes us imagine things we've never thought before; as we read, we can't help wondering "How does he make it happen?" This is as it should be—poetry books shouldn't be shabbily-disguised instruction manuals—they should make us curious. When we're curious, we explore. When we start exploring, there's no knowing where we'll end up. Marsalis reminds us with this book, that jazz, more than being just a collection of classic records by great artists, is an art with an implicit credo of improvisation

and adventure. We can only hope that the virtues of *Jazz A·B·Z* inspire other writers and publishers to proceed with the same sense of serious fun, and to take the same kinds of hopeful and thought-provoking risks. In the end it is Marsalis—a horn player, a jazz man, a member of the growing ranks of celebrity writers—who can honestly say, surveying this year’s stacks of books and pointing to his own:

This is why I’m the King and you’re all the quarry:  
I seek kingdoms and y’all seek kennels.  
Keep your horn in the case, Knave!

(n.p.)

*Joseph Thomas is a poet and scholar. He lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches contemporary poetry, children’s literature, and creative writing at California State University, Northridge. His book, Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry, will be published as part of Wayne State University’s Landscapes of Childhood series in the fall of 2006.*

*The American edition of JonArno Lawson’s The Man in the Moon-Fixer’s Mask will be published by Wordsong in the fall of 2006. Black Stars in a White Night Sky, his second book of poetry for children, will be published at the same time by Pedlar Press in Canada. He lives in Toronto.*

*Richard Flynn is a Professor of Literature at Georgia Southern University, where he teaches modern and contemporary poetry and children’s literature. He edits the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly.*

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