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Adventures in Verse

What makes the best books for kids so good? A thousand things, depending on the book. Sometimes it's the characters, the story, the illustrations. Sometimes it's the rhythm, for rhythm can generate momentum and surprise, and, most of all, rhythm can be fun. When it works, rhythm also keeps readers young and old from tripping up, from stumbling over a word or phrase that doesn't fit, and so from losing the sense. But it takes care and craft for a rhythm never to miss the beat. How does rhythm work, exactly, and what are its effects?

Since understanding can be fun, too, let's look at three examples.

I

Often the verse in books for kids rhymes, and often it has an emphatic beat:

> The Highway Rat was a baddie.
> The Highway Rat was a beast.
> He took what he wanted and ate what he took.
> His life was one long feast. (Julia Donaldson, *The Highway Rat*)

That's easy enough to tap or clap along to, and you don't need actually to count to four to hear four taps, claps, or beats in each line. In the third line, there's a beat on 'took,' 'want-,' 'ate,' and 'took':

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    1            2         3            4
He took what he wanted and ate what he took
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In the other three lines, which are shorter, there's a beat after the end of the line, an extra tap or clap to complete the set:

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     1       2         3       (4)
The Highway Rat was a baddie.
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You could call the fourth beat in a line like this a silent beat or prescribed pause, and it makes sense to prescribe a pause, here at the end of a sentence. But you don't have to have a technical description for any of this. Six-year-olds certainly don't, and they can hear and can perform a four-beat rhythm with gusto. So far, so good, then.

There's no mistaking the rhythm of these lines from Julia Donaldson's *The Highway Rat* (2011), even though these are the opening lines and even if this is the first time you've ever read them. Partly this is because the first two lines have that parallel construction (the Highway Rat was A, the Highway Rat was B) and because the third line has a circular structure (he took […] he took). Partly it is because the basic pattern of four beats to a line and of lines grouped in fours, with the second and fourth lines rhyming, is so common.

The next two lines promise more of the same –

His teeth were sharp and yellow,
    His manners were rough and rude,

– but then something strange happens. Or, rather, something happens which is strange if you stop to think about it. If instead you're delighted by this portrait of a comical baddie and want to know what happens next, it works seamlessly:

His teeth were sharp and yellow,
    His manners were rough and rude,
And the Highway Rat went riding –
    Riding – riding –
Riding along the highway
    and stealing the travellers' food.[1]

That's six lines rather than four, and yet the verse doesn't stumble or trip when, at the end of the eighth line, where we might have expected something to rhyme with 'rude' and the sentence to end, the sentence keeps going. The sentence keeps going, and the Rat keeps riding! It takes an extra two lines for 'rude' to find its match in 'food.' The group of four lines has expanded to six and, at the same time, the fourth of these six lines seems to be too short: 'Riding – riding –.' How does that work?

Well, you can tap or clap some silent beats, to maintain the pattern of four beats to a line –

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 1    (2) 3    (4)
Riding – Riding –
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– or you can hear the basic pattern not as four beats to a line but as two. Even in the other lines, what I have been calling the first and third beats tend to be heavier, more emphatic than the second and fourth beats. Tap or clap half as often, then, and the rhythm runs on uninterrupted:

[1] These lines, as well as the title of Donaldson's book, pay homage to Alfred Noyse's 1906 poem 'The Highwayman': 'And the highwayman came riding – / Riding – riding – / The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.'

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          1                2
And the Highway Rat went riding –
      1        2
     Riding – riding –
 1               2
Riding along the highway
           1                       2
     and stealing the travellers' food.
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With a second line voicing only the heavier beats, and with the one word *riding* repeated four times in succession, these lines rise to a kind of climax before resolving, at last, with the completion of the sentence and the rhyme. It's an effect which a regular pattern of four lines, each with three or four voiced beats, couldn't achieve. It's not an onomatopoeic effect: it's not that the rhythm suddenly imitates a horse's gallop. Instead, the rhythm becomes stronger, more forceful. This, the rhythm tells us, is one hard-riding rat!

