

SPOTLIGHT ARTICLE

A Record of Her School Days: The Diary of Nancy McClellan King

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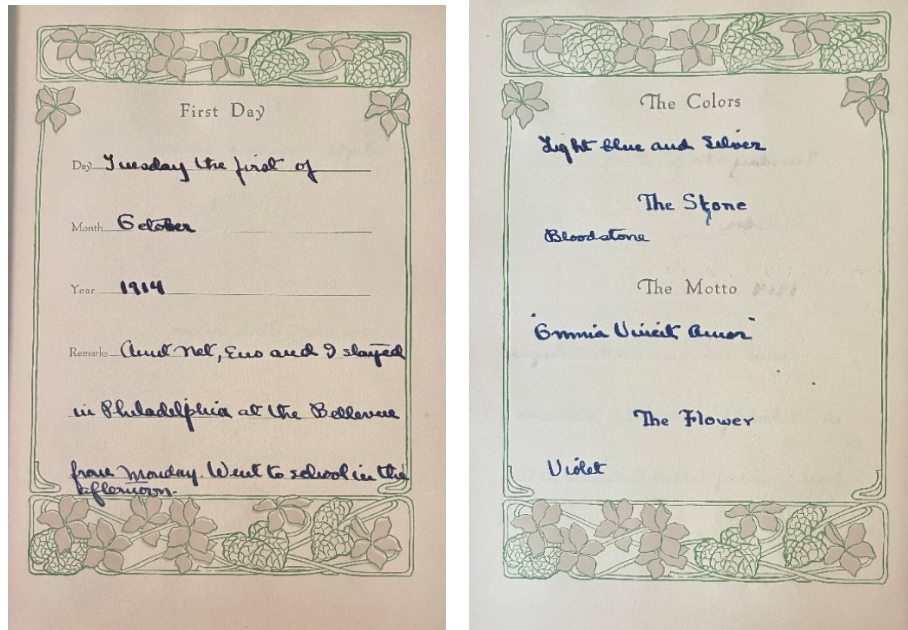
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ON 29 MAY 1915, Nancy McClellan King wrote her full name across the flower-printed paper of the inside cover of her diary. She dated it and added the name of her school in swooping blue ink: Miss Wright’s School, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. Such a detail mattered, because Nancy’s diary did not consist of blank pages. Rather, it was a record book titled *A Record of My School Days*, printed by Dodge & Company Publishing in the early twentieth century specifically for girls to write about their time in secondary school. The diary (now part of the author’s collection) has a title page, a table of contents, and four years’ worth of prompts to fill in. Hence, we know that Nancy’s first day took place on Tuesday, 1 October 1914, and that Nancy stayed in Philadelphia with “Aunt Net” and “Ells” the night before (Fig. 1).

One might imagine that a prompted record book would read as dry and formulaic, a series of dates and lists. However, Nancy writes with every bit of verve a teenage girl can muster. The Dodge & Co. book provides a structure within which Nancy writes and against which she pushes back. The book may ask for remarks on a roommate, but it is Nancy who decides that the relevant details are that Ruth Bellamy “hates athletics, loves boys, and gets very homesick” (as a reader might learn, Nancy loves athletics, gravitates towards girls, and longs for school when she returns home). It is Nancy who renegotiates the allotted space within the record book, breaking off sentences with an asterisk and picking them up pages later, resulting in a hunt for any reader who wants to finish the anecdote. It is Nancy who crosses out several prompts and replaces them with a 24-stanza ode to her time at school entitled,

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simply, “Poem I Made Up.”¹ Nancy writes both dutifully and experimentally, playing with the prompting and space allotted to her as she constructs the story of her time at school. To read this *Record* is to watch a young author employ her own agency to adapt and assert herself within models provided for her by adults: the material structure of the book, the literary traditions of her education, and even the expected linear progression of time.

