

## Profile: Arnold Adoff

### Mary Lou White

"My symbol is the circle," is Arnold Adoff's formulation of his aesthetic view of poetry. The 1988 recipient of the NCTE Excellence in Poetry Award visualizes his writings in circular fashion, "Many times the stories that I feel come back again and make a circle." The theme of one of his early books, *Black Is Brown Is Tan*, which was based on his early 1970s family with two primary-school-age interracial children, is repeated and deepened nine years later in *All the Colors of the Race* in which the poems express the feelings of a teenage girl who deals with her interracial status as one segment of her holistic view of life. Like ever-widening circles other themes and stories are repeated.

Adoff's life has circular patterns as well. Born in the South Bronx On July 16, 1935, he grew up in a Russian immigrant family that placed high values on his Jewish heritage, music achievement, becoming an American, championing liberal causes, and prizing the roles of women. At eleven he started writing poetry. Unwilling to follow in his father's footsteps as a pharmacist, he studied history at City College of New York and wrote for the college newspaper and literary magazine. His political activism found an outlet there as he worked for the protection of civil liberties on campus. While doing graduate work in American history at Columbia University, he taught social studies in Brownsville. Leaving Columbia before he completed his graduate work in the late 1950s, he incorporated many passions in his life; he continued to write poetry, he became manager for the jazz musician, Charlie Mingus, and he supported himself by teaching in the public schools. During this time he met and married Virginia Hamilton who was a young black writer and musical artist from Ohio trying to make her breakthrough in New York City. Their early married life was exciting and stimulating; in New York's Greenwich Village they were influenced by painters and musicians; in France and Spain they sought quiet places to develop their writing. Adoff taught in Harlem and on Manhattan's Upper West Side. He became an aficionado of black poetry, combing bookstores for poems published in out-of-print black literary and news magazines. He encouraged his students to write poetry and to listen to the words of published black poets. The time was 1968, the heyday of the civil rights movement, when Adoff published his first anthology, *I Am the Darker Brother; An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans*.

In 1969 the Adoffs moved to Yellow Springs, Ohio with their two young children. They built a contemporary house on the land behind Virginia Hamilton's mother's house, land that had long been a part of the Perry family. In this beautiful tree-shaded village, an incongruity of liberals and artists and intellectuals deep in America's heartland, Adoff began the most productive years of his life.

His historical research training from City College and Columbia University served him well as he worked on six more anthologies. Most of these were collections of black poetry and were received with especially high critical acclaim.

While Adoff was doing research for the anthologies he continued to write his own poetry. When his daughter Leigh was attending a private, rather progressive school in Yellow Springs in the early 1970s, her primary grade teacher taught from the linguistic reader by Leonard Bloomfield. Adoff relates this incident:

"One day Leigh came home and I was working on a piece of 'experimental' poetry for *Poetry Magazine* in Chicago. She said, 'What are you doing, Daddy?' I said, 'I'm writing a poem, 'Aa, Ba, Ma, Fa.' She said, 'That's funny, that's what I was doing at school; I was reading 'Aa, Ba, Ma, Fa.' I realized then that what I was doing for my peers was suited for the kid who was just beginning to read. This is not just in a phonetic-linguistic sense, but beyond that as a means of getting the kids to infer views of a complex world, to infer visions, and to infer feelings from the simple two-letter syllables." Out of this experience came his first book of original poetry for children, *MA nDA LA*.

Adoff defines his poetry as shaped colloquial speech. Children as young as first and second graders often ask "Why do you spread your words all over the page?" or "Why do you leave all that space?" Even teachers ask, "How do you shape your words?" "Why do you drop your little s's down?" "why don't you use apostrophes or punctuation?" Adoff answers these questions: " I have incorporated the concept of time in my writing by the use of space; the millesecond that it takes the eyes to move forward is an aspect of time. Time is the music or the rhythmic force and that, I think, is a step forward in the medium."

"It doesn't matter if my work has upper or lower case, or capitalization, or punctuation, or not. The structure is the shape. It's shaped form poetry. When I have done my job right, the shape and structure can imply the subject. Sometimes it can give the feel of a first baseman or a catcher or some of the other subjects. If I have done my work right, the block of type and the double stanza breaks and the space between the words are like invisible rubber bands that hold the poem together and pull your eye along."