Much of the book's story is told in stanzas of four lines, but every now and then there's another of these extended, six-line stanzas. The Rat encounters a series of travellers on the road – a rabbit, a squirrel, some ants, a duck – and with each encounter he declares his nefarious intent. To the rabbit he cries:

> 'Give me your pastries and puddings!
> Give me your chocolate and cake!
> For I am the Rat of the Highway,
> The Highway – the Highway –
> Yes I am the Rat of the Highway,
> and whatever I want I take.'

Here, too, the verbal repetition, the emphasis on the heavier beats, and the delayed completion of the rhyme mean the rhythm rises to a climax, but a climax of bravado rather than horseratship.

At last, however, our dastardly antihero is undone. When the Rat meets the duck, she promises to take him to a cave high on a hill, a cave in which her sister lives, she says, and which is filled with buns and biscuits. The Rat is intrigued, and up the hill they go:

> At last they came to a lonely cave,
> and the duck began to quack.
> She quacked, 'Good evening sister –
> Sister – sister –'
> And … 'Sister, sister, sister …'
> a voice from the cave came back.

Outwitted by the duck, fooled by the echo into thinking the sister really has replied, the Rat enters the cave, determined to steal those buns and biscuits. And as if to mark this twist in the tale, the rhythmic pattern here has a new effect. In voicing only the most emphatic beats, that short line suggests the duck's raised voice, as she calls into the cave, listens for an answer, and calls again: 'sister – / Sister – sister –.' Whereas, earlier in the book, this rhythmic pattern had produced a climax, now the verbal repetition and the delayed rhyme sound the gradual fading of the echo. In Axel Scheffler's accompanying illustration, this is neatly represented by the words 'Sister, sister, sister,' positioned in the mouth of the cave itself, shrinking in size as the echo trails off.

So, the hapless Rat enters the cave and loses his way. Meanwhile, the duck steals his horse, gallops off, is reunited with the other hungry travellers, and shares with them the food the Rat has stolen, recovered from his saddlebags. They feast in celebration, but the Rat is left to wander aimlessly through the cave until, eventually, he emerges through another exit, on the other side of the hill. There he finds a job, and the story concludes with one more six-line stanza:

A thinner and greyer and meeker Rat,
he robs on the road no more,
For he landed a job in a cake shop –
A cake shop – a cake shop –
And they say he still works in the cake shop,
sweeping the cake shop floor.

Here, too, the rhythmic pattern has another new effect: not forceful climax, but comic bathos. Humbled, our antihero is reduced – oh cruel irony – to sweeping the floor of a shop selling precisely the cakes and pastries and biscuits he had been so eager to steal. If the echoing of 'sister' tricks the Rat, here the repetition of 'cake shop' seals his fate. Here, for the first time, the verbal repetition extends across four consecutive lines, with 'cake shop' appearing even in the stanza's final line. There shall be, the rhythm tells us, no escape for this once proud Rat!

What's so great about the rhythmic play in *The Highway Rat*, I think, is that it produces such varying effects from what is, in abstract terms, the same six-line pattern, which is itself a variation on the customary four-line stanza. No six-year-old thinks in abstract terms about stanzas and beats, but the effects are real enough. There is, if you like, a narrative registered by the periodic appearance of this extended stanza – from strength and bravado to meekness and bathos. This narrative in the rhythm frames the main narrative, that of plot and character; the rhythm guides interpretation and response. Here, at the end, it tells us why to smile.

II

In each of Donaldson's stanzas, whether of four or six lines, the rhyme traces a little arc of expectation and fulfilment. This generates momentum; it's good for telling stories. But the sounds

of the words – the vowels, the consonants – can be entertaining in other ways, too. In those opening lines of *The Highway Rat*, it's no accident that the Rat is a 'beast' and a 'baddie,' rather than a 'beast' and a 'villain,' though 'villain' and 'baddie' mean much the same thing. The alliteration is punchy, introducing the Rat with swagger. It helps, too, that 'Highway' and 'riding' share the same stressed vowel, so that when that first six-line stanza reaches its climax, it does so with insistent assonance: 'And the Highway Rat went riding – / Riding – riding – / Riding along the highway.' Elsewhere the highway is called a 'road,' but though 'Riding along the road' would have meant much the same thing, it would not have contributed so well to that climax.