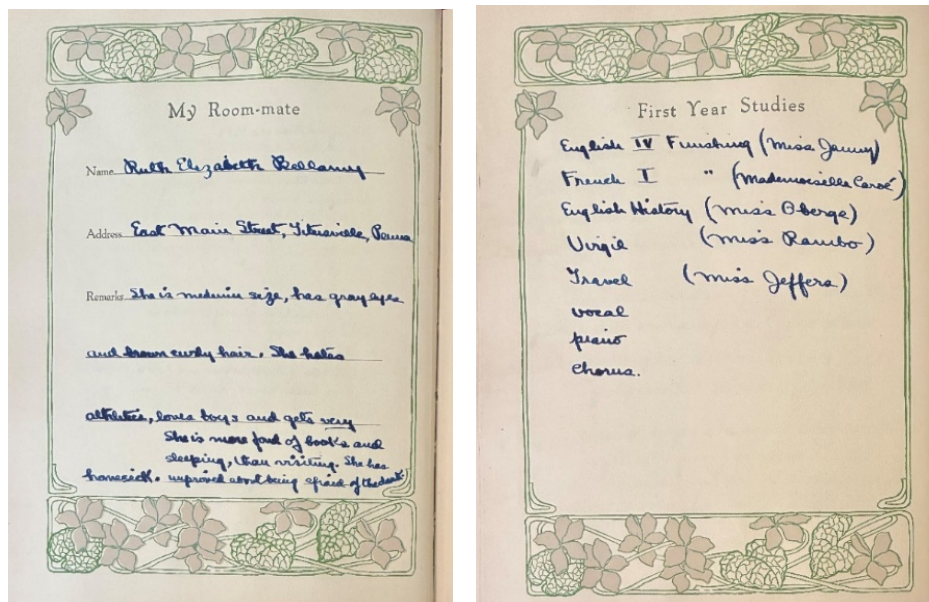


Figures 1 and 2. “First Day” (Fig. 1, left) and “The Colors,” “The Stone,” “The Motto,” and “The Flower” (Fig. 2, right), diary entries by Nancy McClellan King in *A Record of My School Days, 1914–15* (photographs by Mohala Kaliebe).

The first model, comprised of the *Record*'s prompts and the space it provides for them, suggests what, when, and how much girls ought to write. The date Nancy penned on the first page, in May 1915, was at the end of her first year at Miss Wright's School, which began in October 1914. Nancy writes in the past tense throughout her first-year entries, which cover the events of several months within a few lines—suggesting that Nancy recorded the events of her first year not as they happened, but in a reflective manner weeks or months afterwards. The diary's design facilitates this approach. The prompts do progress chronologically, from “First Year,” to “Second Year,” to “Third Year,” to “Fourth Year.” Some prompts within each year allude to specific points in time—“First Day,” “First Meeting of Class.” The rest, however, are subject-based, inviting girls to assemble their thoughts on an aspect of school life, presumably after the fact. The amount of space Dodge & Co. provides for each prompt suggests how much a girl should write for each. “The Colors” and “The

Motto” get half a page each. “My Room-mate” demands the girl’s name, address, and four lines of “Remarks.” “First Year Studies” gets one page.

