

## Poets and Presidents

Friday, January 21

Grades 6 -9

11 a.m.-12 p.m.

**Curriculum Connections: American History, Language Arts**

**Language Arts Standards sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association: 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11 & 12**

**Standards 5 and 8 will be met if extension activities are used.**

### About the Program

President John F. Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy believed strongly in the power of words and the value of poetry for their children. In *The Best-Loved Poems of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* and *A Family of Poems: My Favorite Poetry for Children*, Caroline Kennedy has gathered together poems about nature, heroism, adventure, and imagination by celebrated poets Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, Nikki Grimes, and Carl Sandburg; poems her parents loved and read to her during her childhood.

As part of the Kennedy Center's *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy: A 50th Anniversary Celebration*, Caroline Kennedy shares her thoughts on poetry and its place in her family and introduces several well-known poets of today who read their poems and discuss their belief in the power of poetry and language.

Though styles evolve and topics change over time, one thing remains constant: poetry provides potent glimpses into universal themes, opening up readers/listeners to new experiences or letting them revisit others. After all, as TS Eliot has said, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."



Photo © Jacques Lowe

### What is Poetry?

Poetry uses carefully chosen and arranged words that evoke a response from the reader or listener. Meaning, sounds, rhythm, and more come together in poetry to make readers -- or listeners -- laugh, cry, learn, feel, explore, and more. Poetry is to be experienced.

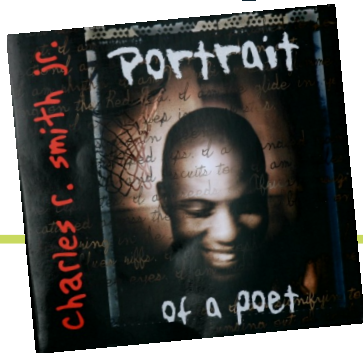
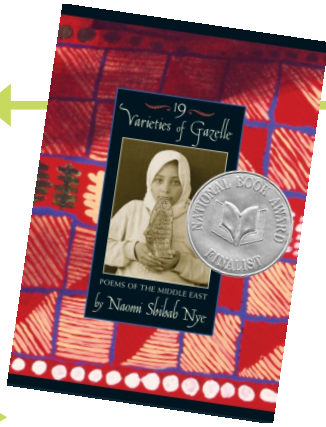
### Meet the Poets

**Marilyn Singer** grew up with a love of language and wordplay. Not surprisingly, Ms. Singer began writing as a child. She writes fiction, nonfiction, and picture books, but is perhaps best known for her poetry. Ms. Singer was born in New York City and raised in Long Island. Since her first book was published in 1976, Ms. Singer has written more than 80 additional books, all well received by critics and readers. Her work continues to be given accolades and awards.

**Marilyn Nelson's** unique explorations through poetry may stem from growing up on various military bases. Dr. Nelson was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the daughter of a Tuskegee Airman, her mother a teacher. Not surprisingly, she began writing while still in elementary school. Her poetry for both adults and young readers has received numerous awards and accolades. Several books have been chosen as National Book Award finalists. She is currently a professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.



## Meet the Poets, cont.



Jerusalem, St. Louis, and San Antonio have each had a profound effect on **Naomi Shihab Nye**. Born in St. Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother, Ms. Nye and her family moved for a period to Jerusalem until relocating to San Antonio. She started writing as a child and has never stopped, penning many collections of poetry, picture books, and novels for young adults. Ms. Nye's work has been critically acclaimed, receiving numerous awards and accolades.

As a child growing up in California, **Charles R. Smith, Jr.** was an armchair traveler, letting books take him on exotic journeys and introducing him to interesting characters. When he wasn't reading or writing as a young person, he played sports. Always, however, Mr. Smith has said, the more he read, the more he wrote embedding his interest in athletics. He continues to tell stories through words as well as photography. His books have received numerous awards for both the illustration and writing.

Whether examining history, sports, family, food, or familiar tales, each of these poets presents an unforgettable experience, providing readers with unique perspectives. They offer new ways of looking and seeing the ordinary, raise questions, evoke strong emotions, cause a chuckle, and provide insight.

The work of these contemporary poets achieves all of this and more because words, carefully put together, are powerful.

