

IT'S A TEACHER'S LIFE...!
A Collection of Poems Set in a Girls' Private School

By Helena Harper
(Athena Press 2008)

Contents

The School Ethos
The Workplace
The New School Year
The Staffroom
The Lessons
The Workroom
The Duties
The Prize Giving
The Carol Service
The Trips
The Open Afternoon
The German Teacher
Matron
The Cook
The Caretaker
Amy, the Able
The Inspection
The Exams
The Reports
The End-of-Year Bash

You will find excerpts from these poems below.

The New School Year

The staff meeting first,
then departmental meetings,
sectional meetings,
Staff Association,
Staff Consultative Committee,
Health and Safety,
Catering Forum -
What else?
Oh yes, General Studies
and PSHE.
Musn't forget the extras...
Teachers' Pensions,
whiteboard training -
oh, it's all so draining!

New timetables,
new syllabuses,
new pupils...
Rude, early morning awakenings
by alarm clocks
grown rusty after weeks of disuse.
Got to prepare lessons -
but it's such an effort!
'Why is it taking so long, brain?
Brain, you've got to get going!
Come on - do you hear?'
It protests with groans
and dragging of feet,
and sluggishly creaks
back into gear...

The holiday's a century ago now,
yet, finally, the first week ends.
That was a feat -
only two days teaching
but everyone's beat!
Now it's home post-haste,
hurry, hurry, hurry,
for God's sake!
It's rest we all seek,
some precious R&R,
before the onslaught,
campaign and manoeuvres
of a full school week!

The Lessons

9 a.m.,
the first lesson bell rings,
all still in assembly,
again Mr. Smith droning on;
the teachers groan -
bang goes that test...
Well, it's a lesson off the cuff now,
nothing new,
it's happened often enough.

The girls drift in to lessons,
it's ten minutes past,
the teacher hands out sheets
fast, fast, fast,
explains at breakneck speed
what to do;
then the first hand goes up,
'Can I go to the loo?'
Another hand is raised,
'Will we get our homework back today?'
'No, get on with your work, Fay.'
A third hand shows,
'Will we get it back tomorrow?'
'I don't know.'
A fourth hand shoots up,
'Will we get it back by the end of the week?'
Who's that? Susan?
But she's normally so meek...
'When will we get our homework back?'
'When I've had time to mark it -
and that's that!'
The bell goes, everyone packs up.
So much for that lesson -
thanks, Mr. Smith,
thanks a million!

The third lesson,
after break,
hair and uniform now a mess,
the pupils enter the classroom
and the teacher starts to sigh:
'Tie your hair back',
'Do your shoelaces up',
'Pull your socks up',
'Do your cuffs up',
'Do your top button up',
'Roll down your skirt!
Whom are you trying to impress?'
The pupils meander to their seats,
fish out their books.

It's Year 9 Maths, Division 3 -
What joy! the teacher thinks.

Now, let's see...

A simple sum to start,

'What's 3 x 6?'

A hand flies up,

the answer's easy of course -

'36!'

The teacher tries once more
to explain multiplication:

'What about 4 x 4...?'

Down the corridor Year 7,
wrestling hard with Geography,
'Where's Cornwall?' the teacher asks.

'In Wales', a pupil replies.

The teacher sighs

and tries once more.

'The water separating France from England?'

'The Atlantic,' someone shouts.

'No, it's not, it's the Pacific.'

Wow, what a lesson this is,

it's just terrific!

Some Gallic greetings

waft through the air,

it's Year 8 French

performing role plays with flair -

at least that's what they think

and the teacher doesn't really care!

Yet slowly their enthusiasm

wins him around,

piques his interest -

what's that he's found?

A pupil with a promising accent!

What a coup!

And then the mediocrity starts again:

'Est-ce que je peux aller...to the toilet,

Monsieur Jones?'

'Aux toilettes, Poppy, aux toilettes!'

'Oui, est-ce que je peux aller aux toilettes?'

'Vite, Poppy, vite!'

'Et moi...aller...to sick bay, Monsieur? J'ai...headache',

The teacher sighs and tries again,

something always driving him on....

What?

The desire to inspire,

to light the fire

that burns within,

the 'aha' in the expression

when something clicks -

that's the reward

for hours and hours of work
and patience,
a reward of infinite measure,
a priceless, unlimited treasure.

