

Creating a Poetry Chapbook

Poetry chapbooks have a long history. Chapbooks are traditionally short collections, from 16-40 pages. In early times, chapbooks were produced by folding. So the page counts are often multiples of 4. We're not limited by that anymore. But that's one reason chapbooks are short.

Chapbooks must have a theme. This doesn't have to be earth-shattering or VERY IMPORTANT. It just means all the poems are related to each other. Often, like fiction, the poems tell a story. This makes chapbooks popular, even with people who don't usually read poetry.

There are many ways to find a theme. You may already have one in mind. For my book, I wanted to tell the story of what happened to my mother and how it affected the family, based in what was happening in the 1960's and 70's. You can use time or family for your own chapbook. For example:

- Tell the story of how you grew up, in poems. Don't worry about how anyone else will feel about your writing. This is your story.
- Imagine going around the Thanksgiving table or Christmas tree or family funeral. Write a poem about each person. Why are they there? What are they thinking?
- Think of a table in the school cafeteria or a street of a town or a cell block. Write a poem about everyone you see or hear. Write as if it is today, or ten years ago, or fifty years ago. What's changed? What's the same?
- Write a poem about every place you've ever lived, how it felt to be there. What made that place different or special, beautiful or terrible? What did you see or eat there? How did it smell? What did you pass on your way home?

Sometimes you don't know what story you want to tell until you start writing. If you're stuck, just start. My first writing book was *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. Ms. Goldberg believes in timed writing. Set a time, say 15 or 30 minutes. You must write that whole time. Don't lift your pencil. Sometimes nonsense comes out. That's ok. After a few minutes, you may find yourself suddenly writing a whole lot about something you didn't even know you were thinking about. You may re-read a few pages and find some lines to turn into a poem.

There are lots of different chapbooks in the world. *Spoon River Anthology* is a famous book where each poem is about someone buried in the local cemetery. I stole it from my brother's bookshelf and it's one of my favorite books. Mary Ellen D'Angelo-Lombardi wrote *A Year of Mondays*, a poem a week after her son's best friend died of a heroin overdose. Some poems are grieving, some are happy memories, some about addiction. The fall chapbook from *Rattle Magazine* was about serving as a juror on a trial. My latest chapbook was inspired by the quote: "Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together." It's all what I call 'goodbye poems'.

Another good thing about chapbooks: the theme, the content, is more important than the form. There are poets who love using form, who believe that the structure and discipline strengthen the art. Others, like me, think the message trumps the frame. If you like Sudoku and other puzzles, then forming a sonnet or a ghazal may be for you (examples below). If you find yourself backing into awkward phrasing to meet a rhyme scheme or dropping words to fit a meter, step back and let your words breathe. Trust the poem. Tell your story in a voice that feels real to you.

Try writing as much as you can for several weeks. That should help you find your story and focus on that. Once you have a bunch of poems, it's time to make a collection. If it's under 16 pages, is there something else you can say? If it's over 40 pages, it's time to weed. Find the strongest poems and choose those. Don't forget the others- they may be great. They just don't fit here.

When you think your chapbook is ready, send it in. We'd like to have all of the chapbooks gathered in by the end of March. Some may come in sooner. If that's not enough time, we can make it longer. For me, having a deadline is the difference between thinking about writing and actually writing.

Good luck! I'm looking forward to reading what you have to say.

Elizabeth

A Wee Bit About Form

Sonnets are famous. William Shakespeare and Robert Frost made them so. A sonnet has 14 lines, generally of 10-14 beats each, with an alternating or internal rhyme.

The last 2 lines often stand alone and rhyme together. Many poems with similar structure seem like sonnets but technically aren't. Terrance Hayes recently had an award-winning book of sonnets which all had the same title:

AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I pour a pinch of serious poison for you James
Earl Ray Dylann Roof I pour a punch of piss for you
George Zimmerman John Wilkes Booth Robert
Chambliss Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr Bobby Frank
Cherry Herman Frank Cash Jim Crow your name
Is a gate opening upon another gate I pour a punch
Of perils I pour a bunch of punches all over you
I pour unmerciful panic into your river I damn you
With the opposite of prayer Byron De La Beckwith
Roy Bryant J.W. Milan Edgar Ray Killen Assassins
Love trumps power or blood to trump power
Beauty trumps power or blood to trump power
Justice trumps power or blood to trump power
The names alive are like the names in the graves

A ghazal (pronounced 'guzzle') is a series of 5-15 couplets, each line roughly the same length. The first 2 lines usually rhyme, and the last word of the second line is the last word of every second line. It sounds simple but it's tricky not to sound forced. This is the start of a poem from 2015 by Yusef Komunyakaa:

Ghazal, After Ferguson

Somebody go & ask Biggie to orate
what's going down in the streets.

No, an attitude is not a suicide note
written on walls around the streets.

Twitter stays lockstep in the frontal lobe
as we hope for a bypass beyond the streets,

but only each day bears witness
in the echo chamber of the streets.

I can tell you about a triolet using a triolet by Zebulon
Huset:

How to Triolet

Line one comes back seventh and fourth,

line two is how the poem will end.

Line three's free but rhymes with one: north.

Line one comes back as seventh and fourth.

Line five's your choice but rhymes that 'orth'
from one and three- six rhymes two, and

line one comes back as seventh and fourth.

Line two is how the poem will end.

Finally, one form even I have used is called the haibun. It consists of a short bit of prose poetry, followed by a haiku. A haiku is a Japanese 3 line poem with syllables of 5/7/5 or 3/5/3. This is a section of a linked haibun poem I published this spring. The prompt that got me started was "I am not..." and the title is also a haiku:

I am not/ the woman I was/ in that house.

1.

Our last house burned. Anything not consumed by flames was buried in toxic ash. Everything: clothes, furniture, wooden spoons, kitchen mugs & throw rugs, my dead father's blue cardigan; my daughter's pink soft blanket, stuffed toys, board books. "It's just stuff," he said. "Everything else is logistics." We salvaged six boxes of Christmas ornaments shelved beneath the cellar stairs. We moved on.

I am no longer
the woman I was back then.
Wife. Daughter. Shadow.

Feel free to try a form. Or not. Free verse, rap lyrics, it's your story to tell. As you wish.

Friends, what an opportunity you have to write and share your chapbook with us. I will make a copy of each submitted chapbook and send it back to you. I would like to keep the originals to share with the general public, but if you insist I send it back I will keep the copy and send you the original. Sometimes when I send work back into a prison it is not allowed, so a copy is a safer bet, but that is your choice. Elizabeth is already looking for poetry venues where she can show off your work. In my mind this is an exercise you can use to strengthen your poetry muscle and gain story telling skills. This is a chance to leave something for HisStory [history] or HerStory. What you have to say is important and here is a venue for you to let it out. Happy Holidays-Gary