

**STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 THURSDAY 4 OCTOBER 2018**

## **National Poetry Day: Poetry is the UK's new force for change**

**\*New research finds that children from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to engage with poetry**

**\*British Army, Care UK: new initiatives as audiences for poetry diversify**

News for release: 00.01 Thursday 4 October 2018: Public perception of poetry, formerly the Cinderella of art forms, has changed: it is now valued as an effective way of engaging disadvantaged young people, combating memory loss in care homes, and even training army officers to become better leaders.

A new **National Literacy Trust** report, **A Thing That Makes Me Happy: Young People and Poetry 2018**, published today for National Poetry Day, explores the links between enjoyment of poetry among 8-18 year olds and the proliferation of fresh ways of engaging with it. Almost half the 2,948 young people surveyed (46% or 1,537) said they turn to poetry in their free time in one or more different ways: as listeners, viewers, performers, readers or writers.

National Literacy Trust's research has long shown the benefits of engaging with poetry, with children and young people who read and write poetry in their free time having improved literacy outcomes. This survey, the first of its kind to consider viewing, listening and performing, shows that young people's interest in *all* forms of poetry is now widespread, with poetry being listened to, watched and recorded via phones and screens, not just read and written on paper.

The report also shows that **students on free school meals, a leading indicator of deprivation, are more drawn to poetry in their free time than their richer peers** (55.7% as opposed to 43.0%), suggesting that poetry could have a '**silver bullet**' quality, offering benefits to groups who traditionally are more likely to struggle with literacy. Young poetry creators on free school meals (FSM) say they particularly like the freedom poetry composition gives them to choose subjects they care about (72.7% vs 54.7% for non-FSM pupils), and the chance to enter slams and other national competitions (35.9% vs 27.1% for non-FSM pupils).

Last month, the prestigious **Forward Prize for Best Poetry Collection** was awarded to its youngest ever winner: 29-year-old American **Danez Smith**, who discovered their passion for poetry after watching slam performers on television.

**Jonathan Douglas** of the **National Literacy Trust** said: "Poetry has the power to unlock children and young people's imaginations, unleash their aspirations and boost their attainment. It also enables children to express themselves in a multitude of ways, from raps and lyrics to free verse and traditional poems. What's more, our research shows that poetry might offer

particular benefits to children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, who are traditionally more likely to struggle with literacy. We hope that children and adults alike can discover the joys of writing, performing or listening to poetry this National Poetry Day.”

**Susannah Herbert** of the **Forward Arts Foundation**, the charity that organises **National Poetry Day**, said: “National Poetry Day’s a chance to show how poetry matters to you, and see how it matters to others: old or young, leaders or in need. We’ve all long known that the benefits of education and culture aren’t evenly spread: this makes poetry’s appeal to disadvantaged young people, or its ‘silver bullet’ potential, all the more important. Children on free school meals, with limited English, attention disorders or no one to hear them read at home may not thrive in tests or sit still in class, but when offered the chance to perform, listen or watch poetry, they respond.”

**School Standards Minister Nick Gibb** said: “Whether it’s Shakespearean sonnets or John Cooper Clarke’s punk poetry, a love of verse opens up a world of expression and imagination. That’s why poetry has a unique place in our country’s heritage.

“I’m pleased to know that so many schools are marking National Poetry Day in imaginative ways. When I visit schools I often see and hear pupils’ poetry and am always taken by the individual ways in which they can use this art to paint such vivid pictures.”

The report also found that young people not yet engaged in poetry would be more likely to turn to it if it involved sports or (video) games. Writing Stars, a poetry competition run by the Premier League in partnership with National Literacy Trust, last year saw more than 25,000 primary school children from across England and Wales write creatively on the theme of resilience.

**Richard Scudamore** of the **Premier League** said: “Writing Stars uses the appeal of the Premier League and professional football clubs to inspire young children to write creatively and engage with a topic they are passionate about. The competition gives them an outlet through which they can express themselves and ultimately have fun with their writing. We were overwhelmed by the number of entries in 2017, so we will be running Writing Stars again this year and hope to encourage more primary school children to engage in poetry.”

