

National Poetry Month

Transcript of Podcast Episode 368

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, what were you doing in April of 1996?

Andrew Pudewa: Having my forty-sixth birthday.

Julie Walker: Oh, there you go. That’s right. Your birthday’s this month.

Andrew Pudewa: What was I doing? I don’t necessarily remember what I was doing two weeks ago, so why would I remember decades ago?

Julie Walker: Well, it was that month and that year when April was designated as National Poetry Month.

Andrew Pudewa: I see. Who had the power to do this?

Julie Walker: I don’t know.

Andrew Pudewa: The president?

Julie Walker: Perhaps, yes. But for us, you know, we love poetry here. We talk about poetry on occasion. And I think last couple years we’ve been talking about poetry this month. We have a product that we sell called *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization*. We have this tagline called “Listen, speak, read, write, think.” And so I thought we could kind of use that as our framework for talking about poetry this month and then maybe some suggestions I can give. I actually went to this website that has thirty ways to celebrate National Poetry Month, and I picked ten that I like the best.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay. Well, you can tell me, and I will comment.

Julie Walker: Okay. Sounds great. So I think of listening first, you know, when we listen to poetry. And oftentimes when I think of poetry, growing up, you know, my dad would read us Mother Goose, and we definitely did Lewis Carroll and a little bit of Robert Louis Stevenson. But I kind of felt like a lot of the poems were very girlish. And so when I was a teacher in a classroom and then later on teaching my own boys, we didn’t spend a lot of time doing poetry because there was kind of this stigma is poetry is for girls. So can boys listen to and enjoy poetry as well?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I certainly did. You know, I've told this story many times: how growing up my parents had a yacht, a small sailboat. And we would spend, you know, one or two or three or sometimes more nights in our boat over at Catalina Island. And there wasn't even a radio, right? So there's zero entertainment or connection with anything external. And every night my father would read poems from what became obviously my favorite poem book called *Favorite Poems Old and New*, edited by Helen Ferris.

And so, you know, my sister and I grew up with this book, and my father was the reader of poetry. My mother would read stories and books, but he was the designated poetry guy, I guess. And of course, he would choose poems that he liked. And so a lot of them were from the humor section or the story section.

So I think that for boys in particular, if you can find poems that are humorous or silly or clever and/or poems that tell a bit of a story, have a narrative line with a conflict and a resolution, that has immediate appeal, whereas I found the poems—just kind of contemplation of nature kind of thing—to be a little bit tedious at that younger age. So yeah, absolutely. You can find boy-friendly poems.

Julie Walker: Right. And so what's required to listen to poetry is a poem that someone reads. And that's super simple. There's no extra work that you have to do to listen to poetry.

Andrew Pudewa: No. I mean, I guess it helps being a captive audience because my sister and I were laying in our bunks in the bed in, you know, in our sleeping bags. There's nowhere to go. There's nothing to do except listen to the poetry. So I don't know. If he had said, "Hey, kids, stop building sandcastles and playing in the ocean, and come over here, and I'll read you poems," I don't know if that would've worked. But having kind of the captive audience circumstance ... You know, it's like for kids, anything interesting is better than nothing at all. But then you get into the varying levels of interesting, and poetry might not be on the top.

Julie Walker: Right. And over the years, as you heard those poems over and over again, you learned to memorize them and were able to speak them, which moves us into our next area.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. I would say that if you hear the same thing again and again and again, especially during that very sensitive period when you're young, and memorization is so easy, it's almost like you can't not start saying what you've been hearing with repetition. And you know, we see this with, you know, kids in certain religious traditions. They get prayers week after week.

You don't even have to teach them the stuff. Pretty soon they just know it. Songs the same way. If you hear the same songs again and again, pretty soon, boom, they just know it. My grandchildren can sing prayer songs in Latin. And I don't think they've ever once actually looked at it. So it's entirely auditory. And for me to accomplish the same thing, I would have to spend much more time, effort, and study, and see it, or else it'd be super hard.

