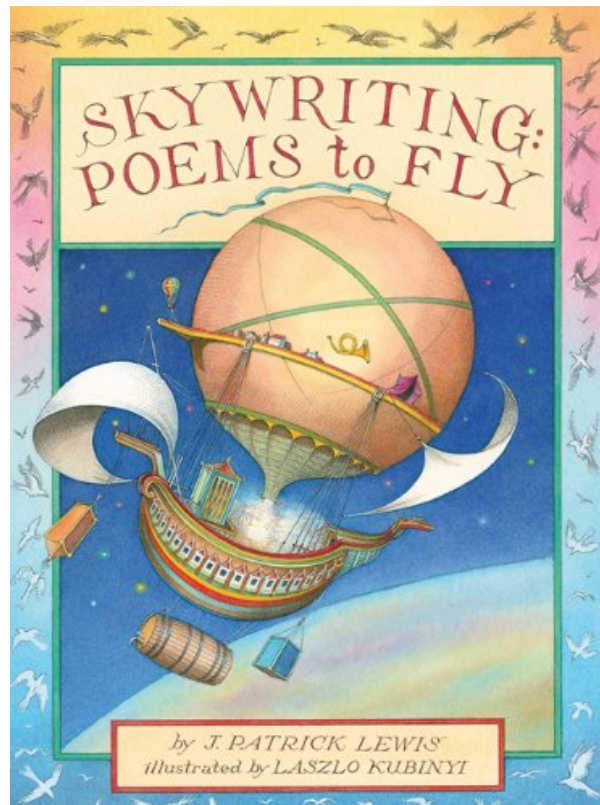
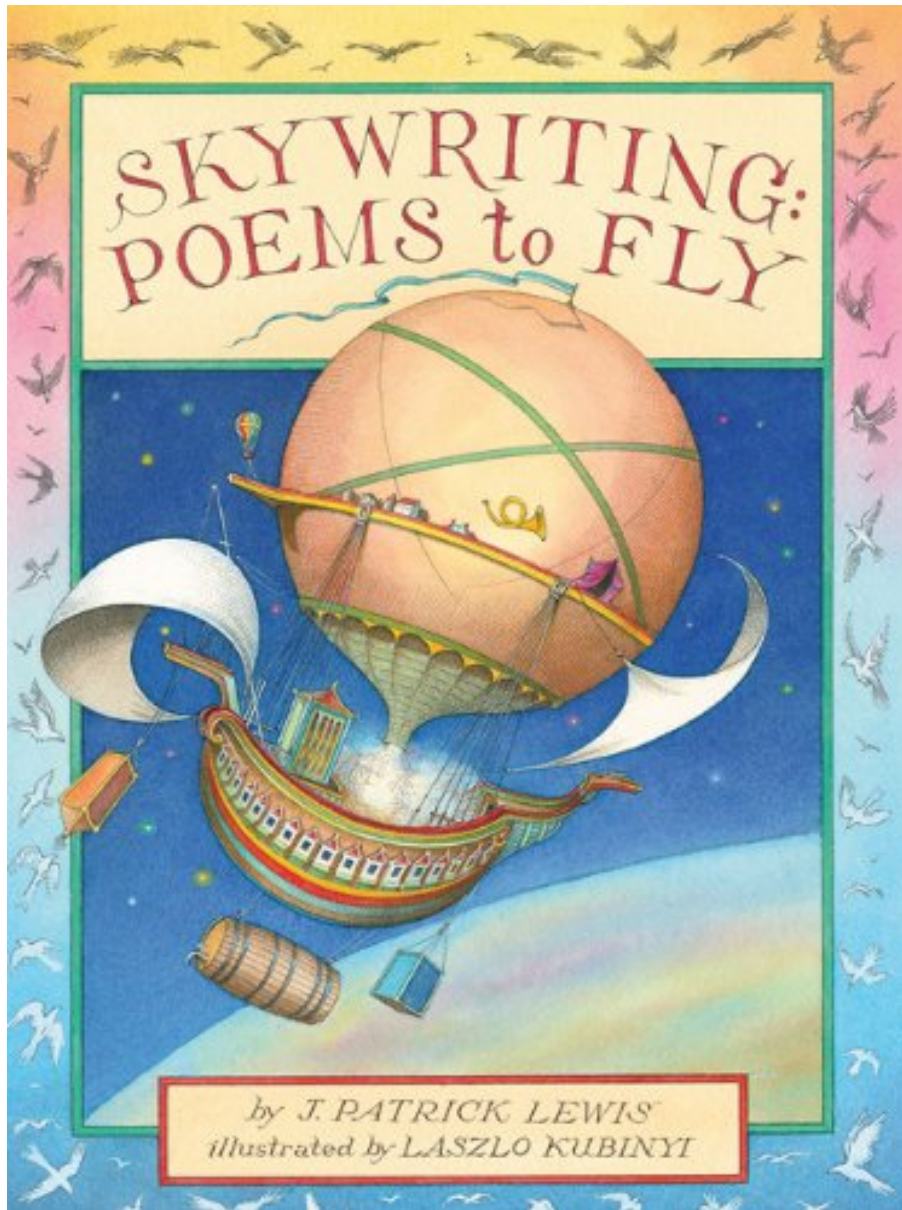


SKYWRITING: POEMS TO FLY BY J. PATRICK LEWIS



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Ever since people have walked, they have dreamed of flying. Prepare to soar in this poetic celebration of dizzying heights and human innovation.