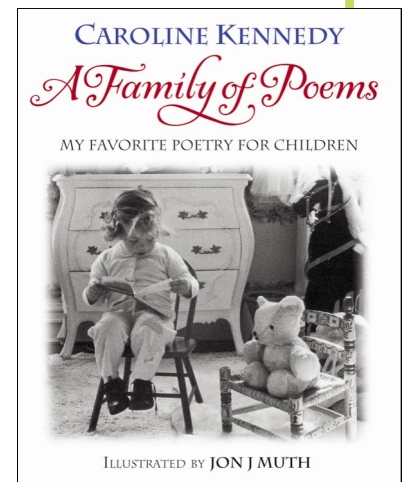
## Instructional Activities

### Reading/Writing

- **Exploring perspective:** Marilyn Nelson and Marilyn Singer write from various perspectives, including those of the instruments and other less-often heard from characters from folktales. Read several poems in Nelson's *Sweethearts of Rhythm* or Singer's *Mirror Mirror*. Write an original poem from the perspective of an inanimate or another unique voice.
- **Forms of poetry:** Marilyn Singer creates a new form of poetry in *Mirror Mirror* that she calls the "verso," or a reversible poem. Naomi Shihab Nye talks about a "found poem." If you like word puzzles, try writing a "verso" about two related subjects. Look for a "found poem" or find out about other less well known forms of poetry (such as the epigram— a short saying that usually rhymes often with a twist).
- **Creating a class collection:** Once each student in a classroom has written or identified one or more favorite poems, the poems will be collected for inclusion in a class collection. Students may want to create a poem inspired by one of the poets introduced in the program. For example, a biographical or autobiographical rap (as Charles Smith does) may be put to music or a beat. Indexes should be created for 1) names of poets, 2) titles of poems, 3) poems' first lines, and 4) subject of poems. The collection can be bound and placed in the school library or duplicated for each student.

### Research/History

- **Exploring what poetry can do:** Find out more about Jack Johnson – when he lived, what he accomplished, etc. Locate a brief biographical essay on Johnson's life and time. Reread Charles Smith's *Black Jack: The Ballad of Jack Johnson*. Compare the two forms. What can poetry convey that may not be possible in other forms of writing?
- **Research inspired by poetry:** The all-girls band known as the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and presented in Marilyn Nelson's book, *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, played during a turbulent period in history. Find out about some of the most critical world events during this time. Make a timeline of the events, adding to it when or where the Sweethearts might have played.



## Selected Books

The following books are in print and available at libraries and bookstores:

### Books Read and Discussed in the Program

#### Marilyn Singer

- *Mirror Mirror: A Book of Reversible Verse* (Dutton)

#### Marilyn Nelson

- *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem* (Hand Print)
- *Freedom Business: Including a Narrative of the Life & Adventures of Venture* (Front Street)
- *Sweethearts of Rhythm* (Dial)
- *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Houghton Mifflin)

#### Naomi Shihab Nye

- *Come with Me: Poems for a Journey* (Greenwillow)
- "The Rider" in *A Family of Poems*  
collected by Caroline Kennedy (Hyperion)
- *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (Greenwillow)
- *You & Yours* (BOA Editions)

#### Charles R. Smith, Jr.

- "All About Me" in *Portrait of a Poet* (CD)
- *Black Jack: The Ballad of Jack Johnson* (Roaring Brook)
- *I am America* (Cartwheel)
- *The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth* (Little Brown)
- *My People* by Langston Hughes,  
photographs by Charles R. Smith, Jr. (Simon & Schuster)
- *Twelve Rounds to Glory* (Candlewick)

### For Further Reading

#### Marilyn Singer

- *City Lullaby* (Clarion)
- *The Company of Crows: A Book of Poems* (Clarion)
- *Fireflies at Midnight* (Atheneum)

#### Marilyn Nelson

- *Carver: A Life in Poems* (Front Street)
- *The Homeplace* (Louisiana State University Press)
- *Snook Alone* (Candlewick)

#### Naomi Shihab Nye

- *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* (Greenwillow)
- *Habibi* (Simon Pulse)
- *Honeybee: Poems & Short Verse* (Greenwillow)

#### Charles R. Smith, Jr.

- *Hoops Kings* (Candlewick)
- *If: A Father's Advice to His Son* by Rudyard Kipling,  
photographs by Charles Smith, Jr. (Simon & Schuster)
- *Rimshots: Basketball Pix, Rolls, and Rhythms* (Penguin)

## Additional Resources

### About poetic forms:

<http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/197>

### About the poets:

**Marilyn Nelson:** <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/97>  
**Naomi Shihab Nye:** <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/174>  
**Marilyn Singer:** <http://www.marilynsinger.net/>  
**Charles R. Smith, Jr.:** <http://www.charlesrsmithjr.com/>

### About teaching poetry:

<http://www.poetryclass.net/index.htm>

### On using poetry:

[http://www.hbook.com/magazine/articles/2005/may05\\_lempke.asp](http://www.hbook.com/magazine/articles/2005/may05_lempke.asp)