

Expert Group Poet Biographies: Valerie Worth

Look around you. Look closely at something small, no matter how ordinary, and make a note of everything that you see. Could you write a poem about that object? This is what Valerie Worth did. Worth was a writer and poet from Pennsylvania. Born in Philadelphia in 1933, she lived with her mother, a botanist, and her father, a biology professor. Her parents encouraged a love of poetry from an early age by reading poetry to her, and her father wrote poetry inspired by his work as a biologist. This love of poetry and language led Worth to Swarthmore College, where she graduated with a degree in English.

While in college, Worth met her future husband, George Bahlke. After college, the two married and moved to different places around the country before settling in Clinton, New York. In Clinton, Worth joined a small writing group. It was in this group that she met Natalie Babbitt, a well-known author and illustrator, and began a close friendship. Worth shared some of her poetry with the group and Babbitt sent the poems to her publisher. Valerie Worth's first book of poems, *Small Poems*, was published in 1972. The book was illustrated by Babbitt. The pair went on to write and illustrate three more books of "small poems."

Valerie Worth's "small poems" were written specifically with children in mind. She liked to closely study the details of the everyday things around her, like weeds, flowers, and small animals. She wanted to write poetry that would "reach more deeply into the world [she] saw around [her]." Worth didn't write about important events from her own life like other writers of her time did. Instead, she wrote about experiences that she felt all children shared. Her poems were written in simple free verse using no stanzas and short lines, and they brought a fresh perspective to ordinary objects that struck a chord with her. She used imagery, or words that help to see and hear, when describing things in her poetry. When asked what advice she would give to young writers, Worth said, "I would say write poetry for the fun of it, for the joy of it, for the love of it. And especially for the love of the things you write about, whatever they may be—whether beautiful or ugly, grand or humble, birds of paradise or mosquitoes, stars or mud puddles: All are worthy of being written about if you feel a deep affection for them—or, indeed, if you feel strongly about them in any way at all."

Over the course of her career, Worth published a dozen books, both poetry and fiction. She received the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children in 1991. Worth died in 1994 at the age of 60. Next time you are struggling for inspiration, look closely at the most ordinary things, and perhaps you will be inspired, like Valerie, to write poetry.

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<<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/About/Awards/Worth.pdf>>.