



Why Verse?

Poetic novels are a natural form for historical fiction, displacement stories, and struggling readers

Iwould be disingenuous if I said I was aware of what I'm about to tell you while I was writing *The Good Braider* (Amazon, 2012). *The Good Braider* is a young adult novel in verse about a girl from South Sudan. My main character, Viola, aged 16, leaves a country at war, resettles with her mother in Portland, Maine, and begins the journey of braiding a new life—part Sudanese, part American. Now that I've written the book, I've been on a journey to understand why I wrote it in verse and what I thought the form would give to the story.

By Terry Farish
PHOTOGRAPH BY TSAR FEDORSKY

I started on the journey because readers often ask me, "Why didn't you just write a novel? Why verse?" A discussion begins, and readers tell me their theories of what the verse form does. I love this, when readers take the book and make it theirs. Teens, teachers, and librarians have suggested:

"The verses are like tweets, a short form that our brains are adapting to."

"The story is told in images, and it's like you're seeing frames in a movie."

"The length of the lines of the verses shaped the strands of a braid."

"The lines made me read slowly."

"The lines made me race."

In addition to writing books, I also work with English-language learners and look for accessible novels with stories that can build a bridge from the known to the less known. I look for books that explore U.S. culture for new Americans, as well as ones about a student's own culture written in the ornery language of English.

Many who work with English-language learners and others who struggle with reading seek novels that promote fluency and a sense of competence in readers. Verse novels accomplish just that. They can move fast and offer readers at any level a

feeling of completion. Other readers, however, reject a novel that resembles poetry. On this point, readers who had initially been put off by a novel that looks like poems tell me that they quickly got lost in the narrative.

As I was writing *The Good Braider*, and as the story emerged in images told in spare language, I was not thinking of possible readers. I was looking for the key to capture the truth of the story. That way of homing in on a subject was what drew me to the specificity and spareness of poetry. I love what Rita Dove, a former U.S. poet laureate, said about verse novels during an Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference panel titled "Staggered Tellings: Immediacy, Intimacy, and Ellipses in the Verse Novel." Verse novels, she said, offer "the weight of each word, the weight of the sentence, the weight of the line, the weight of white space, heightened attention to sound, and deep allegiance to silence."

I became more fascinated by the form with each reaction and theory a reader has offered me. Though my picture book, *The Cat Who Liked Potato Soup* (Candlewick, 2003), is like poetry in a colloquial tongue, none of my previous novels have been in verse. I began to read many middle grade and young adult verse novels, and I talked with some of their writers to hear their thinking about verse. I spoke with writers who use the form in the telling of historical fiction and literature with roots in a variety of cultures. One of the questions I posed to them was, "Does the verse reflect the content of your story in some way?"

Verse and historical fiction

I talked with Margarita Engle about *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom* (Macmillan, 2008), her Newbery Honor book set in 1890s Cuba during one of the nation's wars for independence.

"Poetry and music play such an essential role in Cuban culture that it was natural to include them," Engle said. "I let the voice of a young refugee girl named Silvia speak about natural sounds, along with the birdcalls of *Mambí* rebels, who communicated while in hiding, using the Canary Islands tradition of a language of whistles:

Mambí birdcalls, a stream, tall reeds, the song of a waterfall, my own tumbling, exhausted, singing wild hopes.

"If I had to describe the rhythm of these poems, I would say there is a hoofbeat," Engle said. "Like so much of Cuba's improvisational 'country music,' songs from this era were sung on horseback. I picture an easy lope, the kind of pace that a horseman would use to cover great distances without tiring his faithful mount."

I begin to listen for the hoofbeat, and I hear it.

Caroline Starr Rose, author of the middle grade novel *May B.* (Random, 2012), chose the verse form to take readers into a

culture of poverty on the Kansas frontier of the 1800s. “In drafting, rhythm, sound, and the visual play a huge role,” she said. “I love the immediacy verse gives, not only to the character but the setting. Verse has become a great vehicle for me to write historical fiction because I want the character and her world to feel real, present, and accessible.”

Author Carol Fisher Saller gave a before-and-after example of her process when she was writing *Eddie’s War* (namelos, 2011), set in Illinois as the country enters World War II. Saller was trying to decide whether to write in third person paragraphs or “the stark, short lines that were calling to me.”

(Before)

One summer when Eddie was helping Thomas cut thistles in the bottoms, they heard snuffles and whines and followed the sounds. On his knees, Thomas dug into the side of the hill, into the den, and handed them out, one by one, little foxes, small and soft and wriggling. The boys used their shirttails to hold the kits, four in all.

(After)

When the *Hindenburg* caught fire and fell out of the sky, I saw the pictures in the paper. “I seen ’em, Tom,” I was saying, out south cutting thistles, “people jumping out an’ it still up in the air”— But Thomas looked up, said hush. There was whining somewhere in the grass. We followed the sounds. On his knees Thomas dug with his hands into the hill into the den, handed them out one by one, little foxes.

The second passage has dramatic immediacy, and Saller found the way to give Eddie a voice.