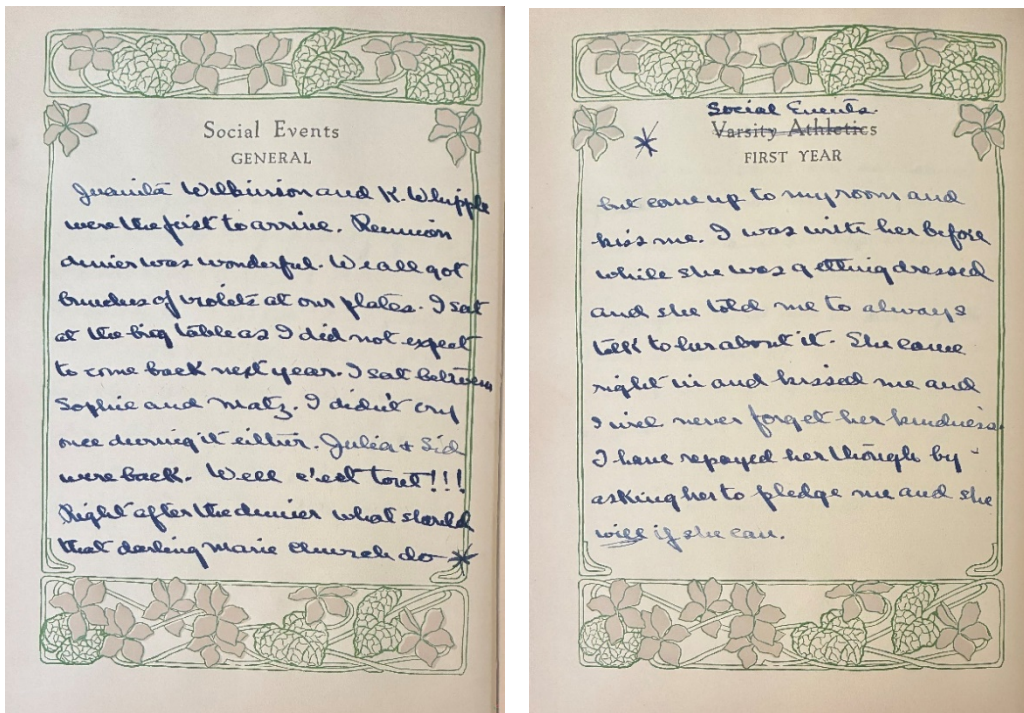
The narrow space allotted for these prompts anticipates that the responses will be short and straightforward, and they are. Nancy writes one neat line to reveal that her school colours are “light blue and silver” and another to spell out the motto “Omnia Vincit Amor” (“love conquers all”). Miss Wright’s School has additional school symbols, for which Nancy accounts by creating additional headings on the same page (Fig. 2), imitating the font used by Dodge & Co. to add the category “The Stone” (apparently, “Bloodstone”) and “The Flower” (apparently, “Violet”). Nancy dutifully fills in the prompts for her roommate, Ruth, cramming her sentences to fit within the allotted lines and floral border (Fig. 3). The single page reserved for “First Year Studies” (Fig. 4) invites a simple list of course titles and teachers, which Nancy also provides. Thus far, the record book requests brief answers, and Nancy writes within its confines.



Figures 3 and 4. “My Room-mate” (Fig. 3, left) and “First Year Studies” (Fig. 4, right), diary entries by Nancy McClellan King in *A Record of My School Days, 1914–15* (photographs by Mohala Kaliebe).

The next prompts ask for more, and Nancy provides more—this time going beyond the book’s constraints. Dodge & Co. provide *eight* pages for “Social Events”: four for “CLASS” social events and four for “GENERAL” social events. The *Record* also provides eight pages for athletics: four for “Class Athletics” and four for “Varsity Athletics.” The length provided for the responses to these prompts suggests that the book’s creators anticipated that schoolgirls would dedicate significant time and expression to social events and sports. Accordingly, Nancy fills “Social Events” with

stories of parties, Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas dinner, the French club play, “Reunion” dinner ... and then runs out of space, bumping up against a single page dedicated to “Societies.” Thus begins the grand renegotiation of space and categorisation. Nancy leaves off “Social Events” midsentence, with an asterisk (Fig. 5). She resumes the sentence after “Societies” (blank but for the letter O) and five pages of “Athletics” stories that bleed over into a single page meant for “Photographs.” The following page dictates more “Athletics,” but Nancy crosses the heading out and writes “Social Events” instead (Fig. 6). She corrects the next heading in the same manner, but evidently tires of retitling the pages; she writes on social events for three additional pages while merely crossing out the headings without writing new ones. The next five prompts are similarly crossed out—the pages that Dodge & Co. designate for “Examination Papers: FIRST YEAR FINALS” consist instead of parts IV–VIII of Nancy’s poem.



Figures 5 and 6. “Social Events” (Fig. 5, left) and “Social Events ~~Varsity Athletics~~” (Fig. 6, right), diary entries by Nancy McClellan King in *A Record of My School Days, 1914–15* (photographs by Mohala Kaliebe).

The poem serves as Nancy’s most ambitious writing experiment, scattered across the *Record* in eight numbered, three-stanza sections that replace the prompts for “Photographs” and “Examination Papers” in the “First Year” section of the diary. Written after the year was over and reflecting incidents described in the book’s prose

sections, “Poem I Made Up” (Fig. 7) situates its speaker as a girl trapped inside on a rainy summer day and reflecting back on her time at school:

(I)

The summer at last is here, is here
And birds and flowers have come
The longed-for season of the year
With all its sports and fun.

I cannot be sad, even if I try
For my soul brims over with life
And I dance on the green with the flowers and birds
That have struggled forth to life.

I have put aside my books for a while
I have left school far away
My school-friends all have scattered and gone
To enjoy their own holiday.

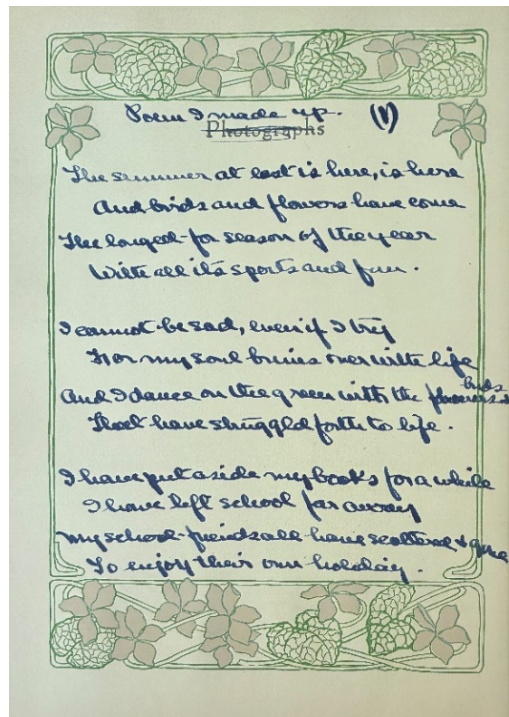


Figure 7. “Poem I Made Up,” part I of poem by Nancy McClellan King in *A Record of My School Days, 1914–15* (photograph by Mohala Kaliebe).

(II)

But sometimes when I must stay indoors
 While the flowers drink deep of the rain
 I find that I always turn back my thoughts
 To my dear old school days again.

I think again of each dear Wright's girl
 Each one has gone her own way
 I think how we all helped each other along
 Not only in work but in play.

There were battles to fight and hard ways to go
 There was winning & losing of rings
 But we all stuck together & lived as before
 In spite of the difference of things.

Nancy uses simple rhyme (“here” / “year,” “away” / “holiday,” “rain” / “again,” “way” / “play,” “rings” / “things”) and repetition (“is here, is here,” “birds and flowers ... flowers and birds,” “I have ... I have,” “I think ... I think,” “There were ... There was”). The nature symbols with which she heralds the arrival of summer—“birds and flowers” on “the green”—are familiar to the point of cliché.

Yet Nancy strives for poetic greatness, building her poem upon the models of lauded poets known to her. Specifically, the alternate rhyme scheme, idyllic nature scenes, and nostalgic tone of “Poem I Made Up” evoke William Wordsworth. Nancy personifies her flowers, which are not passively rained upon but actively “drink deep of the rain.” Wordsworth, similarly, makes his flowers breathe:

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
 The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
 And 'tis my faith that every flower
 Enjoys the air it breathes. (“Lines” 9–12)

Even Nancy's simplistic title finds a companion among Wordsworth's works. If “Lines Written in Early Spring” merit attention, so too might a “Poem” “made up” in the summer.

Nevertheless, “Poem I Made Up” does not mimic “Lines Written in Early Spring” so closely as to suggest that Nancy modeled one poem on the other; rather, she echoes Wordsworth's corpus in broad strokes. For instance, Nancy situates her speaker similarly to the speaker of Wordsworth's “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” Wordsworth's daffodils “flash upon that inward eye” as he “oft” lies pensively on his

couch, much as Nancy's thoughts "turn back" to her "dear old school days" when she "sometimes" shelters inside from the rain:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. ("I Wandered" 19–24)

However, "Poem I Made Up" somewhat inverses "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Wordsworth's reflective stanza ends his poem, while Nancy's begins hers. Wordsworth's speaker first shares his experience of seeing the daffodils, then informs the reader how he reflects upon it. Nancy, by contrast, tells us first of her reflection, then of the original experience. She plays with temporality within the poem, which does not progress chronologically as Wordsworth's does from moment in nature to mind's eye. We begin on any summer rainy day, "sometimes" when the speaker must stay indoors. We then move with her to a memory of a specific track meet in the past school year (also described in the record book's prose), then to the routine of any given school day, then to one particular summer day in the present as the rain stops, and end in the future with hope for the next school year.