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Earth below us, drifting falling

By E. R. Bird

We were promised jet packs. That's what the future was supposed to hold for us. When you think of the future you may imagine things like flying cars or personalized jet packs. So in many ways the future just boils down to thinking up new ways to soar through the air. Humans get a real kick out of that sort of thing. Now I have never seen a jetpack make an appearance in a non-fiction title for children before and I CERTAINLY have never seen one in a non-fiction book of poetry. That's what you get, though, when you read through the latest from J. Patrick Lewis and partner in crime Laszlo Kubinyi in their, *Skywriting: Poems to Fly*. Lewis has written out thirteen poems tracing the history of humanity's obsession with flight. From Icarus to outer space, in essence. The result comes off as a kind of ode to not just our successes but our fantastic failures as well. Where there's a jetpack, there's a testament to our amazing/nutso imaginations.

Thirteen poems trace thirteen attempts at making it to the sky. Some were successful, as with the Montgolfier brothers' hot air balloon. Some were utter failures, like the multiplane of the Marquis d'Equville. Some you've undoubtedly heard of, like the zeppelin. Others, like the kooky Piaseckivz-8P Airgeep or the French Equestrian Balloon are a little more obscure. And some, when all is said and done, never even left the minds of their creators (as with the beautiful Minerva that graces the cover of this book). The desire to lift oneself up unto the heavens above inspires both genius and madness in flight's inventors. Tragedy and triumph too. Backmatter includes Endnotes and a Timeline.

Lewis allows himself to have a bit of fun with this particular book. For example, poems are not held to the same standards or rote forms. Instead, their formats pair well alongside their texts. So it is that the utterly ridiculous Ornithopter is described in a limerick, while the poem about The Wright Brothers gets a more respectful A/B/A/B format. As for the wordplay itself, how do you resist a line like, "metal Darth Vader / impersonator" to describe a sleek metal fighter jet?

One quibble I might have would be the fact that the Icarus story that starts us off is never identified as a myth in either the poem or the backmatter. One might assume that kids would be familiar with this myth and discount it as legend, but couched alongside all these true moments in history, I would have liked this to have been a little clearer.

Though the Endnotes mention the tragic ends to some of these creations, the text of the poems themselves is consistently upbeat. You see the LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin then, rather than its less fortunate cousin, the Hindenburg. Similarly the Space Shuttle Columbia STS-109 is seen at the height of its power. It's only when you read the notes in the back that you hear about its own fate. Some readers may wish that a sober note could have been made in the poetry, alluding to these two incidents. As it stands, it's enough in some ways to

know that they are included in the book in some fashion. After all, ending with a poem that talks about a tragedy wouldn't really sign off the book on the right note.

The backmatter consists of Endnotes and a Timeline. This Timeline is interesting because it reflects some major events happening in the world in tandem with each step forward in flight (example: 800 B.C. is "The Olmecs, an ancient pre-Columbian people living in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico, begin building pyramids"). Alas, there is no Bibliography in sight. This is particularly unfortunate since I think kids will definitely want to read more about things like the Minerva, that insane dream of Etienne-Gaspard Robert to create a veritable castle in the sky. Or, to return to my first love, the jetpack ("Bell Rock Belt") of 1953. Where can you learn about this "fascinating dead end"? I, for one, would love to know more.

Illustrator Laszlo Kubinyi is one of those artists that stay on the periphery of children's literature without demanding the spotlight. His usual modus operandi is his extremely delicate linework coupled with what I'm going to dub precision watercolors. Every time Kubinyi's pen drops to the page it looks like it was planned a month ago. He is, in more than one way, the idea artist for this kind of a book. Lewis needed an illustrator who would be just as comfortable setting a scene in 1783 France (complete with an astounded Benjamin Franklin) as he'd be drawing the 1982 analog font describing a Lockheed F-117A Nighthawk. Though the format remains consist, Kubinyi clearly has range.

I think of other examples of early flight in children's books. Titles like the 1984 Caldecott winning *The Glorious Flight: Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot July 25, 1909* by the Provencens, or Marjorie Priceman's 2006 Caldecott Honor book *Hot Air: The (Mostly) True Story of the First Hot-Air Balloon Ride*. Those two winners are incredibly different from one another, and the same rule applies to *Skywriting* here since it adds poetry into the mix. The best books of collected poems on a single topic mix it up a little. They show faults and flaws along with accomplishments and successes. If everyone's a winner then what have you really won? Even the methods of flight in this book that were successful retired after serving their time. There's a strange poignancy then to Lewis's choices. Kids will come away from this book believing that there will always be new ways to launch themselves into the sky. They just better be prepared to find a way to land as well.

For ages 4-8.

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