

Chapter Three

Rebecca Kai Dotlich: The Joy and Tears of Poetry

“**P**oetry is an art form that brings you close to tears when you read it,” says poet Rebecca Kai Dotlich, who lives in Carmel, Indiana, with her two children and husband. “The words become your own. You love them, you need them, you identify with them.”

Robert Frost was the poet she identified with as a young girl. She wrote comments in his books as if she were writing him letters.

At thirteen, Dotlich knew she was destined to write. Although she accumulated a mailbag of rejection slips—without a single acceptance—during her first twelve years as a writer, she never let setbacks deter her. She explains:

I wanted to be a poet so badly that there wasn't any other option but to become one. I felt like a writer, therefore I must be a writer, and I was going to write until I died. Even if I was continually rejected, I would not have given up. I would have kept writing. Always.

What made editors begin to notice Rebecca Kai Dotlich's poems? “[My] writing today is tighter, more mature,” she says.

R E B E C C A K A I
D O T L I C H



Profession: Children's book author and poet

Year; place of birth: 1951; Indianapolis, Indiana

Education: B.A., Indiana University

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Career accomplishments: Has published her work in *Highlights for Children*, *Ladybug*, and *Storyworks* and in numerous poetry anthologies

Selected books: *Away We Go!* (HarperCollins Children's Books, 2000), *Lemonade Sun: And Other Summer Poems* (Boyds Mills Press, 1998), and *Sweet Dreams of the Wild: Poems for Bedtime* (Boyds Mills Press, 1996)

What they say about her: "Author Rebecca Kai Dotlich, who grew up and still lives in Indiana, knows well the colors, sounds, and scents of summer and remembers what it is like to be a child during this magical season."—Linda DuVal, (Colorado Springs, Colo.) *Gazette*

"This only comes from years of reading and writing poetry. The stuff I wrote at fifteen or sixteen is nowhere near as perceptive and mature as the writing done by people that age today."

Dotlich says she stopped the chain of rejections when she began to make "universal connections" with readers. "If you're writing about something that has happened in your life, make that poem accessible to the reader who says, 'That kind of sounds like something that happened to me one time,'" says Dotlich. The poet's hope, she stresses, is to "communicate your experience to another human being."

You might say she's done that. Many of her poems are printed in anthologies. One of Dotlich's books, *Lemonade Sun*, has drawn high praise from critics, teachers, and librarians. She

has also been commended for her energetic school presentations that get reluctant readers excited about poetry.

While Dotlich appreciates the positive feedback, she's not hung up on reviews or attention. She puts it all in perspective:

If you really want to be a writer, don't worry about fame. Don't let it get into your psyche. Don't worry about awards. Just enjoy putting words on paper. If you enjoy writing, other people will find delight also. Getting to pursue your passion in life is success in itself.

Poetry is not a competitive sport. If you start worrying because someone else's poetry is better than yours, you might as well give up writing.

