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Poetry on the Subway: An Interview with Children's Poet John Rice

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This article discusses the relationship between poetry and liminal places and revolves around an interview with the British poet John Rice. Rice is a children's poet and for a time he occupied the post of Glasgow's subway poet-in-residence. The interview explores the educational implications of such a post and examines Rice's views on children's creative writing. This article argues that the writing of poetry is an activity that should be encouraged more enthusiastically in primary and secondary schools given that it offers a number of highly significant benefits for young people.

KEYWORDS poetry, creative writing, liminal places, children's poet

INTRODUCTION

The 2012 International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language conference was held in Glasgow and as part of its pre-conference event the Literature, Media, and Cultural Studies special interest group focused on Glaswegian literature. The Scots makar Liz Lochhead gave a reading of her work and a number of teachers and academics gave presentations on writers who are associated with Glasgow. My contribution consisted of an evaluation of the educational implications of the post of poet-in-residence working for the city's subway system.

Glasgow's public transport system has featured in the poetry of Edwin Morgan ("At Central Station"), Liz Lochhead ("Poem on a Day Trip"), and,

The author is grateful to John Rice for his collaboration. Further information about Rice's work can be found at his website: <http://poetjohnrice.com>

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more recently, Graham Fulton (*Inner Circle*). Other recent initiatives are the poetry performances of Ishbel McFarlane who recites poetry on the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow, and the ClockWorks project which seeks to publish poetry and stories and provide this reading material to the subway's commuters.

The subway's relationship with poetry became somewhat notorious in the 1980s. Morgan was commissioned by the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive to write poster poems for the refurbished subway, however, four of his poems were deemed unsuitable. According to the SPTE Morgan's poems could frighten people from using the subway and in fact they felt the need to issue a reassuring statement: "we must take this opportunity to assure our passengers that as far as we know there are no piranha fish in the Underground."

POETRY OF LIMINAL PLACES

I have been interested in the concept of literature about liminal places ever since I read Alain de Botton's (2002) *The Art of Travel*. In this book the British philosopher writes about the work of Edward Hopper and Charles Baudelaire, whom he describes as poets of liminal places:

There was poetry in this forsaken service station . . . Its appeal made me think of certain other equally and unexpectedly poetic travelling places – airport terminals, harbours, train stations and motels – and the work of a nineteenth-century writer and a twentieth-century painter he had inspired, who had, in different ways, been unusually alive to the power of the liminal travelling place (de Botton 32).

According to de Botton, when we use liminal places we experience "a dreaminess in which we seem to stand outside our normal selves and have access to thoughts and memories that may not arise in more settled circumstances" (56–57), in other words, what can be described as Hopperish moments. For de Botton "Journeys are the midwives of thought" and liminal places are "conducive to internal conversations" (57). The idea that commuters can choose to immerse themselves in the innermost depths of their minds instead of staring blankly at the linoleum was something that warranted further consideration.

SUBWAY POET-IN-RESIDENCE

In 2008 the Scottish Arts Council appointed John Rice as Glasgow's subway poet-in-residence and he held this post until 2010. Rice has published

13 volumes of poetry and even though he is primarily a children's poet and storyteller he also writes poetry for adults. As part of his residency he wrote a number of poems that were printed on posters and postcards; he visited schools, libraries, museums, and other venues, and started the Glasgow schools poetry competition "Bang on Bard!"

Like de Botton (2002), Rice feels that there exists poetry in such a liminal place as the Glasgow subway and he is proud of the fact that by means of his residency commuters were offered the option of reading poetry rather than advertisements, of being distracted from the habitual in a way. My interest in Rice's work was partly motivated by de Botton's idea that when we use public transport we engage in a "jealously focused" (250) attention on reaching our destination; we rarely stop to consider the world around us or even the one humming inside us. Given that Rice is a children's poet, I wanted to explore whether during his residency he sought to challenge this somewhat blinkered perception, especially among young people.

CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Rice feels glad that his work among the school children he accompanied on the subway allowed them to appreciate not only poetry but also what they had previously taken for granted when journeying on "The Clockwork Orange," as the subway is fondly known by Glaswegians. In the words of ten-year-old Claire, "The best part of the trip was riding on the subway. I've been on it lots of times but normally just read a book. This time we looked around and noticed our surroundings. John is very funny and he's inspired me to write more poetry." What I find particularly significant in Rice's work as a subway poet-in-residence is the idea that the reading and writing of poetry is a means by which young people may discover an avenue that allows them to hone their sensory abilities and use language in a creative manner.

Beach and Marshall (1991) acknowledge that there exists "a necessary and organic connection between the reading and writing of poetry that poets understand, students need to experience, and English teachers all too often forget" (392). Cox (1991) sees the two as being "intimately related" (80) and while not demanding the abolition of traditional literary criticism essays he feels that creative writing actually leads to a heightened critical awareness of a writer's style. Mitchell (2002), Dymoke (2003), and Wainwright (2004) suggest that students' knowledge of poetry improves both by reading a wide variety of poems and by being given the opportunity of actually writing poetry. Burdan (2004) concurs and points out that poetry writing is actually of benefit to students when they engage in critical analysis. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) maintain that poetry writing helps students to adopt a writer's stance and notice the use of poetic language and techniques. Schillinger, Meyer, and Vinz (2010) and Bluett (2010) too

appreciate the connection between the reading and writing of poetry and according to the latter the act of reading poetry for writing purposes “makes one engage with the poem in a very immediate and vital way” (46).

As part of my ongoing research aimed at investigating the veracity of the widespread idea that “Poetry doesn’t matter to most people” (Parini 2008, ix), I am examining the attitudes of teachers and students vis-à-vis the reading and writing of poetry. Some consider education as being partly to blame for the loss in cachet that poetry is supposedly experiencing (Edmundson 2004) while others “denounce literature’s privileged role in education as an irrelevant or elitist relic” (Paulson 2001, 2). The views of a children’s poet who regularly comes in contact with teachers and students are thus fundamental.

THE INTERVIEW

When I interviewed Rice I was struck not only by his sense of nostalgia for the work he had done during his residency but also by the passion with which he described his role as a poet and educator. The interview questions were organized around four broad themes: Rice’s residency; young people writing poetry; creative writing and multicultural classes; and poetry and education.

Rice’s Residency

Interviewer: What was your main objective as a subway poet-in-residence?

Rice: I think there were two or three major objectives. One of them was to strengthen the link with the communities that were close to the subway stations, so making strong links with the local people who live around the stations. And as you know it’s a circular line. I’ve worked with many people and organizations there. The other major one was to add to the enjoyment of the experience of the subway or at least the enjoyment of travelling on the subway.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you were successful in making people enjoy poetry while on the subway?

Rice: I think so. We had some very good responses. We had the usual negative responses; you always get that. A lot of people don’t understand it. We did publish a lot of poetry posters. We also published a lot of poetry postcards, which we gave out with the tickets at the ticket office. And people really enjoyed that so we got very nice comments from people, both verbal and written comments, and some really unusual ones. Like there was one poetry poster and the gentleman who read it was getting married. It was a love poem I’d written for my wife and he wanted a copy of it to give to his wife on their wedding day. So we printed it in a small version because it

was very large in the subway. We framed it and gave it to him as a wedding present. So you know it was really nice to do that sort of thing. I think the main reason for its success really is that it was very public and being Scottish myself. I come from Glasgow originally but I haven't lived there for thirty odd years and being a Glaswegian I knew the people and I knew the sort of things they liked so it was helpful like that I think.

Interviewer: Would you say that the residency was mostly successful with children, with students, or was it also successful with adults?

