

# Profile: Eve Merriam

## Glenna Sloan

Like Miss Tibbett, a character in one of her stories for children, Eve Merriam lives in the city. Her home is a spacious apartment in a building on one of Manhattan's busiest streets where, like Miss Tibbett, she composes at her typewriter, listening to the sounds of the city, relishing its rhythms and its drama. "I love it here. I find the ethnic variety of New York thrilling. And everything is somehow larger than life, so when things go wrong here, they seem worse than they would anywhere else. People almost take pride in having to cope."<sup>1</sup>

As many who live in the city do, Miss Tibbett loved touches of green, especially her sweet-potato plant that "grew so much it wound all around the room and covered the closet door" (*Miss Tibbett's Typewriter* 1966, p. 5). Eve Merriam also loves green, growing things. "If I had not been a person, I would have been a tree," she says. "I have a very strong link with trees."

One of the well tended plants in her home is a papyrus, itself a veritable tree whose leafy branches fill one corner from floor to ceiling. "I always say, if paper becomes too expensive, I can make my own." She smiles, sipping coffee at the lovely antique pine table in her dining room. Early American cottage furniture warms every room of Ms. Merriam's apartment with the golden glow of worn pine wood.

Every piece of furniture, she points out, is not only lovely to look at but also utilitarian. A cupboard that once filled a corner in a colonial kitchen now hides her stereo. The hutch table at which she writes, its leaf fastened back, converts to a bench, so designed by practical colonists to serve them twice: for dining and for sitting by the fire.

Believing that blank spaces are important, especially for dwellers in the crowded city, Eve Merriam tries not to overfill her shelves with books nor to cover every wall with pictures. The spaces, the greenery, the simple beauty of the old furniture, the earth colors in carpets and sofas, all these combine to create an atmosphere of serenity, warmth, and vitality. Since Ms. Merriam possesses these qualities herself, it is not surprising that her home reflects them.

Eve Merriam is a versatile writer, author of plays and of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry for adults and children of all ages. She has published more than forty books. Her articles, on a wide variety of subjects, have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *New Republic*, and other major publications. Drama, a relatively recent development in her career, has come about largely through her poetry. In the spring of 1981, she was in rehearsal with an updated version of her Broadway musical *Inner City*, which is based on a book of her poems, *The Inner City Mother Goose*.

Ms. Merriam has won numerous awards for her writing, beginning in 1946 with the Yale Younger Poets Prize for *Family Circle*, her first collection of poems, written for an adult audience. She was the winner of *Colliers'* Star Fiction Award and an Obie Award for playwrighting. The high quality of her considerable body of poetry for children won for her the 1981 National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children.

Eve Merriam derives satisfaction from all aspects of her writing career, but nothing is more important to her than bringing children and poetry together. Not only does she write poetry for children, when possible, she also goes into schools like an evangelist, to spread the good news that reading and writing poetry is fun. "I try to transmit to children and their teachers something of my lust for the language of poetry."

For Eve Merriam, poetry read aloud has always elicited a physical response. "I find it difficult to sit still when I hear poetry or read it out loud. I feel a tingling all over, particularly in the tips of my fingers and in my toes, and it just seems to go right from my mouth all the way through my body. It's like a shot of adrenalin or oxygen when I hear rhymes and word play."

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1. Except where otherwise noted, quotes are from the author's conversation with Eve Merriam on May 8, 1981.

It is this kind of response to poetry that Eve Merriam wants to help children to experience for themselves. She goes on: "I try to give young people a sense of the sport and playfulness of language, because I think it's like a game. There's a physical element in reading poetry aloud; it's like jumping rope or throwing a ball."

Poetry and children form a natural partnership, Eve Merriam insists. Poetry's musical effects of rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, extensions of children's own speech, naturally appeal to them. Children, like poets, are intrigued by the wonderful things that words can do: how their sounds mimic what is being described, how puns are possible, how language can be made, in Eve Merriam's words, to "natter, patter, chatter, and prate."

If children turn away from poetry, Eve Merriam thinks that the adults in their lives, particularly their teachers, are probably responsible. From her acquaintance with textbooks and her experience in holding workshops for teachers, Ms. Merriam concludes that many teachers take a wrong approach to poetry. For some reason, perhaps because they were themselves poorly taught, too many teachers seem intimidated by poetry.

According to Ms. Merriam, their intimidation causes teachers to intellectualize poetic experience. They ask their pupils for analyses of poems; they feel a need to force the ferreting out of Great Thoughts and Noble Notions, even though a poem may contain none. They ask dreary factual questions. More often than not, teachers in Eve Merriam's experience take the whole business of poetry far too seriously, making the study of it heavy and sanctimonious when it can be light and delightful.

What is her advice to teachers? "Start light. Give children the whole spectrum. Low taste can only be raised by experiencing poetry of all literary levels. Just relax. There are only two rules for poetry: A poem must be read aloud once for the sense or nonsense; then it must be read aloud again for the music. Read, enjoy, then talk about the poem. Do away with questions. Examine the poem instead, reading and re-reading bits of it in turn, picking out words that start the same or sound alike."