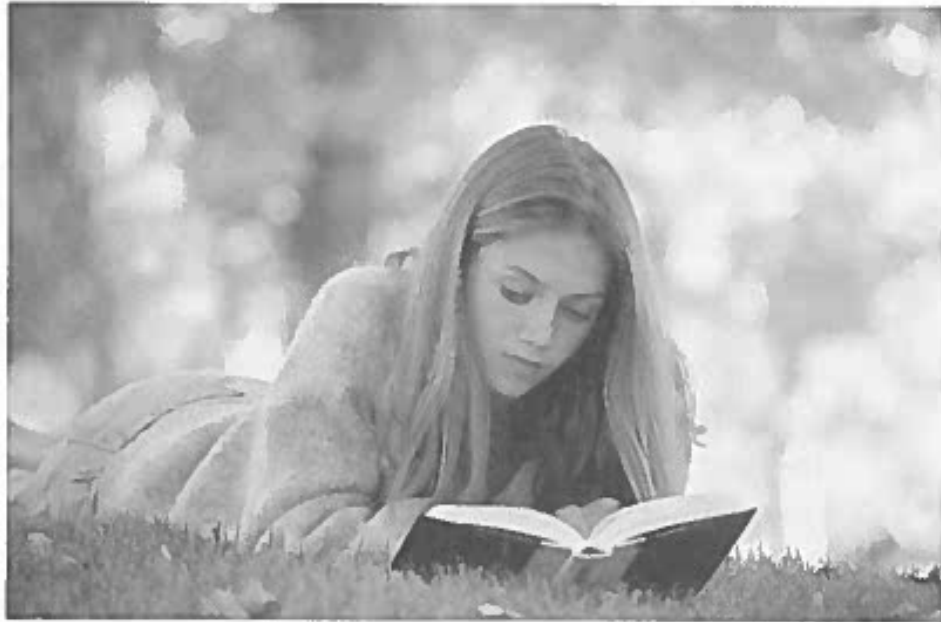
Making the Most of Love and Loss

Dotlich is a grown-up in love with the joys of youth. Her poems celebrate the thrill of counting stars and stalking fireflies. But her experiences of personal loss and tragedy give her poetry a grown-up perspective.

Dotlich has lived through many painful experiences. A favorite uncle was killed in the Vietnam War. In a terrifying episode at the Indianapolis airport nearly thirty years ago, a deranged, armed man took Dotlich hostage until rescuers freed her. When she was twenty-two, her only brother died suddenly while serving in the U.S. Army in Europe. A year later, her father died.

"I was heartbroken," recalls Dotlich. "It changed the dynamics of my entire family. For solace I searched for poems by poets who had known heartache, pain, and loss. I felt I was a poet, so it helped that other poets would write words that expressed how I felt. Because I read it when I needed it, poetry really, literally, saved my life. It was something I related to, and the words had a healing power no different from medicine."

Some of the poems she read had themes of death. She read the powerful war poetry of Wilfred Owen, a British soldier who died on a battlefield in France just a week before World War I ended. He was only twenty-five years old. She admired William



Rebecca Kai Dotlich believes that reading can help teenagers get through hard times and become better writers.

Wordsworth's power to express sorrow in "Ode: Imitations of Immortality," written after his brother John drowned.

Dotlich dismisses the idea that today's audiences want only poems with sunny, neat endings. "A poem doesn't have to end on a hopeful note, because lots of times it can't. Sometimes it's right if the end is tragic and hard. Knowing other people are still walking and breathing after tragedy helped me get through my own," Dotlich says.

Dotlich advises teenagers who want to write that poetry can be a great challenge for them as artists as well as a comfort to their soul. "Don't ever forget to see through the darkness," she says. "Include joy in your writings. Even though you need to put your words of struggle and grief on paper, so too you need to find and write about the times and the moments in life that bring you joy."

One of her three volumes of poetry in progress—a serious book aimed at young adults—addresses some of those issues.

Its central theme is her brother's death. Dotlich was doubtful about writing of her loss. She explains:

I didn't want to share this with anyone, because I thought it was too self-important, too self-indulgent, too private. Why would anyone else want to know about it? Now I think I would like to share it, and maybe there will be kids reading it who have lost a brother or a sister or a friend at a young age. Even though it's painful, reading how someone else felt can help you expel some of that grief you feel.

The teen years can be a time that your life feels so out of control. The incidence of suicide is very high in adolescence, so when I visit high schools to talk about poetry, I always talk about suicide. This is a time of dramatic changes for you, and it may be the first time you pick up pen and paper to express your feelings. You're trying to figure out who you may be. Just tell yourself, "This is a poem that needs to be written."

Growing Up

As a child, Dotlich loved fairy tales, Ogden Nash's light verse, and classics such as *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Her favorite books were the Nancy Drew mysteries. One year, she asked for the whole set for Christmas. She recalls:

When I was growing up, an uncle who was a bachelor doted on his seven nieces and nephews. Each year, we took turns being the "Christmas star" and got to pick a special present instead of the usual sweater. My brother asked for a bike his year, and the next year my cousin opened her chosen present. It contained the entire collection of Nancy Drew mysteries! Boom, boom, boom—there were all the titles in a row, and there must have been fifty of them.