Rice: I think it was very successful with the children because I did go to a lot of different schools and every time we took a school party to the subway—we did this three times—the children rode on the subway and they also wrote. They would go back to class and they would type up their poems and they would do drawings and a lot of that was about getting the students to understand how good public transport can be and the benefits of public transport in this day and age. It was successful with adults too because we had such good feedback about the posters and the postcards. I think that was very worthwhile and worth doing. I wish I could have worked more with them but I didn't really get the chance.

Interviewer: You've mentioned that you've managed to sort of make people appreciate or enjoy poetry. What do you consider to be the other achievements of your residency?

Rice: For me it was just lovely to rediscover the city. I wrote a lot about the city as a result.

Interviewer: Were there any other achievements? Not just personal achievements for you as a writer but achievements in terms of the residency itself.

Rice: Yes. I think I did a lot in getting the staff involved and so I did poetry readings for the staff, you know lunchtime poetry readings with sandwiches and coffee and sometimes breakfast. I read to the engineers, the drivers, the administrative staff. I read to almost everyone in the Glasgow subway, everyone who worked for the subway. I think that was very positive. And then we received an invitation from the buses, to put posters on the buses. A lot of it was exponential and it got too big sometimes; they wanted so much and I was working too much. Yes, it was very successful in terms of using transport, public transport as a vehicle for poetry.

Interviewer: The French poet Charles Baudelaire and the American artist Edward Hopper seemed to find poetry in such liminal places as harbors, train stations and so on. Do you feel the same way about the Glasgow subway? Do you see it as a place that can inspire poetry?

Rice: Well I think you hit the nail on the head when you mentioned Hopper and Baudelaire and you know those places like the train stations, harbors

and that. I always think that harbors especially are really romantic places; they have a sense of romance. You wouldn't really say that about a subway but there is a sense of romance in it because it's still a journey, it's also a sense of movement. The interesting thing about it is the light and dark of the subway. When you come into the station, it's light; when you leave the station you're going into the darkness. I was in the cab sometimes with the drivers and they would sort of look sad coming into the light but when they went back into the dark they looked radiant. So it was a complete reversal for them really. I think that sense of light and dark is poetic. There's a sense of loneliness down there underground; it's not a usual place to be. I did have a sense of loneliness in that subway I think. Some subways are so busy you don't get that sense, but in Glasgow the travelling public is much fewer so you get a sense of loneliness. I like that.

Interviewer: Some people see the time spent commuting on the subway as a waste of time. Did you hope to change that kind of perception in people during your residency?

Rice: Yes. I think most people sit on the subway and they look at the advertisements and sometimes they just can't look; they're just so boring. We knew that posters are really important, especially if they're related to their lives. But it was too loud, the subway's too loud to actually perform poetry; you couldn't read to people and they feel that it's a bit of an intrusion when you try to read to them in the subway. They just think here comes another mad passenger. So it was a difficult one.

Interviewer: The philosopher Alain de Botton says that when people commute from one place to another their "jealously focused" attention on reaching their destination stops them from noticing what they're seeing on the way there. What are your thoughts on this?

Rice: I agree, I quite agree with that. I think one of the things I was trying to do was to give them something else to read other than the adverts and I was trying to get them to see that if they read poetry it would be much more personal, to give them some sense of enjoyment, some sense of reflection. And I think on quite a few occasions there were poems related to the seasons or like a New Year poem or a Christmas poem or a St Valentine's Day poem, a love poem. So we tried to give them something that would draw their attention just enough for a moment or so. That's as much as a poem can do really, I think.

Interviewer: You've used subways for many years I would imagine. So would you say that you see many people reading poetry on the subway?

Rice: Definitely! I think the London version, Poems on the Underground, has shown that people will read and enjoy these poems. They're probably things they've never read before because there are very few people who read

poetry books but if they see a poster with a poem on it they'll read it and they'll enjoy it. They won't remember the poet's name but they'll remember the poem and that's fine, that's good. I'm quite happy with that you know. I think it does work. It works for people on a very personal level and it's certainly a distraction from the adverts.

