Topic overview

Nye, Naomi Shihab

American Poets


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Naomi Shihab Nye

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Born: St. Louis, Missouri; March 12, 1952

PRINCIPAL POETRY

Different Ways to Pray, 1980
On the Edge of the Sky, 1981


**ACHIEVEMENTS**

Naomi Shihab Nye’s greatest contribution lies in her poetry, work that has been much honored. Both *Different Ways to Pray* and *Hugging the Jukebox* received the Voertman Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. *Hugging the Jukebox* was chosen by Josephine Miles as the National Poetry Series winner in 1981 and as one of the most notable books by the American Library Association. Her honors also include selection by W. S. Merwin as recipient of the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets (1988), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1997-1998), the Witter Bynner Fellowship (2000), a Lannan Literary Fellowship (2002), the Paterson Poetry Prize, four Pushcart Prizes, and the Charity Randall Prize for Spoken Poetry with Galway Kinnell from the International Poetry Forum. *You and Yours* won the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award in 2005. Her work has been selected for such collections recognizing outstanding writing as *The Best American Essays, 1991* (edited by Joyce Carol Oates) and *The Best American Poetry 1996* (edited by Adrienne Rich). She became a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2010.

Nye has also received awards for her children’s books. She won the Judy Lopez Medal for children’s literature, the Middle
East Book Award, and the Texas Institute of Letters Best Book for Young Readers Award for *Habibi*. Nye also received the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award twice and the 2000 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award. Her book *Nineteen Varieties of Gazelle* was a National Book Award finalist for literature for youths in 2002. The Arab American National Museum presented Nye with the 2009 Arab American Book Award for children’s literature for *Honeybee*. The National Council of Teachers of English’s Assembly on Literature for Adolescents selected Nye as the recipient of its 2009 ALAN Award to honor her writing for young adults.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12, 1952, in St. Louis, Missouri, the daughter of Palestinian journalist Aziz Shihab, an immigrant to the United States after the 1948 *nakba* expelling Palestinians from their communities, and an American mother, Miriam Naomi (Allwardt) Shihab, who was a teacher. Nye spent her childhood in St. Louis, developing an interest in poetry at an early age partly because of a televised performance by Carl Sandburg and poems her mother read aloud; at the age of seven, she had a poem published in *Wee Wisdom*, a children’s magazine. Her parents owned stores named World Gifts where Nye occasionally worked. She traveled with her family, including her younger brother Adlai, to Mexico and within the United States. Her father often told his children stories and folktales with Middle Eastern themes.

From St. Louis, fourteen-year-old Nye and her family moved to Jerusalem, where she attended the St. Tarkmanchatz School and absorbed many stories, impressions, and perceptions of the differences in cultures and the similarities among people. Many of her poems draw on her experiences with people she observed and family members she learned about or knew well. These experiences have been incorporated into her poems and her writing for children and young people.

Due to tensions preceding the Six Day War, Nye’s family left Jerusalem in 1967 and settled in San Antonio, Texas. She completed her high school education in that city. Nye read poems by William Stafford and W. S. Merwin, which intensified her interest in poetry. *Seventeen* printed one of Nye’s poems when she was a teenager. She studied English and world religions at Trinity University and wrote poems that were published in such journals as *Ironwood* and *Modern Poetry Studies* while she was in college. She heard Allen Ginsberg at a campus poetry reading and was influenced by Jack Kerouac, whose widow she visited in Florida. Nye earned a B.A. with honors in 1974, and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. Employed by the Texas Commission on the Arts, Nye traveled to Texas schools to teach creative writing and later conducted similar workshops for students at schools in other states. By 1977, her debut poetry chapbook, *Tattooed Feet*, was printed, with her second chap-book, *Eye-to-Eye*, being published the following year. She married Michael Nye, a lawyer and photographer, in 1978. With their son, Madison Cloudfeather Nye, born in 1986, they remained in San Antonio. The city’s Mexican American culture has been important to Nye’s work. She has delighted in observing and describing the daily activities of all the people she encounters.

