

Penny Harter,ⁱ American Poet and Haikuist – In Her Own Words

Interview by email by Janick Belleau (this writer's copy)

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JB – You have created *A Lesson Plan*ⁱⁱ which contains, shall we say, rules for haiku writing. Twenty years later, these are still applied by many haikuists. Are you still abiding by your own rules?

PH – Actually, the list of ‘rules’ from my lesson in *The Haiku Handbook* was created for a teacher (or poet/teacher) to use with a class, although I followed most of them and still believe in them.

JB – Thank you for sending me your paper *Why I Write Haiku*. I see it as an extension of *A Lesson Plan*. Everything one needs to know is in there.

PH – What I sent you was a slightly earlier version of the essay as it recently appeared in the book *The Unswept Path: Contemporary American Haiku*.ⁱⁱⁱ My writing the essay, and revising it as the years have passed, has been central to my understanding of writing haiku which forms only a portion of the poetry that I write. The title of the paper in the book is *Seeing and Connecting*.

JB – To see a poem means that there is an image one could connect with.

PH – The haiku presents the event in an image, SHOWS us what happened, does not tell us about it or tell us what emotion to feel. It presents a specific event or observation.

JB – Already in 1985, you were writing that one could create ‘emotions by connecting two or more images together in new and strange ways.’ Where do images come from?

PH – An image is a group of words which presents an object or objects, and possibly some action that appeals to the senses. (They appear from three sources:) here and now; memory; and fantasy. (...) ‘Imagination’ has the word ‘image’ in it, and can refer to all three categories.

JB – You also were writing in 1985: ‘The important thing about writing haiku is that it makes us look at things, hear things, notice the touch and taste of things in ways that will connect us with the world around us (...).’

PH – Writing haiku opens my mind, my senses, and my spirit. It helps me get in touch with what is most important — paying attention to what I’ve called, “that click in the gut”, or “leap of the spirit”. When asked to define poetry, I have always said that writing a poem is, first and foremost, an act of SEEING, followed by CONNECTING. Writing haiku helps me to feel relationship between myself and OTHER, so that, in a way, I become OTHER.

JB – Let’s talk about *kigo*. Lots of haikuists seem to think that a haiku must have a *kigo* which they’ve been told is a season word. It leads them to think that the name of a season must appear.

PH – Although I say (in 1985) one should indicate the season by a *kigo*, I sometimes do not include a season word, as in the following favorite haiku of mine.^{iv}

evening rain---
I braid my hair
into the dark

JB – Ms. Harter, in your paper *Why I Write Haiku*, you write: ‘I believe it is important to set the poem in a particular time and place.’ Why do you believe it is important?

PH – Setting a haiku in a particular time and place makes it more immediate. All life is local, each personal moment of experience, if depicted well, can resonate for others, and the specific is always more powerful than the general. However, I do not believe that all haiku must be written from immediate experience in the present tense. One may certainly use memories and even imagined material in a haiku, as long as the end result is a haiku that seems immediate.

JB – So, one can, and should, write, and rewrite, her poem / haiku as long as it seems necessary?

PH – Basho did say many things about haiku, including ‘On your lips a thousand times’ i.e. one should be working and reworking one’s haiku as necessary to get it into proper poetical shape. Please note that this does not have anything much to do with 5/7/5, but rather to do with ‘the best words in the best order’, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said about poetry.

JB – One last question, if I may. For you, haiku is the micro cosmos in the macro cosmos, is it not?

PH – For me, each haiku I write is like breathing out, giving back to Earth recognition, affirmation, and gratitude. (...) Writing haiku is one way of translating the Earth – honoring what the mountain, the dragonfly, the neighbor, and even the dirt under our feet mean to our existence. (...) The writing and sharing of haiku can bring us together as we celebrate our connections with the larger world that we share, while at the same time affirming the particular times and places of our lives and our human responses to them.

JB – Thank you very much, Ms Harter.

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Some haiku by ©Penny Harter

migrating butterflies
cover the names---
the war memorial^v

a spiral of gnats
from branch to branch---
rain-wet pine ^{vi}

beekeeper
humming
back ^{vii}

ⁱ Harter, the author of many types of poetry was born in New York City. She began publishing longer poetry in the 1960s. It was in the early 1970s that Penny Harter started experimenting with haiku. Starting in 1972, she conducted writing workshops in various schools. Today, Harter and William J. Higginson, her husband and writing colleague, reside in New Mexico, where Harter is a full-time teacher of creative writing at the Santa Fe Preparatory School. Over the years, she has published more than fifteen books of poems, including four of haiku and received many awards and honours throughout her career as a writer and teacher.

ⁱⁱ *A Lesson Plan That Works* created by Penny Harter and published in William J. Higginson's book which she cosigned: *The Haiku Handbook – How to Write, Share and Teach Haiku*; McGraw-Hill Book Company; 1985; pp. 167-174.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Unswept Path: Contemporary American Haiku*; edited by John Brandi and Dennis Maloney; White Pine Press (Buffalo, New York); 2005; pp. 100-104.

^{iv} Won second prize at the Haiku North America conference in Evanston, Illinois in the late 1990s; it was published in *The Heron's Nest* in 2000.

^v Won an honourable mention in the 1993 Henderson contest and was published in *Frogpond*, the same year.

^{vi} Although this haiku is unpublished, it won a prize in Japan.

^{vii} This haiku concludes the version of her essay which appears in *The Unswept Path*, to provide a sort of summary of its theme.