



A Poet in School

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[Pat Triggs](#) [1]

[8](#) [2]

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Mike Rosen visits **Gayhurst Junior School**.

Mike Rosen spends a lot of time in schools. We talked to him about working with teachers and children and about the part poetry played in his growing up.

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On his passport Mike Rosen describes himself as 'writer, teacher, broadcaster'. He's done his probationary year all right, but you sense his claim to membership of the profession arises more from his feelings about children and working with them than from being officially 'qualified'. Teaching takes up a lot of his time. Apart from one-off visits to schools, festivals and book fairs, for the last three years he has spent one day a week in a Holloway comprehensive and now also goes for one afternoon a week to a primary school, also in London. He works with classes and groups often with the same children over a long period. The idea is to get them writing. 'Things only really begin to happen with kids when they know you. Writing may be slow in coming. What you get by waiting is what is most use to them and to the school.' He shares his own work (prose and poetry) with children, but as a fellow craftsman: there's no sense of 'copy me'.

Neither does he expect his writing to appeal to everyone. For a year he was writer in residence at Vauxhall Manor School (all girls, many with a Caribbean background). 'I thought, why should I force my poems first of all on girls, and then on girls with a very different culture to my own: different home background, different ways of conceiving of a family - just as secure, just as strong, but with a different scheme of things' -Why should the idea of two brothers rolling around in a bedroom be appealing?' So he spent a lot of time listening; listening to the girls talking about their families and friends and getting them to see 'that they could write about *their* experiences, just as I write about mine'.

His recall of the experience and feelings of his childhood is sharp and clear. It's all captured in his poems and on call whether he is meeting a group of unknown ten-year-olds, or observing his four-year-old son, Joe. There's one way, though, in which Mike Rosen's childhood was different from that of many of the children he meets. Poetry was 'just around' at home. His parents (Connie and Harold Rosen) had lots of tapes and records of poets reading their own work. He didn't understand them, but he 'grew attached to them. He felt the same way about the poems he met in junior school. His teacher Mrs McNabb was keen on choral speaking. Her class did performances and went in for competitions. She rang him up not long ago to ask him to visit her school. 'You won't remember me.' In reply he quoted the first verse of Edward Thomas's *Adlestrop* - one of her favourites.

Yes. I remember Adlestrop ?

The name, because one afternoon

of heat the express train drew up

there

Unwontedly. It was late June.

'None of us knew what "unwontedly" meant - we just liked saying it. I think I still approve of that. Not so much the performing and the competing, but the getting to know. If you go over and over a poem, or any piece of writing that is of itself enjoyable, then you get a sort of long-term attachment to it. It's the same as teddy bears, or pop music; it becomes a part of your identity. Poems should be like familiar things. In school everyone's favourites should be in a book at the back of the class, so that when they are called for they're available.

In the same junior school Mike Rosen was compiling his first anthology: 'all the rude and naughty little rhymes from the playground. I wrote these down so I would have a better repertoire than anyone else.' This irreverent streak continued into secondary school where he discovered parody. 'We'd "do" poems in English, and not finding them particularly useful I'd take them and write parodies about kids in the class.' After the class had "done" a poem teachers were fond of saying 'Now you write me.' 'I remember me and my mum having a real good time writing a Robin Hood ballad together, with just absurd McGonagall-type last lines; falling about writing good-bad poetry. I was convinced I'd written appalling poetry, but it was fun. I remember the teacher reading it through and just writing A at the bottom and handing it back to me. It's strange when you think about it - there's mum and kid really enjoying themselves, having a good laugh and the teacher just writing A and handing it back. It's the epitome of what not to do with a poem.'

Now he spends two or three hours a week typing out what the kids at Holloway write so everyone can share it and so they can take it home. 'So when his mum and dad say, "How're you getting on at school, son?", he doesn't have to say "I got C": he can say, "I wrote this."'

He's thinking like a teacher as well as a poet when he approaches his one-off visits to schools. But there's an added ingredient: Mike Rosen, actor. At Oxford, apart from reading English, he wrote and performed in a lot of revue sketches. He thought that might be what he would end up doing. In a way he was right. When **Mind Your Own Business**, his first book of poems for kids, was so successful Pam Royds, at Deutsch, suggested he might go and read them in schools. Something clicked. 'For four or five years I'd been doing revue - take-offs, loony walks, silly faces. It had never occurred to me that I could go places and treat my poems like revue scripts for kids. There were these two roads, but I hadn't seen there was only a tiny gap between them to be bridged.' Poet, teacher and performer came together: the Mike Rosen show was on the road. On a cold windy Wednesday in February, we went with it.

