Introduction to the Verse Novel
What Is Poetry?

- “[T]he best words in the best order” (Samuel Coleridge).
- “… a short, lyrical response to the world. It is emotion under extreme pressure or recollection in a small space. It is the coal of experience so compressed it becomes a diamond” (Jane Yolen).
- “Poetry, perhaps more than any other form of language, has the potential to convey intense and new ways of experiencing the world. In poetry, the formal features of language [i.e., rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, imagery, word play] become a means of drawing the reader into these intense experiences of the world and the pleasures of language itself” (Charles Elster).
- “… if I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry” (Emily Dickinson).
What Is Children’s Poetry?

• Defining “poetry for children” becomes difficult because one must take into account:
  ○ Authorial intent
  ○ Motives of publishers and booksellers
  ○ Educative desires of teachers and other adults
  ○ Audience (work for children is always mediated by adults)

• “Those pieces that have, over time, been recognized as poetry for children by poets, editors, anthologizers, educators, and— most importantly— by children themselves” (The Oxford Book of Children’s Verse in America 1985).
The Grammar of Poetry: Basic Vocabulary

- **Speaker/Narrator**: person or character speaking in the text
- **Author**: person who wrote the text
- **Stanza**: unit within the larger poem; group of lines; arrangement of a certain number of lines, sometimes having a fixed length, meter, or rhyme scheme
- **Line Break**: where a line stops and another begins
- **End-Stop**: breaking a line at the end of a sentence or phrase or with some sort of punctuation
- **Enjambment**: breaking a line in the middle of a sentence or phrase
I am telling you this just the way it went with all the details I remember as they were, and including the parts I’m not sure about. You know, where something happened but you aren’t convinced you understood it? Other people would maybe tell it different but I was there (3).
The Grammar of Poetry: Craft

- **MUSIC**
  - Rhyme: repetition of similar sounds
  - Rhythm: pattern in sound
  - Meter: recurring pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry; the arrangement of words in regularly measured, patterned, or rhythmic lines
  - Stress: greater amount of force used to pronounce one syllable
  - Pause or Caesura: a break for a beat in the rhythm of the verse often indicated by a line break or a mark of punctuation
  - Alliteration: repetition of the same sound in a group of words
  - Consonance: repetition of consonant sounds in a group of words
  - Assonance: repetition of vowel sounds in a group of words
When I point my fingers at the keys, the music springs straight out of me. Right hand playing notes sharp as tongues, telling stories while the smooth buttery rhythms back me up on the left (13).
The Grammar of Poetry: Craft

**EMOTION**
- Lyricism: an artist’s expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way
- Irony and Satire
- Tragic, Uplifting, Astonishing, Mysterious, Humorous, Sarcastic, Depressing, etc.

**IMAGERY**
- Symbolism: when something represents something other than itself
- Metaphor & Simile: the comparison of two different things
- Personification: giving human traits to objects
- Sensory Imagery: words representing a sensory experience (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell)
Excerpt from Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*

Ma had been a tumbleweed too, holding on for as long as she could, then blowing away on the wind.

My father was more like the sod. Steady, silent, deep (202).

Excerpt from Carole Boston Weatherford’s *Becoming Billie Holiday*

I needed a name that fit like a silk gown, a name to drape like a pearl mink stole across my shoulders (72).
Excerpt from Francesca Lia Block’s *Psyche in a Dress*

I cannot say I was unhappy
But sometimes I would wake at night
in my mother’s bed
and the smell of flowers through the window
Made me wheeze, gulping for breath (72-73)

**sensory imagery**

Excerpt from Ellen Hopkins’ *Crank*

just before you
drop
knowing you can’t turn back.

You know how you feel
at that instant? Well, that’s
exactly how it feels when you
shake hands with the
monster (89).
What Is A Verse Novel?

