LIGHTNING PATHS

Poet Kyle Vaughn Helps Students Craft Inspiration

Photos in this article courtesy of Kyle Vaughn
Two years into teaching a creative writing class at a college-prep school in Dallas, Kyle Vaughn had a breakthrough moment. His students were complaining that they had nothing to write about, which likely sounds familiar to many secondary teachers. Vaughn, a poet and photographer as well as a teacher, knew they had plenty to say. But the class kept getting hung up on what to write, leaving less time to discuss the craft of writing.

A lecture tumbled out: a monologue in which Vaughn “rambled” about creativity and process, about engaging the world, letting themselves be silly, vulnerable, and playful, and shedding the need to be perfect on the page.

“I so often find my students have so much to say, but they’re not conscious of it,” Vaughn says. “They feel this immense pressure to go to big topics.” Vaughn’s monologue became the heart of his new book for NCTE, *Lightning Paths: 75 Poetry Writing Exercises*.

The book grew out of his classroom practice and includes exercises, anecdotes, and examples of how students turned the prompts into poems. It’s also a flipped poetry manual that starts by getting writers directly into content—what the poet has to say—before taking up questions of form or how the poem works.

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—Kyle Vaughn
“Out of all the genres, poetry is the genre that students are least familiar with writing or reading,” Vaughn says. “It’s the one they’re the most afraid of. They have these ingrained things—they’re looking for the symbolism, looking for the meaning. Poets say time and time again that that’s not what to look for, or where to look.”

One of the arguments Vaughn makes in his book is that poetry can shake students out of that pressure to perform and get them to writing that is fresh and original.

“Sometimes it’s taking that smaller thing and making it magical,” he says. “That’s often what poetry does. I think it was Robert Bly who described it as taking the mundane and elevating it, taking something grand and making it more concrete.”

**HOW AN IMAGE TURNS**

Vaughn gets students to fresh writing by focusing on image, the engine that drives most free verse poetry. His approach comes in part from his own poetry mentors, including Bly and Jack Myers, author of *The Portable Poetry Workshop*. As a young poet, Vaughn sent Bly some of his poems, seeking advice. Bly told him two things: “They needed more psychic weight which, as he described it, is basically just emotional resonance. But he said that would come in time.”

Vaughn says Bly “picked up one particular poem and said it needed to turn up or down at the end. That was a concept I had never heard.”

A year later, Vaughn was reading James Wright’s poem “A Blessing,” about an encounter with two ponies in a field outside Rochester, Minnesota. (Read the poem on the Poetry Foundation site: bit.ly/Wright_Blessing.)

Vaughn realized he had just encountered a poem that “turned up” in the end, that is, moved from a concrete experience—the ponies in the field—to an experience that transcends the body—breaking “into blossom.”

In other poems, the image “turns down” at the end, moving from reverie to an image that is grounded in the body. “I started noticing this everywhere,” Vaughn
says. “I saw it in Arthur Rimbaud. Anne Sexton will do it a lot. Early on, I realized there’s a lot going on that we don’t talk about in poems.”

Vaughn says he also “reverse engineered” many of his favorite poems to understand how they work for readers and to turn them into writing exercises that he and other teachers can use in class.

DEEPENING THE WORK

A key issue for many beginning poets is the question of how to develop or deepen their poems on the page. Vaughn’s focus on image not only helps poets start with unexpected and fresh ideas—prompts include cards, libraries, and math, for example—but also helps them consider how the image is working in a poem and how to shape it further.

“When we have a basic image, what more can we do? How can we shape it? How can we take it to a more imaginative place than just plain description?” he says.

“A lot of young writers get stuck in that place, just describe, describe, describe. That’s a good starting point,” but a good poem shouldn’t stop there.

Later sections of Lightning Paths dig into craft. Vaughn takes up forms such as the landay, ghazal, haiku, odes, prose poems, found poems, beatitudes, and epic lists. But here, too, rather than focusing on form for its own sake, he focuses on forms that aren’t divorced from content.

In an article for the March 2015 issue of English Journal, “Poetry and Emotional Intelligence: A Radical Call,” Vaughn doubled down on his argument for using poetry as a path for young writers to develop their inner lives. So much class time is focused on scansion, alliteration, and other technical questions of craft, he says. “These writers need a different jumping-off point. Their inspiration needs crafting as well.”

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To read a sample chapter or order a copy of Lightning Paths: 75 Poetry Writing Exercises, visit http://bit.ly/NCTE-Lightning.