One of Adoff's early mentors was Jose Garcia Villa, a Philippine professor at the New School for Social Research in New York. "He really broke through my consciousness. Villa said that the poem lives on the page more than just its arrangement on the page. Philosophically I still maintain this and I give him credit for this."

"Another extraordinary influence was the constructivists, a school of painters and sculptors in the early twentieth century in the Soviet Union and France, who were very concerned with the work that they did with the industrialization that was happening, such as the skyscrapers. I cannot remove some of my work from the shapes of the buildings that I saw when I was a kid and from the shapes of machines—the hard edges and the angles. Structurally, I see letters flushing underneath each other and I see, almost the way a building or a machine is constructed with accurate engineering; otherwise it will collapse. I view the poem as a structure that has to have all the elements precisely in place."

"Jazz was another tremendous influence. I don't know how many lifetimes I spent sitting in clubs. When you work with a particular musician and a particular group you are sitting in the club for four or five or six hours a night each night. Many times you are hearing the same song played over and over again. That is very much like reading something over and over again. After a while, you go beyond the notes into the spaces between the notes. I think it was listening to hundreds of repetitions of particular jazz pieces that gave me a clue to some of the rhythmic things that I do."

"Painters probably influenced me more than writers, painters like Robert Motherwell and, before him, Stuart Davis, who incorporated words into the picture and artists like the very fine draftsman who did the drawings for John Dos Passos' USA trilogy. I am affected by the visual Walker Evans photographs from the 1930s, the surrealist painters that I saw in the 1950s and the impressionists as well. From time to time you learn to go inside the color, or you learn to go beyond the color and what is into the absence of color."

"So with words, there are also nonwords, and so it's emptiness and problem solving. The solution, then, is the devising of a system where there is an integration of speech and silence and meaning and music. The synthesis is something you hope is a good poem. The bottom line to all of this is rather complex, compared to they're changing the guard at Buckingham Palace.' This should be, because these are complex times, but it's not to take the innocence away from young kids and it's not to take that clear vision or simplicity away. It's just to add another element."

The theoretical underpinnings of Adoff's art are carefully developed. "The circle is the system that I use and the components of this system are *balance*, *integration* and *utility*. I strive for the *balance* of six elements in my work: the semantics or meaning of the writing, the rhythmic line of force, the poetic form, the poetic prose technique, fantasy and realism. It's really a balancing act like that of a juggler and many of the times only a few of those elements are in the work."

The component of *integration* is what led Adoff to write for young people. A struggling poet in the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, he was always politically active and trying to make statements. He viewed his anthologies as attempts to affect change. "Integration is not only the racial or the gender or the class aspects. It's the societal role. Integration of my work *into* the lives of the kids and integration of the writer *into* the society is what I try to do. And where would my energies go if not integrated into the next generation which could be influenced?"

The third component, *utility*, is based on the *uses* of art: self-realization, critical thinking, view of the world, view of wonder. 'I call this 'cognitive-imaginative' where you can view something that is imaginative and build a better understanding of reality through an understanding of fantasy. I learned that from C.S. Lewis, the author of the Narnia series when we read those books to Leigh and Jaime. They learned about the *human* species and our time from Asian the Lion and all those people then. It was a wonderful lesson for me."

Although Adoff is frequently compared with e. e. cummings in reviews, the similarity is in the absence of punctuation, not the deeper use of form. Adoff is on the cutting edge of literary experimentation with form in children's writing. In both prose and poetry, a growing number of children's authors are trying to make the typographical placement add visual impact to the meaning of the statement.

Another unique feature of Adoff's work is his technique of creating a series of poems within a book that acts as a prose work yet is different from both a single narrative poem or a prose story. Read together, the individual poems tell a story. They are akin to verses of a conventional poem or chapters of a story. The short form of the poem tells the story with greater impact because of its brevity. It can be reread for meaning, rhythm and structure more readily than a prose narrative. Adoff often links the poems by having the last word of one poem fit with the first word of the next one. Each poem can stand alone but read in sequence they afford still another interpretation.

Teaching is one aspect of Adoff's life that is part of the circle. He keeps coming back to teaching. During the nearly twenty years in Yellow Springs he did a great deal of lecturing in school settings, traversing the country on the lecture circuit. Not only does he lecture to groups of children, he works with children's writing, often in connection with the local Young Authors programs. He has useful ideas about how to have children develop their poetry writing.

