

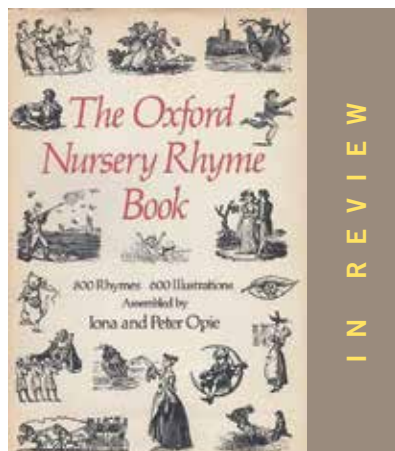
Reviewed by **James Harding**

## The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book

Written by Iona and Peter Opie

Illustrated by Various

London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1955



I have a neighbor, Mimi, who runs a once- or twice-a-month sale of antiques and vintage items out of her garage around the corner. I love perusing the enticingly crowded shelves along the wall (last week I found a beautiful, buttercup-yellow creamer) and the large dining room table covered with baskets full of small treasures. When my friend Lindsey was in town, she found a mysterious kitchen tool with a comfortable wooden handle and an elaborately undulating iron blade (which we identified as a pear peeler, stemmer, and corer). I enjoy eavesdropping on Mimi's conversations with other customers and neighbors when they ask about her wares. "I don't sell junk," is her simple refrain. "If I wouldn't like to have it, I wouldn't try to sell it to anybody else."

Thumbing through the pages of Iona and Peter Opie's *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book*, I have that feeling of looking around Mimi's garage. I do not go there to find anything in particular, and yet every time I come away with something I did not know I wanted. And it is always fun because this is a collection based on pleasure. The Opies also penned the scholarly and fascinating *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, revealing the often-startling historical references contained within the verses we take for granted. But while that volume perches impressively in the reference

text area of my library, I find its more practical sibling gets taken down, opened, and perused, and it often does not find its way back to the shelf.

The sheer volume of rhymes in this collection (800!) contributes to the sensation of unplanned discovery. This is not a book that can be read from cover to cover—it is like going through your great-aunt's attic: At some point you have to stop, come downstairs, wash the dust off your hands, and start making dinner. The multitude of miniature black-and-white wood-cut illustrations adds charm to the layout of each page and serves to catch the reader's eye without dominating the text they accompany. No scholarly footnotes accompany the content, although every now and then a practical explanation illuminates an obscure or antiquated turn of phrase.

Although it is possible simply to open the book and see what you find, I also recommend paying attention to the organizing categories the Opies have chosen, which they explain in their short Preface as a developmental sequence: "Baby Games and Lullabies," "First Favorites," "Little Songs," "People," "A Little Learning," "Awakening," "Wonders," "Riddles, Tricks, and Trippers," "Ballads and Songs." Within these sections, additional page headers announce intriguing sub-categories. "Five Fingers" is a page of rhymes for counting and naming the digits, placed opposite "Five Toes," with as many different rhymes for playing with baby's

feet. “Games\*Dramas\*Deceptions\*Marvels” is the heading for two pages of rhymes that accompany hand and finger games, and here I was surprised to find the familiar “Pease Porridge Hot” described as a game for stacking hands, whereupon each phrase a player takes her hand from the bottom of the stack and puts it on top, the stack representing the pot of porridge.

Iona and Peter Opie published *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* in 1955 after 10 years of collecting, placing this effort exactly in the time frame of Orff and Keetman’s post-war work developing the Schulwerk, including the Bavarian Radio broadcasts, Keetman’s first children’s classes at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, the publication of the five *Music for Children* volumes, and the first gathering of international teachers interested in the Schulwerk. Margaret Murray first met Orff and Keetman during this period, and her English edition of Volume I came out in 1958 chock full of examples of English nursery rhymes as the basis for building elemental music and movement experiences for children. The Opie book, as a definitive collection of English children’s rhymes, would have been the perfect companion to the English *Music for Children* volumes, providing a wealth of additional materials for development by Schulwerk teachers.

The last time I was in Mimi’s garage, I bought two boxes of pressed-paper poker chips, drawn by the appealing boxes and the weight and texture and color of the chips themselves. Having the chips then inspired me to play poker with friends in the first weeks of my summer vacation. In the same way, looking through *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book*, you may find a rhyme or set of rhymes that inspires you to create a musical lesson in your classroom. Say you opened the book to page 148, the first page of nine devoted to riddles, and found this intriguing description of an hourglass:

“Two bodies have I,  
Though both joined in one,  
The stiller I stand,  
The faster I run.”

Great movement words, like a partner choreography! Here is another riddle, rich with movement possibilities, about shoes, also for two dancers:

“Two brothers we are  
Great burdens we bear,  
On which we are bitterly pressed;  
The truth is to say,  
We are full all the day,  
And empty when we go to rest.”

And this description of an egg, a dramatic movement scene for a group:

“In marble walls as white as milk,  
Lined with a skin as soft as silk.  
Within a fountain, crystal-clear,  
A golden apple doth appear.  
No doors there are to this stronghold.  
Yet thieves break in and steal the gold.”

A rondo of riddles? This idea is suggested in *Music for Children*, Volume III, pages 44-45, with a musical theme to connect them. With these three poems I already have great ingredients for a Schulwerk class; materials with potential to inspire children to create and imagine with movement and sound, an appealing theme of “Guess what I am?” to tie student performances together, and an experiential lesson about the power of poetic language to infuse common objects with drama and mystery. Could the students write their own riddles about other objects? Could I collaborate with their language arts teacher?

Just like perusing Mimi’s garage, not everything you see in *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* will prove useful for you. However, I heartily recommend taking many strolls through this collection of linguistic treasures—open the cover, wander about, and see what you find! ■

**JAMES HARDING** teaches music to children ages 3 through 14 years at the San Francisco School. He is the author of *From Wibbleton to Wobbleton*, a collection of lesson ideas with a focus on creative play with the elements of music and movement.