



# Mary Quattlebaum

The following activity guide was written by the author, Mary Quattlebaum.

## About the Author

Mary Quattlebaum enjoys writing picture books, poetry, and novels for kids. Elements of her own life often show up in her work—from her husband’s funny experiences as a child magician to her weedy plot in a city community garden to adventures on Washington’s Metro train.

### *Where did you grow up?*

I grew up in the country in Virginia. My six younger siblings and I had all kinds of animals: dogs, horses, turtles, hamsters, cows, cats, fish, and goats. We roamed the woods and fields near our home—and even watched wild beavers, deer, and all kinds of birds.

### *What was your favorite book as a kid?*

I loved poetry and still have my childhood copy of *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*. My sister Helen and I adored horse books, especially those by Marguerite Henry. I reread *Misty of Chincoteague* every few years. Also as the oldest kid, I often read aloud to my younger siblings. Our favorites were the Curious George and Amelia Bedelia books as well as *The Little Brute Family* by Russell Hoban.

### *How did you become a writer?*

I loved reading and writing as a kid. I remember creating a series of tiny illustrated books about a girl and her pet donkey when I was about seven years old. As a teenager, I was very concerned about environmental issues, especially the plight of the whales, and wrote letters to the editor of our local newspaper and to congressmen and ambassadors. I’m also very grateful to several teachers and professors for their knowledge and support: Pat Cheadle, my second grade teacher; Sheila Cockey, my Spanish teacher; Debbie Green, my college advisor; and David Porush, my creative writing teacher. While a medical writer at a children’s hospital, I had a chance, with my husband, to work with the sick kids there and their poetry. Their writing was so creative, playful, and heartfelt that the kids inspired me to try writing for children.



### **Where do you get your ideas?**

Everywhere! Many of my books were inspired by my city neighborhood, by my family, by stories my parents told of their childhoods. You never know what might become a poem or story—mud pies, kiwis, a lost mitten. I try to write down ideas quickly, before I forget.

### **How do you write?**

Well, I mostly rewrite. I usually write a first draft in longhand on a yellow notepad. I revise as I word process that draft on the computer. And then I revise some more. I try to date my drafts—and have found that it can take two years from starting a short poem to finally finishing and feeling satisfied with it. Poetry is an especially enjoyable challenge because its form is so important. Each word, each mark of punctuation, must be carefully considered.

### **What advice do you have for young writers?**

Writing is exciting because you can do all types of writing—reports, poems, letters, stories. As an adult, you can be a newspaper reporter, a reviewer of books and plays, a novelist, a poet. As a freelance writer, I enjoy doing lots of different kinds of writing. And I get to work at home in my cluttered office and wear sweat pants.

## **Suggested Activities for Specific Books and Poems**

### **A Year on My Street**

- Poems come in all shapes and sizes, with all kinds of subjects. Some rhyme and some don't. Discuss elements of poetry and ask students to identify:
  - Repetition ("Taking My Double Dutch Turn," "Listening to the Sax Man").
  - Onomanopoeia ("I Wave to My Drummer-Friend Jake," "Big Boys Shooting Hoops").
  - Imagery ("Listening to the Sax Man," "Feeding the Pigeons").
  - Rhyme ("Taking My Double Dutch Turn," "Making a Street of Snow People").
  - Form, contrasting free verse ("Stepping Out in Red Boots," "I Wave to My Drummer-Friend Jake) with rhymed or metered poems ("Making a Street of Snow People," "Walking in My Dreams").
- These poems are about the people and animals in a city neighborhood. Direct students to think about their own neighborhoods and to make lists of some of the people, animals, and happenings around them. Tell them to write a poem or story about their neighborhoods.
- Read "Stepping Out in Red Boots." Tell students to listen for words that describe the boots. Direct them to write about their own favorite pieces of clothing and how they feel wearing them.
- Read "Big Boys Shooting Hoops." Direct students to listen for the sounds of a basketball game. Talk about the shape of a poem, of a poem as an example of free verse (nonrhyming poetry) that looks sort of like a game of basketball. Because people dribble, jump, pivot, and shoot in a game, the author wanted to begin each line in a different place so that the poem "moves" around a lot—just like someone playing basketball. Direct students to list sounds associated with favorite sports or activities. Ask them to discuss the shape or movement of this activity. (That is, how might you make a poem look like someone playing soccer or running or even reading a book?) Direct them to write about their favorite sports or activities, trying to capture their sounds and movement.



### **Jackson Jones and the Puddle of Thorns**

1. Jackson's friend Reuben gives him a surprise. Direct students to think and write about someone they'd like to surprise. What might they give or do for this person?
2. A bully named Blood constantly bothers Jackson and his friends. Direct students to discuss Jackson's reactions toward the bully and to write down their own feelings about bullying. How have they handled bullies or excessive teasing?

### **Underground Train**

1. This book includes sights and sounds of a trip on Washington's underground train. Direct students to close their eyes and call to mind an interesting trip that they once took. Ask them to think about what they saw, what they heard, and what made the trip interesting. Direct them to write about their trips.

### **Aunt CeeCee, Aunt Belle, and Mama's Surprise**

1. Read like a play, with one student as narrator and others taking the parts of the family members. Those without speaking parts might be cats. Try adding props. Have fun!
2. Tell students to list personality traits of Aunt CeeCee, Aunt Belle, Daddy, Mama, Flo, and the girl narrator. Ask them to list personality traits for members of their own families.
3. The family in this book is like the author's own large, noisy family, which loves celebrations. Ask students to discuss their own families and activities they enjoy doing together. Direct them to write about one of these activities.

### **Tips for Young Poets**

1. Look and listen. Ideas are all around you.
2. Read LOTS of poems.
3. SHAPE. Play with different forms (haiku, sonnet, free verse, etc.). Form is the vase you pour your words into.
4. SOUND. Play with different rhythms. Be aware of the sounds of words as well as the meanings. Play with alliteration, consonance, off rhyme, and rhyme.
5. IMAGERY. Paint pictures with your words. A poem is so short that dull language really stands out.
6. Revise, revise, revise! Read your poems aloud as you revise.

### **Books for Kids: How to Write Poetry**

*Handbook of Poetic Forms*, edited by Ron Padgett (Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1987).

*How to Write Poetry* by Paul Janeczko (Scholastic, 1999).

*The Young Author's Do-It-Yourself Book* by Donna Guthrie, Nancy Bentley, and Katy Keck Arnsteen, illustrated by Katy Keck Arnsteen (Millbrook Press, 1994).