"Take a Karla Kuskin, a Shel Silverstein, or a Myra Cohn Livingston and lay them out and see the poet's approach. It is the process of comparing and critical thinking that they will be using over and over again."

"I care a great deal about compression. It's important when I work with kids that I never leave a fifth or sixth grade without talking about 'implication' and 'inference.' I talk about how you can expand but more often than not, I am cutting away and cutting away. One of the elements of structure is to require readers to participate more actively. If you require inference and if you require readers to grasp an implication, then sometimes that should be required by something that is missing rather than by something that is there hitting them over the head."

"Typing is important for young writers so that they can shape their poems closer to how the poem will look in print (even if they never publish) rather than to have the number of words of a line determined by how big or small you write freehand."

"When I am drafting a poem, I visualize myself surfing—only I don't surf, but I'm kind of doing so on a word processor or on a sheet of paper. That's the way kids should be gliding into the process of revision—not sweating and grinding, attempting to find a word that rhymes at the end of a line that could be in any way close to what they *really* wanted to say. Why create more locks? Why create more prisons? Why not open up a few walls?"

In 1986 the Adoffs were invited to the positions of Distinguished Visiting Professors at Queens College in New York. They worked with graduate students in education and held these positions for two years. In the 1988–89 academic year Adoff is continuing the position at Queens College with Nicholasa Mohr while Virginia Hamilton is serving in a similar position at The Ohio State University.

"We're writers connecting with the public schools and the College of Education, which is very rare. I don't know too many situations like this where there are 'writers in residence' who actually do hands-on work with *teachers*. We're working with graduate students studying for their masters in education, not for masters of fine arts in creative writing! We give assignments that deal with learning to write and revise. For example, Virginia might do a fairy tale while I have them write journal entries and the realistic and fantasy elements in their lives.

Another aspect of teaching is being pursued by Adoff. He is currently the poetry consultant for Holt, Rinehart and Winston's new literature series. When he suggests poems that might be used in the textbooks he includes a page of insights about each poetic selection to be used by the editorial staff who write questions or background information for teachers's use.

During Adoff's lectures he is often asked to read his poetry aloud. He does this very well and often brings a wider interpretation to the listener. For a person who stresses the visual image of the poem there are some inconsistencies in the act of oral poetry reading. Adoff resolves the philosophical problem in a practical way.

"If you read the poem aloud that is 'the reading' of the poem. That is *not* the poem. But if art is utilitarian, if I am a teacher as well as a poet, then other teachers must be given ways of using my work. Practically, I still go out as often as I can and do whatever I can to increase the *use* of poetry. If that includes the reading of poetry out loud, then it's the coin that I spend to use my energies developing something although I think in the end it really subverts one of the elements of the art form. Everybody has to pay something for what they believe in and that is the coin that I have used to pay for some kid's heart and soul, a kid who may not hear the rhythmic element of a work unless he or she hears it read aloud."

Many of the themes of Adoff's books of original poetry reflect his young family and their interests. Five books deal with ethnic themes. Of those, three concern children in an interracial setting and are based on Adoff's family: *Black Is Brown Is Tan*, *All the Colors of the Race* and *Big Sister Tells Me that I'm Black*. *Where Wild Willie* is about a black child and includes the syntax of black dialect. *MA nDA LA* was not written as a poem of a black family; it is simply a tonal poem. The illustrations in an African setting create the ethnic theme. Five of his books are on childhood experiences of growing up: family warmth, *Make a Circle, Keep Us In*; sibling rivalry/love, *Today We Are Brother and Sister*, which is set in the island off Puerto Rico where the Adoffs have a vacation home and sports, *i am the running girl*, *Outside Inside Poems*, and *Sports Pages*. Four books are on themes of nature: *Tornado!*, *Under the Early Morning Trees*, *Friend Dog*, and *Birds*. Two books are solely humorous: *Eats Poems* and *The Cabbages Are Chasing the Rabbits*.

Now that the two Adoff children are in their early twenties and both pursuing medical careers, the question arises as to where Adoff can turn for themes.

