

# Verse Novels for Teens

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Edmonton  
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Plato banned poets  
from his utopian  
Republic

# A verse novel is a story told in a series of poems.

- Each poem usually fits on one or two pages
- Can be told in
  - one voice
  - alternating voices
  - multiple points of view
- Action centers on an emotional event
- Tends to be introspective

# A verse novel is not:

- Ballad
- Collection of poetry
- Novel with really short chapters
- Epistolary

# Literary traditions

- Oral storytelling
- Traditional narrative verse
- Lyric poetry
- Live theatre
- Film and television
- Spoken word performance
- Prose literature

# What kind of verse?

- Free verse
- Traditional
- Hybrid

# A dissenting view: it's NOT poetry

- “Writing my prose in funny-shaped lines does not render it poetry.” Virginia Euwer Wolff.
- “It is typeset as verse, but it isn’t poetry in any way other than arrangement of text on the page.” Olga Stein, review of *The Crazy Man* in *Books in Canada*.

# Poets first, then storytellers

- Helen Frost
- Mel Glenn
- Nikki Grimes
- Juan Felipe Herrera
- Steven Herrick
- Karen Hesse
- Ron Koertge

# What kind of stories?

- Realistic contemporary
- Historical
- Other
- **Multicultural** (contemporary & historical)

# Verse Novels for Adults

- 1833:  
Eugene Onegin by Alexander Pushkin
- 1986:  
The Golden Gate by Vikram Seth

# Why use verse to tell a story?

- Draw attention to a truth
- Create an intense emotional experience
- Enhance accessibility and clarity
- Pleasure of poetry

“The quality of the poetry gives the verse novel its true distinction and luminous intensity. Poetry burns for longer than prose.” Dorothy Porter

# How does poetry differ from prose?

- Attentiveness
- Concentration
- Experimentation
- Originality
- Form

(from *Poetry for Dummies*. The Poetry Center et.al. 2001)

# Authors tell us:

- Karen Hesse

“The frugality of the life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions during the dust bowl demanded an economy of words.”

# Authors tell us:

- Virginia Euwer Wolff

“I did try changing part of a draft into paragraphs, and I just got all blocked and stifled and couldn’t do it.”

# Authors tell us:

- **Robert Cormier**

“as I began to write, it seemed to cry out for verse. I tried writing it in prose but it didn’t work, so I let it go its own way.”

# Authors tell us:

- Margarita Engle

“The life of Juan Francisco Manzano haunted me for years before I finally realized that to do justice to the story, I needed to write it in verse.”

# Authors tell us:

- Steven Herrick

“because I can’t write prose”

# Who reads verse novels?

- Readers who love language
- Readers looking for
  - a story focused on emotions
  - an alternative format
  - a quick read
- Rappers
- Reluctant readers

# Reluctant Readers

- Shorter overall
- Fewer words per line
- Concise
- White space
- Natural speech rhythms
- Confessional quality
- Passion
- Power and punch

# Where are verse novels in the library?

- Poetry (800s) vs. Fiction
- Terminology
  - narrative verse
  - verse novel
  - novel in verse
  - novel in poems
  - story in poems
  - story-poem

# Award Winners

- ***Crazy Man*** - Pamela Porter
  - Governor General Award
  - TD Book Award
  - Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction
- ***Out of the Dust*** - Karen Hesse
- ***Make Lemonade*** - Virginia Euwer Wolff
- ***True Believer*** - Virginia Euwer Wolff
- ***Bronx Masquerade*** - Nikki Grimes

**Poetry is the supreme  
fiction, madame.**

Wallace Stevens



**Poetry should surprise by  
a fine excess.** John Keats