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Workroom

The shelves strain patiently under
the load of paper
that rules the teacher's life.
Without judgement they observe
the daily to and fro:
teachers gulping coffee,
grabbing a bite of biscuit,
moaning in desperation over the work
to be corrected.
'Can't they read?'
'They just don't listen, do they?'
'It was written on the board,
and they've still got it wrong!'
'She hasn't done the right question!'
'I give up.....'
Again and again the same notes ring in the air
like the refrain of an old,
well-worn song.

Out they dash to photocopy
a sheet for next lesson,
only to return in exasperation -
the photocopier not working again!
How wonderful it all is...
What to do now?
Let's see....
Plan A's gone out of the window,
let's revert to plan B...
As the deliberations continue,
a 'Have you heard?' pierces the air.
The next lesson's forgotten
as all eyes turn to stare,
the ears prick up
as the newest gossip (or cock-up)
banishes temporarily the latest care.
The voices lower in case
'someone important' should overhear,
can't be too careful...
After all, the walls may be bugged -
better be quiet, my dear!

The private joys and pains,
laughter and tears,
and gifts of help and comfort
are daily aired and shared
in this family
of workroom colleagues.
Unrelated they may be,
but an invisible strand,
like the air each breathes,

ties them together
and makes them as one -
no longer separate beings
but different aspects of
an indefinable whole -
a close, invisible
community of the soul.

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Prize Giving

The teachers gather,
resplendent in black and red gowns
and hoods of satin and fur,
but the gowns weigh heavy
and the hoods slide groundwards,
threatening eternal strangulation.
Yet the torture has to be borne
for this one occasion in the year,
the teachers must take centre stage
(so the Head has said)
and that must be made palpable and clear.

So into the sports hall they troop
behind the governors and VIPs,
and the request is made more than once
'Stand up, do, stand up - please.'
The speeches start,
the Chairman of Governors begins,
what a wonderful year it's been,
so much done, so much seen
so much fun and the pupils so keen.
The Head continues the refrain
of excellence supreme,
but if you were to look more closely
it wouldn't be all it might seem.

The hands grow sore as they
applaud certificates galore,
a celebration of prescriptive
syllabuses and countless exams -
in short, a system we all
love and adore,
where to learn numerous facts
and to compete and win is king,
the teachers forced day in day out
to train the pupils in this song
and look how well they sing...
The prize-winners' outfits supposedly
fashionable in the extreme,
but just how do they manage
in their heels so high
not to topple over
and let out a cry?
The guest speaker,
a successful female judge,
champion in a world of men,
continues the song that has been
so well sung...
But surely there's a better way
where knowledge isn't all

and exams and syllabuses don't
hold indomitable sway,
where the idol of competition is overthrown,
independent thought comes into its own
and where the seeds of cooperation
can at last be sown?

The speaker drones on
and teachers' eyes focus on the clock
to see who will win the jackpot this year.

The betting's been fierce
for the length of the speech,
and as the clock stops at
15 minutes 10 seconds
a smile crosses a face
and everybody now knows
that the jackpot belongs to Mrs Brace.

The platform party leaves,
the teachers follow,
heading to the reception
to satisfy hunger and thirst
or dashing quickly to the loo
before they burst.

Parents and pupils arrive
in a steady stream
and soon noise and
sardine-pressed bodies
fill completely the senses.

The teachers feed off the food
and the words of thanks
that fall occasionally from
pupils' and parents' lips.
These scraps of appreciation
satisfying momentarily
while thoughts of doing
something worthwhile
surface – though just temporarily -
until fatigue overwhelms
and drives the teachers home...

The meagre morsels of gratitude
becoming rarer each year,
yet somehow teachers survive
on this diet of starvation,
for year after year
they continue to appear
for this magnificent occasion,
this wonderful experience of living,
the indescribable, unique and irreplaceable

Prize Giving!

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Trips

Coach booked,
catering requisition complete,
codes of conduct signed,
staff selected,
activities designed -
now what else?
Of course!
How could I forget?
The infamous risk assessment
hanging like lead around my neck.

Now let's see...
Accidents, mugging, kidnapping,
theft, terrorism, soul-searching,
acts of God, sneezing and stumbling -
it's all there.
No, wait a moment,
eating, drinking, thinking,
blinking and breathing must go in...
Is that it?
Who can say?
I don't care -
I'm ready to throw the accursed
thing in the bin!

The day arrives,
registration in the hall,
pupils high as kites -
they're having an absolute ball.
The names are called above the din,
but where is dratted Sally Finn?
She's already 10 minutes late!
Too bad, got to hurry now -
can't afford to stay and wait.

