



Where do you get your ideas?

Sue Hardy Dawson

As a poet, I often get asked 'Where do you get your ideas?'

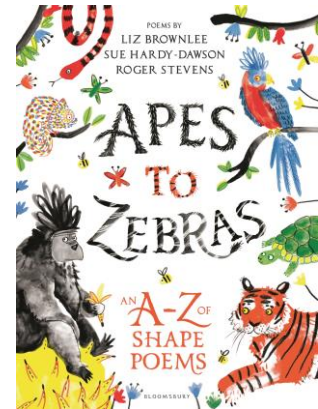
All poems start with an idea. What I mean by this is I'm often not expecting to write a poem – that's why I carry a notebook – my brain is constantly fishing for ideas. I never know which idea will hang about in a book on a shelf and which will grab me and start to rattle around inside my head.

One of my favourite poems is Ted Hughes' *The Thought Fox*. This poem was an epiphany for me as a child. Ideas could form just as the fox does in Ted's poem and catching them and finding a container in which to put them is one of the things a poet does. Sometimes, I try lots of different containers for my ideas, sometimes, just like the idea itself, the words suggest a container that fits the words.

I typed the following into my phone whilst walking my dogs.

Draft 1

*Oh I fish for them in languid pools
at the edge of darkness caught on the moon
Wait for falling stars in the backs of cars
on a window ledge in a spider's web
underneath the bed in a rivers tune*

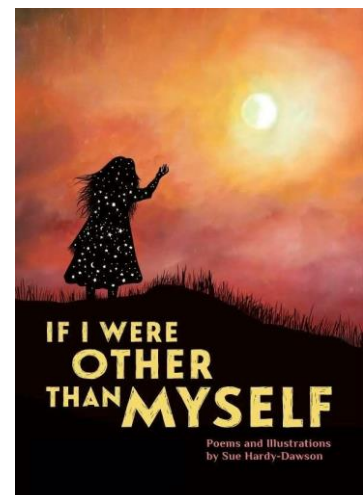


So that was it. The beginning of an idea. As it turns out, there were some words that rhymed in there but I hadn't intentionally done that.

Equally, because I had written it quickly, some of the ideas were jumbled up and not fully explored. The next thing I did, and often do, is write it out more as a poem might be:

Draft 2

*Oh I fish for them
in languid pools
at the edge of darkness
caught on the moon
Wait for falling stars
in the backs of cars
on a window ledge
in a spider's web
underneath the bed
in a rivers tune*



The poem seemed to work well as a list poem because the order of ideas wasn't something that mattered greatly. When I came to organise the lines and expand the images, I felt that rhymes could work quite well.

So finally, it became:



Obviously, my poem rhymes but it isn't important that it does. I merely capitalised on happy accidents in the rough idea. Also, I have put the images into a sort of order, things you might see out of the window or whilst walking, things that might wake you at night. Essentially, this poem is both a personal and a shared experience poem. Ideas come from everywhere. Sometimes, we don't even realise they are forming. Other times, they take over and demand to be heard. So, there is no wrong or right way, each poet's journey will be slightly different.

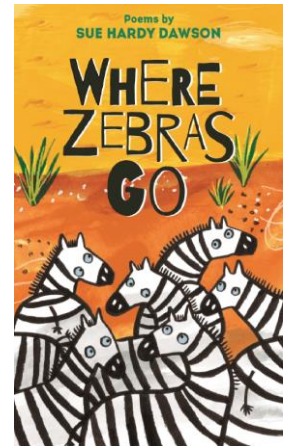
1. **Make a list of places.** Collect as many ideas for somewhere you might find a poem or idea and write them on a sheet of paper or whiteboard. Emphasise that the surreal and magical in this type of poem is all good.

2. **Put unusual places together.** 'In your pocket' or 'up in a cloud' could become 'in a pocket of clouds'. This gives a whole new dimension.

3. **Make a class poem first.** Collect ideas from the whole class

4. **Children then write their own.**

Note: **Poems don't have to rhyme.** If the children want to make them rhyme it's important to explain to children that it's the very last thing and should be achieved by moving their ideas around rather than using words just because they rhyme. I use rhyme and rhythm a lot but I always explain it's the last thing I do and never at the expense of using the best possible words or ideas.



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Sue Hardy Dawson is a poet & illustrator. Her debut collection, *Where Zebras Go*, was shortlisted for the 2018 CLIPPA prize. Sue's poems and CLPE teaching resources can be found on the CLPE website.

Her second, *Apes to Zebras* co-written with poetry ambassadors, Roger Stevens and Liz Brownlee won the North Somerset Teachers Book Awards.

Sue visits schools and has worked with the Prince of Wales Foundation, 'Children and the Arts. As a dyslexic poet, she loves encouraging reluctant readers and writers.

Her new solo collection, *If I Were Other Than Myself* is due out with Troika, February 2020.

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