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Well-versed? If Novels in Verse Are So Accessible, Why Don't We Have More?

Tia Fisher

Abstract

In her presentation, Tia Fisher will examine the elements in verse novels which work so well for a hard-to-reach young audience. She will go on to explore some reasons for the format's currently 'niche' status within publishing and suggest ways we might make verse novels as popular with gatekeepers in the UK as they are in the US. With much focus from reading professionals on *engagement* (it was, for example, the theme of the Youth Libraries Group conference in September 2023), verse novels are an excellent way to entice developing or dormant young readers to pick up a book for pleasure.

Keywords: *verse novels, craft, engagement*

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In 1993, the American author Virginia Ewell Wolf wrote what is widely considered to be the first verse novel, *Make Lemonade* ^[1]. She wanted to encourage the teenage mothers with whom she was working to read, and devised a novel in a series of short free-verse poems. She was successful and the format became really popular in the States, for both middle grade and Young Adult. A decade later, Sarah Crossan brought the format back from the U.S., and her debut, *The Weight Of Water*, ^[2] was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. Despite this, verse novels just haven't made the same splash over here as there have in the States, and here I want to examine the suitability of verse novels for latent and emerging readers; possible reasons why there are so few titles in the UK, and how these may be overcome.

I'm not alone in thinking that verse novels win over reluctant readers. Jason Reynolds, the former US National Children's Laureate and author of the ground-breaking verse novel *Long Way Down*, ^[3] thinks that our approach to reluctant readers is all wrong. If someone's afraid of dogs, he argues, we don't present them with a pitbull. So if a young person is intimidated by literature, why do we show up with a pack of pitbulls in the form of pages and expect them to stop running away? Instead, he says, we should offer them the 'palm sized pup' of a verse novel and they could get the buzz of completion and understanding, maybe for the first time ever ^[4].

One reason for their appeal is simply, fewer words. A verse novel has about a third of the word count of its prose counterpart, and it offers the reward of finishing a story fast, of feeling successful. A verse novel can be read in class, in its entirety, and both fluent and non-fluent children really benefit from being read to ^[5]. Children who struggle with writing can create fully structured, exciting, emotive, empathic stories themselves using narrative verse.

Serena Malloy, the dyslexic author of a middle grade verse novel called *Wider Than the Sea* ^[6], says that asking dyslexic children to read a big block of text with no spaces is like asking them to climb a mountain. The line breaks and the white spaces of verse are great for neurodiverse readers and those who have English as an additional language. Barrington Stoke, the expert publishers in books with high interest and low reading difficulty, are exploring the research into diverse novels themselves, and I await their research with interest.

Verse is *authentic*. Relevant. Authors like Dean Atta, Lucy Cuthew, Sara Bernard and myself, blend different formats: verse, prose, text messages, web pages and scripts. I even put a shopping list in. Some verse novels feel like a slice of life.

For teens whose brains have been rewired by their phones, the fast scrolling through the pages of a verse novel will feel familiar. There are so many ways in which an author can control the pace of a verse novel by spacing and position of the text on the page.

According to American teacher-librarian Dorie Raybuck, reluctant readers are often visual learners, and the meaning of text in verse novel can be supported through concrete poems and calligrams and the graphic placement of the words ^[7].

Readers of verse novels are taken from scene to scene in an almost cinematic style. And as with graphic novels, it's up to the reader to bridge the liminal spaces between the image of one poem and the next, so they collaborate in the storytelling. Literary theorist, Dr. Vera Nünning, thinks that this 'affective gap', as she calls it, the need to infer rather than being told, intensifies the reader's experience ^[8]. Verse novels deal with intense emotional issues. They're colloquial. They're raw and gritty, with natural speech rhythms. Related most frequently in the first person, the reader is dropped into the narrator's world like a player in a video game. This greater engagement makes for greater empathy and a fifth of the Empathy Lab's Read for Empathy secondary school fiction collections are verse novels ^[9].

According to the National Literacy Trust, two out of three young people read song lyrics on screens ^[10]. Ruth Ennis, who works in outreach with Children's Books Ireland, baits her hook accordingly. She hides the book behind her back and says, 'Do you like lyrics?' Only when she has their buy-in, does she produce a verse novel and say, 'Then you'll love this!'

The rhythms of song, of speech, of singing, of running, even a dog panting, can be transcribed. There's so much immersive immediacy, young people might not even realise that they're reading a series of poems.

But verse novels are more than a quick read. The readers can revisit each poem, to infer, analyse the layout and the poetic devices, dig to find the deeper meanings tucked inside. The verse novel, in my opinion, more than deserves a place on the curriculum, on syllabuses, and to be promoted by teachers in schools in their quest to promote reading for pleasure.

The 2023 National Literacy Trust *Report into Reading Engagement* ^[11] put reading enjoyment in the UK at the lowest level since the survey started. Teenage boys' reading pleasure, particularly boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, has plummeted.

When I wanted to write a novel about county lines child exploitation, my target audience was 14-year-old boys, so I chose narrative verse as my medium, and tried to make it as accessible and entertaining as I possibly could. I wove in other mediums and formatted the text to bring the page alive. I stripped my syntax to the bone, hid the poetic devices like courgettes in pasta sauce. Did it work? I think it did. *Crossing the Line* ^[12] is currently nominated for the Yoto Carnegie Medal 2024 and longlisted for the UK Literacy Association 2024 Book Awards.

So if narrative verse is so engaging, if it wins awards, why is it still niche in the UK? Is it so hard to get published, or is nobody *writing* verse novels? Rachel Hamilton, an agent at BIA, told me that verse novels still make up only a very small percentage of her submissions. In fact, in my conversations with members of SCBWI (The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators), I heard of several authors who were advised by their agents to rewrite into prose. One of them was even quietly ghosted. And it's

not clear whether the 'No poetry, please' on agent profiles actually includes verse novels. I only know of one agent (Rachel Mann, ex JULA, now at CAA) who mentions them specifically on her wish list.