Nye’s poems often catalog the habits, concerns, and attitudes of various people and cultures. Her affinity for others and appreciation of their individuality are the most outstanding characteristics of her poetry. Nye has traveled widely, gaining experiences that have enabled her to fill her poetic album with snapshots of people worldwide who simultaneously reveal both the unique and the universal qualities of humanity. Academic and literary journals, including *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *Ploughshares*, *ALAN Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Horn Book*, and *Iowa Review*, have printed Nye’s work. Her poetry and prose have also been selected for numerous anthologies, including *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988), edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif S. Elnusa; *Texas Poets in Concert: A Quartet* (1990), edited by R. S. Gwynn; and *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), edited by Nathalie Handal.

Nye has been the Holloway Lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, a lecturer in poetry at the University of Texas campuses at Austin and San Antonio, and a visiting writer at the University of Hawaii and the University of Alaska. She has
traveled to conduct workshops with teachers and students of all ages in the Middle East and Asia with the United States Information Agency’s Arts America Program. Her poems show that she is at home in all cultures, from Madison Street in St. Louis to the jungle in Guatemala. In all places, she looks for and finds connections between herself and others. Participating in the Project for Translation of Arabic (PROTA), Nye translated literature that was printed in *Modern Arabic Poetry* (1987), *Literature of Modern Arabia* (1988), *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (1992), and *Modern Arabic Fiction* (2005), all edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, to make it accessible to non-Arabic readers.

Often Nye appears as a spokesperson for poetry. She appeared in the series *The Language of Poetry*, an eight-part series on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), in 1995 and was featured in another series, *The United States of Poetry*. She has also been recorded on National Public Radio programs, including *The Writer’s Almanac* and *A Prairie Home Companion*. Nye interviewed poet W. S. Merwin for a series of videotapes focusing on modern literary figures distributed by the Lannan Foundation. She read poetry at the Library of Congress and at the White House while Bill Clinton was president. Starting in 1999, Nye participated in National Council on the Humanities activities. She served as poetry editor for *Texas Observer*. In March, 2008, Nye participated in the first Split This Rock Poetry Festival in Washington, D.C., reading some of her antiwar poems, including “Letters My Prez Is Not Sending.” Despite her busy schedule filled with reading, speaking, and teaching engagements, she urges readers of her poems and essays to take time to pause and savor their lives.

**ANALYSIS**

Naomi Shihab Nye, like earlier American poets Walt Whitman and Sandburg before her, celebrates diverse people and their cultures. Considering herself a nomad, Nye travels to discover new ideas and acquire experiences that enrich her poetry, much of which contains autobiographical elements based on her perceptions of places and people. Her innate curiosity and sense of wonder cause Nye to undergo adventures spontaneously and delight in her discoveries and encounters with unpredictable strangers and unfamiliar locales. Her knowledge of history grounds her poetry with facts and enables her to present often overlooked perspectives and events. Today, the global village requires an inclusiveness that Nye affirms by describing indigenous and immigrant Americans as well as Pakistani, Japanese, Indian, and Central and South American people. While her poetic voice embraces, her content connects—with the earth, with all others. Her method depends on imagery, metaphor, and story.

Nye explores human attempts to grasp meaning and create a meaningful life. Describing ways people do this, she points out the beauty inherent in such everyday activities as Texas ladies shopping for peaches, or an Arab man making brooms “Thumb over thumb.” Her poems demonstrate that heightened consciousness promotes new levels of awareness. They also show the meaningfulness of stories. They document people’s conscious connections with others and the universality of cares, grief and joy, and behaviors. Her free-verse lyrics are full of images describing the ordinary perceived as extraordinary. Poetic stories become metaphors defining human lives.

