



Writing Poetry

Getting Started

Narrator

On this track, you will hear poets discussing sources of inspiration and useful methods. Now listen to W.N. Herbert, Paul Muldoon and Jackie Kay.

W.N. Herbert

One of the problems that people set themselves when they are beginning to write is they, they assume that they must be inspired. And inspiration – there's a kind of grand notion that says it's like almost divine wind; the great flatulence of god which must pass through people in order for them to put pen to paper at all. But of course, you know, in order to put pen to paper at all you have to actually think of something, and you actually have an interest in the craft of how you're putting it down. And that is where inspiration comes from; it comes from work on the page.

Paul Muldoon

I think one of the things about poetry that I noticed that those who are thinking about it, perhaps for the first time, are determined to do is to make it mean as much as possible. Whereas in fact, in a strange way, to make it mean as little as possible – I don't mean by that nonsense, but what I mean by that is to cut down on the range of possible readings. And basically if you look after one, that's enough to be going on with and if there happened to be one-and-a-half or two – fantastic! Many people try to incorporate three or four or five readings into a poem and end up with none, because nobody knows what's happening. And that's one of the reasons why poems are unintelligible is that they mean no single thing. And there's a theory of course that they should mean all things to all men, which is complete baloney. They should mean one thing, roughly speaking, to one man or woman. That's enough to be going on with.

Jackie Kay

Well I think, you know both music and the movies are very good for poetry in a funny way, you know, because movies often give you little moments and snapshots and the way that movies can zoom in to something in a close-up is very like a poem. A poem is a kind of a close-up. It's a close up of a moment in tiny detail often, and then it can pull right back and you can get an entire expanse of land so in a poem you can get a whole panoramic vision in a short poem. So it has that ability that the camera has, poems have, of shifting focus and moving a lot. And music also shares a lot with poetry in terms of its rhythms, whether you're listening to classical music or folk music or jazz and blues, you'll still always get a sense of the music's rhythm, its patterns and the way in which certain, say jazz refrains, work, the way that they return to the same note again and again. And those kind of techniques poets use too.

W.N. Herbert

The crucial thing about a notebook is it's where everything can begin. If you are working in between times, as I am often, then you have to get hold of those first little bits of phrases, those first little bits of ideas, those first colours, those first rhymes that might start something off. I believe that it's an essential tool for all writers. I don't think that anyone should ever rely on their memory for creativity. I think if you're not doing that as a writer then you're not doing your five-finger exercises; you're not practising your chords; you're not sketching. And if you're not doing that then the next stage is harder to get on to and so people get bigger and bigger gaps and then they come back to the notion that they have to be inspired to start at all, and they don't do the work.

Jackie Kay

The most important thing I tell them to do is to read contemporary poets in particular but just to read, read, read and read. To me the point of life is to read, just as much as it is to write. And a lot of people that write poetry, or that want to write poetry, start off and they don't read and you come to them with their poems and their poems are say, written in sort of very olde English syntax and you say to them, 'What contemporary poets have you read?' and they haven't read any. So I, I'd say that that was very important. And to go to readings, to go and hear people read; there's a huge amount of literary festivals now all over the place that they could go and hear live poetry readings, because hearing a poet read their own work gives you a key in a way into their work.