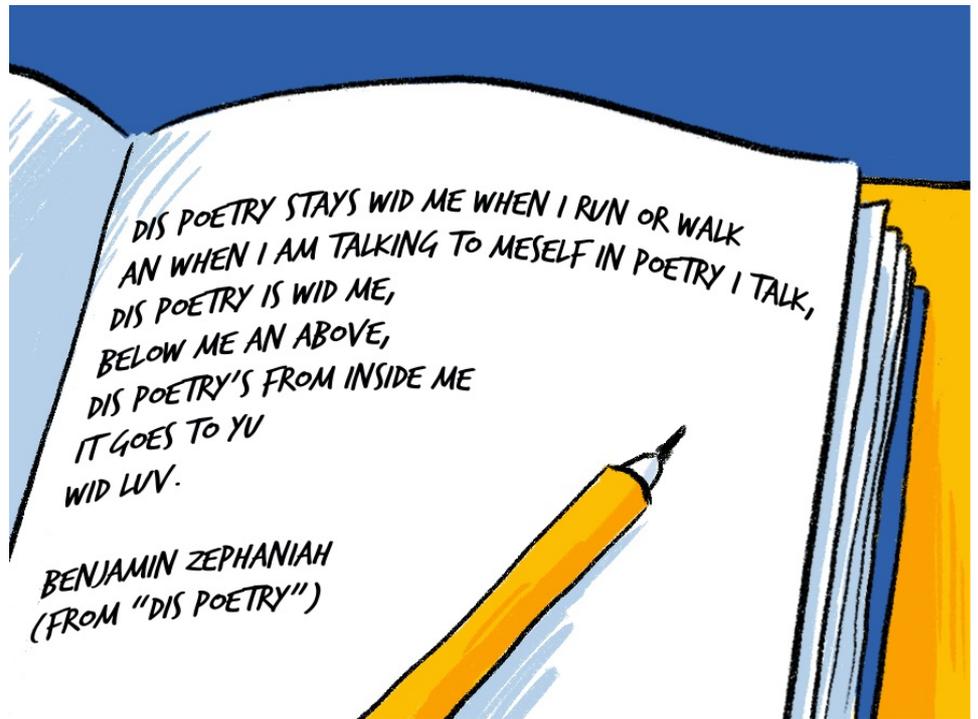


Poems can be secret weapons, claims new book

Can poems change the world? Today is National Poetry Day, and according to a new book poems can improve our health. Some think poetry is even powerful enough to cause political change.



Rule breaker: Award-winner Benjamin Zephaniah pushes boundaries by writing in oral patterns.

“Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number!”

In 1989 Percy Bysshe **Shelley**'s verse echoed around China's **Tiananmen Square**, chanted by thousands of rebels demanding change. In 2011 as the **Arab Spring** ignited around them, revolutionaries in **Tahrir Square** sang the same lines. And in 2017 Jeremy Corbyn recited the words to thousands at Glastonbury as he unveiled his vision for Great Britain.

As the UK celebrates National Poetry Day today, many are considering the true power of a poem.

For some, no matter how many revolutionaries quote Shelley, poems do not change a thing. Writer Tom Hodgkinson describes poems as “supremely useless”. But he thinks this pointlessness is good because poems offer a pleasurable escape from the “real world of busy-ness and moneymaking.”

For others, the stresses of the modern world have made poetry more useful than ever. *The Poetry Pharmacy*, released today, recommends

poems to ease a host of daily ailments, from loneliness to heartbreak. If you feel anxious or depressed, the book prescribes some **Derek Mahon**: “I lie here in a riot of sunlight / watching the day break and the clouds flying. / Everything is going to be alright.”

Politicians may particularly benefit from a dose of verse, says journalist Andrew Marr. He argues that if MPs read more poems, they would become more “sensitive and empathetic”.

He recommends to the prime minister, Theresa May, a helping of **Elizabeth Bishop**. After losing many of her party's seats in the last election, she might be comforted by these lines: “The art of losing isn't hard to master / So many things seem filled with intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”

But for some, poetry means protest. As soon as Donald Trump was elected president, people started to write. Danez Smith's *You're Dead America* was published on BuzzFeed just hours after the result was announced. The poem describes how: “the man from TV / is

gonna be president, / he has no words / & hair beyond simile.” Poetry editor Jeff Schott claims poems like this can “stir us into action”.

But can poetry really change the world?

Rhyme and reason

“Just one line of verse can inspire change,” argue some. Poetry makes you see the world from a different point of view. And this special insight leads to action. It can compel you to fight for justice, or help you overcome difficulties in your own life. Poetry changes the world every day.

“No one has ever changed his life because of a poem,” says author Michael Robbins. But that is the best thing about it. In a world in which everything must have a practical use, we must be able to experience some things just for pleasure. Poetry changes nothing, but that is for the best.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: In the UK, poetry book sales have increased by 50% in the last four years. There are also now over 30 annual festivals dedicated to

spoken and written poetry. In America, the number of poetry readers has declined by 45% since 2002.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Lines from Shelley's poem have been recited by rebels and revolutionaries since they

were written; but it is impossible to say precisely what effect this had on the historical events that unfolded. Equally, the same poem can be interpreted in many different ways by different people.

YOU DECIDE

1. What is your favourite poem?
2. Can a poem change the world?

WORD WATCH

Shelley – English Romantic poet (1792-1822). These lines come from his 1819 poem *The Mask of Anarchy*.

Tiananmen Square – In central Beijing, the site of several important events in Chinese history, and of the large student-led demonstrations in 1989. Several hundred civilians were killed in the government crackdown in what is known

ACTIVITIES

1. Ready...Set...GO! You have five minutes to speed-write a poem. Try not to think about it too much – just focus on the images and words that come naturally to you.
2. Do some research and find a poem that you think is particularly powerful. Why do you think it is effective? What is your favourite line?

as the Tiananmen massacre.

Arab Spring – A wave of revolutions that took place across North Africa and the Middle East between 2010 and 2012.

Tahrir Square – In Cairo, Egypt. It was the focal point of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution which led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.

The Poetry Pharmacy – By William Sieghart.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“All poets, all writers are political.”
Sonia Sanchez

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Published by Particular Books.

Derek Mahon – Northern Irish poet born in 1941. He has published over 20 collections of poetry.

Elizabeth Bishop – American poet and Pulitzer Prize winner (1911-1979). She also won the National Book Award in 1970.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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