She continues: "Take, for instance, my poem, 'Lullaby':<sup>2</sup>

Sh sh what do you wish  
sh sh the windows are shuttered  
sh sh a magical fish  
swims out from the window and down to  
the river  
lap lap the waters are lapping  
sh sh the shore slips away  
glide glide glide with the current  
sh sh the shadows are deeper  
sleep sleep tomorrow is sure

For children to count how many times the sound *sh* is in the poem, they will have to hear the poem read aloud. Just looking at the printed page doesn't give you the sound *sh* found in the word *sure*. Nor is the *sh* always at the beginning of a word; you can hear it in *wish* and *fish*, if you read the poem *out loud*."

*Out Loud* is not only the title of a book of poems by Eve Merriam, it is also her teaching philosophy in two words. She maintains that no one learns to love poetry without hearing it read out loud. Teachers must force themselves to read aloud and not be deterred by their mistakes. All the better if they flounder and flub, says Ms. Merriam. "Begin over again when that happens. Repetition can only help comprehension and it lets the music of the language sink in. If we can get teachers to read poetry, lots of it, out loud to children, we'll develop a generation of poetry readers; we may even have some poetry writers, but the main thing, we'll have language appreciators."

To share with teachers and children the joys of expression through poetry, Eve Merriam includes in her collections of poetry for children what she calls "open-ended poems," blueprints for children to use in writing their own poetry. Here is one example:

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2. "Lullaby." From *Out Loud* by Eve Merriam. Copyright © 1973 by Eve Merriam. Published by Atheneum.

### A Rhyme Is a Jump Rope<sup>3</sup>

A rhyme is a jump rope—

Let's begin.  
Take a turn and  
Jump right in.

What can we do with a rhyme for *today*?

Perhaps we'll go sailing in the *bay*.  
We could feel the silver dots of *spray*.  
We might watch the white gulls *fly away*.

In Turkey a king is known as a *bey*.  
In Paris there's a street called Rue de la *Paix*.  
*Olé* in Spanish means the same as *hooray*.

How long do you think this rhyme will *stay*?  
Until the sky turns dark and *gray*?  
(If you were a horse you could answer *neigh ...*)

The book of poems, *Finding a Poem*, concludes with Eve Merriam's advice for young poets in an essay filled with examples and encouragement. Because she cares deeply about turning children toward and not away from poetry, Ms. Merriam wrote a series of pamphlets, distributed by Atheneum Publishers, that furthers the cause of poetry-for-enjoyment in terms that children can understand. These pamphlets are entitled "Inside a Poem," "Out Loud," and "What Is a Rhyme? A Read-Aloud Explanation for Children, Teachers and Parents." The following is an excerpt from the latter :<sup>4</sup>

...A rhyme can chime at the *end* and also in the *middle*:  
Come on, be my *friend*—tell me a *riddle*!  
What's red at the *top* and blue (blew) all *over*?  
The wind in a *crop* of sweet rosy *clover*!

A rhyme can be tricky  
If you watch a butterfly  
flutter by  
Or turn a handstand  
On a bandstand.

What else can you do with a rhyme?  
You can take a rhyme and shake it  
and wake it up:  
Come on, rhyme!  
Time to chime!

*Ding, dong, Bong!*

Eve Merriam sees three main strains throughout her poetry and other writing. The first is her delight in word play, in the ridiculous side of language, its oddities and eccentricities. She loves "kidding around with language," doing slapstick nonsense, making puns and working out word puzzles. From *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme*, here is one example of Eve Merriam's wit in word play:

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3. "A Rhyme Is a Jump Rope." From *There Is No Rhyme for Silver* by Eve Merriam. Copyright 1962 by Eve Merriam. Published by Atheneum.

4. "What Is a Rhyme?" Copyright © 1966 by Eve Merriam. Published by Atheneum.

Gazinta<sup>5</sup>

There's a strange sort of bird of a word  
That abides near the Great Divide;  
A gazinta is this bird absurd.

And here's how it got its name:  
Two gazinta four two times,  
And four gazinta eight the same.

Eve Merriam considers its social aspect to be the second important strain in all her work. She reports being astonished when an anthologist once told her that she was the only poet who wrote poetry for children on social issues. While she agrees that these issues may be overdone in literature to the point of propaganda, she believes that the pain of war, pollution, the evils of technology without humanity, sexism, racism, and the like are matters that touch the lives of children and concern them. Accordingly, in *Finding a Poem* and in other collections, she includes poems like this one:

The Dirty Word<sup>6</sup>

swallow it raw  
awr  
rwa  
arw  
rwa

WAR

The third strain evident throughout her work is, in her own words, "an affirmation of the joy of being alive." She speaks of the sensuality of her feelings for trees, for the ocean, for the natural world in general. Poems like "Vacation" in *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme*, with its appeal to all of the senses and its runaway rhythm do reflect Eve Merriam's joy in living fully, in exploring experience with all the senses. The images, lovingly detailed, of "Simile: Willow and Ginkgo" in the same collection, are those created by a poet who knows the trees she describes both by sight and by heart.