Interviewer: So would you urge other cities to do something similar?

Rice: I think a lot of them already have by now because they've seen the success of London. London's Poems on the Underground has been going on a long time and a lot of poets nowadays are very good at community work and residences. I mean I've visited thousands of schools and libraries and art galleries. So we're quite used to being with the public and working with the public and reading poetry and encouraging them to write poetry themselves.

Young People Writing Poetry

Interviewer: One idea is that the function of poetry is to defamiliarize reality, that is, to describe our habitual experiences and the world we live in in a fresh new way so that we are compelled to notice it. Do you consider this important when you encourage young people to write poetry?

Rice: I think defamiliarization is really for adult poetry. I don't think I could say that I try to do that with children. Children are not very familiar with the world around them because they have a very restricted life so far. They're usually with their friends or they go to the supermarket, the park, school and maybe once a year they go for a holiday. So the world is very small. So what I try to do is I try to help them write happy, joyful poems or even some sad poems but I think I'm always looking at encouraging their emotional responses, not their responses to the world but their responses to things that happen to their family or things that happen to their friends or on the journeys that they go on; something very personal and something quite emotional.

Interviewer: Would you say you encourage young people to respond with their emotions rather than with their intellect?

Rice: Yes, yes. I think that's a better way of putting it, yes. When you asked that question it really did make me think and I don't find that children can look at the world that way because they haven't seen much of it. What they have seen a lot of is their family and the people around them, grandmothers and uncles and aunts. So I get them to write a lot about that world and perhaps the school world as well.

Interviewer: You meet many young people in schools and other places. What sort of attitude do they have toward poetry?

Rice: I'm a very lucky man because I'm invited to schools all the time. I mean I'm in a school tomorrow and the next day and then the following day. I'm very lucky that I can meet so many children. I never had any problems from children with poetry. Perhaps it's because I'm a family man and I act like a family man with the children and I think that has something to do with it, the personality. I know that children do enjoy some comedy, they enjoy some sad poems as well but you have to do it just right, to tell some stories and to tell lies. They love that; they love the fun and the naughtiness sometimes of my work. It can be quite naughty.

Interviewer: Do you feel that this positive attitude toward poetry stays with them as they grow older or do they lose it for some reason or other?

Rice: I think with some of them it certainly does. I get a lot of emails because of the website now and people asking for poems that I read to them in the 1980s and the 1990s because they've got children of their own and they don't know any other poets. They never came across poetry any further because it's a very difficult thing to find in life perhaps. Maybe not now with the Internet but in those days, the 80s and 90s it was difficult to find poetry if you were a mum or a dad. I've never had a problem encouraging children to enjoy poetry. They do love it. And at the end of my show I ask them, "Who would like to read a bit of poetry now?" And 99.9% of them put their hands up.

Interviewer: What do you consider to be the main benefits of encouraging young people to write poetry?

Rice: Well that's the subterfuge. What I'm trying to do is to give them an opportunity to understand that they have this language, their own particular language, in their case English. They have this language and they can use that as a very strong communication tool. They can use it you know to reap great benefits for themselves. Sometimes I try to get the children to express in a structured formal way the thoughts and feelings that they have. When they're writing poetry they're giving a lot of consideration to where words go and what choices of words go on the page. It's a question of trying to get them to form an insight into the importance of language, the skill of using language.

Creative Writing and Multicultural Classes

Interviewer: Would you say that creative writing also works with children who are non-native speakers of the language, that is, with multicultural classes writing in English? Does it also have the same kind of effect on them?

Rice: I think so because there's a multicultural element inside Glasgow. It's very positive. If it's already positive within the class there's no difference; all the children will want to know what that poem means and enjoy that poem.

I wish I had the talent to speak other languages. I learned other languages including Arabic when I was very young but I don't have those languages anymore at that level and there aren't many people who do. So we can't really speak to the many different ethnicities within a class and that can be anything up to six or seven different kinds these days. So I can only use English. Of course children might also find poetry in their own families maybe, somewhere else maybe. Perhaps they would know of a poet in their own language. It would be nice to see that happening actually.

Interviewer: So when you do poetry writing activities with children in multicultural contexts, do they enjoy it as much as the native speakers of English or is there a difference?

Rice: I think they probably enjoy it just as much but it's hard for me to judge that really. I think with some of the children you don't know who's going to be the brightest and finest writer in that group. But often it's very surprising. But I think what I manage to do is find a child in every class who is not into poetry but knows how to tell a good story. I start working on the oral tradition and I think sometimes a good way into the multicultural element of a classroom is to do storytelling because I know that children go home to their families and friends who have stories, either traditional stories or stories about the family.

Interviewer: So do you encourage them to tell their own story sort of, to bring their own culture and their own story into the writing of poetry?

Rice: Yes, if I have the time to plan a true visit like that. Yes, I always make an effort to encourage students to bring in a story. Sometimes I ask them to bring in a hat. I know it might sound a bit strange but if you bring in a hat you can always tell the story of the hat and usually that hat will be quite unusual. It will have something to do with their family and the heritage of their family. So I often ask them to bring a hat in if it's a multicultural school and we can go about learning new things from each other.

Poetry and Education

Interviewer: Some people argue that we should no longer teach poetry in this day and age, that it has become irrelevant and unimportant, that it no longer matters. What do you think about this?

Rice: Well to be honest I've never heard that before. You're the first person to mention it. I don't think it's reasonable because I know that poetry is the high point of any language. Isn't it, really? So I don't think that's the case, no. I've met too many children; I think I've encouraged perhaps half a million children in my career, 500,000 children who all seemed to be keen on poetry. If you present it in the right way and if you personalize it they're

keen. We were unlucky as young people, people of my generation, because it's not like today.

Interviewer: Some people have described poetry as a dying art. What are your thoughts on this? Do you see a future for poetry?

Rice: Yes, definitely, especially if you think of what's happening nowadays. You see stand-up comedians, you see rappers coming out of America, you see lots of good lyrics being written by the song writers and the musicians, you have storytelling sessions everywhere, you have poetry slams. The whole idea of the spoken word has been revitalized and it appeals to different audiences and it has come from the 1960s, which emphasized that kind of culture, the spoken word culture. So I think poetry has been very useful to us over the past 50 years or so. Thanks to the 60s I think society has learned that there is a lot of spoken word entertainment and art that is very popular. I think poetry is easily somewhere quite central.

Interviewer: Do you feel that education helps people to appreciate poetry or does it hinder them?

Rice: I think we need to put it further up the agenda in some schools. There are some teachers who don't understand it, they don't quite get the message and sometimes they don't see the importance or the relevance of it; they'd rather do you know the things that most children want like rap. But that's unfair. I mean most young girls of thirteen or fourteen are writing beautiful poetry because they're very mature at that age, emotionally mature. So I think we need to rethink how we teach it in schools. It's being taught in primary school but we're losing it in secondary school. If you take for instance the fact that in most British schools they're reading war poetry. Now that war was a hundred years ago so we're still reading poetry from a hundred years back and not rhyming and chiming with their own times. I wish they'd read some of the poetry in schools that's been written by soldiers from the Middle Eastern wars like Beirut, or you know Vietnam or from Afghanistan and Iraq. Things that soldiers write today, their viewpoint now, not that of a hundred years ago.

Interviewer: You've mentioned that some teachers don't know how to go about teaching poetry. Do you feel that these teachers actually read poetry themselves, that they enjoy it?

Rice: I don't think they do read it. I don't think they do read it as much as we suppose they do because sometimes if I mention a poet's name to a teacher they don't know who that poet is and if I mention certain poems or certain anthologies I realize that it's a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read; it's usually poetry from very deep in the past. I mean I know that sounds very critical but I do wish more people would use poetry more successfully.

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