During the early twenty-first century, Nye intensified her poetic pleas for peace and conveyed antirwar messages through emotional imagery and blunt statements. Having experienced warfare in the Middle East, she expressed disillusion, anger, and frustration with some political leaders’ choices that perpetuate hostilities and affect vulnerable populations. She protests injustices and does not conceal her emotions when outraged. Nye’s poems seek stability instead of chaos and exploitation. Her emphasis on examining and presenting multicultural topics links readers despite their differences. She expresses value for people’s uniqueness and urges them to share their insights. Perspective is a constant theme as she asks readers to be aware of and consider differing points of view. Nye identifies with others, listening and comprehending their worries. She views truth as the means to awaken and revitalize people broken by various burdens and losses. She creates poems that honor nature and humanity to expand readers’ appreciation of their global community and how their actions or apathy affect distant people and environments. Nye’s poems exemplify her literary characteristics of friendliness, helpfulness, and compassion, which
Different Ways to Pray

_Different Ways to Pray_, her first major collection following several chapbooks, explores the different ways people achieve self-awareness and revere the world. Poems document the new level of thinking and responding that results from getting to know oneself. “Otto’s Place” recounts the sense of completeness and satisfaction achieved as the speaker experiences a physical connection between her body and the earth. “The Whole Self,” a poem reminiscent of Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking,” analyzes the perceiver of actions and laments the accompanying loss of spontaneity. Recognizing there is no going back, the speaker exhorts herself to “_Dance!_ The whole self was a current, a fragile cargo,/ a raft someone was paddling through the jungle,/ and I was there, wading, and I would be there at the other end.”

“Different Ways to Pray” catalogs particular approaches: Whether one prays or is prayed for, kneeling, sitting, talking “with God as … with goats,” what is central to prayer is a sense of connectedness. Other connections are celebrated. “Kindness” describes a state of being in which a person, having experienced loss, finds comfort in giving. Giving in “Coming into Cuzco” is personified in a young woman who “handed me one perfect pink rose,/ because we had noticed each other, and that was all.” In so doing, the young woman refreshed a tired and bewildered spirit. Another kind of connection occurs in “Walking Down Blanco Road at Midnight,” where “a folding into the self … occurs/ when the lights are small on the horizon/ and no light is shining into the face.” This collection ends with the poem “Words Under the Words,” directed to the poet’s Palestinian grandmother and expressing the hope that the spirit beneath words can be felt even if inadequately delivered, a hope, the poem implies, reflecting the prayerful hope of all people.

Hugging the Jukebox

_Hugging the Jukebox_ continues earlier themes while placing particular focus on stories. The title poem, “Hugging the Jukebox,” reveals a young boy sent to live with his grandparents on a Caribbean island. At age six, he sings with great passion and with a large voice all the songs on the jukebox. Hugging the box and belting out songs, he leaves grandparents amazed and tourists spellbound. “For Lost and Found Brothers” celebrates the influence of people, known and unknown, and their stories, told and untold. The theme of this poem—stories of people feeling lost and the underlying connection of all people—develops motifs of the importance of stories and of the interconnectedness of all people, even of people yet unknown to one another.

Other poems reveal the way ordinary tasks assume significance. In “At the Seven-Mile Ranch, Comstock, Texas,” the speaker, through solitary work on the ranch, becomes conversant with the land as if it were a friend: “The land walking beside you is your oldest friend,/ pleasantly silent, like already you’ve told the best stories.” “Daily” demonstrates that ordinary tasks become sacred when accomplished with care and attention. With folding clothes, addressing an envelope, people’s “hands are churches that worship the world.” In “The Trashpickers, Madison Street,” trashpickers “murmur in a language soft as rags,” and with their recovery of items from the trash, the discarded are re-born.

Yellow Glove

_In Yellow Glove_, metaphors for the experience of people’s lives abound. In the title piece, “Yellow Glove,” a child frets about a yellow glove identified by adults as valuable that is lost in a muddy, winter ditch. Surprisingly, the child finds it in the spring, now dirty and worn, refurbishes it, and puts it safely away. Later in life, the speaker ponders its significance in a world of “bankbooks and stereos,” concluding that it is “Part of the difference between floating and going down.”
The metaphor in “Dew” is that of wearing moccasins in the dew, a practice a Kickapoo grandmother suggests to make them fit. The metaphor in “The Use of Fiction,” “a clear marble/ he [a boy] will hide in his sock drawer for months,” refers to a truth—a new special bond—that is arrived at by a little lie. While Nye’s work is usually optimistic, some pieces reflect another reality. “Hello” shows how a rat, real or metaphorical, can gnaw away at a special fruit. “No One Thinks of Tegucigalpa” laments the negligible care for the injustices and the poverty of lives that are a part of the world. “How bad is it to dress in a cold room? How small your own/ wish for a parcel of children? How remarkably invisible/ this tear?

RED SUITCASE

Continuing the exploration of stories is the operative metaphor of Red Suitcase. The metaphor that introduces the text draws on a Moroccan folktale of a red suitcase with nothing but a blank sheet of paper inside. These poems capture stories that might have appeared on that sheet. In “How Palestinians Keep Warm,” the speaker ruminates on how ancestors grounded themselves. “Choose one word and say it over/ and over, till it builds a fire inside your mouth.” She wants to share this wisdom with babies and finds with only her thin shawl that she can do this best through stories.

“Travel Alarm” humorously advocates, in its story of a childish prank, the placing of priorities on loved ones and shared moments. “Arabic” reaffirms, through a bizarre story, the universality of human experience. An Arab complains that those who do not speak his language cannot share his pain, yet when the speaker “hailed a taxi by shouting Pain! … it stopped/ in every language and opened its doors.”

FUEL

The poems in Fuel explore the subtle influences that shape lives. “Hidden” identifies the influence of the unspoken but significant name of someone. “Fuel” speaks to those apparently insignificant things in life that nourish people: a received look that is recognized, acknowledged, and fully accepted; the active listening response that emanates from a plant; the blue in the sky, recognized as a call. People are connected to others in ways they never see or know in “String,” when at a certain time of day in a certain light, they connect with those they love who are far away, or they connect with their former selves. These connections are like knots in the string “giving us something to go by.” One series explores the influence of the everyday, an approach first inspired in Nye by Stafford, her mentor, and reflected in “Bill’s Beans.” Another series explores the mystery of things. Some transformed person writes on all the bus benches, “NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.” A little boy, in “One Boy Told Me,” marvels, “Just think—no one has ever seen/ inside this peanut before!” The first poem of this collection sums up the prevailing attitude of all the poems: “Muchas Gracias por Todo,” thanks very much for everything.

WORDS UNDER THE WORDS

Words Under the Words, a compilation of three out-of-print collections, Different Ways to Pray, Hugging the Jukebox, and Yellow Glove, begins with an essay, “Loose Leaf,” an extended prose poem describing Nye’s perception of her life as poetry. She sees her life as a loose-leaf binder or a photo album, holding records of important incidents, like snapshots. The pages can be rearranged, the chronology is not important, and there are blank pages for the stories she has yet to know. This analogy speaks to her poetry as well as her life.

MINT SNOWBALL

Nye’s poetry in Mint Snowball documents her reactions to daily incidents, locations, and individuals many people might dismiss as insignificant or not notice. Presented in paragraphs divided into four sections and an epilogue, these narrative poems explore family, community, history, news, and behaviors shaping society. Through these observations, Nye identifies
commonalities humanizing otherwise seemingly disparate groups that often are unfairly assigned characteristics and intentions that intensify conflict, misunderstanding, and hate. Nye shares her culture in “Trade,” in which soldiers march in the background while Nye introduces a friend to her 105-year-old Palestinian grandmother who asks if she can switch homes with the friend’s grandmother who is safe in Ireland. Nye mourns casualties of strife and refers to breached historical claims disrupting lives in “Pictures from the Village” and “Why the Silence Still Hangs over Eastern Oregon.”

Nye celebrates the earth and how it sustains life, recalling childhood memories of working on a farm in “Job” and her return as an adult with her son to observe the same processes involved in tending plants and how those experiences shape her. Mint links Nye’s two cultures and families in the United States and Middle East. That herb represents soothing and refreshing qualities that comfort and sustain Nye, transporting her emotionally to places and people she loves. She plants mint in her garden, even when climatic conditions are unfavorable, indicating her determination to pursue what she values. Nye comments that mint has universal appeal to diverse populations worldwide, spicing drinks, food, and the air. She refers to mint in her poems to express various themes, especially peace, calm, and forgiveness, such as her uncles reconciling while drinking mint-laced tea after a fight in “Mint.” To Nye, mint symbolizes the antithesis to war and hostility. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Nye proposed that people cultivate mint. In “The Urge for Epasote,” Nye emphasizes generosity through sharing herb seeds and stalks, especially those difficult to procure.

