

## Poetry and the Life of a Flaneur

An interview with author and poet [Julie Larios](#)

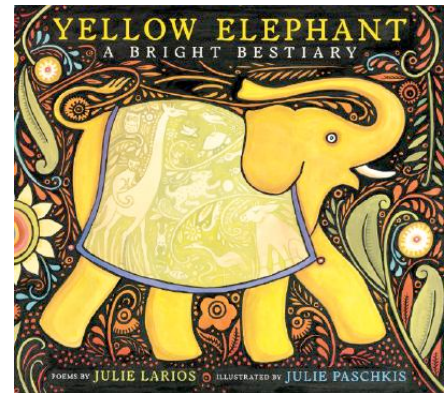


Julie is a gifted poet for children and adults, a brilliant speaker, and a former faculty member at [Vermont College of Fine Arts](#). In this excerpt from a 2008 interview, Julie speaks about her writing process and what it means to live life as a *flaneur*.

*Dianne: Since many know little about creating a poetry collection, can you share the process?*

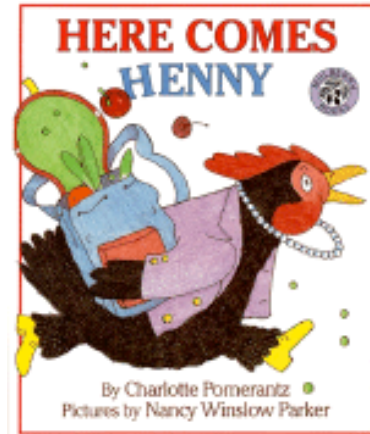
**Julie:** I had a lot of fun with [Imaginary Menagerie](#) and worked hard to make the collection feel all of-a-piece. The creatures definitely came first, though I have to admit that certain creatures appealed to me and stayed on the “list” I was making (mentally) because aspects about them intrigued me. Compared to [Yellow Elephant](#), where the choice focused in on familiar animals, [Imaginary Menagerie](#) tries to pull kids in to a less familiar world. I spent quite a bit of time turning possibilities for poems over and over in my head, and my guiding “title” at first was “Curious Creatures.” The collection started there, and the actual writing of poems came way down the line in the process.

I began [Imaginary Menagerie](#) by looking first at books about the strange creatures people were talking about when the Old World bumped up against the New World. I thought about the rhinoceros, the armadillo, other “strange but true” beasts. I wrote more than fourteen poems, then honed the choice down to what I thought would be a good spread of creatures from different cultures and traditions. In a collection of poems, you have to think about a through-line, something that pulls everything together. In [Imaginary Menagerie](#), I wanted to focus on the mystery.



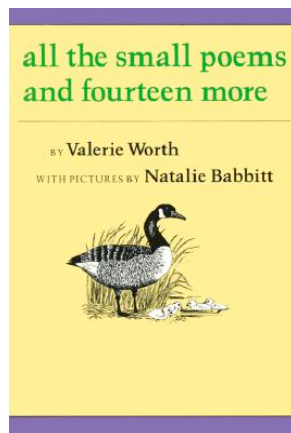
*Dianne: Can you talk about the genesis and revision of poems? For example, once you decide to write a poem about a mermaid, how do you explore the topic? Do you "google," free-associate, write to several different forms, search for images that might spark new ideas? How does "poem-making" work for you?*

**Julie:** Initially, my thinking about any subject for a poem is triggered by one of two things, both internalized. The first is a sense of mystery – the riddle (or you could call it the metaphor) behind whatever I’m considering, the ambiguities that are at the heart of poetry. In what way does this object (or this creature, or this relationship, or this event) remain mysterious no matter how carefully we look at it, no matter what we compare it to?



The second triggering factor is sound— for example, with the mermaid poem, I initially thought about how waves washing up on a beach sound as if they are saying, “I wish....I wish....” The poem sprang initially from that one sound, coupled with the thought of a woman caught between two worlds, not wholly belonging to either.

***Dianne:** Particularly in poetry and prose for young toddlers and preschoolers the sounds of the words themselves, and the musical, rhythmic patterns of the language delight the listener. I'm thinking particularly of books like [Here Comes Henny](#) by Charlotte Pomerantz. Perhaps included in this playful language experimentation, are jump rope rhymes and nonsense verse, which often make no sense at all, but which are fun to say and chant and move around to. Any thoughts as to why?*



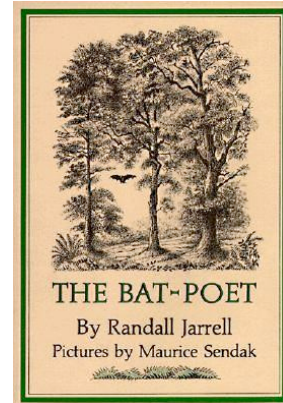
**Julie:** I love *Here Comes Henny*! For a long time, I’ve been fascinated with wordplay, with nonsense rhymes and playground poetry, thanks to two wonderful poets I studied with named Richard Kenney and Heather McHugh. Both of them encouraged me in my graduate workshops to experience sound in the way children do – through play, through nursery rhymes, ditties, lullabies, proverbs, curses, blessings, puns, riddles. There is a surprising list of modern poets who have done the same – look at the nursery rhyme rhythms of W.H Auden, or the work for children from poets like Richard Wilbur, Randall Jarrell, Ted Hughes and Valerie Worth. My advice to beginning poets is to go out onto a playground and eavesdrop for a day. Truth be told, a desire for rhyme and rhythm (and for play, and for patterns) is hardwired into our brains.

Children love the playfulness of language, they experiment with it constantly. They don’t always require logic. And they know the world is sometimes a dark, mysterious place. Sound, song, pattern, nonsense, energy, power, mystery – children float in that world.

*Dianne: So much of poetry and writing, in general, is linked to the idea that we must slow down and observe the usual and the unusual, take a detour once in a while, travel in a direction we're not always sure of.*

*You gave an amazing lecture at Vermont College about the topic of living the life of a flaneur. What does that look like? How does one fit this "slow-down time" into our hectic lives?*

**Julie:** Like everyone else in this busy world, I often rush around and forget to look at what's speeding past me. Too often, we experience the world in broad strokes and forget to stop, to step in and observe. I do have the desire to slow down in me, and I give in to that desire as often as I can. Is it just by luck that I've come to a life of writing? I don't think so.



What the *flaneur* knows how to do is to let go of the feeling that all activity must produce immediate results. A *flaneur* knows how to linger, how to tarry. Writing is like that. You learn how to lollygag, how to drift. I get the impression that some people think slowing down is unappealing and/or unattainable. Neither of those is true. You just have to make yourself do it. If you schedule writing time, then take that time and go for a walk with no discernible purpose. You're a writer during that walk, you're a writer when you stop to look at the way sunlight hits a tree at midday.

*Dianne: Do you have a favorite poetry exercise you like to share with children or adult wanna-be poets?*

**Julie:** Rethink the idea of "rhyme." Typically, the word "rhyme" is presented as full-rhyme, which produces patterns like June, moon, tune, croon, spoon. Too often, the pattern is artificial and stiff. Don't abandon sound and rhyme altogether – that also produces bland or banal writing. Look at off-rhyme, or near-rhyme. Move between two words (often opposites) by changing the word just slightly, sound-wise, each time. Here's an example: gold / goats / gates / gaze / graze / shave / shiver / silver

The rules for what makes something poetic are malleable. Sound is still involved, but it can be a subtle use of sound, not just a 2x4 over the head. Formula is poetry's enemy.