"I get back tremendous amounts when I travel around the country. You learn about what American culture is when you see what the kids are doing and how they're playing ball and what they're saying and all the different white Englishes as well as the black Englishes. I could spend several lifetimes and not really do it all. I have a wealth of material from my own youngsters and from their friends when they were teenagers. I keep up with young children and I 'exploit' my own self and my own immaturity. I refuse to grow up. I can philosophize about an aesthetic but I can be as twelve as any twelve-year-old."

Significant honors have been bestowed on Adoff's work. Inclusion on the American Library Association's Notable Children's Books list has been awarded to three poetry books and five anthologies. Several books have been listed on *School Library Journal's* Best Books of the Year list. Other honors have been given to several of his poetry books and anthologies.

Adoff's most recent hook of poetry, *Greens: Poems* is typical of the very attractive picture book form in which his books are published.

"It's an added dimension, especially for a poet such as myself, for whom the visual element is so important, to have my work illustrated. I have almost always been thrilled with the art and the artists and they have almost always *added* to my work. The artists are all so good. Sadly, then they learn 'how to write' and do their own books."

"I demand a big say-so. I am very difficult to work with sometimes. When that poem goes from the manuscript page to being printed, so many times there is a problem because of width or values of typeface. Many of my works have not been published precisely the way they were intended to be. Now I have publishers who have the people who run the computer-operated typesetting machines at the printers call me from the shops to set up a spacing system so that they can program their machines to get my form right and also to get right the amount of spaces between the letters and between the words. I cause publishers to spend more money than they would, even on most other poetry. But in the end, those that care are those who really feel it."

In the true style of the poet, Adoff does not reveal all about his life. There is a large chunk of autobiographical material about the young Jewish boy growing up in the South Bronx which has not come into print. It is part of his writing that has been brewing for many years. In the future readers will very likely read more about that young man's life.

There are other future projects. The fall of 1988 will bring forth *Flamboyant*, a prose poem form quite new to Adoff with a setting inspired by the Puerto Rican home. Another anthology is in the works, this time an international collection of black poetry worldwide.

Adoff visualizes more than his poetry as a circular symbol. He places the totality of his life in that configuration. "In the end, if I'm successful in my poetry, the poem on the page is a synthesis of my aesthetics and my personal life and mental state and my 'craft and sullen art' as Dylan Thomas said, and my control of technique and all of those other elements that I care about. If I am successful, then my life is a synthesis of being a poet and a teacher and a *participant*. So that's a step beyond my mentors and beyond many artists who function in our society. And that would be a step forward."

### A Chronological Bibliography

#### Poetry Anthologies Compiled by Arnold Adoff

*I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans*. Macmillan, 1968.  
*City in All Directions: An Anthology of Modern Poems*. Macmillan, 1969.  
*Black Out Loud: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Black Americans*. Macmillan, 1970.  
*It Is the Poem Singing Into Your Eyes: An Anthology of New Young Poets*. Harper, 1971.  
*My Black Me: A Beginning Book of Black Poetry*. Dutton, 1974.  
*Celebrations: A New Anthology of Black American Poetry*. Follett, 1977.

#### Poetry Written by Arnold Adoff

*MA nDA LA*. Harper, 1971.  
*Black is Brown is Tan*. Harper, 1973.  
*Make a Circle, Keep Us In: Poems for a Good Day*. Delacorte, 1975.  
*Big Sister Tells Me that I'm Black*. Holt, 1976  
*Tornado!* Delacorte, 1977.  
*Where Wild Willie*. Harper, 1978.  
*Under the Early Morning Trees*. Dutton 1978.  
*Eats: Poems*. Lathrop, 1979.  
*i am the running girl*. Harper, 1979.  
*Friend Dog*. Lippincott, 1980.  
*OUTside INside Poems*. Lothrop, 1981.  
*Birds*. Lippincott, 1982.  
*All the Colors of the Race*. Lothrop, 1982.  
*The Cabbages are Chasing the Rabbits*. Harcourt Brace, 1985.  
*Sports Pages*. Lippincott, 1986. *Greens: Poems*. Lothrop, 1988.

#### Other Writings and Compilations by Arnold Adoff

*Black on Black: Commentaries by Negro Americans*. Macmillan, 1968.  
*Brothers and Sisters: Modern Stories by Black Americans*. Macmillan, 1970.  
*Malcolm X*. Crowell, 1970.

*Mary Lou White teachers at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio*