

## **“Passing on the Past”: Marilyn Nelson’s Lyric Histories and the Future of Children’s Poetry**

In her talk “Girl in the Attic,”<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Nelson recalls being dubbed a “lyric historian” by a seventh-grade girl, whose school she was visiting. Her 2012 collection for adults, *Faster Than Light: New and Selected Poems, 1996-2011*, reprints a generous selection of her poems for young people in the first section, entitled “Lyric Histories.” Drawing on poems from *Carver: A Life* (2002) through *My Seneca Village* (2015, then still in manuscript) she presents to the adult poetry audience straight print versions of poems extracted from their complete narrative sequences and from their often richly designed intertextual books for young audiences such as, *Fortune’s Bones* (2004), *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), and *The Freedom Business* (2008). My paper will explore the ways in which these poems aim to enrich both the historical imaginations and the aesthetic imaginations of the young audiences they first address. Nelson presents and reinvents buried African-American histories in order to engage our present historical moment and our imagined futures; at the same time, she inhabits and reinvents traditional meters and fixed forms that engage her young audiences through pleasurable and musical language that they may carry over into their own written and embodied performances, such as the 2012 Classic Slam recitation of Nelson’s “How I Discovered Poetry” and the response, “My Swagg” by two teenage girls: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF5pMLWZluM>. In her recent Zena Sutherland Lecture, Nelson expresses her hopes for the future of poetry for young readers: “that the world into which they are growing may be—perhaps because of them—better than the one in which we now live. Young readers grow up. And the future depends on what they will make it.”<sup>2</sup> By making poems that refuse to pass over the past, but, instead, pass it on through accessible, musical, resonant lyric histories, Nelson points the way toward a vibrant future for young people’s poetry.

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<sup>1</sup>“Girl in the Attic.” *Children’s Literature* 42 (2014) p.106.

<sup>2</sup> “How I Discovered Young Adult Poetry.” *The Horn Book Magazine* 92.5 (September/October 2016), p.31