So that auditorily rich, and I guess what I would say is high-repetition environment, allows kids to then just imitate. And that's what we're wired to do – is imitate. And then if a child says, hey,

listen to this, and then they tell you something that you read to them a hundred times, well, you've got to be charmed.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: My grandson Aiden, who is ten, has memorized a number of the songs from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Because he has listened to the audiobook enough times that he's got these very complex songs there.

Julie Walker: You mean the ones that I skip over? Oh, my goodness. Don't tell him that.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, one of the benefits of an audio book is it's a lot harder to skip over stuff.

Julie Walker: This is true. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: But now he's reading the paper book because his mother said, "You may not watch the movie until you finish reading the book." And it's slow going for him. It's like two pages in a day is a Herculean task. But, you know, he's determined. So he's got this stored-up stuff in his mind. And it seems to me it was pretty effortless. So, and then he just ... And you know, I've talked a lot about the joy of sharing stuff.

And you know, we've talked about memory. And the exercise of memory allows you to share something that you love and appreciate with someone whom you love and appreciate. And so there's just that joy of knowing and sharing stuff. And that's where I think young children and poetry really fits.

Julie Walker: Yes. You mentioned that students can just pick this up by repetition and osmosis. Do you have any strategies for memorizing poetry for those of us that are a little older, maybe even teenagers, who want to memorize a large chunk of poetry? What kind of strategies would you give if you're wanting to memorize so that you can speak it?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, one element would be having a good recording. And there are many websites that have recordings of poetry. In fact, I would guess that almost any poem that's well known enough that you would know it, there's somebody reciting it somewhere on YouTube or some website. Some of the websites that are specifically all about poetry have links to recordings.

So if you really wanted to memorize a poem, the easiest and best way, I would say: Get a good recording of it, and then just start listening to it again and again and again and again. Now with young children that would probably do it. With older children or adults, you'd probably want to print out the poem so that you could hear and see every word corresponding. And then you

know, you have the printed out version. You can kind of test yourself against the printed version. And you would knock it off in very small chunks, right, the way you would memorize anything – one line at a time. And you just say it again and again and again until you can say it without any help and without stretching too hard to remember.

Then you would add the next line. And then say those two lines again and again and again until you could do that without too much struggle. And then you'd add the next line. And you can go forever. I mean, there's no limit to the capacity for what is possible. What's limiting is the time, the energy, the willingness, et cetera.

But you know, there's a school that I'm aware of, Highlands Academy. And all of the seventh graders memorize an extremely long, complex poem, "Horatius at the Bridge," I believe. I can't remember who wrote it, but this thing is dozens of stanzas long. And so this is kind of like the big project for seventh graders.

And they get a little certificate and a pin that they accomplish this. And so you create this cultural ... Now is it easier for some kids than others? Yeah, I would guess so. But is it possible for every seventh grader in this school to do it and for hundreds of other seventh graders who follow this curriculum? Absolutely. So you know, even a overwhelmingly long and complex poem is really just a whole bunch of lines of poetry strung together. It's one line at a time.

Julie Walker: Right. Good. So our next area, listening, speaking, reading ... Reading poetry. Can you give any tips or thoughts on maybe what types of poems to read that you can enjoy? Either read out loud or read to yourself?

Andrew Pudewa: I tend to think of poetry in the same kind of category as I would think of Shakespeare. It was not written to remain silent, right? And this is one of the few cases where ... You know, people say, okay, you've got to read the book before you watch the movie. I actually think Shakespeare is the opposite. You should see the play or watch the movie of the play maybe several times before you go to undertake reading it on paper.

Poetry – the same way. If I were reading a poem, I would want to be reading it out loud, preferably to someone else because reading out loud to yourself has kind of, I don't know, awkward social connotations, although I do secretly do this.

Julie Walker: Oh, good.

Andrew Pudewa: But part of what makes poetry a delight is the sound of words combined with the richness of imagery, and then whatever else the poet injects into it in terms of, you know, an emotional aspect, whether it's a storyline or humorous or a sad poem. It's funny; my father, he would always read this poem I hated.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: It's Edgar Allen Poe, and it's how Annabel Lee by the sea dies.

Julie Walker: Okay. And he was a sailor.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And I don't know. He loved this poem. But it was number one, romantic, so totally uninteresting, number two, kind of dark and depressing.

