



Poetry in the UK

Poets and poetry have always played a public role in British life. Did you know that John Betjeman was instrumental in saving St. Pancras station from demolition? There's a statue to him there, looking up in wonder at the ironwork. Betjeman was an avid defender of Victorian architecture and a much-loved figure on television in the 1970s with programmes on his favourite buildings. St Pancras station holds a Betjeman poetry competition every year for young poets aged 10–13.

After the May 2017 Manchester Arena attack, poet Tony 'Longfella' Walsh read his 'This is the Place' poem about Manchester, moving the huge audience to tears and cheers. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour slogan 'For the many, not the few' comes from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem 'The Masque of Anarchy'. Poetry exists in many forms in the UK.

Many people know that Shakespeare wrote great sonnets and Wordsworth wrote something about daffodils, but there's a lot going on in poetry in London most days of the week. In addition to venues like the Poetry Café, the Troubadour Coffee House, The Betsy Trotwood pub, Torriano Meeting House and the Poetry Library at the Southbank Centre for readings by both established and novice poets, there are bookshops with great poetry sections, international poetry award evenings, poetry classes and poetry appreciation days. There's also a vibrant spoken-word scene in London, with performers reciting their work in venues like SLAM near King's Cross. Apples and Snakes is a UK-wide, and sometimes international, organiser of spoken word events. Often the audience is the judge in these 'battles' and whichever poet gets the most applause wins the evening.

The biggest poetry prize in the UK, and also open to international writers, is the T.S. Eliot Prize. Founded in 1993 by

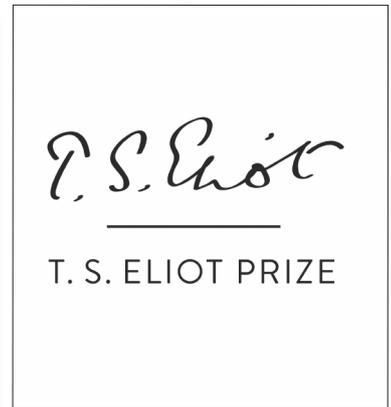
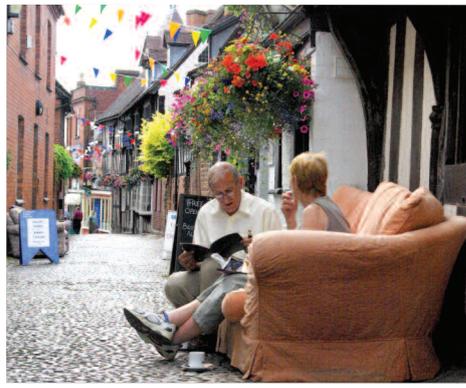
Eliot's widow, it awards £20,000 to the best poetry collection of the year. Last year, Jacob Polley won for 'Jackself' (Picador). Readings by the ten shortlisted poets of 2017 will be held on 14 January 2018 at the Southbank Centre. It's one evening of

the year where you can see all the great and good of the country's poetry world in one place, letting their hair down and cheering for their favourites. Other big prizes are the Forward Prize and the National Poetry Competition. The Forward Prize will be awarded this year on the 21 September also at the Southbank Centre. There's £10,000 first prize for best collection and £5,000 for the best first collection as well as £1,000 for best single poem. The National Poetry Competition attracts thousands of international entries and is the biggest prize for a single poem. Winners will be announced in 2018 and published in the Spring issue of *The Poetry Review*.

The Free Verse Poetry Book Fair takes place this year on 30 September in Conway Hall, near Holborn. It's free to enter and buy or just admire the wares of more than 90 small and not-so-small presses who predominantly publish poetry in the UK. The day is interspersed with readings and panel discussions. If you're interested in books or publishing it's a fascinating look at what is being done away from



LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL



the mainstream world of Penguin or Random House. Some of the books are works of art in themselves, with beautiful covers and artistic interiors.

Another way to hear lots of poetry and buy books that you can't find in high-street bookshops is to attend poetry festivals. These take place all over Britain, with two of the biggest being the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival held in November in the lovely Suffolk town of the same name, and the Ledbury Poetry Festival just northwest of Cheltenham, which takes place during ten days in July. Here you'll get to attend writing workshops, lectures and readings. It's like a mini Hay Festival, but all about poetry.

There's been a Poet Laureate in the UK since 1668. It's an official position within the royal household and as such, the Laureate is expected to write occasional poems for state events, but their duties consist mainly of raising the profile of poetry and encouraging people to read, write and listen to it. The current Poet Laureate is Carol Ann Duffy, the first woman and first Scot in the role.

National Poetry Day was 28 September this year. Schools will usually mark the day for your children with reading and writing poetry and the Southbank has a day of readings and events. National Poetry Writing Month, or NaPoWriMo as it's known online, is in April every year with many poets giving prompts and exercises online to help those interested write a poem a day. The Poetry School in Lambeth offers courses all year round and the Arvon Foundation, founded by Laureate Ted Hughes, hosts residential poetry courses as well as writing in other forms throughout the year in beautiful settings around the UK. I've attended a poetry week in Hughes's old house at Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. It was magical; a room of one's own, no household duties and one-to-one sessions with tutors and writing exercises, plus lovely walks in the countryside.

Or, if you've got a few poems hidden away in a drawer and want to give them an airing, why not join one of the many workshops held in fellow poets' houses or local pubs, which will give your work a sympathetic ear and constructive criticism? There are local STANZA groups, as they are known, in most areas of London and across the UK; you just have to be a member of the Poetry Society to join one. The Poetry Society was founded in 1909 to increase public awareness of and appreciation for poetry and has a café and performance space in Betterton Street, Covent Garden. They publish The Poetry Review to showcase contemporary poems and reviews of poetry books. If you're looking for more magazines that showcase poetry, try your local independent bookshop or search online.

So, get out there and experience the best of the country's continuing contribution to world literature.



T.S. Eliot



John Betjeman statue



the poetry book fair

free entry
free readings
bookshops

FREE VERSE

Leafe Press / Like This Press / Males Press / A Midsummer Night's Press
MEL / Mullran Press / New Departures
Nine Arches Press / OFF PRESS / Peartree Books / Penned in the Margins / Picador Poetry / Pithing Press / Rack Press
Reality Street / Roncador Press / Seren Books / Shearman Books / Smokestack Books / Soaring Pungent Press / Starwell Books / Templar Poetry / Two Rivers Press
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West House Books / White Alder Press
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