

The poet, the children and the fantastical map – a story of words and writing from the woods

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Imagine a poet was sitting in a wood in Cambridge. Imagine she could hear children playing, and she sat silently listening. Imagine what she heard made her write her own poems and that the children wrote prolifically too. Imagine this is a true story...

On the inside title page of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination's latest publication, *A poem of a dream of the woods*, there are three short lines:

/ Jackie Kay

/ Children from The Spinney Primary School

/ Elena Arévalo Melville

They represent an extraordinary collaboration between very young children, the Makar (the national poet for Scotland) and a professional illustrator, in which each contributor is valued equally. Inside the book are poems from Jackie that grow from children's phrases, poems from the children inspired by Jackie's ideas and invitations, illustrations in which children's trees and monsters meet Elena's sketches, and Elena's *Fantastical Map of the Spinney Wild Woods* which brings together words, images and the physical landmarks of the Spinney.

CCI has always believed in listening to children and taking their ideas seriously. Inviting adult professionals to work in collaboration with young children puts our beliefs to a public test. It is a provocative act and an important one, especially in the midst of current debates about childhood, language, literacy and teaching.

This article is not a detailed contribution to that debate but an optimistic example of how we might choose to work with very young children to support their linguistic powers. It is, I hope, a story which shows we can learn as much from children about language and literacy as they can learn from us. And a reminder that listening sometimes sits quietly at the heart of education, like a poet might sit in the woods.

You go first...

Our book of poems and illustrations really began on the day a tiny patch of woodland in South Cambridgeshire was opened for the first time in ten years. The Spinney sits right on the boundary of the Spinney Primary School, and for the last three years CCI has been working with the school to establish the woods as a place for creative adventuring.

We encouraged the school to invite the youngest children to lead the way, anticipating that four and five year olds would be intrepid explorers of the ditch, the tangled riot of plants, and the hidden paths. But we also wanted to give the children a chance to become

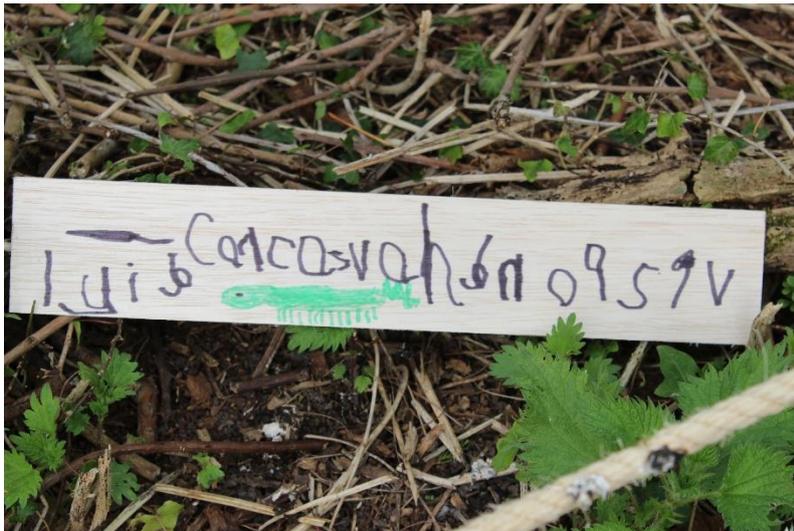
knowledgeable experts and interpreters of the Spinney. Their first impressions and discoveries would define how we thought about the Spinney for years to come. We wanted to give their very young voices lasting authority.

Places and signs in the Spinney

And they didn't disappoint. We saw children abandon cleared places in favour of the most overgrown parts of the Spinney; we travelled with them to the woods' edges and furthest corners; and we saw a prolific response to this free exploration in the children's creative work in clay and drawing back in the classroom.

In our first short film from the Spinney you can see children leading Ruth Sapsed, CCI's director, to their favourite places in the woods – to the 'desert' with its rabbits, through the bush 'that might hurt you a little bit', into the 'engine', to a pile of old branches and abandoned sleepers. <https://www.cambridgecandi.org.uk/projects/footprints/beginnings>

The children also led their own families into the Spinney on a special 'stay and play' morning, and made signs for the Spinney which communicated its physical and fantastical identity in their own words and images: 'to the magic house', 'this pond has crocodiles in', 'the angry bird ship'.



'Are you Jackie Kay?'

When I returned the following year to work with the same class of children, now five and six years old, and an older class of seven and eight year olds, we shaped this second project directly from our experience with the four year olds. We prioritised free play in the woods and creative adventuring with open-ended materials in the classroom. And we went one step further.

We invited Jackie Kay to explore and write alongside the children. We were not expecting her to give a masterclass in poetry but to work with the children's own expertise and discoveries, finding ways for her strong ideas to meet theirs.