In poetically and non-linearly moving her reader through time, Nancy practises what Rachel Conrad calls dynamic temporality. By "manipulating taken-for-granted cultural representations of time as irreversible, forward-moving, steady, and linearly progressive," Conrad argues, poets can push back against the "standard Western temporal narrative" which "views children as temporary, moving on a timeline, and for the future" (15). To illustrate this writing method, Conrad describes the poems by young people in one particular collection² as follows:

While many poems in *Salting the Ocean* mark their figured experiences as taking place in the present or through a remembered past or imagined future, other poems use shifting verb tense to interweave images about the past, present, and future. These poems could be said to be both in time and out of time. They offer speakers who live in and through time, yet also step partially outside of temporal experience to comment, reflect on, or manipulate an aspect of temporality. Some of these poems use explicit temporal markers (such as the words 'past,' 'present,' 'future,' or 'time'), while others engage with these themes without explicitly naming them. Poems that demonstrate dynamic temporality use a creative manipulation of temporal registers often evident primarily through patterns of verb tense in relation to content. (92–93)

Nancy's "Poem I Made Up" can also be said to be both in time and out of time, for she shifts her tenses and her speaker among the past, present, and future, reaching through time to reunite the school friends taken from her by the summer holiday.

Nancy begins complicating time in the third section of the poem, leaving behind the Wordsworthian natural imagery and reflection and bringing her reader to a track meet:

(III)

But Oh! the good old times we had
Those times we would never lack
I can hear the Athletic field ringing now
With a lusty boom chic-a-rack.

I can see Captain Wight raised high aloft
On the shoulders of Holman's team
I can hear the songs & cheers & shouts
In honor of Wright's school team

I can see Jane Agnes Wight's head now
Held high aloft with pride
As she saw her "chubby" sister sail
Off on that "lustrous" ride.

Tenses and time fluctuate here. The girls "had" these "good old times" in simple past tense. Nancy suggests with "never lack" that these times endure, but situates this endurance in the past as well with the addition of "would." Abruptly, however, the poem enters the present. The speaker alternates between "I can hear" and "I can see" as the sounds and sights of the victorious track meet appear around her. The polysyndeton builds excitement, with "songs" *and* "cheers" *and* "shouts." Captain Wight "sail[s]" off as if on a boat while her sister looks on proudly, a parody of a captain going away to sea. The present and the past coexist in this stanza, as the speaker "can see" but Jane "saw." Nancy's speaker returns to the glorious moment, but her school friend remains "scattered and gone" as described in the third stanza of Part I, apart from her in the past.

From the track meet, the poem shifts:

(IV)

I can hear Miss Stone's "you played well girls"
Amidst the ringing cheers

JJS April (2026)

While a broad smile seemed to fill her face
Indeed, from ear to ear.

But the scene now changes to the night-time
Just before bed-bell rings
And in that tennie, how much we have to do
Just a million host of the things.

In these stanzas, Nancy marks a distinct change of “scene,” from a singular event to a representative one: the last ten minutes of any school day.

The girls then enter a frenetic, present-tense countdown:

(V)

There is every-body to stop and kiss
And a few to chase down the hall
And amidst it all is heard the voice
Of singing Dorothy Hall

There are windows to open and trousseaus [*sic*] to close
And a rush for tooth-paste and towels
At the last minute slowly taking her time
Down the hall our dear Camden prowls.

Then ding, dong, ding goes the clock in the hall
And the bed-bell loud & deep
Is rung by the listening girl at the stairs
And we're off to the Land of Sleep.

Nearly half the lines in this section of the poem begin with “And,” quickening the pace of the last ten minutes as the girls “stop” and “kiss” and “chase” and “open” and “close” and “rush” to complete the “million host of things” they must do before bed. Unlike at the track meet, during which the speaker experiences the present while her classmate Jane remains in the past, all of the schoolgirls stay present in the collective “we” from “have to do” to “off to the Land of Sleep.” Only the character of Camden gets to experience time differently, “slowly taking her time” at “the last minute” while the girls “rush.”

The poem progresses from the nighttime to the morning routine and then on through the school day, still marked by the minutes passing and the dinging clock:

(VI)

When only a minute seems to've gone past
 When "Good morning" from Sarah we hear
 And we sometimes get up, but most always go back
 To the Land of Dreams, I fear.