- A verse novel is a hybrid genre that employs characteristics of both prose and poetry.
- **Verse – poetry genre**
  - A stanza
  - Any composition written in meter
  - A poem
- **Novel – prose genre**
  - A fictitious prose narrative of considerable length and complexity, portraying characters and usually presenting action and scenes in the form of a story.
Characteristics of a Verse Novel

- **Hybrid Form**: a series of short, individual poems linked by topic, character, and plot
- **Story**: in order to develop the narrative line, the reader is encouraged to proceed in a linear fashion, much like one would read a book of prose
- **Meter and Rhythm**: attention to pattern in sound and the arrangement of words is important, whether the writing is patterned after *everyday speech* or formal poetry
Characteristics of the Verse Novel

- **White Space:** reader is left room to fill in the space on the page with association or his/her own creation.
- **Chronological Organization:** reader is encouraged to move sequentially through the text, rather than skip around.
- **Intense Internal Focus:** The action centers on an emotional event, and the rest of the novel deals with the characters’ feelings before and after.
Virginia Euwer Wolff Comments on Her Writing

Excerpt from a 2002 interview with Wolff in the School Library Journal:

**VEW** - I've written a story in funny-shape lines and I haven't identified the ethnicity of the characters or the city they live in. I haven't given any of them last names, which is less of an issue. But where is the city, what is the ethnicity, and why these funny-shaped lines? These are three offenses that I'm committing and reviewers are going to hate them.

**SLJ** - Would you talk more about those "funny-- shaped lines" that you use throughout Make Lemonade and True Believer? Some reviewers have described the narrative style as free verse.

**VEW** - It has been called free verse; it's also been called blank verse. It's definitely not blank verse. There's not a bit of iambic pentameter in it. I'm a lifelong English major, I know that blank verse has to have iambic pentameter. So do you. **But it's not free verse, either. I'm not trying to write poetry. That would be very arrogant of me. I'm not a poet. I am a prose writer and it's prose and funny-shaped lines. I wanted white space around the words, to feel more friendly to young moms who might not have time and concentration to read a lot of words all at one time.... It felt right and it still feels right for LaVaughn to speak that way.**

**SLJ** - It feels right for a teenager who's thinking about so many things so intensely.

**VEW** - We think elliptically. We have a lot of pauses in our intake of breath. I speak in a lot of dashes-dashes are my end punctuation a lot, before I embark on the next sentence, because the previous sentence didn't seem to be going anywhere. And LaVaughn doesn't speak in Emily Dickinson dashes. But she does speak in, I think, the length of a breath. And then she'll inhale and speak some more. LaVaughn, like her author, is never absolutely sure of what she's saying. And I don't think I've said that before anywhere to anybody but myself But as I am feeling my way through a narrative, LaVaughn is feeling her way through life.
Vikki Van Sickle’s “Subcategories Within the Emerging Genre of the Verse Novel”

- Poetic Singular Voice
  - “The verse novels in this subcategory draw on the technical aspects of poetry, such as personification, extended metaphor, imagery, and standard metrical patterns in order to transcend the literal and leave an emotional impression upon the reader.”
  - Examples: Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* and Sharon Creech’s *Love that Dog*
Dramatic Monologue

“A dramatic monologue is delivered by a single person who is not the poet... Perhaps the underlying tenet or central feature of the dramatic monologue is the revelation of the speaker's true character and temperament... The major poetic device in dramatic monologue verse novels is the free verse form in which they are written. The speakers are not crafting poems for class or for their own pleasure, as Jack does in Love That Dog. There are no unusual uses of space or rhythm and absolutely no instances of rhyme. Instead, the verse in The Crazy Man and True Believer reads like a transcript of the speakers talking. The verse is full of colloquialisms, grammatical errors and conversational speech rhythms.”

Examples: Virginia Euwler Wolff’s True Believer and Make Lemonade
Multiple Voice

“Multiple voice verse novels draw on elements of both dramatic monologue and poetic verse novels. They may be poetic in terms of figurative language or form, but the major distinction between these subgenres is the number of voices. Multiple voice verse novels are told in a variety of first-person voices. The voices are clearly defined and differentiated by their opinions, concerns, speech rhythms and use of language. While the other two categories discussed in this paper are intensely emotional and explore the speaker's personal journey, multiple voice novels explore the many sides of an issue.”

Examples: Karen Hesse’s *Witness* and Mel Glenn’s *The Taking of Room 114*
The Contemporary Children’s and YA Verse Novel

Virginia Euwer Wolff’s
Make Lemonade (1993)

Mel Glenn’s
Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? (1996)
Contemporary Children’s and YA Verse Novels: Award Winners

Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* (1997) Newbery Medal Winner

Virginia Euwer Wolff’s *True Believer* (2001) National Book Award

Sonya Sones’ *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies* (2004) ALA Best Book Award