Sometimes this play with the sounds of words is more than an occasional touch. Jeanne Willis's *Lottie Potter Wants an Otter* (2016) is a book-long tongue-twister:

> 'I really want an otter!'
> uttered little Lottie Potter …
> So off she tottered down to Tilly Town.
> With a skip and with a hop,
> she stopped at Trotter's Otter Shop
> to look for something furry, warm and brown.

Imagine instead that Lottie had said 'I really need an otter,' not 'want'; imagine that Lottie had 'exclaimed' rather than 'uttered' those words; imagine that Lottie had 'hurried' down to town; and imagine that she had 'entered' an otter 'store' owned by a Mr 'Jenkins.' Willis's lines are thick with repeated vowels and consonants: no opportunity to weave a word into this sound play has been missed. The effect is then compounded by the rhyme scheme. Whereas, in *The Highway Rat*, the customary four-line stanza has a single rhyme, linking its second and fourth lines, here there are three different rhymes and every line rhymes. What's more, the second rhyme ('Town' and 'brown') remains open until both the first ('otter' and 'Potter') and third ('hop' and 'Shop') are complete. Really, it's a bravura performance both to tell the story and to juggle the rhyme and sound play in this way.

This is also to juggle sound play and rhythm, and Willis's rhythm is every bit as infectious as Donaldson's. This is easy to hear, but to write it down, it helps to rearrange the lines:

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    1      2      3       4        5      6      7       (8)
'I really want an otter!' uttered little Lottie Potter…
   1        2        3       4     5     (6   7)   8
So off she tottered down to Tilly Town.           With
    1       2      3         4          5       6       7   (8)
a skip and with a hop, she stopped at Trotter's Otter Shop
    1        2         3      4         5     (6   7   8)
to look for something furry, warm and brown.
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No fewer than eleven of the twenty voiced beats in the stanza's first five lines feature the 'o' vowel from 'otter,' and this includes the beat on 'want,' in which the vowel is spelt with a different letter. What's more, the 't' from 'otter' recurs in 'uttered' and 'little' and 'Lottie' and 'Potter'; 'Town' rhymes with 'down,' as well as with 'brown'; 'hop' rhymes with 'stop-,' as well as with 'Shop'; and the 'p' from 'hop' sounds in 'skip,' too. The words tumble on, busy and bustling – just like otters. 'I've got spotty otters,' Mr Trotter explains, 'potty otters, / hot from Lanzarote otters, / otters, every shape and every size.' Otters galore, like the sounds of 'otter' itself!

Alas, when Lottie chooses an otter and takes it home, things start to go wrong: 'The otter that he got her / was a bounder and a rotter.' Rhythmically, things go very wrong. These two lines, in beginning what seems to be a new six-line stanza, follow the easy pattern Willis has established:

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    1       2      3       4     5      6      7       (8)
The otter that he got her was a bounder and a rotter …
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But rather than a third line of five beats, a line like 'So off she tottered down to Tilly Town,' and rather than a third line which opens a rhyme to be completed three lines later, we get another rhyming pair:

> The otter that he got her
> was a bounder and a rotter …
> It was grumpy, it was grotty …
> and it bit poor pretty Lottie[.]

In fact, that second pair gets an unwanted third line:

> It was grumpy, it was grotty …
> and it bit poor pretty Lottie
> very hard upon the botty …

Too much, too hard! The six-line pattern has been put out of joint, and when the stanza's final line arrives, there is no rhyme for it to complete:

> and it bit poor pretty Lottie
> very hard upon the botty …
> and it didn't give a jot it hurt to sit.

This is just as much a tongue-twister as any other stanza in the book, and 'sit' does quietly echo 'bit,' but there's no ringing rhyme to bring resolution: 'bit' bites in the wrong place, so to speak, and 'sit' sticks out like a sore thumb (or, worse, sore bum).

Of course, the rhythmic breakdown is only temporary, and, in the end, everything turns out well. Having parted ways with the naughty otter, Lottie decides to try another kind of pet, in the book's last stanza:

> 'I'm looking for a beaver!'
> she announced to Mrs Cleaver
> at the Beaver Stall in Tilly Market Square …
> But the beavers were such *divas*,
> and as much as it might grieve us …
> Lottie changed her mind and bought a Grizzly Bear!