And when the gong is threatenly [*sic*] heard
 We all make a rush for the stairs
 And try to look awake at the breakfast table
 And after that at prayers

Then starts the weary routine of school
 Oh! how tired & bored we grow
 And how welcome sounds the bell for recess
 As into the hall we go.

With "When" after "When" and "and" after "and," Nancy walks her reader through one day of present, quotidian happenings to represent a year of school. The tension between the day and the year stays visible—the girls "hear" Sarah in a present, particular morning, but they "sometimes" get up and "most always" fall asleep on different days throughout the year. All the while, the clock marks their movements.

When Conrad writes about clocks in children's poetry, they largely serve as markers for adult conceptions of rigid time imposed on children against which the children rebel.³ This portrayal aligns with Nancy's. The girls' movements are managed by the "gong" which "threaten[s]" them and by the "bell" which releases them. The school routine is "weary," and they grow "tired & bored" until they are freed for "recess." Notable, however, is the fact that it is *Nancy* who has agency over the movements of this school day, not the clock. Nancy purposefully situates her speaker, her reader, and her classmates into this school day which is also a school year. These are beloved, "*dear* old school days" (II, emphasis mine). Nancy has the temporal agency—defined by Conrad as "a person's use of time and temporal practices to contemplate or accomplish one's own goals" (12)—to return to them. She reunites "each dear Wright's girl" (II) under the "we" following the chimes of the school clock (V, VI).

For Nancy, everything revolves around the girls. "The first thing that impressed me [about Miss Wright's School]," Nancy writes in the prose section titled "Impressions and Notes DURING FIRST YEAR," "was the loyalty and love of all the girls towards the school and the love and kindly feeling towards each other." Her poem reflects her classmates' importance to her and ends with an appeal to them:

(VIII)

But the sun's coming out for the rain has stopped
It's the call of the great out-doors
So I must be off till another day
When it rains & thunders & pours.

So to you, Oh all the girls of dear school
Next year, may we all be back
And to our motto & colors & ancients(?) & all
Give a hearty Boom chic-a-rack.

After ending the frame narrative of the rainy summer day and sending her speaker off to play in the sun, Nancy addresses “all the girls of dear school” directly and appeals to the future. “Next year” is uncertain—Nancy hopes that they “may” return rather than asserting that they will. Yet she has the power to bring them all together now, to address them directly, and wish with them as a collective “we” to reunite under the school symbols and shout the school cheer.

Nancy practises agency in her writing by adapting her models—her record book, William Wordsworth, and time—as she pleases. In the case of her record book, Nancy revises its pages to suit her purposes, maintaining the book’s structure but reclaiming space for her desired topics. Record books such as Nancy’s merit study as much as any unprompted piece of children’s writing, allowing us to consider the ways in which children negotiate with adult expectations to accomplish their own objectives. In the case of William Wordsworth, Nancy grants herself literary authority by imitating the poet but distinguishes herself from him by aligning her poem with her teenage priorities. In “Lines Written in Early Spring” and “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” the natural world and its relation to mankind serve as the central conceit; for Nancy, the natural world is a mere starting point from which to return to school, sports, and friendship. In the case of time, Nancy’s originality is evident in her practice of dynamic temporality, as she poetically manipulates the past, present, and future to bring herself and her friends back to her beloved school days. Nancy McClellan King renegotiates her models with intent and dynamism worth exploring—and therefore serves *as* a model for scholars interested in how young people assert their own literary voices within adult frameworks.

NOTES

¹ I quote all but five stanzas of the poem over the course of this essay. The complete poem will be published in the forthcoming online *Anthology of Child Writers* (COVE Editions).

² Naomi Shihab Nye, ed., *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* (Greenwillow Books, 2000).

³ In Gwendolyn Brooks' childhood poem "The Busy Clock," Brooks's speaker sympathises with the clock, which has "no time to play" because it is bound to the needs of "bustling men and women" (Conrad 31). By contrast, June Jordan's poem "In the Times of My Heart" has "the children tell the clock / a hallelujah." While an adult poet, Jordan worked with and championed young poets. Conrad's central "argument" in "*Time for Childhoods*" is that 'tell[ing] the clock' is what happens when young poets take on a lyric voice, and young poets' artistry is evident in *how* they 'tell the clock' (or tell off the adult clock)" (160).

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