Julie Walker: Well, Edgar Allen Poe ... Yeah. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: But it had a sound to it that was pleasant to the ear. So even a poem that doesn't capture the imagination can have an appeal to the senses. And in rhetoric, we talk about the schemes and the tropes, right. So the schemes are those things ... And we even say rhyme scheme: things like alliteration and assonance and the rhythmic pattern and the rhyming pattern. Those have a musical appeal. And you can enjoy that even if you don't understand the poem or even if you don't understand all the words in a poem.

Then there's the tropes. And those are the devices such as metaphor and simile, personification. And there's, you know, a slew of those things. That's what kind of opens up the imagination. It appeals to that richer otherworldliness that poems can bring. And I think the best poems do both of those well.

But a poem can can ride on either. There can be a simple poem that just sounds fun. And you like it, and you enjoy it, and it's okay, but it's not deep or moving. And you can also have poems that are deep, moving, or challenging or intellectually engaging that don't have that same beauty, that musical aspect. But I think the best poems for children and the poems I like the most, combine those two in the most artistic and skillful way.

Julie Walker: I would be remiss if I did not mention our, again, our *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization*. And that program has poems for students to memorize to increase their vocabulary, to increase their ... the linguistic marble from which to become better writers. But you hand-selected those poems so that they have ... A lot of them have both components: the schemes and the tropes.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, a lot of them are poems that I grew up with or I kind of became familiar with or acquired along the way.

Julie Walker: Is "Annabel Lee" in there?

Andrew Pudewa: No. I didn't put that in. What I wanted was something kind of like a Suzuki method for memorizing language because kids today, people today just don't memorize language the way they used to. You know, here and there you see it. There's Awanas and you know, Bible verse memory competition. Or there's a great organization like Poetry Out Loud that promotes public performance, public speaking of poetry in a competition format.

Julie Walker: Is this memorized poems?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, memorized; they have to be memorized. And it's a national competition, poetryoutloud.org. And I had a group of students, and we all did this one year. And what I

noticed was they worked a lot harder for this competition than I ever could have got them to work ...

Julie Walker: Isn't that the truth?

Andrew Pudewa: ... just by trying to cheerlead them into working hard. It was that getting ready for the big day. So there's a huge benefit in competitions, whether it's an essay contest or a poetry contest or a recitation contest or a play or a speech contest because that just kind of focuses the student on doing their best in a way it's really hard to extract otherwise. I think fewer people today actually do any of that, whereas one hundred fifty years ago, every child was expected to memorize huge chunks of poetry and scripture, excerpts from famous speeches. You know, one hundred fifty years ago, every single kid would've memorized the preamble of the Constitution.

You couldn't even pass fourth or fifth grade or whatever it was, without having memorized that. And of course, you know, there's the historical value; there's the civics value. But there's also the fact that it is beautifully written, sophisticated, rich language. So I wanted to try to create something that would restore both the vision and the method where people could kind of recapture this power of knowing deep in the heart, beautiful language. You know, I have this talk called "By Heart: The Goodness of Memory" because we think of memorization: Oh, it's very mechanical, right, whereas my mother, a music teacher, never said, "Memorize your music."

She always said, "You have to learn it by heart" because what you memorize does come into your soul. And one thing I've pointed out is if you don't give kids good quality language to memorize, they'll memorize whatever junk is in the environment: TV commercials and rap songs.

Julie Walker: Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: And not all rap songs are junk, but my point is kids are wired to memorize.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And so we want to be careful of what we provide.

Julie Walker: Yep. Okay. So we come to writing, writing poetry. That we could spend multiple podcasts. We could create a whole curriculum on writing poetry. And people have. But what are just some tips and tricks for parents and teachers who want to have their students begin this journey of writing poetry?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the first thing I would underscore here is that if you want to write poetry decently well, the more poetry you have memorized, the more exposure you have to the wider variety of poetry, the better you're going to do it. And we see this is very true in music. The great composers had huge chunks of memorized music in their brain before they ever put a quill pen to a piece of parchment or whatever.