I don't think I was ever jealous before or since that day, but I was jealous then. The next year it was my special

Christmas turn, and I asked for the same present. Unfortunately, my uncle lost his job, so I got another sweater.

At Northwest High School in Indianapolis, the long-haired Rebecca Dotlich was a good student, but no straight-A valedictorian. Her life's course was set when her English teacher, Doris Bradford, told Rebecca that she would have a future as a poet. Bradford saw promise, not perfection.

"Young adults do themselves an injustice if they think their poetry can immediately be anywhere near what they are reading," says Dotlich. "They haven't had enough experiences for perspective, or studied poetry enough for technique. They haven't grown yet like they are going to grow."

Students who want instant gratification as writers do not persist and never learn the fundamentals of good writing that would enable them to write for a lifetime. "Don't be hard on yourself," she urges. "Don't expect to write the perfect poem. Nobody does. Write *your* poem."

In the Classroom

When Dotlich enters a classroom as a guest speaker, her animated teaching style holds her listeners' attention. She tells students they can learn much about poetry by studying song lyrics to find the songwriter's message and the source of power in the words. "Listen," she says, "for the poetry in the lyrics."

While writing a poem may intimidate a student, telling a story does not. From that story, Dotlich will choose a line with poetic possibilities. Then she discusses imagery and asks the student to compare an object in the poem to an unlike object. Invariably, a few students resort to automatic writing. Dotlich encourages them to replace those words with something new and vivid. "Never write a cliché," she says. "If you can't put in something in place of cliché, put in nothing. Using a trite word or phrase shows that you are not a serious writer. Reach for something that hasn't been reached before. Put your own trademark on words."

Advice for the Teenage Poet

Rebecca Dotlich emphasizes reading poems aloud. “Be patient with a poem,” she says. “Linger over it. Fall in love with it. Read it slowly, pausing at line breaks. You can improve the movement of the poem. Line breaks can improve the movement of a poem. You can create a poetic lilt in the words.”

Dotlich explains how to break lines of poetry:

Read your words—your lines—again and again, making judgments and choices as to where it feels right to pause and where you want the power of the line to be. If you feel more comfortable, start off writing in paragraph form. Then go back and break the lines into words that feel right together. Sift through your batch of words and put slash marks where you want to pause or make a word stand out. Try different ways. How does it sound?

Again, I can’t express this too many times: the more poetry you read, the more at home you will feel with poetry. And the more joy you take from poetry, the better you will be at writing it.

Dotlich stresses that poets observe and listen to everything. “Do your best to be inventive,” she says. “See something the way no one else has. Really look. Observe. Pick apart the object, the time, the hurt, the joy you’re describing. Choose words and details carefully and playfully.”

Dotlich’s face lights up when she reads her poems aloud. “I write for self-expression,” she explains. “I write about things sometimes because they are so lovely or so unbearably sad or startling that I just want to paint it with words or die.”

She urges teenage writers to explore language freely in unrhymed blank verse:

Definitely read rhyming poetry and try writing it. It’s fun, it’s very challenging, and it’s possibly among the hardest poetry to write. But my advice would be to concentrate

Poet Rebecca Kai Dotlich encourages young people to stay away from clichés in their writing.



on free verse. When you write your poems in free verse, you won't be worrying about rhyme. This will, I hope, allow you to experiment and play with language more often. Even though it doesn't rhyme, it should still sing and have its own rhythm. Use figurative language along with elements of poetry like metaphor and assonance—the repetition of vowel sounds such as “bones” and “toes.”

Dotlich challenges her readers to write about ordinary subjects with extraordinary implications that bring them joy or other emotions. “Just like an artist studying the masters, you read their poems and you learn from them how to put words together. You won't write about something in the same way as the poet, for we all come from different experiences.”

Poems sometimes have heartbreaking endings, but Dotlich believes that most things in life work out. Even the Nancy Drew Christmas story turned out OK. “On my thirtieth birthday, my mother surprised me with the whole set,” she explains.