Verse and displacement narratives

Writers have also used the verse form to write powerful narratives of displacement. Thanhha Lai’s character in *Inside Out and Back Again* (HarperCollins, 2011) brings young readers into the immediate experience—line by line—of what you *must* pack when you are about to become a refugee:

Into each pack:
one pair of pants,

*one pair of shorts,
three pairs of underwear,
two shirts,
sandals,
toothbrush and paste,
soap,
ten palms of rice grains,
three clumps of cooked rice,
one choice.*

Many of Cathy Ostlere’s poems in *Karma* (Penguin, 2011) are in two voices. She invites the reader’s eye from left to right and back and forth between speakers to hear the story of Maya, a 15-year-old girl whose mother is Hindu and whose father is Sikh. It would take several prose paragraphs to detail the sensations of Maya’s encounter with a child beggar on a street in New Delhi, but Ostlere captures it succinctly in the poem “Chai.” Here’s a taste:

*A hand tugs at my arm
holds a small earthen cup.*

chai chai

*It belongs to a boy, small
yet his face is old. He could be
nine or twenty or thirty-seven.*

one rupee chai

*He puts the chai into my hand
presses my fingers around
the unbaked clay.*

drink now chai chai

*The tea is brown like a puddle.
one rupee
And swirling like an eddy.*

chai rupee rupee

chai

The verse must be drunk like the “puddle” of tea while the child begs Maya—and you, the reader—to *please* buy his chai.

Another story of displacement, involving a family that moves to follow work in California, is Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Downtown Boy* (Scholastic, 2005). Herrera, poet laureate of California, is the author of many bilingual picture books and also young adult novels in verse. He does something that Stephen Burr characterized in a 2008 *New York Times* article as “a new hybrid art, part oral, part written, part English, part something else: an art grounded in ethnic identity...”

Listen to the voice of *Downtown Boy*, which, like much of Herrera’s poetry, sings in English and Spanish and creations from the two:

“Lesgo!”

Mami says, “Lesgo!
It’s Sunday!”

“Vámonos!”
“Al perro!” Papi says.
After *huevos con papas* breakfast
with tortillas as big as the moon.

“But where are we going? I ask.
“To the Greyhound,” Mami says again.
“The hound? Why? Are we leaving?
I told you I don’t want to move again!”
“You’ll see, Juanito, *vas a ver*,” Mami says.

From all of these writers, I learned multiple reasons for using the verse form: To reflect a culture’s music and literary heritage; to offer reprises of the rhythm of a language; to create a fast pace of lines that mirrors the character’s own ride; to bring the cinematic camera intimately close. I also learned a derivation of the term *verse*. It is from the Latin word *versus*, meaning a furrow, and literally a turning (of a plough). This takes me to a personal image of writers as laborers. Writing is the work of the hands. I smell the dirt as the line turns.

Before I wrote *The Good Braider*, I was immersed in the Sudanese culture of Portland—the cooking, the music, teens’ and their families’ reactions, adjustments, re-creations of community. I collected oral histories for many years. The sound and rhythm of the voices of teens and elders were vivid in my mind. Their words filled my notebooks and tapes. Lines I heard such as, “If my family says no, then I cannot see that boy,” were spare and direct. I found music in the give-and-take of many voices, when families gathered after work, or when girls gathered on a Saturday morning to talk and braid hair. The music of many voices influenced the verse in the novel “White Girl’s Braids”:

[Lado] wants to bring a white girl over for us African girls to braid her hair.

Poni says she is definitely *not* going to braid a white girl’s hair...

“You know in salon it costs \$500 for the braids,”

I say about doing the white girl’s hair.

“It takes from 9 in the morning until 4.

Lado’s friend can go there.”

“She is not even Lado’s girlfriend,” Jackie says.

We groan...

I cannot imagine the feel of smooth white-girl hair between my fingers.

I didn’t want to write about the war from which Viola had escaped, but I felt that I had to look back to her past in order to make sense of her life in Portland. The spare, free verse lines allowed me to enter her backstory. I was in violent terrain in this war, and poetry offered me a way to hold life more formally, more sacredly. I wanted to give Viola sacred things, in metaphor, through breath in the white space, with the scent of thyme, even in the symbol of the elephant. Her mother presses in her palm:

The World in Verse

Here are some books in verse that tell stories of new arrivals to the U.S. or explore the native countries of some who have left their homes.

Applegate, Katherine, **Home of the Brave** (Macmillan, 2007)

Engle, Margarita, **The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist** (Houghton Harcourt, 2013)

Engle, Margarita, **The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba’s Struggle for Freedom** (Macmillan, 2008)

Farish, Terry, **The Good Braider** (Amazon, 2012)

Herrera, Juan Felipe, **Downtown Boy** (Scholastic, 2005)

Lai, Thanhha, **Inside Out and Back Again** (HarperCollins, 2011)

McCormick, Patricia, **Sold** (Hyperion, 2006)

Ostlere, Cathy, **Karma** (Penguin, 2011)

Testa, Maria, **Something About America** (Candlewick, 2005)

a bit of elephant bone
she found among the stones farther north
on the Nile. “It’s good luck,” she says.

From my research in Sudanese communities, I found that people’s unspoken stories were as important as the stories they told me. Girls talked about going to the mall and wanting freedom—not about the war, fear, or heart-break. There were vast silences. Maybe I needed the page to hold the silence—even while I was also researching reports of on-the-scene journalists so I could understand the truth of the war. I found myself moving from image to image, sometimes feeling fear as I wrote the words and then refined them and deepened them with Melanie Kroupa, my editor, as we worked.

I wanted the spare words and the silence between them to hold that fear—as well as hope—for this young girl from what is now South Sudan. I think of the phrase Rita Dove spoke, that the verse novel holds a “deep allegiance to silence.”

Yes, and the silence—in the white space—is a partner for readers as they deepen the verse’s meaning with their imaginations.

Terry Farish is the author of The Good Braider, a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults book, an SLJ Best Book, and winner of the Lupine Award and Boston Authors Club Young Reader Award. She’s also the author of The Cat Who Liked Potato Soup (Candlewick, 2003), illustrated by Barry Root, and editor of The Story of a Pumpkin: A Traditional Tale from Bhutan (New Hampshire Humanities Council, 2012) by Hari Tiwari and other refugees from Bhutan.