

# Literacy Time PLUS<sup>+</sup>

## welcomes... **PAUL COOKSON**

**So Paul, we are honoured that you have agreed to be our *Literacy Time PLUS* 'Poet-in-residence'. What kind of things can our readers look out for this year?**

I'm honoured to be asked! Readers can look forward to lots of things – news about new poems and projects; how a poet works – school visits, performances, workshops; ideas on how to write their own poems, various projects and events ... maybe even the famous people a poet might occasionally meet! Also, I'll give you a sneak preview of new and unpublished poems – perhaps even some of the cheeky ones that have yet to make it into print! If I'm allowed to ...

**You obviously have a great passion for poetry and write for all ages. But why do you think your poetry is so appealing to young children?**

I think poetry is appealing because of its nature – it's often short, to the point,

amusing, and many of the books have great cartoons. Performance poetry is particularly appealing because there are so many great performance poets around in schools – David Harmer, Brian Moses, Roger Stevens, John Foster, James Carter, Nick Toczek ... Plus, with a poem – if you don't like one poem that much you can turn the page and there's another one that you might like; it's not like a novel where, if you don't like the first few pages, you're put off the rest of the book.

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Poet-in-residence

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### Poet-in-residence

#### How and when did you first start writing poetry?

Probably at school. When I was a teenager I used to want to be in a band so I wrote loads of 'songs' – I couldn't play guitar or sing (still can't!) but I used to do my own versions of songs that were in the charts. Thin Lizzy had a song called 'The Boys Are Back In Town' so I wrote one called 'Back in Town with the Boys'! Queen did 'Bohemian Rhapsody' – I thought Bohemia was a country so I think I did one called 'Hungarian Symphony'! Then I started reading poems by Roger McGough and there were a couple of little books by Simon Jenkins and Steve Turner and their styles were very appealing – often short, but accessible, witty, full of puns. Plus I started to see performance poets like John Cooper Clarke and Stewart Henderson. So I started copying them and eventually put a little collection together when I was about 19. And just carried on from there really. I met Ian McMillan who told me about poets in schools so I became a part-time teacher and started visiting schools. A hobby that eventually turned into a job.

#### What inspires your writing?

All sorts. Things that happen, things that have happened. Other poets, comedians, songwriters... I think the best things to write about are the things you know about and the things that interest you the most. So, I've written lots about growing up and childhood. My first favourite band was Slade (most

famous for the 'Merry Xmas Everybody' hit ) so I've written lots of poems about the band and have written a little book of Slade poems called *Touched by The Band of Nod*. I was on Mark Radcliffe's show on Radio 2 with Noddy Holder (lead singer of Slade) and he said, "Paul is Slade's Poet Laureate you know". I've also written loads about football – another love.



#### You're Poet-in-residence at the National Football Museum, aren't you? Tell us more about that.

Well, I did a poetry collection called *Give Us A Goal* for Macmillan. I'd just visited the National Football Museum in Preston (my home town – even though I've always supported Everton) and thought "what a good place to do a book launch". I asked them, they agreed, and we had about 500 kids come in over two days. Then they booked me for a few days the next academic year and that's how the residency

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### Poet-in-residence



PHOTOGRAPH © PETER EVANS

begin. I now spend a number of days there each year working with groups or videoconferencing workshops. Also, I get to write lots of poems about particular football occasions – The World Cup, The FA Cup, Munich Air disaster ... lots of players. In fact over the last couple of years I've met some of my heroes – Alan Ball, Bobby Charlton, Nobby Stiles ... and had my photo taken with them too!

#### Which of your own poems means the most to you, and why?

I suppose the ones that mean the most are the more personal ones like 'Father's Hands', or other ones about my family and friends. One of my favourites is called 'Let No-one Steal Your Dreams' – and it's about having ambitions and dreams and then achieving them. In fact loads of schools have used it as a leavers' poem, or a school mission statement which is always moving.

My favourite poems tend to change, though, depending on what I'm writing at the moment and what mood I'm in. Sometimes it's the funny, cheeky ones – those that kids like the most.

**Your anthology *The Works* (Macmillan 2000) is found on nearly every school bookshelf. How did that collection come about and how do you account**

#### for its success?

It was just around the time that the National Literacy Strategy and Literacy Hour had arrived and teachers were suddenly required to teach a lot of specific forms and genres of poetry. I thought it would be a good idea to have an anthology that gave examples of all these, all in one place. It was a case of, 'where do you find a haiku on a wet Wednesday morning?' – that sort of thing really.

