

Interview by poet & author [E. Kristin Anderson](#), April 2010

Today at the *Tart* we have award-winning author Jen Bryant! Her novels in verse are especially popular here in the state of Texas, where *Pieces of Georgia* was on the Bluebonnet List. Jen's recent *Kaleidoscope Eyes* is one of my favorite historicals, and made my Unsung YA list back in January. When she's not writing verse novels, she has her hand in fabulous picture books, such as the Caldecott Honoree *A River of Words*, a biography of one of my favorite poets, William Carlos Williams. Jen took the time out of her busy schedule to answer a few questions for me and my readers, and here's what she has to say:

E. Kristin Anderson: There's something intimate about a novel narrated in verse. What inspires the voices behind your stories?

Jen Bryant: Yes, you're right. Most of them are written in the first person (in my case *The Trial*, *Pieces of Georgia*, and *Kaleidoscope Eyes* all have a single narrator and use "I") which in and of itself is more intimate than the third person. But even in the case of *Ringside 1925*, which uses nine different narrators, the reader does have a closer, more vicarious experience, I think, because he/she experiences everything through the eyes of each of the nine narrators. In addition, each speaker has their own distinct poetry form, one that reflects their personality and beliefs, and thus makes them immediately identifiable to the reader. I doubt I would have that kind of flexibility in traditional prose.

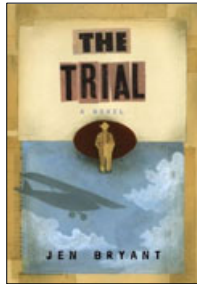


As to what inspires the voices themselves, I would say that varies from book to book. For me, the voice HAS to be there before I can make the other elements work. I'm not a writer who works from an outline, so the voice—and also the setting—drives the story forward. In *Pieces of Georgia*, for example, all I knew at first was that Georgia would live on a horse farm (a setting I knew well as I'd been a horse-crazy teen) and that someone would give her an anonymous membership to the Brandywine River Museum (another setting I loved and knew well) and that the reader wouldn't find out who it was until the end. I then spent several weeks exploring her character through rough poems in which I incorporated these settings, and once I struck upon a voice that worked, I knew the rest of the book would work itself out as long as I remained true to it. In this book in particular, I was also drawing on my own (very trial-and-error, very unorthodox and self-guided) experience in learning how to become a professional writer. I didn't go to school for writing, so I did my best to study the writing masters . . . just as Georgia studies the Wyeths, in order to learn how to become a visual artist.



EKA: Do you write stand-alone poetry? If so, can you tell us about this poetry? Do you approach these poems differently than when writing a novel?

JB: Actually, most of my novels-in-verse have come about because I was writing individual poems about the subject matter first. My historical novel *The Trial* (about the 1935 Lindbergh baby kidnapping) began as a series of poems I was writing for adults, with the intention of sending them out to literary magazines. But then one afternoon, I walked into my office and saw them scattered across my desk, and I realized how many of them I'd written, and that made me wonder if I might be able to tell the whole story in poems and make it a book for young people. Sometimes this even happens with picture books. When I showed several poems I had written about the artist Georgia O'Keeffe to my friend Eileen Spinelli, she told me: "if you can come up with a beginning and an ending, these could become the manuscript for a picture book!" The result is *Georgia's Bones*, a lyrical biography of the artist O'Keeffe, which I then dedicated to Eileen.



To illustrate how these forms intersect and cross-pollinate, here's a stand-alone, adult prose poem I wrote about the Lindbergh case. The poem imagines Anna Hauptmann, the wife of the man accused of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby on the night of March 1st, 1932 in Hopewell, NJ, greeting her husband as he arrives to pick her up that night, in the NYC bakery where she worked:

March 1st, 1932 (by Jen Bryant)

Bells tinkle. The door swings opens, shuts. She smiles up at him, hands him a rag and broom. He helps her scrub tables, sweep crumbs from the counter, wrap the day-old pastries in sleeves of wax paper. Locking the last cabinet, she thinks of home—how good to be off her feet, to kiss their small son goodnight. Asleep in his crib next to the bed, Richard curled against her back, she will slip closer to his quick, steady breaths.

And now here's the page from *The Trial*, my novel-in-verse, where I drew on that poem to describe how people reacted to Anna's testimony of her husband's whereabouts that night:

Anna's Alibi [excerpt, p.106, *The Trial*]

When Anna Hauptmann
took the witness stand,
she told us where her husband was
on the night of March 1, 1932.

"My husband Richard, who is a carpenter,
came to Frederickson's Bakery
to drive me home.

I work there a few days a week, and on Tuesdays
I work late.
He arrived around eight.
I locked the shop,
and we went home for the rest of the night.”

All the newspapers say
that Anna Hauptmann is a loving mother
and a hardworking, loyal wife.
So wouldn't she say anything?
Wouldn't she lie to save Richard's life?

EKA: Who are some of your favorite poets, contemporary or classic?

JB: Emily Dickinson, Stanley Kunitz, Galway Kinnell, Yusef Komunyakaa, Ruth Stone, Mary Oliver, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, William Stafford, Billy Collins, Gary Soto, W. S. Merwin . . . (I could go on, but you get the idea!)