Mike Rosen visits Gayhurst Junior School, Hackney

Preparation begins at home.

A lot of thought goes into ensuring that schools make the most of a one-off visit. Mike sends three pages of ideas and suggestions well in advance.

Beforehand: Read some, any or all(!) of my poems with the children... letting them talk freely about the ones they like or dislike and encouraging them to explore similarities between the 'events' in the poems and 'events' in their own lives. Encourage them to play with some of the word-game poems.

My Visit: I will be informal. I ad lib. I like to talk about things that have happened to me in the previous two or three days. I may read them poems that aren't in any of the books. If I have groups under 30 in size, I like to hear what some of the children have to say - one at a time. Because it is a 'performance' (though I disguise it as a kind of conversation) I find it helps me if teachers sit at the back rather than beside me at the front.

One o'clock. Mike says goodbye to Joe, Susanna and Eddie (who is asleep). Today the school is only a few minutes' drive away. Some visits /mean a very early start and a lot of travelling.

The school. The gates are padlocked. How to get in? A chilly detour reveals the entrance, hidden at the back. Far above in the dark red building a window opens and a cheery voice shouts down. 'There you are, thought you'd got lost!' It's the headmaster.

Up three flights of stone stairs to the hall.

Jabberwocky on the walls. There are two 'performances' scheduled, third and fourth years, fifty children in all. Chairs are set out in the library; but Mike goes straight into the classroom, still in his coat, to meet the first lot.

He runs his fingers over his mouth. 'Brub brub... I've got to warm up my lips to talk to you.' Laughter. 'I'll see you in the library.'

'D'you know my name? ... Can you spell it? ... D'you know what they used to call me at school? ... Rosiebum - don't tell anyone. I'm going to tell you about something that's been worrying me all this week??

It's the story of the orange juice that keeps disappearing from the Rosens' doorstep, with mimicking of sleepy Rosens and stealthy juice snatchers, and lots of audience participation.

'Who's doing it?... What would you do?... Shall I tell you what we did?? That's this week's news. Just thought I'd tell you about it.'

'Nightmares? do you have nightmares?' I used to have one about the underground in London. I'm in the underground, down between the lines. And the platform's getting higher and coming to squeeze me. And I can see a train coming, nearer and nearer. And I'm shouting, "I'm here. Down between the lines.

Can't somebody see me?'"?'

'Who knows what the longest journey in the world is?' 'From the light switch to the bed,' everyone shouts. He performs that one, and some others about sharing a bedroom with his brother.

'I don't suppose any of you ever do this?' showing Quentin Blake's illustration of a clothes fight. As he reads he acts out the poems. He's father, brother, himself, playing the audience with perfect timing, milking the jokes for all they are worth. 'Father says, Never let me see you doing that again' - and everyone joins in.

'But it doesn't end there. Now I say to my little boy, Joe.

"What do you think you're doing?" "Mm?"

"Why did you do that?" "Mm?"

"Don't do it, you understand? Or there'll be trouble." "Trouble."

"And I mean it."

But it doesn't end there ...? Woken by noises from the baby alarm Mike and Susanna creep along to Joe's room. 'He's got all his toys lined up - and he's wagging his finger at them. "Trouble. And I mean it." Nothing changes much does it?'

Time for questions.

'Can you do **Everybody**?' He can. So can they. So can their teacher. 'It took me three weeks,' says Mike. 'It took me three months,' says the teacher. 'Try Calamity -Calamity, alamity, lamity, amity, mity, ity, ty, y,' says Mike - very fast.

'Will there be another adventure of the Bakerloo Flea?' 'No, but there might be further adventures of the Bakerloo Flea women - about a plague of wasps, blowing out of hand dryers, coming out of light switches. You'll have to write some

Bakerloo Flea stories yourselves. What about Son of the Bakerloo Flea? The Bakerloo Flea meets Godzilla? You could do a running commentary.'

Then it's time for the second group. And then talking to teachers about using the visit as a starting point for talk, drama, writing, displays, cartoon strips, tape recordings. About grouping the poems: home life, Me, play life, fantasies, nonsense and word games, sayings.

'Help them to find an overlap between the idea in the poem and any idea, memory or attitude of their own.'

Poetic forms, forms of language, shapes and rhythms are themselves a kind of experience. A form can trigger off ideas, ways of shaping experience, arouse memories.

Dangers: writing to show off, empty nothings, weak imitations, writing to fit expectations.

Advantages: it *can* be the crack in the dam that unlocks the flood.

If you would like to try to book Mike Rosen, write to him at 11 Meeson Street, London E5 0EA. You need to approach him at least three months in advance.

Page Number:

23

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