“Mint Snowball” tells how Nye’s great-grandfather devised a delicacy in his Shelbyville, Illinois, drugstore from scoops of ice shavings and ice cream drizzled with a mint topping he prepared from a recipe he kept secret even from his family. Nye, who never knew this great-grandfather, notes that he gained local acclaim for this treat. She imagines her mother as a child, savoring spoonfuls of a mint snowball, symbolizing future possibilities. A stranger bought the recipe from her great-grandfather, who did not divulge it to his children. Nye, who lacks memories of the mint snowball except for what her mother has shared, feels estranged and disconnected from her past and suffers an emptiness that she fears cannot be filled. She perceives the mint snowball as an unattainable ideal. Nye yearns to comprehend this enigmatic part of her family’s history, but her mother is unable to duplicate the mint snowball, intensifying Nye’s loss. “Mint Snowball II” tells how Nye returns to Shelbyville decades later and locates one of her great-grandfather’s former customers whose mother rewarded him as a child with mint snowballs, creating an enduring memory for both him and Nye.

**HONEYBEE**

Nye explains that the concepts she explores in *Honeybee* originated when, for a college linguistics class, she researched how bees communicate. This collection examines themes of interaction, instinct, and connection. Nye refers to poets who have inspired her, including Ted Kooser, Emily Dickinson, and E. B. White. Her poetry conveys traits and qualities associated with bees and their hives in imagery and metaphors to describe human behavior and societies and related political and social topics. She incorporates references to bees, such as a passage from Proverbs comparing kind words to a honeycomb. Many of Nye’s poems celebrate domestic settings and activities, with homes and beehives providing shelter and sustenance. Her writing encourages people to act responsibly toward their communities and selves, urging them to recognize how others rely on them and to embrace nurturing ethics and work habits.

Nye often uses aspects of nature to emphasize her joy in people and places. She seeks to expand the readers’ realization of the world beyond their immediate location and opinions, encouraging them to respect other cultures and their traditions. Her poems transmit optimism, disillusionment, and despair and the many emotions her characters feel when confronted with acts of benevolence or violence. Nye’s use of pollen imagery suggests people can collect and spread tolerance, acceptance, empathy, and hope to enrich the world and reinforce one another so that people can withstand detrimental impacts. She addresses reconciliation in “Communication Skills,” referring to silences and shunning weakening people and how kindness restores bravery to speak and share thoughts.
Many of Nye’s poems, such as “Broken,” “The Cost,” and “Letters My Prez Is Not Sending,” convey antiwar messages by providing details humanizing conflicts through descriptions of damages, the use of people’s names, and the identification of victims’ dreams and losses; sometimes Nye ends stanzas with ellipses to symbolize the lack of adequate answers as to the justification for policies. Nye’s poetry endorses strengthening the world and its people, not destroying them. She acknowledges the resiliency of many of her characters despite abuses and the empowerment of forgiveness and renewal such as the example she provides in “Parents of Murdered Palestinian Boy Donate His Organs to Israelis.”

Motion is a frequent theme, whether it is bees moving between flowers and fields or speakers traveling to both unknown and familiar places. Nye stresses that populations are vulnerable to military conflicts, disease, or habitat changes. Exile occurs as trucks transport millions of bees to distant areas to pollinate crops, reminiscent of war refugees fleeing their homelands and contributing their insights and talents to new communities, much like Nye’s immigrant father. The threat of extinction, whether loss of life or loss of ideals, underlies much of Nye’s writing. She expresses concern that large quantities of bees have vanished, stating that their absence endangers everyone. Her poems reveal how people, animals, and the environment are interrelated, with even slight imbalances in relationships provoking change, often irreparably. In “For My Desk” and “The Crickets Welcome Me to Japan,” Nye suggests that people should observe ordinary things such as birds and insects to appreciate how they contribute to the world’s harmony.

OTHER MAJOR WORKS


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