But perhaps, agents are wary because publishers are wary? Conversation with Rachel Mann confirmed my own experience that some publishers feel that one verse novelist is enough, even if the readership, the theme, the setting is really different – which feels like crazy talk, because they wouldn't say, 'Oh, we've already got one prose writer, we don't need another'!

Measuring the market isn't easy, because data isn't reliable. Nielsen BookScan doesn't record verse novels as a separate product class, and the tag it gives is not applied very well. Searches for verse novels with booksellers return poor results. By my thumbnail count, there have been fewer than 50 traditionally published British titles since 2017. Although some agents I spoke to think publishers are getting more adventurous; they are more aware of accessibility issues and that young readers' love of wordplay and experimentation in picture books and chapter books doesn't just disappear as they get older; still, verse novels are a vanishingly small percentage of the children's book market. Publishing is a business: book sales are dependent on so many different factors, and not least is the amount of marketing budget allocated.

I tried to test whether, given the same amount of publicity, how well a verse novel would sell against a prose novel. I aimed as far as possible, for a like-for-like comparison, with the total consumer market sales of the 2019 Carnegie winning verse novel, *The Poet X*, versus its 2020 prose counterpart, *Lark* ^[13]. The playing field is as even as I can get it; both are for ages 13 plus and *Lark* is published by Barrington Stoke, particularly suitable for struggling, reluctant or dyslexic readers. Surprise! *The Poet X* sold twice as many paperbacks in its winning year as *Lark*. So my conclusion - which probably wouldn't withstand statistical scrutiny - is that verse novels *can* sell, if marketing and publicity make them visible.

If more young people were introduced to more verse novels, would demand grow? Kevin Cobane, who's a secondary school teacher and Empathy Lab judge, thinks so. He's sure that verse novels would be more popular if only teachers and students knew what was available and the topics and the themes that were tackled. They suffer from invisibility. Even the current Children's Laureate, poet and verse novelist, Joseph Coelho, doesn't talk about 'verse novels', only 'poetry'. Book Trust doesn't even tag 'verse novel' as a category. It's hard to pick your next narrative verse read when they're not on Waterstones' tables or they're not shelved separately, as graphic novels are.

And then there's the *fear* of poetry. Maybe verse novels get a bad rap from their name? I asked 40 teachers, booksellers, agents and editors if they felt that the perception of poetry was a barrier to the uptake of verse novels in the UK. Most of the respondents agreed. Poetry is seen as elitist and cryptic. According to the Centre of Literacy and Primary Education, 80% of teachers feel that poetry is a significant part of the curriculum and the vast majority of their children enjoy it ^[14]. But schools still only teach poetry once a year or less, and most teachers haven't had any developmental

training. And significantly, that 2023 report had no reference at all to the verse novel, the sweet spot format bridging the gap between prose and poetry. It wasn't even listed as a reading option.

The National Curriculum for English wants young people to develop the habit of reading widely and often^[15]. But a third of the young people surveyed by the Penguin/Runnymede Trust report 'Lit in Colour'^[16] said the books they studied put them off reading. There were too many old, straight, white, male authors of outdated texts which felt far from these young people's lives. The respondents struggled with the pressure of having to read a book quickly, and complained at how unnatural it was to read a couple of pages in class and then wait so long to read more. Verse novels could actually address all of those issues, but there are none I could find among the GCSE Key Stage 4 and 5 texts. Interestingly, since my initial research, *four* verse novels have been put forward as suggestions on the School Reading List blog^[17].

Texts are taught because they always have been taught, and not necessarily because they should be. When one exam board diversified their GCSE set texts, they learned (unsurprisingly) that without those hurdles to their understanding in the narrative, students were able to engage more deeply in the analysis of structure and language.

But learning to teach something new takes time, training and money for resources, which is why teachers choose the same texts over and over. The secondary school English teachers I spoke to all loved verse novels for the same reasons for their immediacy, engagement and accessibility. But a lack of training, understanding and resources was stopping the wider teaching of the format. Added to which, of course, there's no time to teach anything not on the exam syllabus.

Verse novels seem stuck in a causal loop of ignorance. To turn it into a virtuous spiral, we need research to prove the effectiveness of the format. With evidence behind them, gatekeepers could lower the drawbridge and publishers and educationists could develop resources to train teachers and students.

If all of the organisations and the reviewers and the awarding bodies could work in tandem, imagine what could be achieved. Perhaps if middle grade verse novels were taught at primary level, children might be more inclined to continue reading after Key Stage 2? Perhaps if young people enjoy their exam texts, they won't be turned off reading? Children who read for pleasure make better informed, more intelligent, empathic, and productive citizens.

Writers don't write verse novels because agents don't take them on, because publishers won't acquire them, because they don't sell. But if verse novels entered the literary mainstream, then publishers would have the confidence to take on more titles and writers will have more chances to experience the freedom and playfulness of this exciting, ever-evolving format.

Notes

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Author Biography

When not writing, Tia Fisher works in a busy children's library in South London where matching a child with the right book makes her day. She's the proud new owner of an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University with distinction.

While at Bath Spa, she put the finishing touches on *Crossing the Line* (Hot Key Books 2023), a verse novel for teens about a boy who gets caught up with a county lines drug gang. *Crossing the Line* has been hailed as, 'the first book i have ever finished other than aliens love underpants' (review by Mason, Yr8). It is currently nominated for a number of awards, including the UKLA 2024 and the Yoto Carnegie Medal for Writing 2024.