

Celebrating Student Works: Red Room Poetry Workshop at Riverside High School

Dr Tamryn Bennett

Where hawks used to nest, where
galahs used to
feed, where wallabies used to shelter;
They came with
their machines and their dogs, flushing
out the wildlife
and ravaging the landscape, cutting
down the trees and
scooping out the hills...

~ Ruby, Year 7, Riverside High School

Ruby's poem is one of hundreds composed by Riverside High School students as part of a Red Room poetry workshop with Launceston performance poet, Bert 'Storyteller' Spinks, in April 2013. Supported by the TATE/ ALEA State Conference, over ninety students from Years 7-10 explored a range of reading, listening, speaking, writing and publishing activities from the digital learning resource, *The Disappearing*.

Designed by The Red Room Company, *The Disappearing* learning resource draws from the public project of the same name. *The Disappearing* is a free app for iPad, iPhone and smartphone devices that geo-locates poems to place. Aligned with Stage 4 and 5 listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing outcomes of the Australian Curriculum: English, *The Disappearing* functions as an interactive digital library of contemporary poetry about place. Combining technology, multimodal and cross curricula content, the app offers students and teachers access to more than 120 poems by celebrated Australian poets. Additionally, workshops utilising this resource encourage students to understand how environments and histories are transformed over time, as well as providing students with an authentic publication mode for poetry and descriptive writing about memory and place.

Commissioned specifically for the



Poet Bert Spinks with Riverside High School students

Riverside *Disappearing* workshop, Bert Spinks composed a poem for the school community. Titled 'The Wolves', Bert's poem was inspired by his bushwalks in the Tasmanian wilderness and family stories of thylacine spotting. At the beginning of each workshop Bert performed 'The Wolves' and asked students to consider its connection to the local environment and the disappearance of this legendary creature.

The Wolves (excerpt)

Five wolves went hiding in the corners of the island,
each with stripes across their spines just like the newly arrived
men's, who also wore faces darkened with the
desire to kill and devour whatever might present itself
as an indication that life

had come before them, and would go on long after they
had gone. The wolves: they made homes for themselves
in the ridges of the mountains or the entanglements of
trees, or roamed from rainforest to altiplano snapping
their teeth and howling out

the hard words the visitors refused to learn.

~ **Bert 'Storyteller' Spinks**,
poem commissioned by *The Red Room Company 2013*
for *Riverside High School*

Following this listening activity students were invited to compose their own ekphrastic group poem in response to an image of the Tasmanian Tiger. This quick writing activity asked students to compose an individual four-line stanza about the thylacine. They then selected their favourite line and read this aloud to form a collaborative group poem.

The wild spark in a marble eye
a flick of tail, a curl like fire.
I see this yellow figure lying on the ground
a ghost of the past that haunts the present.

~ **excerpt from Year 9 group poem**

By starting with short collaborative activities, the atmosphere within the Riverside workshops was interactive, relaxed and exploratory. Bert's experiences as a young poet, and his connection with the subject of the poem also modelled the process of poetic composition, with many students commenting on how different it was to 'hear poetry in the air' and to see it spoken from the mouth of the poet instead of on the page.

In an extended writing activity students were asked to compose a longer poem, or suite of poems, about places and things in the world around them that were in the process of vanishing or transforming. Bert answered questions and gave feedback as students worked, encouraging them to experiment with a spectrum of poetic forms and to think and work like poets, approaching the form from the inside out. The resulting poems ranged from memories of childhood hiding places to persuasive texts about environmental degradation. And while the voices, length and subject of poems varied, students were connected in their capacity to think deeply about the subject and their personal connections to the theme of *The Disappearing*. After sharing and performing their pieces, students had time to refine their poems before they were collected for publication on The Red Room Company website and *The Disappearing* app along with Bert's commissioned poem and other student poems from across the country.

Wrapping up the workshop, students created erasure poetry, also known as blackout poetry. This activity is great for expanding vocabulary and stems from found poetry techniques by Tom Phillips (*A Humument*) and Austin Kleon (*Blackout Poetry*). Working individually, Riverside students 'disappeared' parts of an existing text using markers or pens to reveal new poems. Pages from old books or magazines can be used as source material, but in this instance students used newspaper columns, circling words before colouring over other parts of the text to expose their poetic bones just in time to show a visiting journalist and photographer from *The Examiner*.

Of his Riverside experience Bert says, 'I really love the idea that the app brings poetry to real life situations. Having the opportunity to relate to students across a range of grades was great, and in each class, they were enthusiastic and engaged. The staff were also very supportive of our program. It was a fun, energetic and successful day at Riverside!'

The success of the Riverside High School workshops also speaks to the benefits of professionally delivered programs within Creative Writing classes to enhance imaginative expression, creative confidence and authentic publication outcomes. Read more Riverside student poems, watch 'The Wolves', or listen to an ABC interview with Bert and the students via The Red Room Company website:

www.redroomcompany.org/education/projects/riverside-high-school-tas/

Find out how to run a Red Room Poetry Education workshop at your school:
www.redroomcompany.org/education/teachers/

Special thanks to all participating Riverside students and staff, Cameron Hindrum, Jenny O'Shannessey, Bert 'Storyteller Spinks' (www.storytellerspinks.com), Erika Boas and TATE.

Bio

Dr. Tamryn Bennett is The Red Room Company's Education Manager. She teaches Creative Writing at UNSW and has facilitated poetry workshops for ETAWA, TATE, ACTATE, NZATE, Artspace and El Centro de Cultura Digital (Mexico). Tamryn's poetry and essays have appeared in *Five Bells*, *Nth Degree*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *THEthe Poetry*, *Tabula Rasa*, *English in Australia* and *ImageText*.

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