

# The New York Times

Saturday, December 27, 1997

To see this article on the New York Times website, [click here](#).

## When Poetry Means Much More Than Lovely Rhyme

by Francis X. Clines

The urban Muse was on the move the other night: 15 "slam poets" -- competitive-minded junior high school versifiers -- journeyed here on Dec. 16 from East of the River, the threadbare cusp of the city, to have it out in a mainline bookstore five blocks from the White House.

As this city's cultural events go, East of the Anacostia River is nowhere, the city's poverty core, the place for the rarest Presidential photo op. The area's shortchanged opportunities are occasionally debated West of the River, but toward no great change of fate. Or, as Bernard Best, a cocky seventh-grade bard from Hart Middle School, came close to singing it in his poem, "Realize" (the theme sounding wondrously as "Ree-a-LAHZ!"):

Realize the people on earth  
Realize the ladies who are giving birth  
Realize the little boys and girls  
Realize you don't own this world.

For 75 minutes, Bernard and the other slam poets applied a kind of half-court-asphalt strophic drive to the lyrics they have been making East of the River.

Their creative energy, their smiles, the scene's swirl of nervousness and self-assuredness stopped holiday shoppers in their tracks at Borders bookstore as the young writers from Hart and from Evans Junior High School competed at their poem recitations in the best Whitmanesque celebration of the song within.

Some shoppers, suddenly enthralled, volunteered to score the competition with big sign cards numbered one to 10. As the words rang through the crowded store, the longing on each young poet's face to be rated perfect was as poignant as the night of lyricizing.

The idea of slam competition poetry reading -- an increasingly popular and exuberant performance device for grown-up poets across the nation -- took on an extra dimension as the youngsters from the East of the River Inter-Scholastic Slam League came West to sound their stuff.

"Today is the day butterflies fly," announced Syreeta Anderson for the Evans team, big-eyed as her simple life-popping rhythm swept the place.

People tell lies  
Girls trying to get guys  
We all should open our eyes  
Look up to the skies!

Listening with moving lips was Nancy Schwalb, a published short-story writer who helped organize the slam league while volunteering to teach poetry writing at four public schools East of the River. She had a grant last year but it fell through this year when AmeriCorps, the national service program, cut back on its financing of WritersCorps, the sponsoring agency that sends creative writers into rough neighborhoods.

"I'm pretty good at short stories, but how much short fiction does the world need?" Ms. Schwalb said in telling why she could not leave her daily rounds of budding poets, even if a sponsor is lacking. "We definitely need more poets, even if we don't need poems and my main thing is we have to hear what these kids have to say."

For her, one special beauty of the experience is that unlike pupils in the capital's more privileged schools, her pupils tend to find poetry such an unfamiliar novelty that no impediment of sissification is attached. "Boys will try it as much as the girls will: they never heard of Emily Dickinson," she said of a willingness to write that she finds comes with steady coaxing and the lure of trying to top intriguing lyrics.

Those who volunteer like the ideas of rewards -- some have even won cash prizes in literary competitions -- and team spirit, and some have gone on to the Duke Ellington High School of Music and Art in Washington. Her methods include teaching with the rap lyrics of the Fugees to such Rita Dove poems as "Flash Cards" or Michael S. Harper's "Here Where Coltrane Is."

Well-chosen poems ringing with the universality of life soon prove infectious. "It's a renaissance," Ms. Schwalb said of the slam league. "Entirely indigenous."

The young poets nodded and smiled at Borders when she mocked "the wrong Hollywood stereotype of all this: the nice teacher struggling in the inner-city schools to finally win over a few kids to write." And they laughed at her way with imagery when she added, "The real Hollywood stereotype would be that the kids' talent and expression and ideas, as soon as they're tapped, come bursting out of them like 'Alien.' "

The slam evening proved rich with images of revels and regrets.

Scrub-faced Isaac M. Colon 3d growled forth fear personified.

I am fear  
I can make your mind turn against you and eat you whole.  
But he laughed off the end of the world:  
When the earth opens wide  
I'll be flyin' in the sky  
When the moon turns to blood, you won't find me, bud.

Short, thin Louis Hudson brought shocked laughter from the crowd as he piped his graphic, erotic version of "My First Time" and it turned out, in the very last line, to be about his first milking of a cow. Later, stone-faced, he told of living East of the River on "Mad Street."

You lose your life  
By the gun or the knife  
Though it'll never happen to me  
I still gotta live on the mad street.

Keon Johnson, charmingly boyish, sang in "Women" of how he had them figured out:

Don't tell them how much money you have  
Don't tell them you love them  
Because they say, 'Stop lyin.'

There was big whooping laughter for Barrett Norris, strutting a rhythmic theme of believe-achieve:

If I do put my mind to it  
I know I can do it  
When you see me don't be surprised  
That I got a good job and you're workin' in Popeye's!

Life East of the River arrived full-throated in the official city in Crystal Watts's "Hidden Valley":

A place where you always stay alive  
A place where people don't always give you a dirty eye  
No guns  
No people will die  
There will always be a tomorrow in the hidden valley in my mind.

The origins of the poetry slam go back to the barrooms of Chicago, said Kenneth Carroll, a poet who is the city coordinator for the WritersCorps. "A poet named Mark Smith started slams as a way of reconnecting poetry to ordinary people," Mr. Carroll said. "He felt it had become too much in the domain of academia, sort of stuffy library readings, and his thing was that in a bar we'll all read and whoever the audience likes most gets a free beer. It's kind of an irreverent thing, making fun of the idea that you can judge art, really, in any quantifying way."

There is now an annual national slam of ranking poets and some of the student poets here tutored by Ms. Schwalb got a taste of the big time last April when Robert Hass, the nation's former poet laureate, led Nikki Giovanni and other celebrated poets to a slam that packed Borders with an audience of 800.

The students plug in to the fun of poetry and the whole idea of competition, said Ms. Schwalb. "And parents call me up and say, 'My kid wrote that?' " She fantasizes about having a city championship in poetry writing, just as with football or any other sport. "We should have uniforms, right?" she shouts, and the teams chorus: "Yeah!"

"And Larry Colwell back there," she says pointing to a gray-haired English teacher, "he should be paid as a coach."

"Yeah!" the poets declaim.

The competition proves close, with Hart topping Evans, 391 to 388. Instantly, poets wax crestfallen or squeal with delight.

Ms. Schwalb congratulates the winners and consoles the losers, pointing out that the next slam will come along as surely as the next poem.

As they head back East of the River, the slam poets gleam. "My poem has wings," one of Ms. Schwalb's early students, Zulaikha Edmondson, had written in what now seems a definitive work for the slammers.

Up the wall  
Around and around the room and  
There's no barrier in the way  
To control it  
My poem is strong and determined  
And never, not ever  
Will it be destroyed.

SECTION: Section B; Page 7; Column 2; Arts & Ideas/Cultural Desk

LENGTH: 1288 words