It was a mammoth task – getting all the poems together. Firstly, I wrote to loads of poets and asked them to submit stuff, then I had to scour lots of books for other poems, classic poems, that sort of thing. I seemed to be surrounded by paper for months on end and made lots of lists. Eventually the book came out and, even though there are a few sections that could have done with tightening up a bit, I think it does the job well – and that's why it's been so popular. It's certainly the best-selling book I've ever done – over 160,000 and counting.



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## Poet-in-residence

**You are in schools nearly every day performing poetry or running workshops. What kinds of activities do teachers tend to ask you for most and which workshops are usually the most successful?**

A normal day in school begins with a performance for the whole school – which lasts at least an hour. Lots of poems – especially interactive poems and joining-in ones. Plenty of fun, some bits are almost like stand-up comedy. There's a variety of poems as well though – a few quiet and thoughtful ones so that, during the performance, a whole range of work is showcased. There are a few things for the teachers as well!

Then, after break, it's usually a series of workshops (with any age group). These often involve a question and answer session, followed by the writing of a group poem that can then be performed instantly. This uses a model or framework that the teachers can then use in follow-up work. Sometimes, with older groups, we do a range of written exercises that lead to their own poems. One thing that is constant, though, is that we spend time collating ideas and then see where the ideas take us. So, for much of the time, the poems are ideas-led rather than form-led. Obviously, if we're looking at haikus or kennings or something specific, then we concentrate on the form as well. However, it's always important to write about things that the kids can relate to – school, home, hobbies, monsters, aliens ... things that they will find interesting!

**What would you say to a child who thought poetry was dull or old-fashioned?**

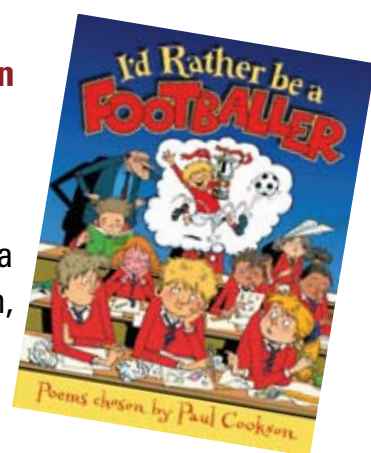
Read my books! See David Parkins' fantastic artwork! David draws Dennis The Menace – amongst other things – for *The Beano*, and he has done some brilliant illustrations for the books I've been involved with. So, even if you don't like the poems – you'll love the pictures!

There's so much poetry around now that is kid-centred – and so many good children's poets that it's impossible to think poetry is dull or old-fashioned. The only problem is that book shops don't give it a high profile so people often don't know about it.

**Do you have any new books or anthologies in the pipeline?**

Yes, there's a new book out called *I'd Rather Be A Footballer* – which is a selected 'best of'. Again, illustrated by David and it looks fantastic – I'm really excited about it. Also, it's a larger format – not quite A4 but almost, so it looks more like a *Beano* annual, which is great.

Last year I did a book with David Harmer, Brian Moses and Roger Stevens in the same format called *The Truth about Teachers*, which has proved really popular so we are working on *The Truth About Parents* at the moment.



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## PAUL COOKSON FACT FILE:

### **Favourite poem:**

The latest one! But 'Father's Hands' and 'Let No-one Steal Your Dreams' are always in the top ten!

### **Favourite food:**

Everyday food - cheese and ham toastie on white bread with pickle - can't go wrong! But I do like king prawns and seafood and I'm partial to a good steak from time to time.

### **Favourite song:**

Too many to mention - there's always something new to love - but I always go back to Slade and 'Cum on Feel the Noize'.

### **Favourite sports**

**team:** Everton!

**Favourite place:** Not so much a place as people - always good to have good friends and family around you.

**Hobbies:** Five-a-side football every Sunday night, going to Goodison as often as I can, reading (I love Stephen King and Dean Koontz), buying too many CDs and playing the ukulele (not very well).

I've even started adding some ukelele accompaniment to a few of my poems!

### **Weirdest thing which ever happened to**

**you:** I once did a parachute jump and missed the field - I landed on the runway!

### **Proudest moment:**

Obviously, family and children, but in the poetry world, I think being on the same show as Noddy Holder was pretty good. Also, I wrote a poem about Brian Labone - an Everton footballer from the 60s and early 70s

who died. The poem was used in the next Everton match day programme and then it was read out at his funeral by Ian Callaghan - ex-Liverpool and England footballer. At events for the National Football Museum since, I've met Everton footballers from that era, who've told me how much they appreciated the poem. I've also written poems about the England 1966 World Cup Team and last year had Sir Bobby Charlton and Nobby Stiles sign them - and had my photograph taken with them too. If someone had told me that when I was at school, I never would have believed it. Still - let no-one steal your dreams!