The museum reached,
the pupils alight,
blocking the pavement
for passers-by.
The teachers shout
and wave and gesticulate
and finally the pupils move
to gather in the groups
they've been assigned;
then into the building they snake,
ready to coil and suffocate
anyone else who crosses their path.
Strangers, beware,
you don't want today to be your last!

From exhibit to exhibit
from room to room they pass,
filling in sheets full of questions and tasks;
a scribble here, a scribble there -
that'll do, what else?
Don't know, the pupil thinks,
got to dash to the loo.
What's this? A sketch?
But I can't draw
and look - they're still ten pages more!

'Mrs. Smith, when's lunch?'
'Half an hour' comes the reply.
What? Half an hour?
Oh no! That's just too long!
'Susan, Susan,
what have you got to munch?
12.30 strikes and out they slither,
lunch in the park -
can't eat inside,
there are just too many.
The March wind cuts face and hands
and ices the bone,
and the packed lunch of
soggy roll and tasteless cheese
does nothing to warm the inner zone.
Hurry, hurry, hurry,
let's get back inside – quick!
I'm freezing cold
and this lunch is making me sick!

The afternoon passes in similar vein
with an obligatory trip for souvenirs,
and suddenly the pupils
show enthusiasm -
mild though it may be -
for this counts as shopping,
their leisure-time God, you see.
The coaches are filled
and the slow, traffic-laden return begins.
Staff doze,
and pupils rush to overdose
on iPods or MP3s...
At last the school's in sight;
the coaches roll up
and disgorge their contents
with rapid glee;
the pupils greet waiting parents
and the teachers troop
thankfully in for tea.

At last one can relax,
the pupils are gone!
Still tomorrow's lessons to think about
and prepare,
but the yawns gather pace
and limbs remain stubborn,
rooting the body to seat and chair.
Remind me next year
that these trips are
definitely
definitely
definitely
not a good idea!

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

Amy, the Able

Queen of Resources,
that's what she is -
Amy, the able:
organised, efficient,
expert and skilful,
human and humorous
with wit dry and sharp,
a confidante for all,
and to all
does she her knowledge
and wisdom impart.

Half-term grades,
yearly reports -
she coordinates them all,
fingers quickly instructing
copiers to print sheet after sheet,
then swiftly sticking addresses
onto stacks of envelopes
standing ready to be filled.
The hours tick by but
Amy heeds them not -
there's a job to be done
and she won't leave
until it's done as she wants
and nothing is forgot.
The eyes of management don't see
the hard work so selflessly given,
and their lips betray
no word of appreciation
for the sacrifice offered,
but Amy continues regardless,
duty and diligence driven.

Minibus booked,
coaches reserved,
photocopier's broken –
'Oh, I'm so sorry!'
'Not to worry,'
comes the voice experienced and cool,
it's done in a jiffy and within the hour
the repairman's in,
brandishing his tool.

Commendations and
handbooks typed -
ruthlessly checked,
professionally presented.
Trips accompanied to London and abroad,
house points tallied,

detentions sorted,
date lists done...
There really is no end to the fun.
Yet the day is too short
for all the tasks
she's asked to do;
the stress would crack many another
but Amy sails through
with humour cutting and quick,
her voice never rising
despite countless requests
from teachers wanting just this or just that.
No punches she pulls
when her comments are made,
but always the wicked chuckle is there
ready to break free -
it's what keeps her sane,
all the teachers agree.

What would we do without you, Amy?
No one knows,
it's a commendation of
the highest honour you deserve
for the work you produce
under pressure so great,
for coolness and calmness
served with a smile,
for honest directness
and willingness to go that extra mile.
You're a colleague in a million
a true friend indeed,
and surely one day
the rewards you will reap,
from the seeds of the harvest
you have sown so deep.

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Inspection

Monday,
all agog to meet the
team of inspectors over tea,
everyone smiles
and pleasantries are exchanged,
a hum of conversation
pervades the air -
a gathering of friends it could be,
but the participants know full well,
it's just the preliminary niceties
before the start of the hard, hard sell.

For months
avalanches of handbooks and policies
have erupted from
smoking-hot photocopiers,
bringing senior managers
and HODs to their knees.
It's increased the shrinkage
of the rainforest, you know,
at an incredible rate,
but if there's anything missing now,
it's just too late.
Got to concentrate on
preparing lessons stupendous
to wow the inspectors
into assessments miraculous;
got to burn the midnight oil apace
or otherwise
there'll only be disgrace to face.