Julie Walker: That's right.

Andrew Pudewa: So again, it's like this idea of furnishing and stocking the mind. And what's interesting is if kids have memorized a bunch of poetry, they can write poetry that does all sorts of cool things and not even necessarily know that they were using

Julie Walker: iambic pentameter

Andrew Pudewa: or anapestic trimeter or, you know, all of these things.

Julie Walker: ABAB rhyme scheme.

Andrew Pudewa: Because they're just ... They're drawing from the specifics, general principles, which they are then able to apply spontaneously through imitation. And I unfortunately think that in many cases, kids are maybe in a classroom. Or there's some kind of curriculum, and it's going to be like, "Okay, write poetry!"

Julie Walker: Kind of a blank page approach.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And they don't have enough experience to draw on to do it well. And so they feel a little frustrated by that. The other thing is there's this idea that somehow poetry is about expressing emotions and feelings. And there's a certain level of maturity required before you have any interest whatsoever in expressing emotions and feelings.

So I think one very good way, after you've set a foundation by having kids read and hopefully memorize a lot of poetry, is to give them some content, right? So one of the things I have always loved to do is take a story, you know, like a fable or a fairy tale or something familiar, and say, "Well, use that for your poem." Because you know, to walk outside, look at a tree, and write a poem about a tree, or to have a walk through the flowery meadow on a spring day, and then write about that in any kind of meaningful way – that is tough.

And I sure wouldn't even want to do that. But you know, tell me to rewrite an Aesop fable in poetry form. Well, that would be ... I could manage that. And one of the things I've talked about a lot is vocabulary as being absolutely necessary for being able to think a thought, right? You can't really think a thought you don't have the words to think it in. And so when you either give them a story or, you know, help through coming up with long list of words that are connected with something, or writing from an experience and then getting the words on paper, then you can go to the next step, which would be, okay, let's look at those words. Hey, do any of them rhyme? Are there synonyms for words that might rhyme? Okay, we could do that. Okay. Then start putting that content ...

I was with Dr. Webster one time. And he was absolutely determined that I had to write a sonnet.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: And I honestly did not really want to sit there and write a sonnet. But he was just determined that we weren't going to do anything else or, you know, that this was going to happen. And I just thought, well, I don't know. What could I possibly write about? And I had recently had an experience where a fox came into our yard in our home, right in Tulsa, right in the city, and killed, murdered almost all of our twelve-some chickens. And it wasn't like the fox was eating them; he was just killing them. It was just awful.

And I realized two things there. Number one, you can write poems about horrible things just as easy or maybe more easily as you can write poems about beautiful, good things. And number two, the reputation that foxes have in Aesop fables as being sneaky and malevolent is well deserved. But anyway, I did; I got the sonnet about the fox. But you know, for kids, I think you've got to help them come up with some content unless they have an idea already.

But if you don't work on that content side: What's the story you want to tell? What's the idea? What's the thing you want to contemplate here? And get vocabulary words right there. And then start arranging them into poetry. That's a huge, huge benefit. And I've done many times, you know, a kind of cross-genre writing exercise.

Julie Walker: Author imitation.

Andrew Pudewa: You take a poem and rewrite it into a prose story. And I've talked about how I did that once, kind of as an experiment. And I understood the poem in a much deeper way than I ever had before by writing it into prose, into a narrative. And then take a narrative story; write it into a poem. And so going back and forth between those two allows for a greater understanding of both.

Julie Walker: Right. I like it. So I'm going to read a few suggestions that ... This was called "30 Ways to Celebrate National Poetry Month." And we'll put a link in the show notes so that you could read all 30 of them. But I'm just going to select my favorite. Invite your students to email letters to award-winning poets as part of this year's Dear Poet Project. I like that. Just like the art of writing letters, Andrew. We've missed that. But of course, then you have to be able to have read the poem to even comment on it.

Andrew Pudewa: So I would accept that idea. But I would let the kids know it's okay to write to someone who's dead.

Julie Walker: Oh, there you go.

Andrew Pudewa: Because quite honestly, the best poems in the English language – most of them are written by dead people.