Asked what early influences are reflected in her work, Eve Merriam spoke first of being read aloud to when she was a child. The sonorous cadences of the Psalms in the Bible had a strong appeal for her. "The Psalms echo in my work, sometimes directly. For one of my city poems, I borrowed form and language from a psalm: 'Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night, the fear by day.'"

Eve Merriam grew up in the Philadelphia suburb of Germantown, where she was born in 1916. She found the cultural life there to be rich and varied. Eve was a regular at Friday afternoon children's concerts and at try-out performances of shows bound for New York. Those who enjoy the polysyllabic playfulness of the rhymes in Gilbert and Sullivan operas will hear their echoes in Ms. Merriam's poetry. As a child, she attended many D'Oyley Carte productions of Gilbert and Sullivan works.

Hearing the language of master playwright George Bernard Shaw was a part of her early experience. Eve Merriam's brother-in-law, who loved the theater, took her often to Rose Valley to Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theater where Shaw's plays were performed. Eve read with delight Tom Daley's humorous column in the Philadelphia *Bulletin*. Her eyes sparkle as she recalls how much she and her brother enjoyed the funny parodies of Mother Goose rhymes by Guy Wetmore Carryl and his brother Charles. "Obviously those parodies had something to do with my writing *Inner City Mother Goose!*"

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5. "Gazinta." From *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme* by Eve Merriam. Copyright © 1972 by Eve Merriam. Published by Atheneum.

6. "The Dirty Word." From *Finding a Poem* by Eve Merriam. Copyright © 1970 by Eve Merriam. Published by Atheneum.

In Helen Heffer's (1980) study of her work, Eve Merriam comments about the writers who influenced her most, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. H. Auden and Jacques Prévert:

With Hopkins, there is a certain tremendous density of language, of passion, which is so compressed. I think it's the principal reason I'm a poet . . . . It's only half a joke, one definition I give of poetry: It's like condensed orange juice; add the three cans of water and you get prose. Hopkins is so dense and so packed. I get bored or impatient using descriptions or articles and he rarely will say "the," "an" or whatever. The words are just there in tremendous clusters.

Auden was my god as an undergraduate . . . . The things Auden said, like that great sonnet, "The Unknown Citizen." "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we would certainly have heard." Tremendous irony. And I think that with Auden there is a cleverness in some of his work where he has taken song forms and adapted them. He did "Refugee Blues" and that kind of thing. So he would often deal with deep material in what would seem on the surface a fairly light way. . . . There is a line of his that I can never forget every day of my life and I can't even remember what poem it's in. But he talks about himself as "a fathom of earth alive in air." And it just seemed such a wonderful image to me. (p. xxiv)

Eve Merriam admires in Prévert and Auden their social awareness of the world and their urban sensibility, themes that recur in her own work. Of Prévert she adds:

Prévert was very interested in songwriting as well as poems. He's very playful; there are lots of puns in his work. And at the same time he has tremendous empathy for the condition of women. And he loves writing for children, too. So I think there was almost a calling out to a sort of soul mate, not that I put myself in that category, I'm much lesser, but that sort of personality. (Heffer 1980, p. xxv)

Eve Merriam's two sons, Guy and Dee Michel, taught her first-hand about children's natural love of the oddities and delights of language. In her interview with Helen Heffer, Ms. Merriam tells how her young sons inspired her first poetry for children:

I just started with the playful aspect of enjoying the sounds of language. I began to find with my own children that children don't know the meanings of words, but things are automatically punful. Guy, when he was very young, had been taught to wave bye-bye. My husband and I were talking and somebody used the word "bicycle." Guy heard "bi" and he started to wave bye-bye. . . . The two of them, Guy and Dee, thought the word *encyclopedia* was hysterically funny, and I realized that it was because they could accent the "pe" and that was a naughty thing to do. . . . That's the aspect that I would *love* people of all ages to continue to have with language—that's what attracted me to rhyming and playing around with it: that's the enjoyment of the verbal felicity of language. (1980, p. xxxviii)

Today Eve Merriam is proud of her two sons and her influence on *them*. "It delights me that we are a family of word lovers," she says. Guy, an illustrator, illustrated *The Birthday Cow*, a book of her poems, and did the dust jacket for another, *Rainbow Writing*. He also collaborated with his mother to produce, for Pied Piper Productions, a filmstrip and cassette about her poetry. Dee, Eve Merriam's younger son, is a student of linguistics. "And we are all terrible punsters," Eve admits with obvious delight.

Asked for her advice to aspiring poets of all ages, Eve Merriam said this: "Read a lot. Sit down with anthologies and decide what pleases you. Copy out your favorites in your own handwriting. Buy a notebook and jot down images and descriptions. Be specific; use all the senses. Use your whole body as you write. It might even help sometimes to stand up and move with your words. Don't be afraid of copying a form or a convention, especially in the beginning. And, to give yourself scope and flexibility, remember: It doesn't *always* have to rhyme."

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