Every lesson planned in detail minute
in case a dreaded inspector appears;
just my luck - that lesson went well,
but was there an inspector there?
Was there, hell!
Now, it's bottom division Maths,
my best group for sure;
here they are...
And wouldn't you know it?
There's the inspector at the door!

Tuesday and Wednesday slither by,
Thursday breaks,
and the worn-out staff crazily copy
differentiated worksheets
they've stayed up all night to make.
A few more hours of
torture still in store,
and then the lesson

observation is no more;
thank God is all I can say -
good or bad, come what may,
I'll be numb with relief
by the end of the day.

Then suddenly it's all over,
and senior management
celebrate with smiles and champagne;
the report's been good,
and they thank the staff
for all their sweat, blood and tears,
but the teachers are dead on their feet
and long will it be
before they feel like themselves again -
'What we need?' they say,
'A holiday by the sea!'

Has it been worthwhile?
The politicians would say yes,
but what do they know of education?
Less and less!
To say this school is better than that,
is that the point of all the stress?
Why can't competition be forgot
and cooperation come out on top?
Can you tell me, please tell me,
why not?

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Exams

'Silence'
'No entry'
'Exams in progress'
the signs say;
muffled footsteps of invigilators
treading up and down the rows of desks
pass unheard
as the pupils write frantically
with bowed heads,
pausing for a moment to glance at the clock -
who will win the race this time? -
before hunching themselves
once more over their desks.

A ruler falls
and a cough erupts into the air,
rippling the silence in the hall,
but the waves subside unnoticeably
leaving just the ticking of the clock
lapping gently against the silent shore.

New invigilators arrive
and the old ones leave
with smiles of relief,
their vigil of utter boredom
at last at an end.
Their replacements sit down
and stare into space,
nothing to do but think...
and think... and think...
Eyelids growing heavy with
hours of sleep denied,
threatening to sink...
and sink...and sink...
into forgetful ecstasy.
But the legs miraculously resurrect the body
from its drowsy torpor,
carrying it snake-like up the aisles,
banishing the enfolding arms of
sleep into temporary retreat,
back into the realm of blissful mystery.

Time passing so slowly for the one,
so quickly for the other;
seconds seeming hours for the one,
minutes seeming seconds for the other;
how can that be?
The hands on the clock
tick in the same regular breaths for both -
look – it's there for all to see!

But the eyes are deceived
by a master of illusion -
oh, could we but see
with the eyes of the soul,
then the god of time would be engulfed by
the sea of infinity.

The minutes march on in the illusory race,
drawing the exam to its climax
of last-minute frenzied pace,
pens moving ever faster
over the paper sheets,
and then it's over -
the cramped fingers release,
the hunched backs straighten,
and the invigilators rouse
themselves one last time
to collect the papers...

With loosened, eager tongues
the pupils troop out in an unfettered orgy
of exclaiming, bemoaning and frantic
questioning.

The teachers follow,
and silence reigns once more,
broken only by
the great illusion of time,
ticking indefatigably
in the phantom human mime.

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

The Reports

It's arrived - the once-a-year chore,
delight bursts forth in every breast
at the joy of the long nights in store
and the headaches of the positive words
in which the reports must be dressed;
for a spade a spade one cannot call
but an implement used to dig -
oh, indeed, it's a veritable ball
this 'report-speak',
and the teachers rejoice
in the time-consuming task
that they must for each pupil repeat.

But as the hours pass the mind disengages,
for boredom reigns supreme,
imprisoning body and soul in a vice-like grip,
and forcing fingers to tap the
forest of mindless prose
to meet the deadlines that
hang like thunder clouds
over everyone's head.
Yet would it not be better for all
to cut directly to the quick
and write in clear words and few,
instead of churning out obscure,
tangled meanings
and getting into a real stew?

But such is the system that exists;
would that we could create another
indisputable reality
where education delights
both teacher and taught
and restrictions and syllabuses
are but a long, distant memory.

Copyright © 2008 Helena Harper

www.helenaharper.com

Amazon links

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Its-Teachers-Life-Collection-Private/dp/1847481825/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1230149878&sr=1-1

http://www.amazon.com/Teachers-Collection-Poems-Private-School/dp/1847481825/ref=dp_return_2?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books