The survey, which includes statements from young people defining poetry as “a thing that makes me happy”, “a way of writing how you feel or what you think about something without being judged” and “freedom to express every thought, passion and experience”, does not take an entirely rose-tinted view of poetry as a profession, however.

Asked to define a poet, one primary school boy responded succinctly: “Someone who wasted there (sic) life getting broke”.

Poetry is certainly not among the better funded art-forms: of Arts Council England’s total budget for National Portfolio Organisations, in 2017-18, poetry received less than 1%.

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This **National Poetry Day** - which takes 'change' as its theme - has registered a 30% jump in participation by schools and libraries throughout the UK. For the first time, care homes and doctors' surgeries have risen to the challenge en masse: 50 care homes run by **Care UK** have planned celebrations of favourite poems, inviting local poets, school children, friends and family to join in. National charity, The Reader, has curated a special collection of change poems, featuring work by Keats and Hardy alongside Leontia Flynn, Matthew Francis and Penelope Shuttle, which will be read aloud in shared reading groups throughout the UK and distributed on buses and trains across the Liverpool City Region.

Even the military finds value in poetry: after the success of this year's inaugural British Army Poetry Competition, the **Army School of Education** near Winchester is now incorporating the reading of poems into its officer preparation courses.

Course Instructor **Lt David Boyles** teaches trainee officers to respond to short modernist masterpieces by the likes of William Carlos Williams, not for pleasure alone, but to enhance their ability to cope with ambiguity.

"In an era of contingency operations, where the military simultaneously provides a nuclear deterrent and disaster relief, while training anti-poaching forces in Malawi and guarding the Royal Palaces, soldiers must quickly become comfortable with both variety and ambiguity. Poetry is a great vehicle for this: it is also very cheap," he says.

"When something happens that wasn't in the training manual.. the experience of considering different interpretations, and ultimately deciding on one, should serve them well. This is the job of all soldiers, and all leaders."

Certainly, poetry is having a moment. 2017 marked the best sales on record for poetry books, revealing a strong appetite for the work of contemporary poets including Alice Oswald, Hollie McNish and Wendy Cope, a surge in demand for children's poetry, and an increasingly diverse live events and festival scene.

Poets are now moving in on territory long held by fiction, this year taking three national prizes generally awarded to prose-writers, with Helen Dunmore winning the Costa Book of the Year award, Pascale Petit the RSL Ondaatje Prize, Kayo Chingonyi the Dylan Thomas Prize and Scottish poet Robin Robertson's first novel *The Long Take*, told in verse, on the shortlist for the 2018 Man Booker Prize.

Themed anthologies, particularly those that speak to shared emotions, fear or hope, are increasingly popular, while poetry is at the forefront of current-affairs too: a Channel Four film of Ben Okri's poem on Grenfell Tower, commissioned by the Financial Times, was viewed 6 million times on Facebook.

According to the government's most recent annual [Taking Part survey](#) 1.4 million adults in England say they wrote poetry in the preceding 12 months.

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**Media enquiries:** Annabel Robinson or Sophie Goodfellow at FMcM on 020 7405 7422 or email [annabelr@fmcm.co.uk](mailto:annabelr@fmcm.co.uk) / [sophie@fmcm.co.uk](mailto:sophie@fmcm.co.uk)

**Notes to Editors:**

- Poetry sales have risen by 42% since 2013.
- Over 16,500 schools took part in National Poetry Day 2017
- More than 250 individual events in the UK, including readings on buses, trains and trams, have been listed on the [National Poetry Day map](#).

**National Poetry Day** (4th October 2018) is a mass celebration of poetry that annually engages people across the country with millions joining in on the day by reading, writing, performing and listening to poetry. It enjoys very high participation rates, especially online and in schools and libraries: supporters include Arts Council England, Royal Mail, the BBC, and HRH the Prince of Wales.

National Poetry Day is co-ordinated by the Forward Arts Foundation, a registered charity that celebrates excellence and increases public knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of poetry in all its forms.