

Itty Bitty Literacy

By Lorna Oppedisano

“If you’re my friend, you end up with a poem.”—Nancy Carpenter, author, poet and teacher

Photography by Alexis Emm

Nancy Carpenter dreams to be the Johnny Appleseed of poetry, handing out a poem per person. Perhaps a lofty aspiration for some, but – having written literally thousands of poems in her lifetime already – you could say that the published author and teacher is well on her way to fulfilling that goal.

Born into a family of readers – “very much a college family,” Nancy said – she always knew she would be a teacher. She followed in the footsteps of her aunt and earned a bachelor’s degree from Mount Holyoke College, a school with a great poetry tradition.

“I was just immersed in a world of literature and writing,” she remembered, “and it was wonderful.”

Nancy went on to earn a master’s degree from Dartmouth University, and teach grades seven through 12 as a reading and writing specialist. While she didn’t exclusively teach poetry, she did put an emphasis on the unit, and approach it in a unique way, making sure to pay tribute to modern poets as well as the greats. She always encouraged her students, even the ones who groaned after hearing “poetry unit,” to produce quality writing, she said.

When Nancy was 30 years old, she had her first son and the family moved from a house in Dallas to a small hay farm that they slowly expanded. At that point, Nancy was writing poetry, but not in any professional manner. She would write pieces for family; she was the “family laureate,” writing “occasional poems,” as she called them.

“It was a pastime. I have an amazing ability not to make money,” she said with a chuckle.

Part of running the farm meant owning horses. When Nancy went to her first horse show to watch, she thought to herself, “I could do that!”

She decided to try her hand at show riding, and was in national competitions for 25 years. Most importantly, she was introduced to two miniature horses, Itty and Bitty, and another career was set in motion.

Having written poetry for family and friends until this point, it had never been a serious profession for Nancy. But considering she is a teacher at heart – she had continued to tutor children while running the farm – authoring a children’s poetry book was the perfect fit.

She started small. She connected with illustrator Dana Bauer, and they created the “Itty & Bitty” series. She toured with the horses themselves, visiting local children’s charities and hospitals – the horses stayed outside, of course – and then to local schools.

After the second book – which she worked on with illustrator Rose Mary Berlin – she began going on book tours.

The key to Itty & Bitty’s success was the “hook,” Nancy explained. The first book in the series was the first trade book in the country on miniature horses.

One of Nancy’s goals with her children’s book writing – both the Itty & Bitty series, and the work that she’s had published in *Highlights for Children* – is to help children learn to read. Her poems are simple, she said, but she’s not afraid to challenge the readers with more complex words.

Along with being the Johnny Appleseed of poetry and working to increase literacy, Nancy hopes to get a number of new books published in the future. She has a couple more Itty & Bitty books in the pipeline, as well as a few collections for adults. But, as with most writers, not all of her work is for the masses.

“A lot of my poems will never be published, because they’re too personal. They’re for friends,” Nancy said. “If you’re my friend, you end up with a poem. I have thousands.” *SWM*

To learn more about the Itty & Bitty series, visit ittyandbitty.com. For more of Nancy’s work, visit quilltokeyboard.com.

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