Julie Walker: Okay. There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: But there are a few living poets that you might come across. You know, the trend of modernism in poetry ... I don't think that's a great place to start with kids. I think you can get to modern poetry, but you should do so through the tradition first.

Julie Walker: Right. So you could write a letter to Mother Goose or to

Andrew Pudewa: Robert Louis Stevenson

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Or Poe. He might actually read it if he's a ghost.

Julie Walker: Another suggestion. This is a super easy one. Begin each day or class period with a new poem. So poetry month, twenty days in a classroom, twenty new poems. That'd be fun.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm okay with that. But when you think that way, you lose the power of repetition. So if I read a poem to you one time, you may or may not like parts of it. And if I didn't read it to you again, you would quickly forget. If I read you the same poem every morning for a week, by the end of the week, I guarantee you will love that poem more ...

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: than the first time you heard it. So I might amend that and say, well, yeah ...

Julie Walker: A new poem every week.

Andrew Pudewa: Introduce a new poem. But keep reading the poems that you already read so that you build the familiarity.

Julie Walker: Oh, I like that. Yep. So here's one. Ask your students ... maybe one of these poems that you've read in your classroom. Ask your students to choose a poem to read aloud to their families. So go home and perform it. There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, again, rehearsal's going to make it a better experience for everybody.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So here's another one, and you mentioned poetryoutloud.org. Here's a place that you could do this. Organize a reading of your students reading poems out loud, and so memorizing them.

Andrew Pudewa: I want to add to that, that I think a very cool thing is when kids memorize a poem, they can make a video and send it to their grandparents.

Julie Walker: Oh, I love that. Oh, I would love that.

Andrew Pudewa: Because I have received actually videos of my grandchildren reciting poems, and it's really a high point of the day.

Julie Walker: That's true. Yeah. So when ... And you mentioned contests. We actually have a page on our website, IEW.com/contests, where we list all kinds of contests: writing contests primarily, but poetry-writing contests. HSLDA does one every year. And then speaking contests,

you know, speech contests. So we'll be sure and put those links in our show notes so you can get ...

Andrew Pudewa: And Poetry Out Loud If you win the national thing, it's I believe, a twenty thousand dollar scholarship.

Julie Walker: Oh, my word. There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a significant level of competition that's going on there.

Julie Walker: So you mentioned schemes and tropes and some of those cool words that are used to describe different types of poetry. That would be one: explore the glossary, and introduce your students to different ... a poetic term as you're learning poetry. Make a playlist of audio recordings of poets reading their work.

Andrew Pudewa: Perfect. Yep.

Julie Walker: Love that. Talk about the immigration and heritage in the classroom with these ... with some poems from different countries.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Julie Walker: That would be fascinating to study that. Have your students illustrate poems and hang them around their homes. But also, I'm thinking about our *Magnum Opus Magazine*. And we have a place for students both to submit poetry as a part of their great works but also illustrations. Our *Magnum Opus Magazine* – we do a print copy every year and then an email.

Andrew Pudewa: And I want to say this year's *Magnum Opus* is head and shoulders better than any *Magnum Opus* we have ever produced.

Julie Walker: We have so many great submissions from students. And the artwork is incredible. So yes, if you have not ... We'll put a link in the show notes to request your copy of the *Magnum Opus Magazine*. And also just to be a part of submitting because we don't include poems in the email newsletter. But we do include poems in the print copy, which we do every year. So, and those were my favorites from the things that you could do to celebrate poetry month with your student.

Andrew Pudewa: Good! Well, I guess we should go outside and look at the flowers and think of a poem.

Julie Walker: Or think about "Jabberwocky."

Andrew Pudewa: I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree.

Julie Walker: 'Twas ... I don't remember the first line of "Jabberwocky."

Andrew Pudewa: ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble ... It’s a darker poem.

Julie Walker: It is, right?

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, we should mention: can people get free poetry lesson, like first level of our *Linguistic Development*? What’s the link for that?

Julie Walker: Well, we’ll put it in our show notes.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay. Yeah. So you could try out our poetry memorization course and not buy a thing. And then see if you like it.

Julie Walker: Yep. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today’s broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.