Writing History: The Haiku

This gorgeous little poem is the word equivalent of photography – it creates fleeting but striking pictures in the brain, and is designed to capture the world in snapshots that hint at the greater picture. Haiku originated in Japan, and composing them was counted as one of the highest forms of intellectual and artistic practice. Their shortness makes them appealing to read and less intimidating to try writing than most formal structures. You can approach them like a game, and they make a lovely addition to a drawing or card.

Haiku really come into their own as nature poems or poems to chart the seasons, and that is what many of the traditional ones are about. That is why they are great for communicating current world issues, hopes and fears. Since the onset of Coronavirus, which has limited human activity and lessened emissions, wildlife around the world has really had chance to flourish again. Whatever happens next, now is our chance to show the beauty of a world without human destruction, and to persuade the people around us to keep fighting for it.

Cracking the structure

The framework of a haiku is very basic; three short lines. Each line has a set number of syllables – for example, the word carrot (ca – rrot) has two syllables, while the word 'bear' (bear) only has one. A haiku looks like this:

This is the first line (five syllables)

The second line is longer (seven syllables)

And then the third line (five syllables)

You can feel free to follow this simple structure as it is, or you can challenge yourself by trying to add these two Japanese features, which are present in traditional haiku:

Kigo: a *kigo* is a seasonal reference, which tells you what time of year it is. This can be as general (summer flowers) or personal (Dad's summer shirt) as you like.

***Kiru*:** this means 'cutting' and is harder to define in English. Generally, it is a 'moment' that feels significant in some way. Most commonly, a *kiru* happens when there is a contrast, sudden turn, emotional peak or natural pausing point in the poem. *Kireji*, or 'cutting word,' is a word in the poem that causes this turn in some way – an example would be 'but', although remember it is not always a conjunction that can do it. The word 'ice-cream' after a line about the hot sun would also count as a cutting word.

T: 020 7587 1842 W: literacytrust.org.uk Twitter: @Literacy_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

Note: a lot of modern haiku writers play with these rules, and aren't always so strict. Check out the British Haiku Foundation for more liberal examples, if counting syllables isn't your thing.

Bashō: The Father of Haiku

Born in 1644, Matsuo Basho is credited with the development of the form as we know it today. He was a traveller and student of Zen, and he wrote hundreds of haiku, including this very famous poem about a frog;

Furuike ya	An ancient pond
kawazu tobikomu	a frog jumps in
mizu no oto	the sound of water.

The frog is the *kigo* – a vague reference to the season (you don't see adult frogs all year round) - and the *kiru* is the contrast between the silence of the still pond and the frog breaking the surface with a splash.]

Write your own haiku

At the moment, many of us can't spend too long outside, and we are discouraged from taking long journeys. How do we write about nature indoors? Well, there are two approaches – using what you experience, however small (haiku loves small things), and using what you can imagine. You can watch my video on gathering material for poems, but in the meantime here are some tips to get you started:

Go on a hunt

Search around your home or a park nearby for signs of the seasons changing. Clothes, foods and habits change with the temperature – maybe you've had your first ice-cream of the year!

Trees, plants and birds are great subjects. Even better, signs of nature amid a very urban landscape, like flowering weeds between paving stones and scavenging foxes, make for interesting haiku because of the contrast of wild versus manmade.

The window view

Look out of your window a few times a day and, if you can, write down anything you see, or experience, of daily life. What are your neighbours doing? Is there washing hung out? Are there any dogs being walked? What shape are the leaves on the trees? What can you smell – hot tarmac? Food cooking? Grass? Bins? It doesn't have to be 'poetic' – a haiku simply looks at what is there and shows the audience.

Take a mental journey

The great Romantic poets wrote about glaciers, mountain ranges and forests without ever leaving their sofas, so why not us? We also have an advantage they didn't have: the internet. Go exploring on Google maps and see what you can find in other parts of the world to write about, imagining yourself in the Himalayas, the Sahara or the Amazon. What would you see there? You could even write an ironic series of haiku about looking virtually at something you can't touch.

Write about nature stories on social media

Social media is a gift for poetic inspiration, because it shows us interesting things that are out of the ordinary. Go and look for the video of the giant jellyfish in Venice, of elephants roaming wild down roads in India or of mountain lions in American back yards. Use the contrast between the emptiness of urban areas and the sudden richness of wildlife as your *kireji,* or cutting point.

Go further

Look up Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which is his retelling of a journey written in *haibun* – paragraphs of prose about the walk interspersed with haiku to describe particularly striking things along the way. Try writing your own version, based on your daily walk or even just your movements around your home. What do you notice that you wouldn't have noticed before?