EKA: What are some of your favorite verse novels?

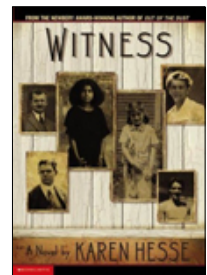
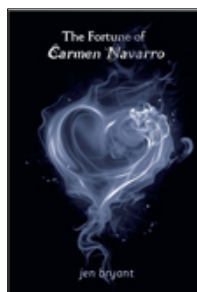


JB: Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, and *Witness*; Sharon Creech's *Love that Dog* and *Heartbeat*; Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade*.

EKA: Unlike some of the other authors I'm interviewing this week, you primarily write middle grade novels. Do you think middle grade readers are more or less likely to pick up a verse novel than a YA? How do you make poetry accessible to this age group?

JB: I can't know for sure, but I imagine it's about even for different reasons.

There are many very intelligent middle-grade readers who nonetheless aren't inclined to do much discretionary/ unassigned reading. So when they DO choose a book to read on their own, a novel in verse appears more 'do-able' because it has more white space and yet delivers the same emotional impact as a longer, more traditional prose novel. Older teens, on the other hand, have jam-packed lives with less free time to read for fun. For them, a novel in verse is just as satisfying and yet takes less time away from their other obligations than a traditional prose novel does.



EKA: Would you ever write a non-verse novel?

JB: Yes. My current novel (I just received the first bound galleys!) which will be published in November, is written in prose and has four narrators—2 guys, 2 girls. Two years in the making, it's called *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro* and is a contemporary version of the novella *Carmen* (P. Merimee, 1854) and the Bizet opera *Carmen*. It's a love story between a military school cadet and a high-school drop-out who wants

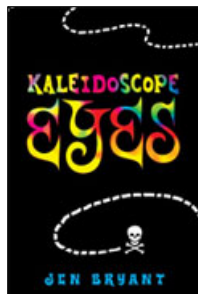
to make it big as a singer. I'm very excited about it and will be posting the cover and more info about it on my author website: www.jenbryant.com.

EKA: You've also written picture books, including the Caldecott Honoree *A River of Words*, a biography of poet William Carlos Williams. What's different about the process of writing a picture book?



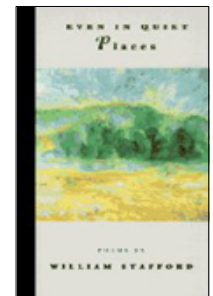
JB: For me, a picture book text is like one long poem. There's usually a single, accessible, yet flexible, image that I try to carry through the story and which ties things together (bones in *Georgia's Bones*, my book about O'Keeffe, and the river in *A River of Words*.) It's a very intense kind of writing where every word and every punctuation mark has a purpose and the poetic elements of rhyme, rhythm, simile, metaphor, etc. are usually more evident. These same elements and use of imagery are also manifested in a novel-in-verse, but I have a lot more pages in which to develop them, so they are not always as apparent one any one page.

EKA: Your latest book, *Kaleidoscope Eyes*, takes place in the 60s and involves an exciting pirate treasure hunt. What kind of research did you have to do for this book?



JB: The research for this book was a BLAST. I grew up in a small NJ town in the 60's and 70's, so my memory was my first touchstone for the setting. I also read a lot of books, on-line articles and archives, and listened to a lot of music from the sixties—specifically from the summer of 1968, which is when the story takes place. I also read a ton about pirates, and in particular the life of Captain Kidd (coincidentally, one of his ships was found submerged off the coast of the Dominican Republic as I was writing the story.) I visited an awesome exhibit about pirates at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, where I saw several examples of real pirate ships, treasure chests and even a pile of 17th century Spanish silver (arghhhhh!). Lastly, I had to read about rivers and how they can change course over time, a small but crucial plot element, which I invite readers to explore for themselves when they get the book!

EKA: Writing a verse novel seems like a process with unique challenges. What advice do you have for writers who would like to write a novel in verse?



JB: I came to verse novels through poetry, and I'm grateful for that. Most verse novels are well-written, but I do think it's critical to have at least some fundamental understanding of poetic devices, elements and forms so that your novel doesn't come off as merely chopped-up prose. Every page doesn't have to be "publishable-on its own" quality, but each page should lean on the basic elements of poetry to a certain extent. So — read lots of master poets — work on your own poetry. That's my advice.

EKA: What have you read lately that you enjoyed?



JB: I've been reading a lot for two projects I hope to do in the future (sorry-can't tell you about those yet). But I also read and enjoyed Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World* (a YA novel), William Stafford's poetry collection *Even in Quiet Places* (for the fifth time), and *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*, by Jacqueline Kelly (awesome historical fiction.) I also re-read William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

EKA: Can you tell us anything about upcoming projects? What are you working on now?

JB: As I'm tweaking a few passages for *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro* (see my answer a few questions ago) I'm starting another novel-in-verse, which is rough so far, picks up some of the themes I explored in *Pieces of Georgia*. More picture book work on the horizon, too, so stay tuned!

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