

**Review: *Lightning Paths: 75 Poetry Writing Exercises*  
by Kyle Vaughn (NCTE, 2018, 121 pp.)**

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***Lightning Paths: 75 Poetry Exercises*** is Vaughn's second book, and his first focused specifically on the teaching of poetry. Vaughn's other book, ***A New Light in Kalighat***, is co-authored with Breana Reynolds and seeks to shed light on the plight of women and children in Kalighat, India. Vaughn's other publications include a handful of essays on teaching, some of which were published in *The English Journal*. His poems have also appeared in numerous poetry journals. Vaughn's career as an educator spans twenty years and includes stints at both the secondary and post secondary level. He also holds some international qualifications, having participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar—Muslim Culture and the Arts (NEH and City Lore), and he has presented at the Penn Graduate School of Education and Asia Society's 2015 Global Education Forum.

Vaughn's book is a series of poetry lessons and examples that can be adapted to a variety of classrooms. These middle chapters are bookended by commentary from Vaughn on the purpose of poetry and some commentary on how teachers should approach some of the book's thoughts. He categorizes his ideas into three discrete sections: Image, Idea, and Form. Throughout the book, his vision for poetry lessons is rooted in the idea that the instructor's task is to provide an idea--that *lightning path*--and that the writer will see it through to the end. In this way, the book's lessons are not entire prescriptions to complete a poem, they are more like starter ideas that will allow students or writers to make connections on their own.

In the book's first section on image, Vaughn provides lessons that seek to push writers toward finding images that are the primary focus of the poem rather than treat them as enhanced lines that are part of the larger poem. Once an image is discovered, suggests Vaughn, the writer can play with language to make it larger than the original idea—"A poet presents an image or images but must arrange them, give them context and

relationship to other images or to ideas, and must give them a space to exist in our inner lives, whether that be our emotional lives or our philosophical/spiritual lives. The image is the building block, but the image alone does not make the poem—otherwise, a mere list of objects would count as a poem” (5). Vaughn’s activities in this section take much inspiration from the five senses. However, rather than using sensory input as details to enhance the feel or flow of the poem, in this section, he pushes the activity toward using the senses themselves as the focus. For example, one activity is called “Imagery of Sound (I Heard Inside).” Here, the focus is on sounds that the author would imagine coming from inside of a chosen object, and the suggested focuses include “volume, pitch, timbre, direction, and duration; the social-emotional properties...” These are sound images that Vaughn suggests can represent something. The challenge here is for the author to then stretch the poem and decide on a list of sounds and then determine what the sounds represent. He provides the start of the idea and an example to round out the end goal, but leaves the rest to the author.

The second section is focused on idea. Based on Vaughn’s discussion and examples, this section outlines new directions and suggestions for picking a topic. Where the first section of the book places the focus on images and sensory details, this section has more of a practical “What should I write about?” feel to it. The appeal in this section is the randomness of the activities. Vaughn suggests cartoons, games, and trinkets as places to begin a poem, but he also tackles the ideas of personal loss and grief (admitting these are difficult ideas to write about). As with the other sections of the book, Vaughn’s activities provide a basic outline for an activity and leave room for the teacher and student to go in many directions. The overall message here seems to be that inspiration can be found in the mundane—all the writer needs is a little prompting and to trust their imagination. Vaughn writes, “Our imagination, language, the images we carry, the visions we dream all reside somewhere almost intangible until we perform the act necessary to make them presentable to an audience” (40). Some of the more accessible concepts deal with games. There are a number of suggestions based on memories or associations with card games and childhood games like hide and seek. Here the commonly repeated phrase of “write what you know” takes on a bit more focus as Vaughn provides a little more context for this time-honored piece of advice.

The final section focuses on form. Here, Vaughn has listed some of the familiar forms (odes, haiku, ghazal), but also discusses some different ideas about fitting a poem into a pattern. For example, he provides a fresh take on lists, found poems, and imitation. This section deviates a little from the “poem starter” feel of the previous two sections to provide more of a complete idea. The lessons and examples in this section give more of a script to take a poem from start to finish with only a few options for the author to smooth the lines and subject together. One such example is called “Line By Line.” This poem offers up eighteen lines of separate questions and ideas that end up framing an outline for a poem. Once this “raw material” is set down, the crafting of the poem becomes more of a lesson in editing to provide focus and flow. While the ideas in this section would fit in any creative writing class, the restrictions here may actually be helpful for less experienced poets. Vaughn works in enough room for the creative process, but also chooses forms that would encourage novice poets simply because of the “rules” required to fill in each line.

In all, the variety of activities offered up in *Lightning Paths* will allow anyone who teaches poetry to find something to add to their arsenal of ideas. Some will likely ring true to any brand of pedagogy or taste in poetry. The provided student examples for each one also give a little more context to the vision of each activity. A classroom of aspiring poets would be encouraged by seeing the final result that can come from working through the process, and a teacher will find Vaughn’s take on poetry a delightful little journey through the possibilities and potential of the variety of things that can spark an idea.