When I arrived to begin the project, the older children asked if I was Jackie Kay. Although they wouldn't meet her for weeks yet, their anticipation and excitement was palpable. They knew she was a writer and they had read and listened to some of her poems. They repeated her name out loud, giving it magic and power.

On our first visit to the Spinney I wrote phrases from Jackie's long poem *The world of trees* on pieces of torn paper and offered these halfway through our morning to the children. The papers were placed face down, like cards, on an old tree stump and the children were invited to choose one, alone or with their friends, find out what the words said, and find a place for them to live in the Spinney.

Playing with words

I'd like to say I *knew* the children would be interested in these words, but I didn't. In fact, I had some serious doubts. I was trying to introduce poetry into a morning of very active and intense imaginative play; there were children stuck in 'quicksand' and battling live brambles, there were others flying round the woods on magic motorbikes. Why would they want to stop for words?

The game of phrases on upside down cards was a deliberate invitation to keep playing, and when I said the words came from Jackie Kay, the children's eyes lit up. They searched for exactly the right place for the words to live in the Spinney: '*dreaming*' appeared in a tangle of creepers ('*You go inside a dream there*', Sofia explained); '*waiting for another tree*' lay patiently among old roots; '*bony fingers*' sat provocatively by a pile of pale thin sticks.

Jackie Kay comes to the woods

When Jackie came to join us she did sit quietly listening in the woods, and spent time observing the children's play from a distance. But she also told stories of her own childhood, laughed raucously with the children, asked them direct questions, set them tasks. Writing with Jackie was sometimes methodical and disciplined, sometimes unpredictable and adventurous. The children responded brilliantly, playing with words, building poems from other people's phrases, writing together and alone.

We kept an old collecting cabinet in the woods and encouraged children to put words in there for others to find and use. Jackie's first poem in the collection, 'Saps and rings and things to say in the forest' grew from Yijin's surprising phrase 'a nest of nettles':

*Drink the magic potion
And dream of what was lost*

*Like the trees dream of saps and rings
And nettles dream of nests*

*Dream of what became ash
Our loved ones, and what was returned to earth*

Like the trees dream of saps and rings

And nettles dream of nests...

/ Jackie Kay

Jackie invited the youngest children to write in different voices; a tree, an animal, their friends, themselves as old people. It was a complex invitation, playing with ideas of identity, time, change and perspective. It called on the children's powers of imagination and empathy, as well as their first-hand knowledge and relationship with the Spinney.

I wondered how five and six year old children would respond, what words would they find to speak in voices other than their own? Could they imagine themselves as old people looking back? Their responses were amazing and beautiful:

My tree would say he is afraid

My tree is afraid because of the wind

I would say to my tree: 'I am cold'

Animal is howling

If I was an old lady I would say to this tree:

'Look how lovely this tree is

It's lovely because of the bright leaves.'

/ Elia Doza (age 6)

Mapping the Spinney

Elena had perhaps the hardest job of all. We asked her to develop a new kind of visual map of the Spinney which could carry elements of the children's discoveries and inventions, and have points of actual orientation too. We wanted the map to intrigue the sixty children who had already been in the Spinney, and to work as a way in for new visitors.

We had no idea what the fantastical map would look like and Elena described a feeling of working *'like an actual cartographer mapping the wild and uncharted'*. The final image is made from more than fifty technical layers; the longer you look the more you begin to see.

We wanted the book of poems and illustrations to have this layered character too, so Elena positioned her sketches alongside children's trees and monsters and behind the poems. You can turn the pages and travel from tree to tree, from word to word, from voice to voice.

If you listen carefully, you begin to realise what is possible if we believe children are *already* accomplished explorers, writers, illustrators – even if they are still learning to read and write.

Full stops and fluency

We made many decisions about presenting the children's work in publication. We added punctuation and decided where line breaks should come, carefully matching our edits to the way words had been said out loud. We showed drafts to the children and asked if they

wanted to change anything. In the original writing process we had favoured fluency and getting ideas into words over grammar and word spacing.

Of course the rules of language are vital. We all have to learn how language is constructed and how to get it to say what we want and communicate to others. Grammar, the etymology of words, the structure of complex sentences can all be fascinating but children also need to grasp the power of words and discover what they can do with them.

Before they learn to read and write children have many languages of expression. Loris Malaguzzi referred to the ‘hundred, hundred languages’ and the ‘hundred more’. *A poem of a dream of the woods* doesn’t just bring together the spoken and written languages of the children and Jackie, and the visual languages of the children and Elena. It represents many other languages too: the language of dramatic play in the woods; the language of discovering and naming an unknown land; the many languages of friendship and conflict; the searching languages of time and memory.

In all of these languages the children were fluent. In their time in the woods and with Jackie every child wrote, every child drew prolifically. They did difficult things. They found other voices and understandings. When they say Jackie’s name now they still say it loudly with the same ring of magic and power. But the power is shared. The children are also writers and they know it, and there is space next to Jackie’s name for them to say their own.



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