

H is for Haiku:
A Treasury of Haiku from A to Z
by Sydell Rosenberg

Amy Losak Interviewed by Robert Epstein

You recently published a children's haiku book, *H is for Haiku: A Treasury of Haiku from A to Z* (Penny Candy Books), which your late mother, Sydell Rosenberg, wrote some years ago. Could you start by providing readers with some biographical information about your mother and her beginnings as a haiku poet?

Sydell Rosenberg (1929-1996) was a New York City teacher and writer. Syd wrote poetry, short stories, literary and word puzzles; and more. In the early 1950s, I believe shortly after graduating from Brooklyn College, she published a racy novel entitled, *Strange Circle*. From what I can remember or was told, Syd wrote this book (she had a different title, *Sham Bottom*) on a dare from her boss at a NYC publishing company where she worked as a copyeditor, after she had "complained" about the quality of the manuscripts she worked on. It was published under a male pseudonym, Gale Sydney, the reversal of her maiden name initials, Sydell Gasnick. I believe this potboiler sold a respectable number of copies for its time. The number that sticks in my head is 270,000. Interestingly, there are copies available online. Mom could be a gentle rebel at times. I love that she wrote this "dirty book!"

Sometime in the 1960s, she "found" haiku. And it found her. How, I don't know. But this form and the haiku community became an important part of her creative and intellectual life until she died.

According to the 1974 *Haiku Anthology*, mom published her first haiku in 1967, in *American Haiku*. But I think she published haiku before then, in 1966, in the poetry column of a long-defunct newspaper. In 1968, she became a charter member of the Haiku Society of America. She attended the founding meeting that October. In 1975, she served as HSA's secretary. Mom also served on two Merit Book Awards.

What themes typically appeared in your mother's haiku, and did she venture into any of the related forms like senryu, haiga, or haibun?

Syd wrote the occasional tanka. I know that one about a squirrel was published in a 1980s issue of *Wind Chimes* (publisher/editor, Hal Roth). She may also have ventured into haibun, but I don't know if any were published. Mom collaborated on an enjoyable renga with haijin Doris Heitmeyer and L.A. Davidson. "Violin Case Renga" was published in *Frogpond* in 1987 and was composed from August 15, 1984 through July 9, 1985. The first four links of the sequence were published in *The Christian Science Monitor* on October 8, 1986. Also, mom's well-known, "In the laundermat" was included in the 1994 public art project, "Haiku On 42nd Street." What a fantastic and novel endeavor! (Before 1994, "In the laundermat" had been published several times: *Modern Haiku*, *The Haiku Anthology*, and *The Haiku Handbook*.)

What prompted your mother's interest in writing a haiku book for children?

Mom was a teacher—English, literacy, and also adult ESL. Her desire to publish a children's poetry book (preferably an alphabet book) took root such a long time ago. She may have been submitting at least one of her manuscripts back in the 1970s, as well as the 1980s. As a teacher, I think she probably thought her short poems would be ideal for children, due to their visually striking, miniature "story-like" appeal. She was right.

Can you describe the format and content of *H is for Haiku* and how children will benefit from reading it with their parents and/or teachers?

H Is For Haiku: A Treasury of Haiku from A to Z, is an A-B-C reader. This approach provides a fine conceptual framework for mom's 'word-picture' poems which highlight a number of simple 'moments' we might tend to overlook. While this compilation is intended for young readers, I think older readers will enjoy these poems, as well.

Could you give us some examples of your mother's haiku that appear in the book?

I love this one:

So pale—it hardly sat
on the outstretched branch
of the winter night.

“So pale” was published three times, twice in *Haiku West* and on her memorial page in the December, 1996 issue of *Frogpond*. It won a 1968 *Haiku West* ‘best-of-issue’ award. I ‘discovered’ “So pale” a few years ago and I have warmed to it.

I also love:

Adventures over
the cat sits in the fur ring
of his tail, and dreams.

“Adventures over” was published in *SCTH* (“*Sonnet Cinquain Tanka Haiku*”) in 1967. Mom never had cats living in NYC apartments, but she loved cats – their grace and play. I think she found their personalities endlessly fascinating to observe. I have loved this one for decades. (This haiku is inscribed on her half of my parents’ double headstone.)

I enjoy these two because of their simplicity. And they are evocative. In the first, mom doesn’t specify what “it” is, which adds to its serene and gentle mystery. In the second, I like the subtle cleverness of ‘fur ring,’ which rhymes with ‘purring.’

How do the illustrations by Sawsan Chalabi complement and enrich the haiku in the book?

Sawsan’s illustrations and lettering, which are wittily integrated with the poems, brim with vitality! Her vivid, active style underscores the poems’ sweetness and humor.

How do you think that aspiring young haiku poets will benefit from reading your mother’s book?

The most important takeaway or ‘lesson’ from this book, I think, is to pay attention to so-called “small moments.” Allow yourself to slow down and linger. Observe. Let random bits of life sink in. You

might find poetry in them. But even if you don't, your life will likely become a little richer, as a result.

What did you learn about your mother in the process of working with the manuscript?

I came to better appreciate her free spirit and sometimes restless mind – her unique way of engaging with the world. We always knew she was “different” – unconventional. Writing validated her expansive and sometimes intense approach to life. Haiku's demands gave her latitude – they “freed” her creatively. I understand this better now.

Did you modify your mother's work in any way prior to publication?

Yes, I edited some of the poems, including the book's title. I also left much of her work intact.

What meaning did it have for you to bring your late mother's manuscript to print?

It's difficult to express what this endeavor has meant to me. It's been a joy, a labor of love I hope brings value and happiness to readers. This has brought me closer to mom, in some ways. But it also was very difficult, and it was not a linear path. I could not have even started this project, let alone completed it, without the support of a legion of people – poets and children's authors; my husband, Cliff; my brother, Nathan; sister-in-law, Debbie; other family members; friends and coworkers. I cannot adequately convey how thankful and grateful I am to everyone for their encouragement.

Did your mother teach you to write haiku when you were growing up? If so, can you provide readers with any examples of your early haiku?

As I mentioned, mom tried to engage me. Sadly, I wasn't very receptive. But, as a child, I vaguely remember a haiku I wrote about a “frightened chipmunk” which she sent off to that same long-defunct newspaper I mentioned earlier. I think it was published and I may have the old clipping around somewhere.

But mom did have an influence on me. I realized this the day she died in 1996. I made a contribution to the HSA in her memory not

long after. I joined myself a few years ago. I write my own haiku, and I'm trying to learn about this rich poetic form.

Could you provide readers with some examples of more recent haiku that you have written?

Here are a few that were published. I hope to continue learning and growing:

midtown fountain
the dancer pirouettes
with a pigeon

(The Heron's Nest, September, 2017)

darkened house
I walk through the front door
dripping stars

(Blithe Spirit, February, 2018)

dead of night
a cat and his owner yawn
in unison

(Akitsu Quarterly, Summer 2017)

peeling tree bark
she hides her spotted hands
in the interview

*(Jennifer Hambrick/International Women's Haiku Festival, March 23, 2017;
Wild Voices, Volume 2, 2018, edited by Caroline Skanne)*

planting herself in the window box calico cat

*(Haiku Foundation/Haiku Windows:
window box, March 28, 2018)*

What else would you like to share about your mother's contribution and legacy with respect to English-language haiku literature?

Mom was a devoted haiku adherent. She was there at the beginning of HSA, and her involvement made a difference. I'm proud of her and her overall accomplishments as a writer.

<https://www.pennycandybooks.com/shop/haiku>

<https://www.amazon.com/H-Haiku-Treasury-Z/dp/0998799971>