To make that final rhyme still more conclusive, Leonie Lord's illustration pictures a happy Lottie cuddling her new bear, and on the ground beside them, the bear's bowl is emblazoned with her name: 'Clare.' This is, in fact, a brand-new sound. Throughout the book the lines have jostled energetically with countless variations on 'otter,' and with the thick repetition of other vowels and consonants, too, but nowhere before this has the vowel from 'Clare' been sounded. Not that six-year-olds will have been keeping track. Still, it's a lovely effect: Clare the bear brings new calm and content. What's so great about *Lottie Potter Wants an Otter* is that the sound of the storytelling is at first so comically frenetic, and that the sound of the storytelling then changes when the story comes to a happy end.

III

Both *The Highway Rat* and *Lottie Potter Wants an Otter* are books of verse: on the page, Donaldson's and Willis's words are laid out as lines, and these lines on the page follow the sounds of the words, their rhythm and rhyme. (You could call both books 'poems,' though publishers tend not to want to use that term for narrative verse for kids. HarperCollins calls *Lottie Potter Wants an Otter* a 'rhyming picture book,' not a 'poem.')[2] But rhythm and rhyme can engage and entertain in prose, too. As a third and final example, take Pamela Allen's *Alexander's Outing* (1993), which happily happens to be set in Sydney. Allen begins comfortably, with the customary voice of storytelling: 'Alexander lived with his mother and his four brothers and sisters in the most beautiful place in the whole of Sydney, but Alexander's mother was bored.' That's comfortable, but also neatly crafted: the sentence first introduces the hero of the tale, then fills in his situation, and ends finally with the problem ~~which~~ that will set the narrative going.

[2] See https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9780007501342/lottie-potter-wants-an-otter/. Julia Donaldson's website lists *The Highway Rat* as a 'picture book,' reserving 'poetry' for books of shorter poems: https://www.juliadonaldson.co.uk/.

Still, in comparison to the language of Donaldson's and Willis's opening lines, Allen's language is relaxed, conversational, even plain.

As the accompanying illustration makes clear, Alexander is a duck, and he and his family live in Sydney's Botanic Garden. With Alexander's mother in the lead, they're pictured walking beside a pond, and the Harbour Bridge and Opera House are pictured in the distance. The next sentence, too, is neatly crafted: 'So one warm sunny morning they all set out in search of adventure, past the bottle tree, through the iron gates, and along Art Gallery Road.' This sentence has a different shape: not the introduction of key characters and a problem to be solved, but an action and three qualifications. In terms of syntax, the first two qualifications are parallel: 'past the bottle tree, through the iron gates.' Preposition, definite article, noun adjunct or adjective, noun. Three monosyllables and one disyllable. Tap, tap, tap. The third qualification has a different syntax, but a similar rhythm:

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 1        2       3
past the bottle tree,
   1        2     3
through the iron gates,
      1        2       3
and along Art Gallery Road.
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If we hear a prescribed pause or silent beat between phrases and at the end of the sentence, we hear something like that familiar four-beat rhythm:

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      1       2       3          4
they all set out in search of adventure,
 1        2       3     (4)
past the bottle tree,
   1        2     3     (4)
through the iron gates,
      1        2       3    (4)
and along Art Gallery Road.
```

The effect isn't forceful or frenetic; it's not emphatic or funny. But emerging out of that relaxed, conversational beginning, these rhythms quietly suggest a pattern – something more than plain speech or writing. The pattern gives the ducks' adventure momentum: the movement from phrase to phrase measures the ducks' progress, landmark by landmark, tap by tap. Alexander and his family are on their way.

It's important, I think, that the four-beat rhythm never emerges fully, never comes to dominate. It remains a suggestion. Moreover, the sentence ends without the ringing resolution of a rhyme. Rather than shifting unambiguously from prose into verse, like a novel that quotes a poem, Allen's prose echoes verse in passing: on occasion, it remembers rhythmic patterns already familiar from other books and songs.

As Alexander's adventure proceeds, this echo comes and goes. The shape of the next sentence, as it begins, seems ordinary enough: 'Stay close, take care!' quacked Alexander's mother, but Alexander did not stay close.' But then, as the sentence concludes, Allen doubles that four-beat phrase with another, almost identical four-beat phrase: 'but Alexander did not stay close and Alexander did not take care.' Think how different the effect would be, had Allen written, more concisely, that 'Alexander did not stay close or take care.' Instead, the repetition hints again at that familiar rhythm, and the next sentence, which also has four beats, round things off with a rhyme: 'He straggled behind with his head in the air.'

Allen's prose is flexible. She keeps verse close, but not too close. Her prose never jangles predictably, but nor is it flat or routine. Every now and then, there's a rhyme or a slant rhyme, or a series of three- and four-beat phrases. When his family cross College Street, Alexander falls in a hole, and no-one can find him. Eventually, some passersby hear a faint quack from deep in the hole. '"How are we going to get him out?" the middle-aged lady asked.' That's four beats and three. And then, just as quickly, the suggestion of verse recedes: the voice of ordinary storytelling returns. Met by the lady's question, we're told, 'The young couple had no idea. "Cheer up," they called out, and dropped a half-eaten cheese sandwich down the hole.' Not especially helpful, and not a resounding rhythm. It's another instance of comic bathos.

When a young boy pours his drink down Alexander's hole, the assembled passersby hit upon the idea of floating him up and out. Accompanied by Alexander's mother and brothers and sisters, the passersby bring water to the hole from a fountain in Hyde Park, using cups, bags, a lunch box, and a thermos flask: 'Now, dipping and tipping, dipping and tipping, skipping and dripping, quacking and flapping, dripping and skipping, from the fountain to the hole and back again they danced.' Allen's sentence dances with them. Those two-beat rhyming and slant-rhyming phrases build to something like a four-line stanza:

```
      1           2        3           4
Now, dipping and tipping, dipping and tipping,
  1            2         3            4
skipping and dripping, quacking and flapping,
  1            2                 3               4
dripping and skipping, from the fountain to the hole
     1     2         3        (4)
and back again they danced.
```

And if those two-beat phrases, with their present participles (-ing, -ing, -ing), their repetition ('dipping and tipping'), and their inversion ('skipping and dripping,' 'dripping and skipping'), voice a dance of seemingly endless energy, an ongoing back and forth and round and round, the final shift from a four-beat 'line' to a three-beat 'line' rounds the sentence off, bringing all that

energy to a satisfying end.[3] The grammar of the sentence puts us in the middle of things, mid-action, but the rhythm of the sentence gently moves the story on. When the dance is done and the water has risen, out pops Alexander, 'like the cork out of a bottle,' and all is well.

What's so great about *Alexander's Outing* is this variety. Because Allen's prose never becomes verse proper, it can echo verse in different ways, as needed. Sometimes the more prominent patterning of language is related directly to what's happening; sometimes it simply shapes the ebb and flow of the story. Allen's prose can rhyme here, not rhyme there. Here it will rise to a familiar rhythm and – just as importantly – there it will relax into the chatty, casual voice of storytelling for kids. Six-year-olds need not notice the craft on which this variety depends. Six-year-olds enjoy the fun of it. Having popped out of the hole, Alexander is reunited with his family: 'Such joyful quacking! Such happy flapping!' But it's the rhythmic variety which gives the book its supple, winning, light-hearted touch.

Finally, if variety is essential to the rhythm of *Alexander's Outing*, variety is essential to the rhythm of kids' books in general. Allen's rhythms are different from Willis's, and even though both Willis's and Donaldson's books are in verse, their rhythms are different too, in structure and effect. In all three books, a basic four-beat pattern is important, but the variations you can play on that particular pattern, in combination with rhyme and sound play, are endless. Those variations can give a narrative momentum or manage its ebb and flow; they can shape voice or tone; they can guide interpretation or response. Most of all, rhythm is fun; it gives pleasure, both in its regularities and its surprises, and this is true whether you stop to think about the rhythm or, like a plucky duck setting out on an adventure or escaping the villain, let it carry you forward.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Pamela. *Alexander's Outing*. (1993) Puffin Books, 2016.

Donaldson, Julia. *The Highway Rat*. Illustrated by Axel Scheffler, Alison Green Books, 2011.

Willis, Jeanne *Lottie Potter Wants an Otter*. Illustrated by Leonie Lord, HarperCollins, 2016.

[3] Do you tap four times to 'from the fountain to the hole'? That's fine. It just means that the shift from four beats to three beats happens in the shift from 'from the fountain to the hole' to 'and back again they danced.' The resolution of the rhythmic pattern is much the same.