

# Poetry 2012: The Written World



## Resources for Teachers

Country: Great Britain

Poet: Richard Price

Poem: Hedge Sparrows

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# About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in upper primary school (P5–P7).

## **Literacy and English experiences and outcomes**

Reading poems from countries around the world links to CfE Literacy & English Experiences and outcomes by offering opportunities to:

- *develop my understanding of what is special, vibrant and valuable about my own and other cultures and their languages*
- *explore the richness and diversity of language, how it can affect me, and the wide range of ways in which I and others can be creative*
- *extend and enrich my vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading*
- *explore and discuss word patterns and text structures*

## **Curriculum for Excellence Correspondences (Level 2)**

Individual activities outlined below can link to particular experiences and outcomes:

### **Reading the poem**

- ENG 2-12a
- ENG 2-17a
- ENG 2-19a

### **Discussion**

- LIT 2-02a
- LIT 2-09a

### **Research Activity**

- LIT 2-06a
- LIT 2-14a
- LIT 2-15a

### **Creative Activity**

- ENG 2-26a
- ENG 2-27a
- ENG 2-30a
- ENG 2-31a

# Hedge Sparrows

You don't see many hedges these days, and the hedges you do see they're not that thorny, it's a shame, and when I say a hedge I'm not talking about a row of twigs between two lines of rusty barbed wire, or more likely just a big prairie where there were whole cities of hedges not fifty years ago, a big desert more like, and I mean thick hedges, with trees nearby for a bit of shade and a field not a road not too far off so you can nip out for an insect or two when you or the youngsters feel like a snack, a whole hedgerow system, as it says in the book, and seven out of ten sparrows say the same, and that's an underestimate, we want a place you can feel safe in again, we're social animals, we want our social life back, and the sooner the better, because in a good hedge you can always talk things over, make decisions, have a laugh if you want to, sing, even with a voice like mine!

Richard Price

from *Lucky Day* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005)

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Notes: 'Hedge Sparrows' is the first poem in a sequence called 'A Spelthorne Bird List'. A note in *Lucky Day* says this "was first premiered at the Troubadour Coffee House, Earls Court, in January 1998".

Spelthorne is an area to the south-west of London, centred on the town of Staines, near the junction of the M25 and M3. The River Thames flows through it, and within it there are several lakes and reservoirs.

Another note in *Lucky Day* explains that "Spelthorne is a Saxon word meaning 'Speech Thorn Tree'".

# The Poet & His Work

**Richard Price** was born in 1966, and grew up in Renfrewshire. He was educated at Napier College and the University of Strathclyde, where his doctoral thesis was on the novels and plays of Neil M. Gunn. He was the Head of Modern British Collections at the British Library from 2003 to 2010.

He is a founder editor (with Raymond Friel) of magazines *Southfields* and *Painted.Spoken*. He is associated with the 1990s grouping of poets called the Informationists, which also includes W. N Herbert, David Kinloch, Peter McCarey and Alan Riach. He is also a member of the London-based Poetry Workshop.

His poetry collections include *Marks & Sparks* (Akros, 1995), *Perfume & Petrol Fumes* (Diehard, 1999), and *Frosted, Melted* (Diehard, 2002). *Lucky Day* (2005), *Greenfields* (2007), and *Rays* (2009) were all published by Carcanet; *Lucky Day* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize. He also writes fiction: *A Boy in Summer* (2002) is a book of linked short-stories while *The Island* (2010) is a suspense story that charts the strangest day in the life of a father and his daughter.

In 2011 the musical project for which he is the principle lyricist, Mirabeau, released its first album, *Golden Key*. Several of the songs are settings of poems from his earlier poetry collections.

# Reading the Poem

- Who is speaking the poem?
  - How would you describe their character? Would you say they are more happy or sad – grateful or complaining – talkative or quiet – outgoing or shy?
  - What sort of place does the speaker want to live in?
  - What sort of place does the speaker dislike?
  - What does the speaker feel has been lost over recent years?
  - In the poem a bird is speaking, but can you link what it says to the lives of people?
- 
- How many sentences are in the poem?
  - Although it is not broken into lines like most poems, it is punctuated with commas. What is the longest section between two commas? And the shortest?
- 
- Read the poem aloud.
  - It could be read by one person, or you could try reading it as a group of three or four people.
  - If the latter, decide who speaks which part – don't just read one after another, but 'shuffle' your voices, so a listener never knows who will speak next.
  - Pay attention to the commas!
  - After you have practised a few times, try to read it as quickly as possible.
- 
- There is a tradition of 'prose poems', that is "a prose work... having some of the characteristics of poetry".
  - What are some of the "characteristics of poetry", in other words, how is a poem usually different from a story? Think about the way a poem looks on the page, and the way it sounds, and perhaps also what it's about.
  - Does this text have any "characteristics of poetry"?
  - Do you think it is a poem? If it isn't, what do you think it is?

## Discussion

Talk about the birds you see locally.

- Do any of them have a distinctive song? If so, try to imitate this, and then try to write it down. (You can make up your own spelling!)
- Where are you most likely to see certain birds? In gardens, in the school playground, on overhead cables, at the beach, on tree branches?
- Talk about how birds differ from each other. Think about size, shape, the way they move, their song, what they eat, and so on.
- Do you know any sayings, rhymes or stories to do with any of the birds?

## Research Activity

Find out about hedge sparrows, or dunnocks.

- Where do they live?
- What do they eat?
- What is their song like?
- How big are they?
- Do they migrate?
- What sort of nests do they build, and where?
- Which countries do they live in?
- How do they differ from house sparrows and tree sparrows?
- What is their Latin name?
- If any one in the class speaks a language other than English, ask them to find out what the bird is called in their language.

Make a display featuring your information, alongside Richard Price's poem.

# Creative Activity

Write a poem in the **voice of a bird**.

First of all, choose a **bird**. It should be one you know something about, and have seen in real life, rather than just in photographs, or on tv.

Write down some **facts** about it – ask yourself the same questions as those about the dunnock under 'Research Activity' above.

Think about what it's going to talk about – **subjects** like

- the weather
- where it lives
- its children, or its parents
- other birds like it
- other bird species
- what it likes to eat
- what it's afraid of

Find its **voice** for your poem. Listen to its song (there are recordings at [www.rspb.org](http://www.rspb.org) of many birds singing), and decide how you think it would speak if it was human – perhaps

- shrill and quick, or deep and slow
- in long, complicated sentences using lots of big words, or short simple sentences using everyday words
- confident, even bossy, or timid and shy
- giving instructions, or asking questions

Write your poem in **three parts**:

- an introduction, to set the scene; the bird tells us where it is, and perhaps what the weather's like
- a main part; the bird tells us something of its life, perhaps something that has happened to it
- an ending; the bird is about to fly off somewhere and says its goodbyes

Think about how your poem **looks** and **sounds**, whether it is

- a single paragraph (a "prose poem") like 'Hedge Sparrow'
- written as a poem, in lines and verses
- whether the lines are short or long, or a mix
- whether the poem uses rhyme or alliteration
- whether there are certain words or phrases you repeat

Once you've finished, read the poem aloud, and see if it sounds right.

## Further Reading & Weblinks

The poem 'Hedge Sparrows', representing Great Britain, is part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world)

All the poems selected for The Written World – to find that for Great Britain, click on Great Britain on the map, or on the 'Europe' icon below the map

<http://hydrohotel.net/>

Richard Price's website

[www.btinternet.com/~carpenter/p9hrur.htm](http://www.btinternet.com/~carpenter/p9hrur.htm)

Includes the complete text of 'A Spelthorne Bird List'

[www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/d/dunnock/index.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/d/dunnock/index.aspx)

Information about hedge sparrows, also known as dunnocks

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18023389](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18023389)

Great Britain country profile

[www.guardian.co.uk/uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk)

Recent news articles about Great Britain

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*This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's project The Written World, May 2012.*

[www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)